

UNSMUDGED

AN ENCOUNTER WITH
PEGGY WILLIAMS

A FIRST-GENERATION
TEACHER OF THE
ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE



Peggy Williams, 2000

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PREFACE

Peggy Williams was known for the extraordinary quality of her touch, the precision and clarity of which even confounded the London police. After a burglary in her flat in the 1980s, detectives dusted her rooms for fingerprints. Perplexed by what they found, they questioned her, "What do you do?" Peggy asked them why they wanted to know. They exclaimed, "Your fingerprints, even in the kitchen, are un-smudged!"



Peggy was the last teacher certified and personally trained by F.M. Alexander. When we met, she was a master teacher nearing the end of her life and I was a comparatively new teacher at the beginning of my journey. Peggy's skill was so exceptional that within minutes of my first lesson, she had quietly evoked a change in me so profound that my life from that moment was forever altered. That first lesson with Peggy began a process that has come to fruition in this book.

Peggy was a paradoxical blend of personal authority, intuition, and emotional instinct. She would not relinquish her feeling nature, even when she sensed the display of emotions was taboo. She had a penchant for paradox and thrived on provocation. She refused to be contained by words and had an inherent mistrust of them, but she also wanted to tell her story.

As the last person certified by Alexander, she was eager to share what she remembered of her time with him. However, she was reluctant to describe or address the Technique directly: She detested the notion of presenting the work outside the context of direct experience. She also did not want to tell other people how to think or what to think. However, she occasionally allowed me to record my

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lessons and exchanges with her. Eventually, an unexpected turn of events moved Peggy to speak more directly to her teaching and the practice of the Technique.

As an archival document, this book employs biography, oral history, recorded lessons, and interviews. As an affectionate memoir, its aim is to offer you an encounter with Peggy that is clean, clear, self-evident, and like her fingerprints—unsmudged.

INTRODUCTION

Peggy Williams (née Goldstone) was born in Manchester, England in 1916. She described her childhood as one of misery, “full of emotional upsets and fears.” She escaped her unhappy home life by eloping at the age of twenty-one. The marriage did not go well, but it did have one critical influence on her life: Her husband, who was afflicted with a stammer, tried lessons with F.M. Alexander, and then instead of continuing, sent Peggy for lessons in his place.

The unlikely meeting of F.M. and Peggy proved to be an event of exceptional good fortune. Peggy found a mentor and a method that gave her the means to transform her suffering and realize her unique potential. She often said her first husband had unknowingly given her “the greatest jewel—the greatest treasure—that I could ever receive,” and that “out of great misfortune had come great fortune.”

Alexander “brought out the life in me and brought me to life,” and he helped “me to realize how much there was to life, and to get on with it.” Within weeks of Peggy’s first lesson, she asked F.M. if she could join his training course. She did not imagine that she could become a teacher because she did not believe herself capable of teaching. But she had “a deep yearning for change,” and for Peggy, “that was the most important thing: one’s willing and wishing and yearning to change.” She believed that taking up the work would give her that opportunity.



When I was seventeen, traumatic injuries from a diving accident resulted in a concussion-induced coma and emergency surgery. I was re-hospitalized a few years later because I could not stand or

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sit without acute pain. My back would no longer support me. I was twenty-two. I had done everything in my power to not land back in the hospital after the accident. Nothing had worked. After a month bedridden in the neurosurgery wing, I underwent another surgery. The acute pain was alleviated, but I had no idea how to prevent it all from happening again.

While I was in the hospital, recovering from the second surgery, I was sent to physical therapy. Somehow I knew that the physical therapy exercises I was given could not help my condition. I left the hospital and its physical therapy and never looked back.

At the time “sports training” was hitting its stride and a friend recommended that I try it. The trainer immediately had me lie down on the floor and then took gentle hold of my neck muscles in a manner that gave me unquestionable relief. For the first time since my accident, I glimpsed the possibility of regaining some sort of physical wholeness. After she held my neck and head, I commented on the profound relief I experienced, and she told me that though she was not a certified Alexander teacher, she had learned a bit of the Technique.

My brief introduction to the Technique, almost forty years after Peggy met F.M. Alexander, was heartening. It gave me relief from pain, the means to prevent it, and a glimpse of something far more important: I had not felt the promise of such vitality since before my accident, if ever. Hope was not far behind. Like Peggy, out of great misfortune had come great fortune.



In September 1947, Peggy entered F.M.’s training course at 16 Ashley Place. She said that she was plagued by fear but working with Alexander gave her confidence. “That was the main thing. It made a huge difference very quickly. As long as I had some ‘back’ the fear wasn’t there.” For Peggy it was “as simple as that.”

Her early years of training at Ashley Place were marked by intense periods of emotional and physical pain. Typically, training at that time lasted three years. However, Peggy remained on the course as a student, then as a training assistant and teacher for more than eight years



Peggy and Nanette, 2000

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SPEAKING WITH PEGGY

A typical phone conversation: New York City / London, March 20, 2001.

Nanette Walsh: It's a gorgeous day here in New York, the first of spring I think.

Peggy Williams: Oh, you lucky person. It's been the most dismal day here, cold and gray, although I've had some visitors. Actually, I gave two lessons this afternoon... and a lovely friend phoned me, so it's been a busy day really. Anyway, I'm a little tired—but not bad—pleasantly so, one would say.

Shall we continue where we left off yesterday then?

Ooh kaay... [voice dipping then rising slightly]

Have you thought more about how you might like to introduce yourself to the reader?

Well, just say that I'm an Alexander teacher! I was fortunate enough to begin when Alexander was working. I was more fortunate to spend five years [on the training course] with him coming in to work with us quite a lot of the time. I think that really tells all!

Yesterday you thought you might begin with the story of your life....

It's so bound up with my life; I cannot separate the two. Becoming involved in the Technique was really brought about by misfortune—my marriage to my first husband, Louis. But he gave me the greatest jewel, the greatest treasure that I could ever receive. He pointed the way, so that I could understand how important the Technique was to my whole way of life. So you see, out of great misfortune came great fortune.