

Practical Language and Body Mapping for Dancers and Movers

by Robin Gilmore, M.F.A.

Dancers may have more consciously learned movement patterns than any other profession. Among the many forms and techniques of dance there are often conflicting instructions, and the dancer must translate these ideas into artistry. Alexander teachers can help dancers sort out true movement principles from myth through clarifying language and Body Mapping. Body Mapping, developed by William Conable of Ohio State University, refers to one's idea and experience of body structure, size and movement. My book, *What Every Dancer Needs to Know About the Body*, is a workbook and "playbook" of Body Mapping and Alexander Technique principles.

Many dancers acquire habits of misuse based on vague or even false information given by well-meaning dance instructors. Coupled with inaccurate self image and a desire to push beyond reasonable limits, this approach often leads to injury and disappointment. Fortunately, modern dance training has evolved in the last twenty years as somatic practices such as Alexander Technique, release technique and Body-Mind- Centering have filtered into the pedagogy. Modern dance classes often begin with a few moments of guided imagery in constructive rest (semi-supine) position. I've had the benefit of studying with many remarkable dance teachers, but my early training could have been a blueprint for what NOT to teach!

Like so many Alexander teachers, it was a recurring injury which led me to study the Alexander Technique. In my case, the back spasms which regularly immobilized me were directly related to pushing beyond my structural limits while dancing. Through months and years of rethinking my approach to movement with the help of several excellent Alexander teachers, not only did the back spasms cease, but my dancing soared. During the seven years I studied with Marjorie Barstow, she often helped guide my thinking while I performed movement sequences. Some of those lessons still resonate many years later.

The following section is adapted from *What Every Dancer Needs to Know About the Body*. The material is useful for everyone because we all have body maps, not to mention spines.

Spines are Not Straight!

While most of us are familiar with that pesky bit of advice to "stand up straight," dancers are often told repeatedly to "pull up." Note the strong verb pull. It is very active and certainly

entails some amount of effort. The instruction to pull up may be coupled with the command to “tuck under” the pelvis. I invite you to stand up and follow these instructions. Of course, one can reasonably assume that pulling up and tucking under will result in an overly straightened spine and rigidity. Dancers certainly don’t want to appear collapsed, but the antidote for slumping is not a straight spine.

Here is a mapping exercise to find out how you think about your own spine. On a blank piece of paper, draw a vertical line which will represent the line of gravity. Draw a profile view of your spine on the page as you think it relates to the line. In other words, from the side, is your spine in front of or behind the line of gravity or some of each? Are there curves? How many? You may want to stand up and walk around first to get a sense of where you feel your spine in relation to gravity. Now compare your drawing with the one at the end of this article. Does anything surprise you?

There are common habits among dancers which distort the spinal curves and can lead to chronic pain and the frustration of not achieving the desired effect. All too often, the cervical and thoracic curves of the spine are overly straight. Alexander Technique teachers certainly know a few things about freeing necks, and we use our hands and words to guide our students toward ease. Note the verbs that Alexander teachers tend to use: let, allow, or simply think neck free. That’s quite a contrast to pulling up!

It may come as a shock for dancers to learn that the thoracic spine is curved toward the back. It is not straight, nor is it curved toward the chest. When a dancer follows a well intentioned instruction to lift her chest, she can accomplish this only by flattening her thoracic spine. She also succeeds in immobilizing her ribs and making it difficult to raise her arms. Again, look at the verb: lift. One might also say, OUCH!

When it comes to the lumbar spine, a common trait is chronically shortened muscles which result in the lumbar spine being driven too far forward. As the large lumbar vertebrae push forward, out goes the belly. The compensation then becomes sucking in that unsightly gut. Sucking in or pulling in the belly produces nothing more than a cosmetic change, not to mention inability to breathe. Learning to release the muscles Reprinted with permission of the author. of the back may seem counterintuitive or even lazy to the dancer, but over time balance can be restored.

The fourth curve of the spine is comprised of the sacrum and coccyx (our tail). The sacrum is also part of the pelvis. With regard to the flow of the spine, the sacrum is very nearly horizontal where it attaches to the pelvis, and the tail is well behind the lumbar curve. Mapping the sacrum can be tricky because from the rear, it appears and even feels vertical. If you place your hand on your sacrum, you will feel a bony surface which fits into the palm of your hand. Seems close to vertical, yes? No. Look again at the profile drawing of the spine and note that the top, front most part of the sacrum is shaped somewhat like a wedge. This density at the top causes the interior curve to be close to horizontal. Allowing ourselves to expand into this interior space frees the pelvis and legs to a remarkable extent.

Contrary to what many dancers believe, our tail does not hang. Unfortunately, as previously mentioned, many dance teachers direct students to tuck under. Having spent years diligently following this instruction, I can attest that tucking under produces nothing but tension and heavy movement. When a dog has his tail between his legs, he is certainly not frisky!

Why are we told to tuck under if it is counterproductive? Visually, if the tail is sticking out, then it's easy to assume that the problem must be a tipped pelvis. However, when we look at the spine as a whole as well as the balance of the head upon the spine, we see that tight neck, back and gluteus muscles distort the spine. Again, the solution lies in learning to let go of tension rather than in imposing counter tension.

Mind Your Language

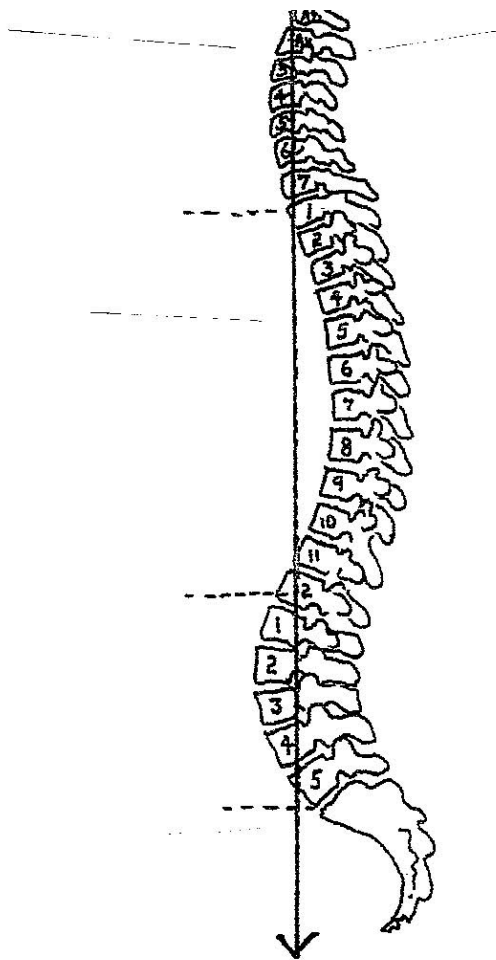
The power of language has already been mentioned and cannot be overemphasized. F. M. Alexander chose his words very carefully, and much of his precise vocabulary exists today among Alexander teachers. Dancers also have their own lexicon which is often technique specific. For example, "contract and release" means something quite tangible to a dancer schooled in the technique of Martha Graham. Over time, these terms become a kind of shorthand which allows teachers and choreographers to convey which movement they want with few words.

Dancers use imagery as well as literal instructions to describe or bring about movement. When an image contradicts anatomic reality, confusion or even injury can result. For example, imagining your spine as a straight steel rod might prevent you from slumping, but steel rods don't bend, nor do they move at all unless they are picked up and carried. Knowing that the spine is not straight but curved and flexible, the following images evoke movement while remaining true to our inherent structure.

Let your spine flow like a river... .
 ...slither like a snake...
 ...undulate like sea grass.

Imagery can elicit subtle shifts in quality which can spark creativity and build a sophisticated movement palette.

Dancers are expert at following directions. While most teachers and choreographers demonstrate as well as give verbal instruction, there is no getting around the immediate neuromuscular response to language. At times the instruction may be confusing or downright impossible to follow. There may be structural constraints such as limited hip rotation which no amount of coaxing will change. Quite often, a source of frustration may lie in attempting to follow a teacher's suggestion verbatim. The teacher's words may not make sense when applied to the dancer's own experience of her body. An astute dance teacher will recognize when a particular image or correction falls short of the mark.



LINE OF GRAVITY

A final point for Alexander teachers to consider when working with dancers is this: sometimes what we in the Alexander Technique call lengthening may entail a decrease in height. For the dancer who actively and consciously “pulls up” thereby straightening the spine, the direction of ease and flexibility lies in softening and yielding to the body’s inherent curves. As the spine recovers its natural length, the dancer who appeared to be pulling away from the ground will come lightly down to earth.

Dancers are not alone in trying to “do” lengthening; they just “do” with gusto. The concept of non-doing may be difficult to swallow for this breed of overachiever. With guidance, they can learn to embody their true Body Map and let go of ingrained habits which impede moving with ease and pleasure. Then let the dancing begin! Reprinted with permission of the author.

BIOGRAPHY: Robin Gilmore holds a Master of Fine Arts degree in Dance from Temple University. She is a teaching member and sponsoring member of Alexander Technique International. As a choreographer, performer and movement educator, her work has been presented internationally for over twenty five years. She directs an Alexander Technique teacher training program in North Carolina and resides in Annapolis, Maryland, USA. To email the author or purchase *What Every Dancer Needs to Know About the Body*: rglimmer@mindspring.com Check your drawing of the spine. How did you do?