

The Alexander Technique: My good fortune!

By Ann Rodiger

My EDS story is no doubt very familiar to you. As an active child with lots of energy I had more than the typical number of trips to the emergency room for stitches (mostly on my shins and chin) and by the time I was ten had had more tetanus shots than most people do in 2 or 3 lifetimes. I was hyper-mobile everywhere and no one knew why. It just seemed to be the way I was.

Because I loved to move I easily fell into studying dance at the University of Oregon for undergraduate work. I got a wonderful education and my flexibility served me well. I was however, “all over the place” with my body, basically flailing, and found balancing on one leg to be a real challenge. One “position” felt just like the next and I had a hard time figuring out where to be with my body as it would go just about anywhere. I had many more choices than the people around me who were fairly tight and quite jealous of my flexibility. Everyone wished they had my flexibility and couldn’t understand that being overly flexible has it’s own set of significant problems.

During my graduate studies in dance at the Ohio State University I started taking classes in the Alexander Technique from the music school. Several of us were doing anything we could to improve our dance technique. These classes were amazing for me right from the beginning. They taught me a way of moving that gave me the ability to balance in an entirely new way. This completely changed my way of approaching my body and movement.

For the first time in my life, I found a sense of direction through my whole body and an organization of the parts that allowed me to move in a much more unified and supported way. I began to have some control over my flexibility and balance that didn’t come from grabbing on to my body and bracing some parts while allowing others to collapse against each other. I also learned how unaware I was of the things I was doing that were contributing to my own imbalance. For example, I learned that I was locking my knees in ballet class and I didn’t even know it! When I locked my knees to “straighten my leg” they would ache. Through my Alexander Technique lessons I learned that because of my hyper-mobility, my sense of “straight legs” was actually my legs going way past “straight.” This was the first time anyone ever said to me— don’t go to your limit – if you do that, you go past the lengthened moment and start to sink down. Meaning that locking my knees was causing a domino effect throughout my body: When I locked my knees, my pelvis tilted and shifted forward causing my lower back to sway which caused my shoulders to slump and my head to poke forward. When I found a more accurate line of support in the legs I could balance more easily and my whole body had the potential to lengthen. And, my knees no longer ached! I was finally learning how to use my flexibility as I wanted rather than having it pull me around. I was eventually able to apply the same principles to my elbows, hips, lower back, neck, and whole body. I was so relieved to have found a method for progressing with my dancing that alleviated the excess pain and stress I was placing on my joints.

My good fortune continued when I was teaching dance at the University of Illinois- Urbana in the late 70's. I found an Alexander Technique Teacher Training class that was starting up and one of the teachers, Joan Murray, had been a dancer so she knew what kinds of demands I was placing on my body. My teaching schedule permitted me to attend the class and become an Alexander Technique teacher myself. The intense study was just what I needed. However, at the time, I still didn't know I had EDS.

Several years later in the early 80's, after I had started my own AT practice in New York City, a visiting friend of a student came in for one isolated lesson. The moment I saw her was shocking. She looked like me in SO many ways. We had similar features and similar bent toes!! I heard about EDS for the first time and following her lesson I went to a doctor and was diagnosed with the hyper-mobility type of EDS. I learned that all the dancing I had done (and all that extra stretching) was contraindicated for EDS. I was still dancing and decided not to stop as I love to move so much.

My hyper-mobility finally caught up with me about 3 years ago when my left hip joint lost it's integrity and the bone met the bone in a painful way that really limited my movement. I developed a limp, and the rest of my body started to very noticeably compensate. My great posture was gone.

Once again I had the good fortune in finding a wonderful surgeon to do a total hip replacement, Dr. Steven Stuchin at the Hospital for Joint Diseases did a fantastic job. The Alexander Technique helped me tremendously in my recovery after the surgery. I knew how to utilize and direct my whole body to help in getting back on my feet. The doctors and nurses were surprised at my progress. I was able to take a relatively long walk and go up and down stairs the first time I got out of bed. I was also able to squat fully as soon as the movement restrictions were lifted, 12 weeks after surgery. I was told this was a relatively speedy recovery, and I attribute much of my progress to my knowledge and practice of the Alexander Technique.

Although I stopped dancing about 10 years ago, I continue to do my own movement practices. Likewise, I am still teaching and practicing the Alexander Technique, which continues to be my saving grace. Throughout the years, it has allowed me to function and move with relative freedom in a mostly pain-free state, to enjoy a career in dance, to recovery with ease from my hip replacement and to do all this despite having EDS. I am grateful for the good fortune of discovering it!