



-excerpted from Sheila Drapeau's interview with Mary Padilla, author of **FREE AGENT**, for **Meet the Author in All About Armonk**

### **How did the idea of writing a book germinate?**

Every ten lessons I write a one-page status report for my first Alexander Technique teacher. It summarizes my current understanding, any related issues that have arisen or been resolved, etc. In general, I write to find out what I think. It's a similar process to having to be clear about the essence of something before you can teach it. And it's because of this that writing about starting to teach really helped pull things together simultaneously on both levels in a synergistic way.

### **Why the AT and not a book based on your veterinary experiences or other aspects of your life?**

Before I got involved in the AT at one point I was going around giving a talk on the sensory worlds of different species and how each kind of animal had its own *umwelt* – it lived in its own world depending on what it could perceive, and acted and thought accordingly. The AT has been an extension of that, taking the concept of embodied thought into our own experience. My interest in this area stems from a fundamental concern with epistemology – how we know what we know. It was this that led me initially to pursue science, where propositions were subject to experimental disproof and there was no credit given to Truth by Assertion.

### **This is your first book. What gave you the time and courage to write it?**

It was the transitional summer before the last term of the three-year teacher training program when I blocked out the time to devote to the practice teaching/writing project. As for the courage part, I had really nothing to lose, and a big part of AT pedagogy has to do with being willing to be wrong. So I made it a point to sit down regularly at least weekly and write.

### **The voice here is unique in that it seems to incorporate journal writing, students' experiences, and personal opinions. What thoughts were behind this format? Did it seem an easier way to introduce the AT to those unfamiliar with it?**

Initially I requested of everyone who received a free series of ten lessons that first summer that s/he plan on giving me a single page, in the medium of her choice, exemplifying his experience, for potential inclusion in a book I was planning to write that would in some way be related to that experience. I didn't know what I was going to do, and I certainly didn't know what they would come up with either. With that rather nebulous goal in mind, I would sit overlooking the pond in my backyard under a little tent of mosquito netting and write what came into my head. The summer before I had seen a photo of a gazebo in Elmira, NY (of all places) to which Samuel Clemens used to repair every summer to write his books, and that was in the back of my mind somehow.

When the lessons and the summer came to a close, the student work started to come in. It was so original and individual and varied that I knew it had to be an integral part of the book. There would be, among these eighteen different takes, something that would be likely to resonate with every reader and help him get a feel for the Technique. I put the chapters and my art on my workbench together with the student pages and just shuffled them around until they came into their final form. Then I wrote the introductory and summary sections, asked my first teacher for a Foreword, and went looking for a printer.

### **How did writing this book enhance your knowledge and understanding of the AT?**

I have always found having to articulate what I think and know about a subject forces me to decide just what it truly is in order to be able to convey its fundamental nature. In particular, attempting to suggest the Technique's experiential nature in words was quite an exercise in allusion. As the AT is all about being indirect, that was a particularly useful experience that now serves me well in explaining it to students and interested members of the public.

### **What aspects of the AT do you find hardest to describe?**

Let me paraphrase Isadora Duncan: If I could say it I wouldn't have to DO it. The AT is a kinesthetically-based experiential discipline based on thinking. The closest I've seen in writing are the **Commentaries on the Confucian Analects** regarding the basic concept of "trying not to try." The difficulties in understanding this may stem from the fact that we have to use the brain to comprehend itself, or, if you will, that thinking about thinking can be a circular process.

### **How does the AT factor into your daily life, beyond teaching it to others?**

I recently came across a concept in a review of a book of lectures given at Oxford on comparative literature that expresses it for me: rising up to meet what's already there. Current neuroscience suggests that the main function of consciousness is to rationalize the decisions already made by parts of our brain not perceptible to consciousness. The AT seems to be a way of enabling us to get out of our own way and stop interfering so much with the intrinsic capacities that enable us to function better, more easily, and with less tension on many levels. There have been a few times in my life when I've given myself up for lost and stopped trying, only to have something within me come to the fore and maneuver me out of a potentially fatal situation. Through my study of the AT I have a clearer sense of how to access that now, and I live closer to that state the rest of the time.

### **Are there any other authors who inspired you to write this type of book? Who are your favorite authors?**

The form I had in mind was **Pilgrim at Tinker Creek**, a Pulitzer Prize-winning collection of essays on life, the universe, and the natural world by Annie Dillard, who wrote from the perspective of living in a cabin in the woods, which as nearly as possible is how I live, at least mentally.

My favorite authors are, in no particular order:

fiction – Willa Cather (**Song of the Lark**), Joseph Conrad (**Lord Jim**),

Hermann Hesse (**The Glass Bead Game**)

psychology – William James (**Principles of Psychology**,

**The Varieties of Religious Experience**)

embodied thought – Edward Slingerland (**Effortless Action**,

**What Science Offers the Humanities**)

neurophilosophy – Antonio Damasio (**Looking for Spinoza**)

My favorite book, though you didn't ask, is **Bambi**, by Felix Salten, which is not a children's book.

### **If someone is interested in learning more about the philosophy of the AT, are there other books s/he should read?**

S/he could start with **Thinking Aloud**, by Walter Carrington, for specific application to the AT. For related topics: **Hare Brain, Tortoise Mind**, by Guy Claxton, on different modes of learning and unlearning, and **Zen in the Art of Archery**, by Eugen Herrigel, on approaching Process by learning a Practice.

### **How do you prepare students for a session?**

I teach them how to work on themselves so that they can prepare themselves for a lesson. By practicing appropriate ways of thinking in a simplest case scenario, they work on undoing habits and substituting better ways of functioning that they can then apply during a lesson and also in their lives.

### **You began your exploration with puppetry, dance, Japanese calligraphy, voice, sculpture, painting, drawing, and other artistic media. How did this road lead to the AT?**

Originally I came to the AT, which is well known throughout the performing arts, through the study of classical voice. But it has much in common with the creative process used in all the arts – setting up the initial conditions conducive to the inherent unconscious impulse by removing the self-imposed blocks.

### **What book are you reading now? What book are you eager to read, when time permits a breathing spell?**

Presently I'm reading **Creating Consilience**, eds. Edward Slingerland and Mark Collard. It's about the concept of embodied thought and the influence of lived experience on those topics within the purview of the arts and the humanities.

When I can I intend to finish **Consilience**, by E.O. Wilson, the seminal text on the vertical integration of the arts and sciences. These both deal indirectly with the subtext of the AT.

### **Any plans for a second book?**

I've put together a chapter outline for **The AT in a Different Key – Rising Up to Meet What's Already There**. This will be a comprehensive overview of the basic principles and practices of the Technique and their potential mechanisms.

### **Why did you write this book?**

Until I was four I lived in my grandmother's house, a Victorian gingerbread sort of place in a mini-wood of six acres, and in many ways I've been trying to get back there ever since. (I actually did go back about ten years ago and found it part of a paved-over housing development.) In my mind it was a sort of Eden. On the top floor was a little library that smelled of old volumes, many of them children's books that had belonged my mother and my aunts. The window look out onto the top of an apple tree that was next to the screened-in porch. The house was pervaded by a sense of well-being and calm that I was not to re-encounter for a long time. I began to pore over books simply as objects in those early days. Later they became my refuge from sterility, insecurity, and chaos, and I lived in them.

We lived miles from the town, and when I became old enough I rode my bicycle for several miles to the library. It was a poor affair, but the better neighboring ones wouldn't let you stay there all day and read if you weren't from their school district. So I read my way through the Modern Library series, systematically making my way through the titles listed at the back of each volume. Reading was a way into a world where I seemed to fit in better than I did in the situation in which I found myself. And education would be a way out of that – I studied assiduously. I wanted to know how we know what we know, spurred on by my discomfort with the lack of critical thinking that underlay the blustery self-confidence of those who had charge of me.

So that intense interest in epistemology translated into an interest in science, where something had meaning only to the extent to which it was capable of disproof, and I entered college to pursue the life sciences. In midlife, when I again had the opportunity as family responsibilities slackened, I once again engaged with this area, this time through a different manifestation of the creative process, the arts. At this point I realized that all these disciplines had as their common element the pursuit of process. How we did what we did was of far more significance than what particular practice we chose in order to access this quality. Our conscious action, it seemed, was a pale shadow of what we could do if and when we could get out of our own way.

And then I found the AT, which I recognized immediately as a means, albeit indirect, into pure process. So I began to study it, then did the more intensive teacher training to learn it on a deeper level, and finally, as I neared the end of my training, wrote the book to discover what I had learned and what I truly thought about it all. I needed a tangential approach, because this is the sort of thing that can only be approached indirectly. To be more strictly accurate, the book wrote itself – I never decided what to say – chapter by chapter.