

The First Day

As I waited for my first student on my first day of teaching, my eyes fell on the door through which she would soon enter, probably wondering to herself what she would encounter on the inside. The world she would find would be a very different place from what had housed my predecessor in this building, for that person had created a fairyland – literally, as she sold fairy-related memorabilia of her own making. Pastel fairy dolls of various sizes and materials (but always including liberal amounts of gauze) had lined the shelves, and small enameled fairies in brilliant colors had hung from the three sparkling blue and yellow cut-glass chandeliers I'd had to replace. The adjoining walls of pink and green had been covered with flower-fairy paintings and drawings, and bright banners featuring fairies and elves had festooned the borders of the ceiling. A prominent display cabinet had held a multitude of fairy-themed jewelry and figurines of burnished metal and glazed ceramic.

The doorway had set the tone, announcing the entrance to a fanciful realm. On the glass panel on the top of the door the shopkeeper had applied large red letters made of gel that spelled out BELIEVE. They had been left behind and were still there, a bit baked on, when I arrived. It had been my first and most symbolic act to scrape them off and confine them to a small Tupperware container. Relocating them to my studio at home, I made them the paperweight for the summer's work in progress, the text and illustrations for the book I was putting together as an Independent Study project. As time went on, the imprisoned letters began to curl and contort as they underwent slow dehydration, out of contact now with the glass surface that had protected them. In the drier parts, the red had darkened almost to brown, and the letters assumed the appearance of islands of what could have been beef jerky among what looked like twisted shreds of aging red jello. There was an eerie fascination to observing this degenerative process, perhaps akin to what it must have been like to watch the gruesome deterioration of the guillotined heads set up on pikes and left lining Revolutionary Parisian streets for weeks following the executions.

A new regime had come to this little building now, and the fantasy empire had moved on (to more capacious quarters on Main Street—fantasy sells, apparently). In this now much refurbished place, I was determined to demystify the Technique. Because of its subjective nature, this modality, I thought, needed to be firmly grounded in its scientific basis, being presented in such a way as to engage the student's facility for critical thinking. So when my first student arrived, this is just what I did. Succinctly yet thoroughly, I explained throughout the course of the hands-on lesson what, after extensive study and thought, I had found to be the essence of the work. At the end, I inquired with great interest what she had gotten from it, eager to learn which aspects of this revolutionary process of employing the mind to change the physical habits of a lifetime had most intrigued her. And this was her reply: "That was awesome! I feel lighter and taller and so free. I wouldn't have believed it possible or understood anything about it at all without the experience." Well, how she chose to interpret it was up to her, and at least she had had the Alexander experience.

So I tried again, but the rest of the day's teaching was like that – and also unlike. Each person was different, but each reacted with his own version of a sense of wonder. I may have taken those letters down, but that door was proving a portal of transformation for everyone who entered. However much I tried to deny that we were dealing with anything more than redistribution of muscle tone, abetted perhaps by some endocrine and autonomic nervous system input, what the students made of it, in the end, was theirs to decide. But it did seem clear that, to a greater or lesser extent, they had at least all had the experience, which in the end was what mattered.