

The Way that Cannot Be Told, and How to Tell It

Since the end of June I had been spending Tuesday nights at the Hudson Valley Writers' Center (so said the sign, properly punctuated) to jump-start the writing of this book. It was the proper place to come for such a purpose, as this was the epicenter of the Hudson Valley of literary tradition. We were but a few miles from Sunnyside, the landmark gingerbread house that had been home to Washington Irving, the nineteenth-century author who had put this area and its folklore on the map. He had set his classic tales in this area, and indeed to get to class each week I had been driving through Sleepy Hollow, where all the street signs pictured the iconic Headless Horseman, and had been turning left at the traffic light by the Old North Church where Ichabod Crane had met his end. Where I had left the highway to enter this town was the bridge I took early every Sunday morning toward the Catskill Mountains to study dressage the Alexander way. This was the region where Irving had set Rip Van Winkle to bowling the spectral game of ninepins with the ghostly crew of the Half Moon that sent him into his epic 20-year sleep.

Our class on writing the personal essay met in the artfully refurbished old Philips Manor station house, which had been abandoned by Metro North, whose trains still rumbled periodically throughout our proceedings on the tracks along the river below. Each week we watched the sun set over the Hudson from the windows of the old waiting room, whose original oak paneled walls and ceiling had been carefully restored. The lighting fixtures, which appeared to be wall-mounted lanterns of the period, had probably once been sconces. But the centerpiece was a massive seminar table, around which the eight of us gathered each week to read and discuss each person's works in progress and in particular the new piece he had written that week.

Most people wrote about events in their lives that bore some special significance for them, often describing some dramatic or telling incident that

illuminated an important principle or had occasioned a particular insight. There was much talk of the importance of setting the scene in sufficient detail to enable the reader to be drawn into the story as if he were there himself. At first the accounts of my experiences in beginning to teach the Technique provoked curiosity, and even a couple of tentative inquiries about the possibility of taking some lessons.

But with time, the comments and questions became more pointed. Where did I put my hands, what did I do then, and how did I do it? "It's just the Alexander Technique," one fellow writer said, "and everybody knows what that is, so why be so mysterious?" And so I tried to explain that to describe it too mechanistically would be to limit it, to try to articulate it would be to distort it, and, to quote the Tao, the Way that could be told would not be the Way. Because I had been at this Alexander stuff long enough to be incapable of more than tangential allusion, I was reluctant to set down anything more specific in writing. But still my classmates insisted: there had to be more of an explanation.

Thinking that they could be right, I turned to my summer students, all beginners, to provide that introduction for the uninitiated. They would, if they wished, be responsible for coming up with their own take on "What is the Alexander Technique." Each would have the chance to contribute a page, in the medium of his choice, expressing his reaction to whatever aspect(s) of the summer experience had most engaged him. Because the lesson is in a fundamental sense a matter of partnership between student and teacher, it seemed appropriate that they should have the opportunity to tell their side of the story as well, and so they have, in the *Collection of Student Impressions*.