

Teaching a Student with Inclusion Body Myositis

by Lauren Hill and Dennis Chada

The Teacher's Perspective

I enjoy working with all of my students and learn from every one of them. Every so often, however, a student comes along who reminds me of the essence of what I am teaching and also challenges me to grow as a teacher. Dennis Chada is one of those students. Since Fall 2011, I have had the sincere privilege of working with him on a weekly basis.

Some days I find myself making the Alexander Technique more complicated than it needs to be. Even though I have experienced repeatedly that things work best if I just stick with its simple principles, I need to remind myself often that simplicity works best. Working with Dennis has been a constant reminder to stop complicating things and to be patient, that the distinguishing feature of the Alexander Technique is the practice of consciously doing less of what we don't need to be doing—that inhibition is a powerful tool.

Dennis was diagnosed in 2010 with Inclusion Body Myositis (IBM), an inflammatory disease that causes progressive weakening of the arms and legs. There is currently no cure or effective drug regimen for treating this condition. Because I had no previous experience with IBM, either in my personal or professional life, I had no preconceived ideas of what his condition would be like and how we would work. This was a good thing, for it is exactly how I aim to approach every student in every lesson.

When Dennis arrived for his first lesson, he stood up straighter than anyone else I had ever taught. In his words, he liked to “stand at attention” and had affected a very rigid upright posture all of his life, even prior to the onset of IBM. The progressive muscle weakness of IBM can result in spontaneous falling, a typical symptom of the disease. Since Dennis had experienced several episodes of falling, he felt insecure when standing and his response was to tighten and pull up seeking to find some sense of stability. Unfortunately, in the IBM community it seems to be standard advice to lock the knees and brace the legs in order to avoid falling over. Dennis had taken this advice to heart. Besides being fatiguing, locking the knees threw his weight even further back onto his heels than it was already in his habitual posture. Being more off balance led to more instability, which led to more bracing and fatigue, which put him off balance, and on and on in an endless cycle.

He was equally skilled at, in his words, “lying at attention” when we would work on the table. Learning to become aware of excessive effort and doing less would prove to be the major challenge for Dennis—and the focus of many jokes in his lessons. His sense of humor has helped his progress.

Learning to do less has been the key to balance, stability, and energy. Table work has been instrumental in his learning to do less. Lying on the table is a secure place for Dennis. As I told him, “You can't fall down because you are already down.” From his first lesson, he established a regular practice of Constructive Rest on his own, and this regular practice outside of lessons is very evident in his progress to date.

Fear plays a huge role in Dennis' tension. Acknowledging and working with his profound anxiety about falling has been a central part of our lessons. Dennis has a recurrent nightmare about falling in the middle of a busy street and not being able to get up by himself. He could get up if he had something to grab onto, but if there were nothing to grab onto, what would he do? Over several lessons we explored how to get up the way he probably did as a one- or two-year-old: from all fours, push the sitting bones up toward the ceiling into a bear crawl, walk the hands toward the feet, and send the bottom back as if to sit in a chair until the weight is clearly over the whole foot. Dennis feels very secure when the weight is over his whole foot (not just over his heels) and he can simply unfold at the knees and



Dennis Chada and Lauren Hill

hips and come to standing.

When he is getting out of a chair, the focus also has been on getting his weight up and over his whole foot so he feels secure. We focus on allowing the weight to come forward and up over his whole foot, so he can lift his bottom off the chair. Then and only then does he decide what to do—continue to standing or sit down again.

I taught Dennis to use his arms in getting up, which helps tremendously in keeping at bay the fear and subsequent tension. I showed him that pushing down on his thighs with the palms of his hands actually pushes him back into the chair at the very moment he wants to rise from the chair. Instead of doing this now, he puts his thumbs under his thighs, grasps the chair seat in a pincer grip, and presses the chair away from him to send his weight forward and up over his whole foot to come to standing.

Dennis' new ability to move with less effort has resulted in more energy—a precious commodity for him. One day he told me of a recent visit to the Mayo Clinic, a huge complex with a labyrinth of tunnels connecting all the buildings—in short, miles of halls to traverse from one appointment to the next. Dennis had recounted in past lessons that these marathon visits to the clinic were very taxing. This time, however, Dennis reported that as he walked the long passageways he was not constantly looking for the next chair, because he had more energy—yet another reminder of the profound effect of doing

less. This was such wonderful news! More energy is just what Dennis needs to continue to live the full life he wants to lead.

Simplicity and patience: Inhibition is a powerful tool!

The Student's Perspective

Shortly after my diagnosis of IBM, while I was looking for non-traditional treatment options, a friend of mine on Twitter suggested that I investigate the Alexander Technique.

I looked on the Internet and found Lauren Hill's studio near my home. I contacted Lauren to discuss introductory lessons, but before our first meeting I went to a conference in Las Vegas for The Myositis Association. While there I met another participant with IBM who very much encouraged me to pursue the Alexander Technique. This man was wheelchair-bound and in his opinion the Alexander Technique had prolonged the time before he was confined to the wheelchair.

I met Lauren in her studio. She showed great good humor in dealing with the quirks that I brought along because of my condition. One of the hallmarks of IBM is that the progression of the disease leaves a person very insecure and even fearful. Spontaneous falling without warning is one of the symptoms of the disease and can make every step an uncertain experience. One of the most important parts of my lessons with Lauren has been overcoming the fear of falling, the fear of being on the ground and unable to get up, the fear of being unable to rise from a chair.

Lauren spent much time helping me learn to shed my rigid posture in favor of a more poised and balanced way of standing and moving. She also opened her "library" to me, providing books and reprints of articles about F.M. Alexander, the development of the Technique, its history, and past and current practice. After several lessons and much reading, my body began to lose some of its rigidity. Then I was able to articulate a goal of balance and poise in movement and stance and a more harmonious approach to everyday life.

Lauren has shown great sensitivity in helping me learn to deal in a positive way with my particular fears (for instance, the

fear of falling and not being able to get up.) In our interactions, I have become more mindful and able to help my body find new ways to accomplish the goals that I set with my sometimes limited abilities. Lauren and I have explored getting up off the floor unaided and rising from a chair without struggling. I have learned that standing rigidly was actually unstable and left me more prone to falling than standing in a poised manner. Another symptom of IBM is constant fatigue, so that every activity is

more strenuous than it would be for a "normal" person. I have learned to stand and move in a manner that expends less energy and allows me to do more.

Moving in a poised manner without overly straining my muscles has allowed me to conserve energy,

retain mobility, and be less fearful of my disease. Learning to change the way I handle the challenge of everyday activity has been a slow process, but very worthwhile. I would recommend the Alexander Technique for people in a situation similar to mine.

Lauren has a quote from Mark Twain pinned to the bulletin board in her studio that I think sums up her philosophy and my experience: "Habit is habit and not to be flung out of the window by any man, but coaxed downstairs a step at a time."

Lauren Hill trained with Joan and Alex Murray at Alexander Technique Center Urbana and has been teaching in St. Paul, Minnesota since 2003. Lauren served on the AmSAT Board of Directors from 2008–2012.

Dennis Chada is a retired 61-year-old man of pleasant demeanor (at least after he gets his morning coffee). He spent the last 30 years of his working life as a Mechanical Inspector for the City of St. Paul, Minnesota. Dennis enjoys photography, writing, travel, and visiting casinos to play blackjack. Dennis hopes his often rigid posture does not lead to rigidity in his thinking!

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