

FARM BOY

by John A. Baron and Lyn Charlsen Klein

John Baron and Lyn Charlsen Klein were presenters at the Alexander Technique Convention in Dublin, Ireland March 22–29, 2013.

Day Two, Alexander Technique Convention, Dublin.



John Baron

JOHN: On the second day of the conference, Lyn and I have breakfast with Erica Donnison, a British teacher. We talk about the challenges of presenting classes both at the Convention and elsewhere: general performance anxiety, choosing themes, over-preparing/under-preparing, and all the familiar dances we put ourselves through as we prepare for presentations.

LYN: Even though I've been teaching for a good many years, I am a bit anxious before making a presentation. Last night at dinner, part of the conversation was about what produces anxiety; how each of us deals with it, how we manage. John then tells us a story about a well-known somebody who began a talk with a story about himself—a story about the image he carries with him—an image that was different from the person the audience sees....



Lyn Charlsen Klein

The Story

JOHN: While working as an Alexander Technique teacher in Rome, Italy over 25 years ago, I was connected to a Wellness Center that offered various services including acupuncture, psychological counseling, and Alexander Technique. We would occasionally have presentations, and one presentation was given by Dr. Carl Whitaker (1912–1995), an American psychiatrist recognized as the originator of Family Systems Therapy. Carl Whitaker lectured all over the world to large groups of professionals presenting this new model for psychotherapy that addressed the context of emotional disturbance within the family structure itself.

We met at the Center early one morning. The group was no larger than nine people, including the secretary, Carl, and his wife, Muriel. He took a little while to start, looking around the group with an occasional smile. He told us that he had been up since 3:00 AM. He said that before giving any kind of presentation, he was invariably up the night before worrying about it. This really bemused us. Here was an eminent professional with an international reputation invited to just chat to a very small and friendly group in Rome—and he was up the night before worrying about it?

Someone asked “Why?” He took a while to answer and then just said, “Because I’ll always be a farm boy!” We were all puzzled by this. He went on to explain that he grew up on a

farm and, although he had gone to medical school, become a psychiatrist, and was acknowledged as the pioneer of Family Systems Therapy, all that didn't really seem to matter, because he never really felt like Dr. Whitaker; instead he felt that he was just a farm boy. Carl the farm boy!

From Story To Workshop

LYN: This story resonates with Erica and me. Immediately I have an image of my own—the one that I carry around, that frightens me because I think it runs my life and isn't who I truly am: “White Gloves.” But this is personal and I don't say anything.

Erica suggests that John and Lyn give a workshop exploring the images we carry around within us.

LYN: A workshop? Confessing the images that are part of us, that we carry into the teaching and our daily lives, that interfere with everything? Are we ready for this?

Later that day, John and I pass in the hall and wonder if we have identified our own inner images. As it turns out, we have.

JOHN: We agree to just think it over a little more and to meet later for “I'll tell you mine if you'll tell me yours.”

In the evening, John and Lyn meet to tell their stories.

JOHN: Before this Convention, Lyn and I have never been more than just acquaintances, but now we find ourselves alone in an empty room sharing our personal images and what they symbolize for us: what we hide, what holds us back, what memories are associated with our fears, anxieties, and performance tensions—especially when it comes to presenting our work to others. Not exactly an informal chat.

LYN: What an interesting experience it is to describe to someone I don't know well at all a personal dream about white gloves that I have been living with and affected by for years.

Lyn's White Gloves

The image is of a young girl's arms. She is sitting at a desk and all I see are her arms, ending in white gloves. Her body is barely discernable.

When I was in high school, I belonged to a social club, and at a tea we were all required to wear white gloves and to behave in a very particular, conventional, southern, polite, predictable way. Pouring punch was the epitome of appropriate social conduct. I flubbed it. I was lectured about it. I never forgot it.

This image of the good girl who (to paraphrase the dream) is wearing white gloves is a part of my psyche that I have been struggling with for years.

I talk to John about the history, the meaning, the significance of this image and how it seems part of my anxiety

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around teaching: being right, being good, being politically and socially correct.

John's Dustbinman

The image I have comes from a memory. I'm 11 years old. There are three people in a room in my family's home: my father, his cousin (who in my opinion was a bit of a jerk), and myself. I have been ceremoniously ordered to sit in a chair. For some reason, my Dad is in full flight lecturing me about the efforts I need to make in order to get on in the world. The cousin is nodding his head, making guttural noises of approval, which seem to be adding to the intensity of Dad's oration. Apparently I'm a big disappointment! (Whoops!) My Dad is getting carried away with all this, and it culminates with him pointing his finger at me and shouting, "You'll be a dustbinman! That's all you'll ever be!" And he turns his back in disgust!

Now for all of us, there have been many more earth-shattering moments to deal with than the above story. I can imagine that I could have shrugged it off after a few minutes like I shrugged off lots of other stuff, but somehow this moment stuck.

Lyn and I just listen to our respective stories and images without analyzing them. We understand that speaking about the image with each other is challenging. If we ask any questions, they are about a part of the image or a part of the story around the image. Just observing our "use" while telling the story or listening to it gives us the added perception of the emotional intensity behind this conversation.

LYN: Here we are revealing secret, deeply felt memories, ideas, thoughts, and emotions and it feels perfectly natural and right to do so. We talk about the physical manifestations of those remembered experiences. I realize, again, how powerful it is to put the body/mind experience together—how I am when I remember, rediscover, talk about these old experiences.

JOHN: What would happen if, instead of giving separate three-hour workshops tomorrow, we combine our classes and together present a workshop on this overall theme and see where it goes?

LYN: Suddenly we are talking about actually giving a workshop based on peoples' relationship to the images they carry, how those images are lived physically, and how they affect our work and the way we function and relate. I'm hesitant!

JOHN: We have a few reservations; people are expecting the scheduled classes on "Performance Tension" and "Applying Alexander Technique to Whatever Shows Up." We decide that if this isn't the basis of "Performance Tension" and about "Applying Alexander Technique to Whatever Shows Up," then nothing will be. The convention organizers have stressed the theme of "seizing present ideas," and as this idea stems from a conversation at the convention....

LYN: I'm still hesitant. I've put my white gloves on—John recognizes that and humorously points it out. We laugh. How embarrassing to be caught out—and what a relief.

JOHN: We decide to "just do it!"

Day Three, Alexander Technique Convention, Dublin.

JOHN: Approximately 80–90 attendees are gathered in the large meeting room to plan the day. At the end of the announcements, the presenters explain the day's workshops. Lyn and I explain that we will combine our classes and experiment with working on "the parts of ourselves that hold us back, both in general and in our teaching—in other words, the parts of our 'selves' we tend to hide and the images and memories that are associated with this: the fears, anxiety, and performance tensions." I recount the Farm Boy story, saying that we will be exploring our own versions of the Farm Boy image in class to see if and how the Alexander Technique helps us connect to our deep-seated personal images.

LYN: And, strangely, about 20 people show up!

JOHN: The class is held in the large exchange room. Sitting in a large circle, we begin by recounting how the class has come about and how Lyn and I have already discussed in detail our own respective images. Then Lyn describes her image "White Gloves."

LYN: We want to create a safe space. After all, we are all in this together. I would never ask anyone else to be this vulnerable if I'm not willing to be vulnerable myself.

"Everyone pays full attention, silently connecting with each speaker. No one interrupts, no one tries to analyze, no one gives advice. We just listen."

Fay Putnam, USA: To have presenters bare their inner selves in such an honest manner was not expected and created a very safe environment. Because we felt safe, we were able to be open to the learning adventure that followed.

JOHN: My turn. OK—a dustbinman! Knowing that many in the class will not know about dustbins, I give a little background: Many years ago, one of my jobs in the family home was to light the coal fire in the morning. Part of that involved raking the ashes from the night before. I'd take a poker, scrape the grate so the ash fell underneath, and then with a small shovel I'd gather the ashes, take them outside, and put them in the dustbin. Every Monday the dustbinmen came to the house, picked up these heavy dustbins, and carried them on their backs to empty them into the cart. With the ashes that had accumulated for a week, plus additional rubbish the bins contained, these bins were quite heavy as well as dusty and dirty. I remember standing by the window, waiting for the dustbinmen, and knocking loudly, waving frantically, and shouting "hello" when they arrived. Apparently I used to boast they were "my friends." I was around three or four at this time. It was only later that I borrowed an attitude of social disdain toward them and their status. Then I recounted the story of listening to my father's tirade, the story that includes his head-nodding cousin and the punch line: "You'll be a dustbinman!"

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After Lyn and I explain these personal images to the class we suggest that everyone find a space in the room by themselves and, without speaking, simply give some thought to their own inner “Farm Boy/White Gloves/Dustbinman.” What might be the image that hides behind the presented image?

Jackie Beim UK: *Lyn and John share their stories, those stories carried since childhood, myths (lies?), and blueprints about what we should and shouldn't be, could and couldn't do—about our very selves.*

We are in a room equipped with several Alexander Technique teaching tables, numerous chairs, and a few flip charts. This group of Alexander Technique teachers, originally seated in a well-organized circle, now arrange themselves all over the place—sitting on window ledges, at 90 degree angles, facing walls, on tables with knees to chins, even on all fours in the corner underneath a table—all thinking of an image that symbolizes a part of themselves that has been internalized over time.

LYN: John has brought paper, crayons, felt tip pens. We ask people to take time to “be with” the images that come to them.

JOHN: After several minutes, and not wanting to get off track by immediately going into words, we ask people to take some sketching paper, crayons, and colored pencils and quietly start to draw, while keeping in mind the image they've just been focusing on.

Niall Kelly, EIRE: *My picture starts as a series of vertical slashing strokes through the center of the page without any real idea of what my picture is going to be. As I continue to draw I begin recalling my experience at the age of 9 or 10, choking at the beginning of a recital of “The Lake Isle of Innisfree.” I start drawing myself as a child and return to the vertical strokes, softening them into a clown-like figure standing behind me.*

Jackie Beim, UK: *My picture features two pairs of red shoes. One is comfortable, flat, foot-shaped, and beautiful—locked and chained up in a box labeled “DANGER,” which is hidden under a pile of scribbles. The other is a pair of pointy high heels—uncomfortable, my mother's kind of shoes, shoes I am supposed to like but don't—in the center of the page surrounded by the words: “Nice,” “Good,” “Small.” There is an element of Cinderella in the picture; I want to go to the ball but I don't want to wear glass slippers.*

Theta Michele Drivon, USA: *I draw a picture of books, report cards, and the glasses I wore for all of elementary school, thinking of my “bookworm” persona that hid me from the world. I also draw pictures of stuffed animals.*

JOHN: Lyn and I pick out crayons and paper and start to draw also. Glancing around the room, we can see some people go hard at it, transforming frenetic energy into firm, colorful strokes. Others remain motionless, while some make shy, hesitant gestures with their crayons. One or two, who seemed hesitant at first, suddenly start drawing quickly on flip charts, perhaps because they offer a larger canvas. The drawing

continues until it feels time to bring the group back together. We form a circle, drawings mainly facing inwards, and look around at the group.

LYN: We invite people to present their drawings to the group, but only if they wish to do so.

JOHN: As people have come to the convention from different countries, many in this group do not know each other. It is challenging to open up to strangers, especially when they are also peers and colleagues. We sit there a little while, until Lyn and I simply place our own drawings face outward so the group can see. And they just look. They remember our stories as they look at our drawings. Slowly, some of the others begin to turn their own drawings for others to see.

Obviously there are no budding Picassos in the group. Perspective, design, chiaroscuro don't even come into it; but, strangely, the scribbles, block colors, faint shapes, size, lack of color, bold heavy strokes of crayon seem more than just that. We sit in a quiet circle, some individuals holding a drawing facing themselves, others with a drawing facing forwards, some participants looking very intense, others not looking intense, a few not wanting to look up.

“Do you want to say something or just show your drawing or do both?”

Jackie Beim, UK: *We shared our pictures with the group and said as much or as little as we wanted. As I spoke to the circle, out of the confusion and feeling of being in two fairy tales, and a couple of films as well, came a clear voice: “How dare I be 5 foot 10!? I'm supposed to be small.”*

Theta Michele Drivon, USA: *As a small child, I made a rule that I had to love my stuffed animals equally, deliberately playing with ones I didn't care for and refraining from doting on the ones I did, so none would feel left out. This admission leaves me wondering how much I accustom myself to shutting down, keeping myself from feeling and expressing the depth to which I love the people in my life.*

Niall Kelly, EIRE: *My “carry-on” is the child in fear of choking at any public speaking, or recital event. This has always caused me to over-prepare. An exhausting effort!*

There is much detail in the pictures and the explanations. Everyone pays full attention, silently connecting with each speaker. No one interrupts, no one tries to analyze, no one gives advice. We just listen. Although the class is three hours long, it seems that it could last all day.

LYN: Everyone shows a drawing and tells a story (even if they feel the need to apologize for it). We listen, we accept, we observe—and I think, in a very simple way, we give support for the recognition, acceptance, and change that is, for me, a major part of the Alexander Technique. How can I make a choice if I cannot see—experience—my patterns: of thought, of movement, of physical reality? The stories are powerful, moving, thought-provoking, heartbreaking, honest.

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JOHN: After hearing from everyone, we decide to divide into pairs, encouraging people to avoid using words. The idea is for one partner to apply Alexander Technique by quietly working “hands-on” with the other partner. But now there is a huge difference in the context of our work, because the person being worked on keeps the image from his/her own drawing in mind, knowing the person working “hands-on” fully knows that image and what it represents.

LYN: What will happen when we become conscious of these personal images and intentionally hold them in awareness while letting someone help us let go of the pattern, if letting go is what is needed? What will happen if we experience the pattern in a different way? We don’t know what will happen; we’re going into the unknown. Isn’t that another aspect of Alexander Technique: letting ourselves experience what we do not yet know?

Theta Michele Drivon, USA: I keep in mind the possibility that I can let myself be singularly focused on the person I am working with, without worrying that anyone else might feel left out. I find myself much less concerned than usual with “doing the right thing” and just follow with great interest what is opening up for the person I’m working with. When we change places, I let myself stay open—this time to receiving attention, as if I can really let myself have what I want. I feel wholly moved to feel so attended to, with sadness but also a great possibility welling up in me.

Niall Kelly, EIRE: I’m able to allow the clown from the picture to come closer and soothe the child, reminding him choking is not the end of the world and, in fact, can even be the start of a more exciting and entertaining presentation.

Jackie Beim, UK: I work with my partner on the table and the work seems to flow. I feel quietly and calmly confident, connected within myself, present, flexible. My habits of feeling too big, wanting to impress, feeling unconfident, pulling down, or losing contact with the floor have diminished or vanished. I don’t feel I am just going through the motions, following a choreographed routine. Above all, I feel a huge sense of compassion: for myself, for my partner, for everyone in the room. And a sense of connection: I am not the only one!

JOHN: With barely fifteen minutes left before we are scheduled to finish, Lyn and I call everyone back to the circle. Many speak about sharing hands-on work in this context as being revealing. It is amazing to see how observant people have been, not only with their partners, but also with the group as a whole.

Each individual chooses how far to go in describing the image and the experience of revealing that image in the group, simply staying with the process, observing, accepting, and holding that expression in a safe personal space, perhaps similar to the safe space this class has created. Opening and closing, breathing and holding, collapsing and tightening, expressing or hiding ourselves, all can be welcomed into this work of ours.

Jackie Beim, UK: It occurs to me later, after the class is over, that I could see these self-limiting ideas/stories/lies as habits; there will be times, often, when I will feel too big, unconfident, not in contact with myself or the world; and I can

remember that it is OK to be me, more than OK! Some wonderful Alexander teachers have suggested we love our habits—that at the heart of our work is self-acceptance; the work today enabled us to experience that as well as know it.

LYN: As the day continues into the evening and the next day and the next, I realize that something has shifted in me. I’m living with my image in a much more conscious way, as though the girl with the white gloves is beside me, inside me, and not behind me living in secret and that she is not in charge. I have choices. I am not as anxious about my classes, or about meeting people at dinner, in the hall, or during break time.

JOHN: I’m beginning to think that the *words* my father used that day “You’ll be a dustbinman” had less impact than the deep-seated *image* has had! Ashes, after all, are what Phoenixes rise from. And though the ashes in the image are inside a dirty and tight dustbin carried around by a person who is considered to be the lowest of the low, the dustbins are emptied from time to time! Yes, at times I do feel I have crammed myself inside a very tight bin, making sure the lid is firmly on: “Hide, don’t let them see what’s in the dustbin, don’t let them look under the lid!” So, of course, I suppose I had to be a dustbinman when I grew/grow up—who else is going to empty the bin?

LYN: If in this workshop we’ve created a place, space for the whole person to show up and be seen—to experience the possibilities that come with owning and experiencing all of ourselves—and to allow ourselves the opportunity to be, literally, touched while in contact with an aspect of ourselves that is challenging—then maybe we have done something worthwhile.

Jackie Beim, UK: There is such a wealth of information in my picture. I can look at it again; I can draw another one. As I do so, I can imagine myself back in that room in Dublin that day and draw on that well of compassion and creativity. Beautiful. Thank you.

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