

CFA's Polatin calls the Alexander technique "the actor's secret"

# Teaching the Expanded Self

Betsy Polatin says the Alexander technique can improve movement and speech and help treat post-traumatic stress disorder.

CYDNEY SCOTT (2)

BETSY POLATIN'S subtle craft is not easy to describe, but her students are happy to expound on the results: after her course, they say, they are more focused, more confident, and more at ease with their bodies. A longtime practitioner of the Alexander technique and a master lecturer at the College of Fine Arts School of Theatre, Polatin refers to the century-old system as "a practical method for self-improvement." In the introduction to her book *The Actor's Secret: Techniques for Transforming Habitual Patterns and Improving Performance* (North Atlantic Books, 2013), Polatin recalls that after her first Alexander lesson many years ago, she thought, "This is still me, but not the me I always knew."

With a light, empathetic touch, teachers of the Alexander technique help people identify and rid themselves of habits caused by a lifetime of stress. As children, most of us moved fluidly, without self-consciousness or tension.



But over time, our bodies have a way of sabotaging our well-being with quirks in our everyday movements, such as the way we hold our heads, sit in a chair, speak, sing, or lean forward to open a door. We could all benefit from simple adjustments, says Polatin, who works mainly

with actors and musicians.

The long list of performers who have used the technique includes Oscar-winning actors Judi Dench, Hilary Swank, Ben Kingsley, William Hurt, and the late Paul Newman and musicians Paul McCartney, Madonna, and Sting. But anyone can benefit from it, and studies have found that it's helpful not just for movement and speech, but to treat post-traumatic stress disorder.

The technique was developed in the early 20th cen-

tury by Frederick Matthias Alexander, a Shakespearean actor who began losing his voice. When doctors could find no physical pathology to explain it, Alexander hypothesized that his breathing and body positioning were to blame.

"When we let go of some of our habits and patterns that keep us locked in a certain way, we see there are all these other choices," says Polatin, who has been teaching the Alexander technique for decades. "The work is so much about changing those patterns." For example, a person may walk a little bit hunched forward, but doesn't realize it, she says. "And so when you point it out, and get them upright, the world looks different to them. Their vision is different. They feel different."

Like grandma's chicken soup, the Alexander technique can't hurt; it involves none of the often-vigorous, sometimes-perilous physical demands of some yoga styles or yoga-Pilates blends. But in the hands of an experienced practitioner like Polatin, those who practice the technique find it alleviates repetitive strain injuries,

**WEB EXTRA**  
Watch a video of Betsy Polatin, a CFA master lecturer, teaching students the Alexander technique at [bu.edu/bostonia](http://bu.edu/bostonia).

backaches, tightness in the neck and shoulders, and cramping from hours anchored in front of a computer screen. For singers, musicians, actors, dancers, and athletes, it can mean a dramatic improvement in one's game, according to Polatin.

"Before discovering the Alexander technique, I was someone who approached life and my art through tension, and as a result it was tougher for my vulnerability to come through," says Jesse Garlick (CFA'14), an acting major. "Now, after working with the technique for three and a half years, I find that it is far easier to express myself in every walk of life because of the ease and grace I have found in the class."

The technique is something that, once you learn it, you continue to do on your own, says Polatin. "One of Alexander's ideas was that it didn't make sense to exercise for an hour a day and for the rest of the time walk around all slumped over and not really caring about what you're doing with yourself." Through subtle, deliberate exercises, like head movements or slow, carefully aligned bends and squats, the technique, she says, "encourages you to think about what you are doing until you catch yourself and say, 'Oh, I want to do something a little more efficiently.'" Breathing is crucial, too. "Most people tend to breathe shallowly—as students do things like texting, they hold their breath, or actors preparing to go on stage hold their breath, and the technique helps them realize that."

Students come to Polatin expecting to learn ways to improve their performance. But the experience is often life-changing. She calls it "the expanded self." And it can be quite powerful. "What happens is the students will do a monologue and then we work, and we get more space inside, more opening in the whole body and less constriction, and they begin to speak, and all of a sudden they get scared because of the resonance, the booming sound of their own voice." And then, she says, the students get used to that. "And that's part of the work. Getting used to your own expanded self." **SUSAN SELIGSON**

# Olympic Gold Medalist Is New Women's Basketball Coach

*Katy Steding looks to mesh her style and players' style*

Katy Steding, BU's new women's basketball coach, is looking forward to "a happy marriage" of her coaching style and her players' on-court style, she said in her public debut at BU in June. Steding comes from the University of California, Berkeley, where as an assistant women's basketball coach she helped lead her team to two NCAA tournaments.

The women Terriers will "have to adjust to what we want to do, but I'll actually have to adjust to what they can do and want to do and how they play," Steding told reporters at the press conference. "If you try to morph players into something that they're not familiar playing like, you're going to have problems."

Michael Lynch, then BU athletics director, introduced Steding, the seventh coach to lead BU's women's basketball team, as a woman whose "experience is second to none," both as player and coach. Before her Berkeley job, Steding was head coach of women's basketball for seven years at Oregon's Warner Pacific College, where she oversaw the program's transition from club level to varsity team. She left in 2008 for a season as assistant coach of the WNBA's Atlanta Dream.

Steding was on the 1996 US Olympic gold medal-winning women's basketball team, and has played professionally in the WNBA, with the Seattle Storm and Sacramento Monarchs, and with the American Basketball League's Portland Power.

She said the coach's position here was her dream job, because of the Universi-

MOLLIE MCCLURE



Steding comes to BU from the University of California, Berkeley, where as an assistant women's basketball coach she helped lead her team to two NCAA tournaments.

ty's rigorous academics, its membership in the Patriot League, and the appeal of living in Boston.

Steding replaces Kelly Greenberg, who resigned in April amid allegations from some players that she bullied them, leading four to quit in the last year. In her chat with reporters, Steding said she didn't know if the controversy would linger with her players. "I don't intend for it to linger. What I've said to everybody is, I think the most important thing is that this is *our* team, and we're going to move forward. I think the girls are excited about the future, and that's all I can ask for....They're good players, so I don't think it's that far off to expect success." The Terriers start the season at crosstown rival Northeastern on November 14.

A student-athlete at Stanford, Steding was a power forward and helped her team to its first NCAA Women's Division I basketball championship in 1990. She graduated that year with a psychology degree. A native Oregonian, she was inducted into Stanford's Sports Hall of Fame in 2002 and the Oregon Sports Hall of Fame in 2004. **RICH BARLOW**

CYDNEY SCOTT

