

Space to Create

PYENG THREADGILL

I WANT TO TRUST IT. Trust this feeling. Trust it will lead me someplace special.

I've always felt there was something magical about traveling. That buildup of rushing, almost chaotic energy to pack every last toothbrush and sock, to make sure to wash every dish and take out the trash before you pile into the car exasperated yet somewhat liberated. Plopping into your airplane, taxi, or train seat you finally exhale. However jarring it is to leave the daily routine, there's a sense of possibility that feels alluring. I've always connected traveling with a way of creating space and time where they once felt dense and limited. Like many artists I initially began studying the Alexander Technique, or Mindful Movement, because I was looking for a similar kind of additional space and range in my voice to be able to express my creativity. Right away the Alexander Technique started to give me an experience of spaciousness in my body that slowly trickled into the sound and feel of my voice.

Expansion makes me think of times like summer—the time of year when I can comfortably leave all the windows in my house open to welcome the summer breeze (barring heat waves of course) and finally shed layers of clothing and let my skin breathe, when my body feels warm day and night and finally my skin is succulent. I think of places like where my mother lives in Encinitas, California. With just a five-minute drive from her house I can land at Moonlight Beach and enjoy the everlasting shoreline as I walk barefoot on the sand and smell the freshness of salt in the California air. I see how expansion affects people around me as well—our bodies breathe and something opens in our voices and minds.

Ironically, not much has changed in my life circumstances but *I've* changed my perspective. How is it that stress, chronic tension, or even pain can be eased by just a regular shift in mindset?

My first experiences of the Alexander Technique were nearly twenty years ago, and they felt like mysterious encounters with the fifth dimension... like magic experiments. I was told to imagine but don't imagine, think up but don't *push my body* up, let go but don't press down. One on one lessons were like a strange riddle that somehow resulted in me feeling more buoyant and open afterwards. My mind calmed down though I hadn't explicitly meditated, my spine seemed longer though I hadn't officially stretched. I didn't feel the need to hurry as much, I noticed my breath more, and felt more content with where and how I was. I thought: "Everyone should experience this!"

But translating the Alexander Technique to others wasn't that simple. For one, it wasn't easy to describe the immediate benefits since they were best experienced rather than explained. Second, as teacher trainees and fresh teachers, we often discussed not overpromising results from the technique. But as a performer and artist it felt strange to not share this mysterious thing that was having a profound effect on how I moved through the world—not to mention the fact that everyone was asking me what it was that I was doing four or five days a week. Secretly, this translation and making Mindful Movement more accessible to everyday folks and artists became one of my motivations as a voice and movement teacher. There were many helpful methods for greater mobility and fluidity, but I also had a good suspicion that few other techniques had such simple steps for untangling years and years of complex contractions in the body. I just felt the Alexander Technique, or Mindful Movement, needed some updates in the language used to communicate its benefits.

I sought out the Alexander Technique because it provided me with room for self-expression—room to calm my nervous system in a way that was different from traveling or summer. Releasing tension throughout my body in stages started to make my breath and movement more responsive and fluid. It gave me an ability to deeply connect to myself and sense the tiniest of parts to the largest parts of me, from my pinkie toe to the entire surface of my skin. This kind of somatic expansion started to make me question whether there were other areas in my life where I could find ease as well. I started to wonder how I could create my life as an artist and mother with less rushing and forcing.

As a vocalist and composer, my initial impetus for studying the Alexander Technique was in order to express my musical ideas. I longed for a means to enhance my self-expression. Sometimes I wasn't able to sing because I had lost my voice (often chronically), sometimes I wasn't able to express myself because

I didn't have the vocal freedom or control yet, and sometimes I wasn't able to fully sing out because I didn't have the confidence in myself and my musical ideas. I thought and hoped that Mindful Movement would enable me to sing everything—all my passion projects as well as guest performance opportunities—with dexterity, accuracy, and my own beauty. But I also had to find a voice teacher who understood my artistic values and mental and emotional space as well. That search led me on a variety of journeys outside of the Alexander Technique that have been crucial to my own Embodied Artist practice.

I recognize that my Embodied Artist practice is greatly informed by the imagination of so many people who came before me. My mother's hunger for wanderlust, the meditation practices of many yogis and Daoist monks in South and East Asia, the prayers of my grandmothers and aunties, somatic voicework the LoVetri Method, the dancing and singing traditions of Black folks everywhere, the connections Indigenous people share with the land, the creative improvisation movements of the sixties, seventies, and eighties in Chicago and New York and more. In the same way that artists seek to fully express their creative visions with less interruptions, Mindful Movement can also allow for less interference in our movement flow. And in the same way that the Alexander Technique often asks me to slow down I have to remember how my grandmothers moved and spoke, the way they took their time. That's when I remember the hints already there in nature, the warmth of the sun and how it makes my body uncurl. That's when I remember there's power and freedom in moving my voice and body through space.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Pyeng Threadgill (Balance Arts Center, 2007) is a voice and movement teacher and vocalist/songwriter. Her teaching approaches the voice with an emphasis on slowing down and offering accessible, healthy vocal technique for all styles of music. Ms. Threadgill guides aspiring and professional singer-songwriters to refocus on the joy and pleasure of singing rather than self-judgment. By connecting to the breath, body, and movement, students develop a holistic voice practice, thereby eliciting each individual's *soul music* and what she calls the Embodied Artist Method™.

As a certified Alexander Technique teacher, Ms. Threadgill has also studied with Jerry Sontag and Anne Bluethenthal. She has studied qi gong with Daria Fain and is a certified teacher in the Eight Pieces of Brocade through the Wu Tang Physical Culture Association. She is a certified teacher in Somatic Voicework™ the LoVetri Method. Ms. Threadgill is currently working on a mixed-genre autobiographical voice chronicle that is slated to be published in the spring of 2023.

Pyeng has taught her Embodied Voice and Movement class at Pratt Institute in the graduate performance studies department and is currently teaching an Introduction to Performance Essentials class at the Clive Davis Institute at NYU. In the summer of 2021, she was asked to be a guest teacher for the annual Somatic Voicework Institute and in the summer of 2022, she was the keynote speaker for the AmSAT annual conference.



Photo by Aria Isadora