

ON HUMAN MOVEMENT POTENTIAL: A REVIEW ARTICLE

I felt deeply honoured to have been asked to review this book by the late Dr. Sweigard's husband, Fritz Popken. At the same time, I was aware that any comments I might make about her work would necessarily fall between two stools: those of 'review' and 'memorial tribute'. I doubt if any committed student of hers could say more -- or less -- especially if their interpretations of movement or dance education are solidly rooted, as mine are, in an ideokinetic point of view.

In this way, my considerable 'pro-Sweigard' bias can be stated at the outset: I was privileged to have studied privately with her for about two and a half years during 1957-60 in the technique which was then called by various names (cf. p. 7) and which I knew as 'neuromuscular re-education'. I was among those who received a warrant to teach and apply her methods which were further developments of basic concepts of Mabel Todd (cf. The Thinking Body. Dance Horizons, Inc., Brooklyn, N.Y., 1968, first published by Chas. T. Branford Co., Boston, Mass., 1937; noted on pp. 6-7 of the present text under review).

Having thus lived with and used these ideas for twenty years, it comes as a bit of a shock to realize that ideokinesis is only now being 'discovered' by many in the dance, physical education and movement fields. My only complaint about this book is that it was not written or published twenty years ago. Even then, Sweigard's work was at least seventy-five years ahead of most theory in movement education, but never mind -- we are still left with a comfortable half century's gap. The great difficulty with Human Movement Potential is that the appearance of the book and the belated wider recognition of Dr. Sweigard's work coincided with her death. The juxtaposition of these events was not, I think, merely accidental.

The book could not have been written or published twenty years ago, given certain historical circumstances and the 'state of the art' at the time. It would simply have been unacceptable, except to very few. We would be mistaken to rule out the human dimension, either in terms of possible receptivity to her ideas, or to her, for Human Movement Potential is, above all, the record of a life's work. As such, it is an incomparable gift. I doubt if anything but the author's impending death and the co-authorship of her husband would have made the book possible. One wonders, however, if the human realities behind the sparse, factual statements in the text are apparent to a reader who knows nothing of the history of these ideas or of the monumental struggle this book represents?

Examples of such statements open Chapter 17 (p. 187). There is nothing about them that conveys the realities of weeks of tedious, thankless, painstaking labour involved in the analysis of 500 X-rays; in the recording and re-recording of postural patterns and changes of patterns in two hundred subjects over an extended time stretch. One could repeat what many have rightly said, i.e. that Dr. Sweigard was a 'pioneer', but does that simple word really lead us to appreciate the difficulties involved

in performing these tasks in an inhospitable intellectual atmosphere, where few except the investigator understood the vision behind the research or its ramifications? Be that as it may, few would deny that such effort requires a quality of courage and steadfastness that is comparatively rare.

One also wonders if future generations of students (or even the present one -- of those who did not know her) will comprehend the massive resistance to Todd's and Sweigard's ideas through the many examples of bare understatement to be found throughout the book. One of my favourites ends a list on the top of page five: "...traditional concepts and loyalties die hard". For ideokinetic concepts run counter to accepted notions about 'fitness', 'good posture', national systems of gymnastics and all the rest:

The ideokinetic approach to better skeletal balance through the use of imagined movement is a radical departure from the long established technique of relying on the volitional efforts of the individual to 'put' or 'hold' the parts of his body in better alignment (p. 223).

Ideokinetic concepts are not parallel with, but counter to many common notions of 'good carriage':

The old technique prescribes the practise of exercises to strengthen weak muscles which are often considered to be the cause of poor posture, and it accounts for the many admonitions concerning posture which have come into common use. Parents and teachers exhort children to stand tall, stretch up, put the shoulders back, hold the head up, and the chin in, tighten the "stomach" muscles, flatten the low back against the floor if supine lying, or against the wall if standing, and finally (the most reprehensible of all admonitions), to tuck the pelvis under. These exhortations are the province of the drill sergeant and the exercise master, but not of the educator (p. 223).

Anyone who has tried to introduce such ideas into a physical education college or a dance department has usually discovered, to their cost, that the role of the nervous system in movement as outlined in this book, plus the notion that an idea is the sole stimulator of human actions, is frequently beyond the reach of all except those who are familiar with modern research in neuro-physiology, or those who have directly experienced the method of re-training through Dr. Sweigard or one of her students.

Many of Dr. Sweigard's pupils were among those who, having suffered physical breakdowns in numerous ways through their allegiance to traditional methods of movement training in various fields, were finally willing to listen and above all, to understand in a practical way the principles governing the body's structure and functions. In this regard, a personal anecdote will not be remiss: we often joked about a title for a book she might write when I knew her. With all respect to Agnes de Mille's Dance to the Piper, I suggested Dr. Sweigard might entitle her book Pay the Piper.

While it is true that ideokinesis provided a kind of therapy for some, for others it provided the keys to optimum function and maximization of potential body articulation; a supremely creative, positive notion. Not all who came to her were hurt. Her ideas about human movement potential are truly apposite to the Chomskyan notion of 'competence' in spoken language. Her lifetime was devoted to teaching sound kinesiological and anatomical principles relative to living, moving, healthy bodies. Body language 'performance' was to be based on sound knowledge of the structural principles relating to 'competence' or 'potential'.

I merely repeat what others have remarked in saying that Dr. Sweigard was first, last and always a teacher, who was at her best when working directly with students. All her efforts were focused on closing the enormous gaps which exist between dissection room, kinesiology classrooms or anatomy laboratories and the daily practises of the many movement professions. She never seemed to tire of explaining how and in what ways

The structure may look well balanced but how long it will move with the inefficiency established in the neuromuscular patterns remains unanswered. Many an athlete remains in his prime for a woefully short time, and many a dancer's career is forcefully terminated before it reaches its peak (p. 5).

Such statements as the above might be construed as idle warnings, misguided prophecies or remarks meant to frighten or discourage those to whom they are addressed. Her vast, accurate and unexceptionable knowledge of anatomy, skeletal alignment and movement in any of its aspects, now condensed into this book, render such statements meaningful in different terms, however, she was known to be a master of the plain, unadorned assertion based on fact.

Indeed, many of her statements were simply devastating. She once told me, in the initial stages of our work together, for example, that every single image I used in teaching dancing was completely wrong, hence deleterious to those whom I taught. After delivering a broadside like that, she was ever-prepared to help one understand and construct the right images for teaching movement, but this process was only possible if one were prepared to view the shambles of one's received ideas and cherished teaching practises in the way she did; with unremitting clarity and integrity resulting from constant awareness, re-examination and increase of hard-core knowledge of what one was doing. 'Knowledge' in this case always consisted of one or more of the following things:

The teaching of imagined movement draws on the sciences, especially anatomy and mechanics. It is impossible to devise meaningful and effective images of movement within a structure that is little known and vaguely understood, and it is likewise an exercise in futility to devise a movement to be imagined that disobeys all fundamental laws of mechanics...understand the nervous system's role in movement...know and understand the principles of the function of muscles...study muscles repeatedly, be able to visualize their alignment on the skeletal framework from the deepest to the most superficial layers...and etc. (pp. 22-3-4).

She never demanded anything of others which she did not expect of herself, but it is difficult to study with a teacher beside whom one feels totally illiterate. Yet, one of the main reasons Human Movement Potential was not written twenty years ago is because she honestly felt she did not know enough. She possessed a quality of humility which often seems to be found in the truly great.

On the other hand, I believe she was aware, even when I knew her, that she had not dealt with any of the philosophical, anthropological, historical, artistic or psychological consequences attendant upon assuming an ideokinetic point of view. It is here I foresee some possible dangers of misunderstanding, of endless useless argument arising over the methods she advocated and even positive misconstrual of what ideokinesis is about, if seen from the standpoint of other disciplines.

We now have this book; the gift of Dodd, Mead and Co. and a lifetime's work in a little known and less understood area -- that of the relation between human thought and action. But we do not have her, nor do we have the living examples of her daily teaching to guide us in making wider connections. The book is cut off from its major author and has entered the public domain -- the market-place -- where it is 'fair game', now or in future, for criticism from experts in many fields.

In the interests of precise definition, connected with teaching fields which often display an appalling lack of them, and in the interests of her over-riding aim to achieve scientific objectivity, the very language in which she chose to write the book is rather a mixed blessing. It is, of course, a reflection of what amounts to a western language ideal, for the language itself is meant to, as it were, 'float free' of the author's historical and anthropological selves and subsequently, of the reader's as well. The book is a paradigm example of our collective belief (i) that we can talk about ourselves neutrally in such a way that the information is available to other neutral 'observers' who, perforce, must be trained in the same language, and (ii) that we must talk about the human body (i.e. the physical apparatus through which our experience is transformed into symbolic action sign systems) in mechanical terms. The linguistic morphology of the work is, therefore, a mixed blessing because it may well gain respect for the system it describes in some circles, but it will provide a barrier to understanding in others. One can look on a technical language (more uncharitably referred to as 'jargon') as an obstacle or as a protection. In the case of this system, it was (and is) more often protective. This leads to a somewhat delicate point.

Dr. Sweigard was not engaged in the currently extremely profitable business of being a 'guru'. She was not a quack doctor, a woolly metaphysician, a 'mystic' or a crank. She resolutely refused to comment, even to speculate about the consequences of her work outside the boundaries of her certain knowledge as anatomist, kinesiologist and movement educator. As I was among her more obstreperous pupils, I taxed her for this. The result was that we both experienced the effects of another physical law; what happens when irresistible force meets an immovable object. In our case, it was simply impasse. The questions regarding interdisciplinary applications of ideokinesis (or possible attitudes towards it) were not answered then and it may be that they will not be answered now, but I would want to say the following

things; this book will only be unfairly criticized by philosophers because no philosophy of mind is made explicit in the book, although it will be obvious to most of them that ideokinesis implies a philosophy of mind. It would be of great value if a trained philosopher could take inspiration from it, learn the method and explicate for us just what kind of philosophy of mind ideokinesis entails.

Similarly, the book should not be criticized because none of the affective or emotional consequences of tension reduction, for instance, are dealt with. Here, we encounter an area which, so far as I am aware, is relatively unexplored in western psychology. Ideokinesis could well provide a way of effectively studying the subject, with the proviso that the investigator learn the method first. One would have thought that ideokinesis would be of interest to those in psychology who subscribe to the ideas of Vygotsky, Piaget, Bruner or any of the pioneers in the field with reference to structures of plans and intentions.

When one thinks in terms of the history of ideas, or the history of movement education itself, one wishes for an elegant and sophisticated version of what I have only poorly indicated here: an analysis of the language in which the book is written and an interpretation of how that language is connected with our historical selves. Such a work might relieve us of the burden of mechanical models of ourselves and lead us toward more anthropomorphic concepts of human beings. It might even lead towards a new and enlightened humanism.

If one thinks of dancers reading the book, one wants to say, do not reject it or the method because you do not understand the language or do not think of your bodies in this way. The language in which the book is written is, after all, a respectable language although it may seem far removed from concepts of beauty and other more artistic or aesthetic notions about the body which you may have. No matter how inelegant it may seem to think in terms of bones, efficiency, and mechanical balance, the author is right in thinking that mere hope or faith alone will hardly correct poor neuro-muscular patterns of movement. And she deplored, as I do, the tendency among dancers to repeat litanies of phrases such as 'dance is' in aid of establishing an adequate technical base for the art, or in explanation to those outside the profession of what dancing is all about.

Of particular concern are professional medical attitudes towards ideokinesis, for any technique that bases itself on a notion of maximization of human potential is likely to be looked on askance by doctors. This is unfortunate, for the sanction of reputable members of this profession is tantamount to its credibility and its acceptance by many people. But, there is a difficulty here: in general, medical doctors are primarily trained to bring people from states of malfunction, disfunction, and disease to 'normal' states of health, which might be defined briefly as 'freedom from pain'. The movement educator's problem is quite different from this. They are constantly guided by notions of optimum function, for they begin with a 'normally' healthy body. In its broadest definition, ideokinesis is about maximum human potential for movement, not malfunction. If our traditional medical criteria of 'sickness' and 'wellness' are applied then it can easily be seen that these criteria provide no categorical slot for, or explanations of, superlative performance.

If accepted as a basis for an educational programme, say, in a school or training college, ideokinesis would represent a departure from more orthodox programmes simply because it focuses on the instrument performing the activity, and not the activities themselves. This would mean a body-centred, not an activity-centred programme.

Finally, a word to anthropologists, especially those concerned with languages and meaning: the ideokinetic approach to human movement and the mind/body relationship it implies is truly a child of its own culture as any other text in any other language. This is to say that all the problems of translation are there. The values represented by the system, i.e. 'efficiency', 'mechanical balance', and such are peculiar to our own culture and are not necessarily important, or even relevant to others. An anthropologist might well ask whether the relationships stated in ideokinesis are made with universal intent, such that the technique would be held to be true of all people in all societies. In how far is ideokinesis culture-bound? It is a commonplace in our discipline that other systems of categories and classifications -- including those of western medicine -- are culture-bound. I do not know how well this book would translate into another spoken language, say, Welsh, Swahili or Hindi, but I think most would agree that it would be of great interest to know, especially in view of the close relationship postulated between images and movement.

In conclusion, it is to be hoped that no one, now or in future, will look upon Human Movement Potential as another dreary 'how to' book. It would only be wrongfully used or interpreted in this way. This book outlines a specific body/mind discipline and it requires a teacher. Rather sadly, it is our lot to have had both separately. Yet, better this situation than no book at all.

Ideokinesis both disciplines and trains the imagination. The system itself was a result of a disciplined, trained imagination. Surely, no one will think that mere phantasizing about posture will produce different or better results. Human Movement Potential offers no prescriptions for 'instant' neuro-muscular re-education or better posture. Properly used, taught and learnt, the system works. Perhaps it is for those of us who are left behind to spell out why and how it works and the consequences of its working in our various fields. Whatever else may be said, the author has provided us with a clear, consistent and accurate model of a body of work which, within its disciplinary and other self-imposed limitations, is superbly well done.

Drid Williams