

*In Memory and Appreciation of Pearl Ausubel**October 7, 1920–November 4, 2008*by *Nanette Walsh*

Pearl Ausubel, beloved teacher, colleague, mentor, mother, grandmother, and friend died at age 88 from a cerebral hemorrhage on November 4, 2008, Election Day. That morning she had attended an art class. At the end of it, she stood up, said good-by, and collapsed. She never regained consciousness and died at hospital later that evening in the presence of her immediate family. Until the time of her sudden collapse, she had been in generally good health and enjoying retirement.

Pearl's wisdom and unflinching generosity of spirit were renowned. She took life as it was, head on. She took us as we were, too. Equipped with a heart the size of Manhattan, Pearl had the ability to bring out the best in us. Her sudden passing is a palpable loss to everyone she touched.

Pearl and her identical twin, Judy Leibowitz, were the daughters of Lithuanian immigrants Minnie and Charles Leibowitz. Minnie emigrated in her mid-teens to work in a hat factory in Connecticut; a year later her father, a Yeshiva Rabbi, came to take her home, but decided to stay in America himself. Within a few years Minnie's millinery work earned enough to bring over her mother and seven brothers and sisters. Working for the labor, socialist, and women's suffrage movements, Minnie became well known not only for her fervent activism but also her generosity of spirit and tolerance. At age 34, she married her distant cousin, Charles, and the twins—Pearl and Judy—were born October 7, 1920 in Waterbury, Connecticut.

In 1929, the stock market crash brought the Leibowitz family to live in New York City. An uncle with a hat factory in the garment district kept the entire family afloat during the depression, and Pearl's grandfather became a professor of Talmud at the first Jewish seminary in New York (out of which grew Yeshiva University). Those left behind in Lithuania did not fare as well. The remaining 120 extended family members were exterminated in 1939. Pearl's mother eventually became the family matriarch, a role Pearl would later inherit.

In 1935, when the twins were 15 years old, their lives were forever changed: Judy contracted polio and lost all normal neuro-musculature from the waist down. Pearl, without hesitation, put the ailing Judy first; her gracious bond of selfless love became a defining aspect of their relationship.

The sisters shared an interest in biology, chemistry, and art. Although Judy was delayed in her education, both sisters graduated with degrees in science from Brooklyn College, and then worked as chemists. At age 23, Pearl left home, marrying David Ausubel, a young doctor she had met while in college. Pearl followed Dave as his medical and academic work took them to Nicaragua, Guatemala, Kentucky, Buffalo, New York, Illinois, New Zealand, Rome, and Toronto. In 1945, their first

child, Frederick, was born; daughter Laura was born in 1950. They lived in Illinois for 16 years while the children grew up. Finally, in 1968, they moved to New York City.

When Pearl left home, Judy began a course of lessons in the Alexander Technique with Alma Frank. The lessons had a profound effect. When Alma went to England, Judy trained with Lulie Westfeldt; around 1950 she traveled to London to work extensively with F.M. Alexander. Judy had a lesson every day for six weeks, sometimes twice a day, and went back two years later for another six weeks. The experience at FM's hands wholly changed her. She later said, "It was through working with him that I really felt I could teach the Technique.... He gave me a purer sensory definition for my body."<sup>1</sup> In 1964 Judy became one of the co-founders of the American Center for the Alexander Technique (ACAT) in Manhattan—the first Alexander Technique teacher training course in the United States.

Around this time, Judy told Pearl that one of the teachers trained by Alexander in England, a "Mr. Carrington," had her climbing stairs by herself without a railing,

just the teacher's hands giving her the directions! That got Pearl's attention; it seemed to her a miracle.

When Pearl moved to New York in 1968, she began regular lessons with Judy. In 1972, she began training to become an Alexander teacher, joining a class of 12 students at ACAT. Surprised to find that training was so difficult, she felt little of the kind of things that most people reported. However, her enduring trust in Judy—and the process that had so transformed her—kept Pearl going. After graduating in 1975, Pearl volunteered to assist at the school three days a week. She also exchanged work weekly with Judy, absorbing all that she could as Judy coached Pearl through releasing the tension in Judy's lower limbs. When Judy became busy with teaching commitments at Juilliard, she sent some of her students to Pearl.

By the late 70s, Pearl had a thriving private practice and was being paid to assist at ACAT. In 1979 she divorced; it was agreed that she would keep the grand old apartment on Central Park West. She continued to teach from her spacious room overlooking the rooftops of the Upper West Side.

Pearl's own way of teaching evolved largely from meeting the needs of her early private students. Many of them were musicians referred by other musicians, who were also coming for lessons. She had earned a reputation especially among string players, including a number of notable professional chamber musicians. Pearl's work with shoulders was especially renowned, and her ability to create a sense of unruffled peace and ease was recognized as a valuable resource for playing, performing, and daily living.

*Pearl Ausubel*

One student, John Austin, MD, a respiratory research scientist and violist, was so impressed with her work and its potential for easing the physical work of breathing, that in the late 1980s he and Pearl designed and implemented the first scientific study of the Technique and respiratory function using control subjects. Their results showed statistically significant improvements in standard measures of respiratory function after a course of Alexander lessons. The study, considered radical at the time, appeared in the mainstream medical journal *Chest*.<sup>2</sup>

Dr. Austin, now Director of Thoracic Imaging and Professor of Radiology at Columbia University Medical Center, remembers Pearl as an eternal but healthy skeptic whose deep insights were founded on a high degree of empiricism. Of the study, he says, "It was the most important paper I have ever written."

By the late 1980s, Pearl's reputation had spread among the medical community. Rheumatologist Dr. Albert Grokoest, also a viola player and a student of Pearl's, was sending many of his patients to her. Ellis Gellhorn, a computer programmer, recalls getting five diagnoses for pain and weakness in her hands, one calling for surgery to immobilize her thumbs, before Grokoest told her that the problem was tension throughout her body. He sent her to Pearl. Though Pearl emphasized that she could make no promises or claims, within two lessons, Ellis was inexplicably convinced that Pearl was exactly what she needed. Still active at 74 years of age, Ellis continues studying the Technique; of it, she says, "It is the most important thing that's ever happened to me."

Pearl and Judy, once again living in the same city and involved in the same profession, became inseparable. They were often seen walking together, Pearl lending Judy an arm, easily keeping pace with Judy's slow and careful steps. They often appeared on the training course wearing the same color clothing. When not together, they spoke every day on the phone, sometimes twice a day. In 1989, when Judy was diagnosed with advanced cancer, Pearl was at her side continuously, holding her through the final stages of death in December 1990.

Pearl never really stopped mourning the loss of her twin. Slowly, however, her life began to take on a fuller expression. She knew the power of the Technique, was secure in her ability to teach it, had nothing to prove, and everything to give. She was now a senior teacher at ACAT, and her unique teaching skills were sought after. With quiet joy and rare humility, she generously shared what she had learned and practiced so masterfully herself.

At age 77, Pearl traveled to China with her daughter, Laura, to adopt her 15-month old grandchild, Melanie. There was ample space for all of them in her apartment; upon their return, Laura and Melanie moved in. Pearl's generous spirit, characteristic resilience, and pragmatic manner defined her remaining years in New York as she continued to pour 100% of herself into her students, classes, friends, family, and colleagues.

Quietly, Pearl's mastery of the Technique had become equal to Judy's, yet her expression of it was wholly different. Judy, noted for her charisma, creative vision, and remarkable kinesthetic imagination, looked at her students, saw what was possible, and helped them realize it in themselves. Pearl looked

at her students, saw what was, and accepted and appreciated them for who they were. Pearl's hands had a clarity and warmth of feeling that was consistently reliable, patient, trustworthy, transformative, and profoundly palpable. She excelled at cultivating in her students that "purer sensory definition" that had so transformed Judy. Never failing to surprise or make sense, her teaching was both of the senses and beyond them. To be touched by Pearl was to be touched by that deeply personal yet powerfully impersonal love that is at the root of all great teaching.

In 2006 Pearl and her teaching were featured in this publication ("Pearl Ausubel In Her Own Words," *AmSAT News*, No. 72, Winter 2006). At about that same time she decided to retire from ACAT and move to Western Massachusetts to be closer to family. In February 2007, she was joyfully celebrated by the Alexander community in New York City at a standing-room-only event at ACAT. That spring, she sold her grand apartment of nearly 40 years and bought a house in Northampton, Massachusetts, with her daughter and granddaughter.

Pearl spent most of the first year of retirement settling in; this included a fair bit of yard work, something she took satisfaction in. It is easy to imagine Pearl, a veteran potter and sculptor of clay, at home

with the earth, cultivating their nearly two-acre yard.

After Pearl moved out of New York City, friends, colleagues, and students made the pilgrimage north to visit her. On one occasion she was asked what ACAT, co-founded by her twin over 40 years ago, should be doing today. With her usual unapologetic practicality, Pearl replied that she thought people should keep their eye on the Technique, and not get into "all this other stuff."

In part, Pearl's sudden passing seems emblematic of her no-nonsense approach to life. One final time, in her inimitable way, she reached what was beyond the immediately apparent.

Before collapsing she stood and said goodbye. Her parting gesture: self-evident, gracious, unselfconscious, related, practical, and to the point. That was Pearl. In truth, her passing is an inescapable loss; we know that sudden does not necessarily mean prepared, but we imagine Pearl ready—as ever!

She is survived by her daughter, Laura Beck, son, Fred Ausubel, daughter-in-law, Stephanie Bird, and grandchildren, Melanie Beck and Jonny, Anna, and Emily Ausubel.

#### Endnotes:

1. Judith Leibowitz, *Dare To Be Wrong*, ed. Kathryn Miranda (Mornum Time Press, 2008), 24.
2. John H. M. Austin and Pearl Ausubel, "Enhanced respiratory muscular function in normal adults after lessons in proprioceptive musculoskeletal education without exercises," *Chest* 102 (1992), 486–490.

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