

64 Colors

Andrea Matthews

teacher & member, Alexander Technique International

When I was a kid, there was a really cool thing: an enormous box made by Crayola that opened to reveal, arranged like the members of a grand choir on risers, 64 different colors of crayons. Plus, it had a sharpener built into the back of it. The romance of a 64 Crayola crayon box—especially a brand-new one, with all the papers neat and clean, the points crisp and undulled—is hard to describe. And the mystery of the really special colors, the silver, the gold, and the copper... Magnificent! The possibilities! Just knowing they were there gave me a thrill—I didn't even have to use them to feel the excitement.

Recently, while I was talking about the Technique with a student, the image of those 64 colored crayons came to me. People so rarely use all the “colors” they possess—they even forget that they have more than five or six, if that. Unless they become actors or singers, they may feel those extra colors have no place in their lives. Perhaps they learned to hide the range of their colors because their vividness made someone else uncomfortable or jealous, and now they wouldn't know how to use them, if they even remembered they were there. Yet they feel something is missing. And they pay good money for others to show them their “true colors.”

What drew me to be a singer, I've realized more clearly in recent years, was the feeling that more of me was more fully engaged in that activity than anything else. Whatever anyone else saw or heard in me, when I connected with the singing, the thrill of being present and full of wonderful possibilities was like sprouting wings or being filled with light—or, now I see, like opening that brand-new Crayola box. I had more colors to be and to work with.

Singing and acting have the advantage of being rather obviously total psychophysical activities, calling on energies and availabilities we don't often think of tapping into in “ordinary” life. But why don't we? There's a philosophical question for the ages. Why do we leave our vividness for other, “more special” people to live out for us?

Perhaps those are questions that cannot be answered so directly. In my experience of teaching Alexander, it is only when students challenge their limiting assumptions about themselves that the hidden reasons for the limitations reveal themselves. Here are some examples:

A student will release the cramping of her fingers and neck, playing her guitar flawlessly, yet note almost anxiously, “But I feel so out of control!” In learning to “control” her performance through tension, she had lost track of her “freedom” and “ease” crayons.

Another student will momentarily cease to throw her attention automatically and exclusively on her disgruntled spouse—and she’ll exclaim, “But I’d be so powerful! Is that ok?” Clearly, at some point, it was not, and her “power” crayon had been tossed out of the box.

After a while the “box” itself gets smaller. A third student suspends his habit of condensing himself to sing a challenging phrase: “It’s so much easier. But I feel so big! There’s so much more space!”

One of the things I love about teaching the Technique is that I get to see the look on a student’s face and the change in their being when they open that box and see colors they didn’t know or remember they had all along. That look and that shift speak a thousand words: “That’s me! I didn’t know that was in there! What a big box of colors I have!”