

## Sally Speaks - How Having Scoliosis Lead Me to Centered Riding

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In 1920, at the age of 7, I was diagnosed with scoliosis, lateral curvature of the spine. One day, I was standing in our very large bathroom with the doctor. Back then, general practitioner doctors came to the house. I was standing up naked, with my back to the doctor, and he noticed that I had a curvature, to which he drew my mother's attention. No one else had previously noticed this. She understood what he was telling her, and the question was "what to do about it?"

My mother talked to my aunt who steered her to someone in Boston who was doing work similar to the Alexander Technique (The Alexander Technique hadn't been developed at that point – it was just starting to become known.) Her name was Mabel Ellsworth Todd. She was doing her own thing, something close to the Alexander Technique. Miss Todd was the head person who started the practice in Boston. She was headquartered in New York, but every month would come to Boston for a week. I would go whenever she came. She had helpers who lived in Boston who worked with me every week that Miss Todd was away. When Miss Todd came to Boston for a week, I would work with her.

During the week Miss Todd was in Boston, the helpers had practically no work during that week because everyone went to Miss Todd. She would take over everything, and everyone watched and learned. She had a lot of good ideas. My mother followed what Miss Todd wanted to have happen. Miss Todd had a lot of savvy. Because of the curvature, I was irritable and I would have tantrums. Miss Todd said to my mother – "Don't scold her for it - you just have to let her have a tantrum and get it out of her system and don't try to stop it. It's part of her life caused by the tension the curvature puts on her body."

I suppose having the curvature hurt, but I don't remember it hurting. I had to walk about two miles to school, which was in Hingham. This was quite a walk, especially in my condition. My sister, Agnes, five years older than me, would make sure that I was taken care of. I remember one specific time when I wasn't getting ready for school and Agnes had to leave without me. I had a real tantrum, kicking my mother, and immediately feeling very guilty. I didn't mean to kick her, but I did - and I'm still feeling guilty about that! It was a difficult time. My mother was very patient with me, and Miss Todd steered her, telling my mother not punishing me for it. I am sure she was right. The tantrums did get better, and I got more manageable.

I worked with Mabel Ellsworth Todd from the ages of 7 through my early 20's. Miss Todd was four-square built and she was four-square in her attitude. I respected her a lot. I consider this work to be the basis of Centered Riding. Mabel Todd wrote the book *The Thinking Body* based on her belief that you could control parts of your body and reach muscles with your mind when you couldn't direct them with physical movement. Mabel Todd's work with me was based upon that belief. She would do some manipulation with her hands and give me exercises to do. I have spent my life doing exercises – I still do exercises, although I'm not as good as I should be.

Miss Todd encouraged me to do horse riding, saying that it would strengthen my weak back. Riding was a good exercise for me because I used both legs equally and strengthened my lower back muscles, which were weak. My grandmother got worried and wanted a second opinion about the whole situation. When I was twelve, Miss Todd sent me to Dr. Brackett for the second opinion. He took a good look at me and said "if Miss Todd can keep it from getting worse, go back to her." Dr. Brackett was a sweet person who was quite lame. He always called me "child."

One day, in a jump, sun-blinded, I fell on my shoulder brace and sustained a full concussion. So Dr. Brackett made a new corset brace, with four steel supports, shaped to my body, laced up the front, and I wore that for many years riding and skiing – and took many spills without injury. I wore this full-length back brace to ride horses and ride in the car. I wore this brace until the early 1980's, when at approximately 70 years of age, with the help of Peter Payne, an Alexander Technique™ teacher, I shed the back brace. Peter Payne had told me when I first went to him – “we'll get you out of this brace.” I thought that would be pretty amazing. Two years later I was out of it.

When I was 13, Miss Todd made me learn to write with my left hand, because I was so over developed on my right side. So I had to learn to do everything, brush my teeth, eat, etc, with my left hand, as well as the right. It was awfully difficult, but it actually did help because my right side didn't get so fatigued since I was using my left side. One summer, I actually taught myself to write with my left hand and the result was..... I don't have good writing with either hand! I remember coming back to school after working on it all summer and having to go to the black board and write with my left hand in front of the class. How nervous I was!

My remarkable mother did all this without every making me feel like I was queer or different. She made nothing of it – it was as if everybody had to do the things I was doing. We didn't dwell on the fact that I was different. She did a good job, my mother, and it has stood with me all my life.

After I got out of school, I didn't go to college right away (not until 1943 when I was thirty years old) because Miss Todd didn't want me to sit any more than was necessary. She encouraged me to keep riding because it was strengthening my physical condition. After graduating high school, I apprenticed for approximately three years with Phyllis Linnington, an English woman who taught balanced seat. Phyllis taught us that we were responsible for what our horses did. What I was taught was a balanced seat, balanced over your center but with tight knees – I would post without stirrups, etc. But I still had Miss Todd's training in my mind about using your body, i.e., “the ball inside your body, and if you dropped it into your pelvis as if into the mud, you could do anything”. As I look back on it, I see this as the beginning of Centered Riding. This was tucked away, and I never taught it until years later, but I used it for myself.

I went out on my own to teach riding in the Northeast for approximately eight years, employing what I had learned from Phyllis Linnington. During these years, I used the winter months to school with Colonel Guirey at the Boots and Saddle Riding School in New York City. Colonel Guirey was a Cossack Prince; he was a lovely, cultured person, a real gentleman. He was a low key teacher but good! I rode with him all winter. In the first lesson he said, “Your knees are too tight!” I was absolutely horrified to hear this because I had spent so long making them tight! So for 15 minutes each lesson, I sat the trot with stirrups and it loosened up my knees. I rode much better when they were soft because then you followed the horse. Instead of being on top of the horse, you became part of the horse.

I did some experimenting, using my ball. I was given a Standard bred horse to ride, named Kim, who wouldn't walk. He was sweet, but high strung - “hot as a pistol” and would've jumped the moon, if he could have. I enjoyed him, and played with him. One day, I had made up my mind at the beginning of the day that I was going to make Kim walk. I had tried everything I knew. I then began to experiment by first holding my breath, then I tried breathing (the way we now teach it in Centered Riding), and the horse responded. I did it at the walk, and then the trot, and the horse responded. If I went on breathing without effort, he went on walking. The Colonel, observing this, said, “Miss Swift, what are you doing?” I answered, “Just breathing, Colonel!” This too was the beginnings of Centered Riding.

I look back upon some of these experiences, and especially my work with Mabel Ellsworth Todd, and recognize how all of this was actually the foundation of Centered Riding. It wasn't until I was 62, however, when I decided that I had had all the office work I wanted that I thought I would “retire,” teach my friends, and travel a little that I began to teach “Centered Riding”. Next time, I will tell you about these early days of Centered Riding.

Photo by Claudia DiSanto from Vienna, Austria

