

Sweigard: A Memorial Tribute

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Dr. Lulu Sweigard is perhaps a less well-known name among the distinguished company of New York University faculty and students who have made major theoretical contributions to knowledge, yet those of us who knew her and are familiar with the dance, physical education and movement professions find it natural to think of her work in ideokinesis as equal in stature to that of Samuel Morse in art and telegraphy, John W. Draper in radiant energy and photography, Howard Rusk in physical therapy, and Martha Rogers in nursing education -- among those whose names immediately spring to mind. Unlike Morse and Draper, however, there are no 'artifacts' of ideokinesis like a telegrapher's apparatus or some photographs that can be seen, handled and understood; unlike Rusk, her work was not meant primarily to be a 'treatment' or a curing technique and unlike Rogers, who revolutionized nursing education, Sweigard's revolutionary ideas regarding movement education are still many years ahead of theory and practices to be found in the majority of departments of physical education and dance education in this, and other, countries.

Part of the difficulty lies in the fact that she refused to have her work codified and patented as a 'process'; as a repeatable 'technique' that could be learned and then mechanically applied. She really believed that what she had developed was a part of general knowledge and that it rightly belonged to the world at large. She was never fully aware, I think, of the subtlety and

sophistication of her own mind and methods. To her, ideokinesis (or 'neuro-muscular re-education' as it used to be called) was simply a nonsense approach based on 'the facts'.

Her down-to-earth view of life might be attributed in part to the fact that she was born in Iowa on 19 April, 1895. Her clear-sightedness and the breadth of her scholarly vision possess characteristics of ever-receding horizons and a sense of infinite space that is easily associated with the American mid-west. She received her B.A. degree from Iowa State Teachers' College in 1918 and came to the east coast, where she took a Master's degree at Columbia University's Teacher's College in 1927 -- and where she met Mabel Elsworth Todd, the woman to whom she "owes a debt of gratitude for having disturbed my complacency with regard to posture and body mechanics" and to whom she attributes her incentives to become a pioneer in an unexplored field of study.

Her long career at New York University began when, on 1 September, 1931, she became an instructor in Education, a post she was to retain until 1 September, 1943. During this time, she fulfilled the requirements necessary for a Ph.D. degree in the School of Education: her thesis was accepted on 26 January, 1939 and it bore the formidable title "Bi-Lateral Asymmetry in the Alignment of the Skeletal Framework of the Human Body." The work she undertook (including the analysis and several re-examinations of 500 subjects and x-rays of them) was itself formidable. The assumptions upon which it was based were these: (a) posture is an expression of habits of body mechanics, (b) balance and movement of the body take place by means of conditioned neuromuscular reflex action without so-called voluntary control of the individual, (c) the

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human body functions as an organismic whole through the integrative action of the nervous systems, (d) principles of mechanics apply to the human body as to inanimate structures, (e) thinking influences muscle action, and (f) changing habits of neuro-muscular responses to stimuli is basically an educational procedure, not an exercise procedure (taken from the Preface of her Doctoral thesis).

It was the last two propositions in particular that many of her colleagues found difficult to cope with, yet, there were many who assisted her in her work, both within the academy and outside of it. Notable among her supporters were Profs. Jay B. Nash, H.W. Zorbough, C.J. Peiper and F.S. Lloyd at N.Y.U.; H.O. Mahoney of the Educational Division of General Electric's X-Ray Corporation and one of their radiographers, J.B. Thomas. A former faculty member of the School of Education, Mayhew Derryberry, was at the time Senior Public Health Statistician at the National Institute of Health in Washington, D.C., and Sweigard particularly remembered S.U. Lawton, M.D. for encouragement and moral support in the face of the "inevitable discouragements" that she encountered during the course of her eight year's long Doctoral study.

Throughout her long life, she taught in many places: Iowa State, Columbia, Skidmore, University of California and Juilliard School of Music (now The Juilliard School) under the protective and amiable influence of Martha Hill, but she kept coming back to New York University either for summer sessions or for a year or two at a time. She became a Research Associate Professor at the School of Education on 1 February, 1944, and she retained that title until her death in August, 1974. She was a long-time member of Delta Sigma Rho, Zeta Kappa Psi and Pi Lambda Theta and was a member of the American Association of Physical Education,

Health and Recreation.

Much of her work, however, up to and after 1957, was carried out through teaching individual students on a one-to-one basis. She was afraid that her work would be misused and the result of her refusal to codify her work has been much of what she taught single students that was meant to be applied only to specific problems is now being taught as the whole of ideokinesis. The eagerness with which some have attempted to disseminate the undoubtedly beneficial effects of her work and the novelty of her approach has generated numerous misconceptions. Nearly everyone can benefit from the study of ideokinesis, but comprehension of it as education requires a sophisticated mind and equally sophisticated knowledge of several areas of education. Her work is too often seen merely as a 'treatment' or a 'cure', and is wrongly associated with a mystical 'laying on of hands', even with forms of hypnosis.

Dr. Sweigard was not engaged in the currently profitable business of being a 'guru'. She was a scientist and a specialist. 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. She knew that many ideokinetic concepts about movement education were counter to accepted notions about 'physical fitness', 'good posture', national systems of gymnastics and the like. She knew that the ideokinetic approach to better skeletal balance through the use of imagined movement was a radical departure from the long established techniques of relying on the volitional efforts of the individual to 'put' or 'hold' the body parts in better alignment. Until the day she died, she had to defend her work, not only against those who held more traditional views (who were the least of her problems) but against those for whom ideokinesis represents a quasi-religious, 'cosmic' form of cultism. It was the latter group, I think, that

stimulated her continuous attempts to document and to make scientifically valid the percepts and concepts she had worked so long and hard to develop.

She left a book behind her and a few articles. The appearance of the book, Human Movement Potential: Its Ideokinetic Facilitation (Dodd-Mead & Co., 1974) coincided with her death, and whilst the book is an incomparable gift--it is a record of a lifetime's work--I merely record general consensus that she 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 that exist between dissection room, kinesiology laboratory or anatomy class and the daily practices 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 will it move with the inefficiency established in the neuromuscular patterns remains unanswered." Lacking the knowledge she had of the human body, a recipient of such pronouncements often found them inexplicable and enigmatic--if not prophetic of doom, yet all of this was tempered with humor, lightness and fun.

La prophesy

When she came to N.Y.U. in 1931, some of the lighter aspects of her work were recorded by a student, Sylvia Dorf, in a rhyming tribute entitled, "A La Sweigard." It is easy to imagine that she liked that; indeed, she may have corrected some of the lines, because in spite of her fondness for teasing people and an almost childlike delight in the simplest, homeliest things, she was an earnest and meticulous scholar who characterized herself as a 'conservative', but there are few thinkers as radical as she was--or as outspoken in her refusals to compromise. She was a woman of deep contrasts; a 'feisty' lady who was not afraid of giving or receiving criticism, and her integrity as impressive as her humility. I doubt that she ever really believed that she knew enough about the human body to write about it.

And one is not quite certain about how she would respond to what is written here, mainly because she was adamant about revealing her age. Most of us knew that she must have been a septuagenarian when she died, but she kept her date of birth a secret. She felt the 'generation gap' keenly and did not want students to focus on her age or on other elements of her personal life. She wanted them to concentrate on 'the work', with the result that she possessed an almost pixie-like quality of age-lessness. One thought of her as 'about fifty' and left it at that. One also imagines that she would have been dissatisfied, as usual, with the fact that more has been said about her than about her ideas to which she devoted a lifetime, but one would hope, too, that she would recognize the deep admiration, respect and regard for her and her work, that for many of us is, and will continue to be a constant source of inspiration.

A La Sweigard

It may be a major or perhaps a minor,
Or else a bridge or even a liner.
Perhaps it's a stress that causes the pain,
Maybe it's the pelvis that increases the strain.
From head to toe a line there must be,
Surrounded with curves like those found by the sea.
Sliding--bending--twisting and compressing,
Whatever it be it sure is distressing.

The axis is a thing that resides in the mind.
To see its perfection in man-- is a find.
To sit--to stand, why even to rest,
Calls all physics' forces to help one the best.
My dear it's a racket
To be a prize packet
With ligament--muscle--tendon and bone
Working together in perfect tone.

In The Education Sun, Vol. I, p.9, 1931-32

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