

Patterns That Perpetuate Themselves

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In the course of defining Rolwing® and elucidating the goals and benefits of structural integration, Dr. Rolf makes a number of striking and suggestive remarks about the nature of human form. She begins the preface of her book with a quote from Norbert Wiener, “We are not stuff that abides, but patterns that perpetuate themselves.”¹ She goes on to say, “Form and function are a unity, two sides of one coin. In order to enhance function, appropriate form must exist or be created. A joyful radiance of health is attained only as the body conforms more nearly to its inherent pattern. This pattern, this form, this Platonic idea is the blueprint for structure. In turn, the function of this more appropriate structure is vitality, vitality of a degree unknown to the average person.”² Since she calls this blueprint for structure a Platonic idea, she must also want to imply that it somehow constitutes the essence of the human form. The closer our bodies approach this essential form, which is somehow inherent to the life of the body, the healthier we become.

Since the nature of form is critical to the work of structural integration, she discusses it from many angles throughout her book. As every Rolfer knows, she was also intensely interested in the nature of energy and its relationship to her work. Thus, it is not surprising that she has something to say about the nature of human form in light of her speculations about energy. Much later in her book she says, “We believe the integrated body to be a more efficient radiator of its electromagnetic energy. It may well be that this has implications for psychic energy as well. . . . Perhaps there is another, or several other, realities. Is ‘balancing’ actually the placing of the body of flesh upon an energy pattern that activates it? The pattern of this fine energy would not be as easily disorganized and might well survive, relatively intact, traumatic episodes that ordinarily distort

flesh. . . . If the balance that offers a man so much greater well-being is really a more precise superimposing of a coarse body on an energy element, many physical and psychical phenomena can be understood.”³ With these words, Dr. Rolf tentatively broadens her concept of a blueprint by identifying with a refined energy pattern. She speculates that the benefits of Rolwing come from superimposing the coarser body of flesh over this more refined energy pattern, as if this Platonic idea or essential blueprint were a kind of energetic template for creating order in the body.

Dr. Rolf is not alone in thinking that there is some sort of ideal energetic pattern or blueprint that determines structure. The concept of an essential blueprint also comes up for serious discussion among biodynamic craniosacral practitioners. Michael Kern, D.O. makes the point this way: “The Breath of Life carries an essential blueprint for health, which Dr. James Jealous called the ‘Original Matrix.’ This blueprint is a deep and unwavering ordering principle intrinsically distributed around the body in the tidal rhythms of primary respiration. . . . The rhythms of the Breath of Life continuously deliver an intrinsic order into the fluids, and thus into each cell of the body. The various tissue and fluid systems of the body form around this essential blueprint and are maintained by it, until the time of death. As long as there is life, this ordering principle is never lost. Franklyn Sills states, ‘No matter how desperate the situation, the information of the whole, its inherent ordering principle, or blueprint, is still available in each part. The blueprint of health is thus present in each part and is still available if it can be accessed.’”⁴

Blueprints for Life

The concept of an essential blueprint is both compelling and problematic. It seems to

explain how profound change is facilitated when we connect deeply with a client. By means of this inherent essential blueprint, our form is maintained, sustained, and appropriately organized in space and time. This claim seems to be borne out by the experience of many practitioners who have seen the body right itself according to a perceivable energy pattern. Intuitively, this way of describing our experience seems to give voice to the profound sense that we are not only perceiving the being or essence of our client but also the being or essence of the human being. When accessed in a therapeutic setting, it is both amazing and wonderful to watch as the body organizes and integrates itself in gravity according to this mysterious blueprint-like formative principle.

Just about everyone who has any experience with the body righting itself in the face of these inherent ordering principles is tempted to use the blueprint analogy to describe what happens. To avoid confusion about the territory under discussion, I should point out that the phenomenon that the blueprint analogy is meant to capture is just one among many different ordering forces. But clearly there is something significant about the experience of working with some of these ordering forces that lends itself to the blueprint analogy. Part of our task will be to try to understand the nature of the phenomenon the analogy is designed to illuminate without being misled by some of its more obvious shortcomings.

Even though it has become an accepted way of describing our experience, the blueprint analogy is problematic for several reasons. Whatever this essential ordering principle turns out to be, it is not very much like an ordinary blueprint at all. For one thing, an ordinary blueprint is nothing like an energetic pattern or Platonic idea. It is not inherent to the thing constructed, and it does not carry within itself the power to change the thing constructed from it. For another, an ordinary blueprint is just a set of plans or instructions for constructing something; it does not constitute the essence of the thing being constructed. Significantly, an ordinary blueprint exists independently from the thing that was constructed by means of it; whereas, the essential blueprint Dr. Rolf and others are referring to does not exist in separation from the life of the body. But if an ordinary blueprint is not inherent to the thing constructed, if

it is not an energetic pattern capable of changing structure, if it does not constitute the essence of the thing constructed from it, and if it exists separately from the thing constructed, what sense does it make to even call this ordering principle a blueprint? It is sufficiently unlike an ordinary blueprint that conceiving of it this way will, more than likely, confound our perception of what is actually happening. The same has to be said for the concept of a template and Dr. Rolf's Platonic idea. As we shall see, Platonic ideas, like blueprints, are not the kind of phenomena that can be inherent to the life of the body. Since Platonic ideas are also eternal and unchanging, they are static abstractions that are not capable of illuminating the dynamic wholeness of organisms.

These considerations raise some important questions. If the formative principle is not a blueprint or Platonic idea, what is it? What is the relationship between the ordering principle and the body? What is it that we are perceiving when the ordering principle is at work and how do we perceive it? Can we provide a phenomenological description of the so-called blueprint phenomena that does not do violence to our experience of it?

In order to answer these questions, we need to first understand that the concepts of a blueprint and the Platonic idea are abstractions from the analytic mind. Since they arise after the fact and are prime examples of our innate propensity to substitute or prefer explanation over the direct experience of what shows itself, they occlude rather than illuminate the phenomena in question. The best way to explore and overcome these difficulties is to work our way through Goethe's phenomenologically oriented qualitative science of nature and the new way of seeing he discovered.⁵

The reason Goethe's approach is so relevant and appropriate is because he struggled with and overcame the very issues that face anyone who tries to understand the universal organizing activity and its relation to the individual body without falling into Platonism, metaphysics, or the reductionist explanations common to mechanistic science. He was critical of the hegemony of mechanistic science, especially with its one-sided approach to living things. But he did not oppose science. In fact, he understood his approach to be complementary to traditional science. Instead of offering alternative explanations

to traditional science, he provided an alternative to explanation. He taught what he called a "delicate empiricism," a participatory way of perceiving that allowed the innermost being of a thing to show itself from itself to the observer in such a way that its ordering principle and way of being was made manifest in the being of the observer. In other words, what Dr. Rolf and others inappropriately call a blueprint is a formative power inherent to the living body that is utterly transparent to perception under the right conditions.

Since Goethe taught an objective way to perceive the core of being, he was highly critical of those philosophers and scientists who began their research with the distrust of the senses. Interestingly, he said, "The human being in himself, when he makes use of his healthy senses, is the greatest and most precise physical instrument that can exist. . ."⁶ Ever since the advent of Plato's philosophy, many scientists and philosophers believe that the ultimate nature of reality is to be found in another realm or behind what shows itself to us. Goethe could not disagree more. Nature's open secret is always staring us in the face – if we only know how to catch it. As Goethe said, "Let us not seek for something behind the phenomena – they are themselves the theory."⁷

By now it should be clear that when I say the blueprint analogy is misleading and inadequate, I am not denying the reality of this activity of correcting structure through some kind of mysterious blueprint-like phenomenon. In fact, this activity of righting structure by means of some kind of ordering principle or essential form is perceivable and can be accessed most easily in the therapeutic setting. The purpose of our excursion into Goethe's participatory science of nature is to provide a coherent understanding of what Dr. Rolf and others are trying to get at with the concept of an essential blueprint. This understanding will be based ultimately on what can be observed and will have profound consequences for not only how we perceive and analyze structure, but also for how we affect change through the practice of Rolfing. As we shall see, what has been called a blueprint can be better understood as an example of what Goethe calls the *Urphänomen* (translated here as *ur-phenomenon*). To a Goethean scientist or scholar, the implication that the *ur-phenomenon* is capable of righting the human form in the therapeutic context

may appear quite surprising. But to the holistic practitioner, it will avoid the conceptual problems of the blueprint analogy and make sense of a common experience without falling under the spell of metaphysics.

But before we deal with Goethe's scientific approach, we need to prepare the way by elucidating the important differences between a Platonic idea (or universal) and a concrete universal (what Goethe calls the *ur-phenomenon*).

Platonic Ideas

Plato stands as a towering figure at the very beginning of Western philosophy. His ideas have so shaped the Western world that many people see their world in terms of Plato's philosophy without ever having read a word of Plato or even having heard of him. His view of the world begins with the mistrust of the senses. The world revealed to us by our senses is always in flux and never at rest. True being cannot be found in the process of becoming, because what is always becoming is always ceasing to be, and what ceases to be ceases to have being. It is impossible for what ceases to have being to ever be a candidate for true being. Since what is always changing has no true reality, it also cannot be a true object of knowledge. If it cannot be a true object of knowledge, it cannot provide the foundation for knowledge. Only what never changes, is always the same and eternal, can be an object of knowledge and provide a foundation for knowledge.

With this one bold stroke Plato severed the wholeness of the life-world into two worlds: the true changeless eternal realm (the true abode of the mind) and the false world of semblance and constant becoming (the abode of the body). This distinction is still with us today in many guises. In Christian theology, for example, it evolved into the distinction between the divine heavenly realm and the sinful earthly realm. In science we find it mirrored in the often-unquestioned assumption that the world we experience is caused by a reality behind the appearances that we cannot directly experience. When science claims the world we experience is an apparent world and the one behind the appearances that it measures and explicates is the true reality, it perpetuates a version of the two worlds of Platonic metaphysics.

From the point of view of Platonic philosophy, most of us are ignorant of the

fact that we live in ignorance. To the extent we only know the world of the senses, we know nothing of true being. Since we only know semblance and the constant negation of being, we ignorantly assume the world of the senses is all there is and the truth of what is. The job of the true philosopher is to ascend to the eternal realm, contemplate the eternal forms, and then return to teach this wisdom to others.

Plato's distinction bears further scrutiny. Plato recognized that there was more to reality than what our senses revealed. He also recognized that this "more" was revealed to us by means of a "spiritual" sense with the help of ideas. The ideas Plato refers to are not the ordinary ideas that inhabit most people's minds. Platonic ideas are eternal forms or patterns upon which all the things of our impermanent, false world of the senses are modeled. Every time you gaze upon the world you see more than what your senses perceive. You always see something as *something*. You see that creature running in front of you as *a cat* or that as *an automobile*, or that as *a tree*, and so on. You are able to perceive something as something because you have a concept for it. It is by means of the concept *tree* that you see something as a tree. In a very real sense, in order to see something as something, you must both focus your eyes and your mind. For a human being, perception is the integration of the cognitive and the sensory. Following Wittgenstein, seeing something as something is sometimes referred to as "seeing-as" or "aspect-seeing" in contemporary philosophy.

I have discussed the phenomenon of seeing-as or aspect-seeing in some detail in previous articles. By employing the concept of intentionality as it was developed by phenomenology, I elucidated how perception is the integration of the sensory and the cognitive. Since phenomenology is not metaphysics, I was able to make these points without getting entangled in Plato's metaphysics. But here, we are trying to understand Plato. For the sake of brevity, we can say this: from the point of view of phenomenology, concepts help bring forth aspects of the world that are not available to the senses alone.⁸ Although you have to do some interpretive digging to find the same point in Plato, you can make the case that eternal ideas or forms function the same way concepts do for phenomenology.

Contrary to the phenomenological approach, Plato argues that these ideas are

eternal and exist in an eternal realm apart from our everyday world. Furthermore, they are the universal and original forms from which all the things of the world are copied. They are "blueprints" from which the impermanent world is built. The chair you are sitting on is one manifestation of the eternal idea, "Chairness." It is but a privation, a poor copy, of the eternal unchanging form, "Chairness."

Plato also claimed that these ideas or universals were essences. The essence of a thing is what makes it uniquely what it is and distinguishes it from all those things that are not it. If we ignore all the differences between the different shades of yellow and extract what is common we arrive at the form or universal, "Yellowness." "Yellowness" is a universal or Platonic idea. It is also the essence of yellow. On the basis of this universal form, "Yellowness," we are able to say that all the variations in yellow are, indeed, yellow and not some other color.

To understand what a universal is in Plato's sense, imagine that you are looking around at the many things that make up the content of your world. You might perceive such things as trees, flowers, people, colors, sky, the sound of the bell, the smell of french fries, and so on. In the process of looking around, suppose you come across a number of yellow things: a yellow pencil, your yellow shirt, a yellow flower, a yellow Nissan truck, a yellow cup, a yellow book, and a yellow cell phone. Each yellow thing is its own kind of yellow color. Some yellows are duller than others. Some are brighter. Some are darker and some are lighter. The yellow of every one of these things is slightly or greatly different from all the others. And yet they are all the same because they are all yellow. Your senses never present you with yellow itself, only with individual examples of yellow. Yet you see them as all yellow. How is that possible? Given the enormous variation in the particular kinds of yellows there are, Plato asked, "What is it that allows us to say that all of these different and particular shades of yellow are examples of yellow?" "In virtue of what can we say all of these individual and different exemplifications are the same?" Plato's answer is stunning: they are the same because they partake of the eternal idea, "Yellowness."

With this all too brief explication of Plato behind us, we can turn to elucidating what a concrete universal is and why it's

important to our enterprise. We are also now in a position to see why the ordering principles of the body cannot be Platonic ideas. Remember, Platonic universals exist in an eternal unchanging realm that can only be experienced by the mind, whereas the body finds its home in the impermanent sensory world. Clearly, Platonic universals exist separate and apart from the living body. As a result, they cannot be inherent to the life of the body. Since Platonic forms are eternal, they are static and unchanging. But the ordering forces of the body are dynamic and alive. Static lifeless universals and static lifeless blueprints cannot capture the dynamic ordering activity of life.

Unlike so many of his contemporaries, Goethe instinctively felt that Plato's distinction between two worlds was wrongheaded and intuitively sensed it as unhealthy. As we are about to see, in his protest against the distinction, he overcame it. He discovered a new way of seeing that rendered Plato's distinction superfluous by demonstrating how the core of being was available to us in perception rather than in some eternal realm or behind the appearances. He also created a phenomenological science of nature, the results of which bear profoundly and directly on the issues we have been discussing as well as on how the art of Roling or any holistic therapeutic discipline is practiced.

Concrete Universals: The One and the Many Are the Same One

As we have seen, the analogy of an essential blueprint is meant to capture the fact that there is some kind of dynamic universal form of the human body, which when accessed, has the power to correct dysfunction and structural imbalances in individual bodies. Central to the blueprint analogy is the idea that it carries the necessary information for bringing the form of an individual body into being and for repairing and maintaining biological order. The analogy to a blueprint, however, breaks down the moment we say that this essential blueprint is a Platonic idea or inherent to the life of the body. The problem that faces us is how this universal formative principle exists in relation to the individual body. How do we make sense of an ordering principle or event, which is not only inherent to each individual body, but acts like a universal form, a Platonic idea, and blueprint with the power to make the

body whole and well? How does a universal live in the individual?

Recall the quote from Norbet Weiner with which Dr. Rolf began her book: “We are not stuff that abides, but patterns that perpetuate themselves.” As a preliminary way to understand the universal formative activity, think of a water fountain. Like the human body, the form of the fountain remains relatively constant while the constituent materials are being constantly turned over and renewed. The difference, of course, is that in the case of a water fountain the organizing force that maintains the form is an external machine, while in the body, the formative power is internal or, better, inherent to the life and the wholeness of the body itself. This last point is important. The formative power is in no way external to the wholeness of the body as the blueprint analogy forces us to picture it – it is a manifestation of wholeness itself. Since the wholeness lives in every detail, the wholeness of life and its organizing forces are one and the same and live in every detail of the body. This power or formative principle that constitutes our wholeness, that lives in us and forms us, that is common to all of us, that is one and many at the same time, that is universal and individual at the same time, Goethe called the *ur-phenomenon*.

In preparation for understanding the human *ur-phenomenon*, let’s begin simply with Goethe’s approach to the life of plants. Goethe was deeply distressed by how the living organism in its wholeness was lost in the mechanistic approach to nature. His experience told him that seeing an organism as a collection of parts was simply a way of not seeing the organism. His instinct was to understand, by direct experience and observation, the unity and being of nature. When he contemplated the vast differences among plants, for example, he wanted to know what the essential being of the plant was: what is the way of being of the plant? He wondered what kind of formative activity was responsible for making a particular being a plant. Even though there are great differences between individual plants, Goethe discovered that the same formative activity that makes each plant a plant and not something else is at work in every plant in the same way. The being of the plant is also what allows us to group all the individual plants together as plants. His investigations led him to an astounding perception that there is only

one plant. Every individual plant is but a metamorphosis of one plant.

On the face of it, this claim is nothing if not bizarre. To get what Goethe is driving at, we must explain how this formative activity, this oneness, can manifest itself as every individual plant and not lose its wholeness and oneness. Although it might appear at first as though he is asking the Platonic question, he is not interested in any abstract concept of the plant, or Platonic universal, that excludes all the differences in favor of what is common to all. He’s interested in exploring the essential “be-ing” of the plant, that formative activity that lives in every plant, which allows the plant from within itself to create itself as many plants without ever losing its wholeness or oneness.⁹

To state Goethe’s discovery in the language of contemporary philosophy, the formative principle of living beings is a concrete universal. A concrete universal is not an abstract universal or Platonic universal. Abstract universals are generalizations formed by abstracting what is common from the plurality of individuals. Concrete universals are universal without being abstract. Goethe called his concrete universals, *Urphänomen* (origin or source-phenomenon, often translated as Archetype or Type), or in the case of the plant, the *Urpflanze* (self-begetting-source-plant). The *ur-plant* is not some primitive plant from which all plants evolved. It is the way of being of the plant: the dynamic, ever-metamorphosing, self-begetting, self-determining entelechy of the plant that gives form to itself from itself. The self-begetting *ur-plant* is nothing like a static blueprint, common plan, or pattern that determines how plants are put together. These examples are external to the being of the plant. The relation of the *ur-plant* to individual plants is also not external in the way the pump is to the water fountain. It is the inmost being of the plant, and it is one and the same in each and every individual plant. It is the originating wholeness and life of the plant itself. It is the self-begetting activity of the plant – it is *what* the plant lives to be and is neither numerically identical to nor separate from the plant. Goethe teaches us to perceive how every individual plant, the entire species of plant, is but one plant that appears in the form of many plants.

To grasp how the one *ur-plant* can be one and many plants without losing its wholeness, imagine a holographic plate that

has been broken into many pieces. Just as a photograph that has been ripped into many pieces, the holographic plate is numerically in many pieces. But unlike the photograph, the image itself isn’t fragmented into pieces. There is in reality only one whole image in each piece. Bortoft calls this one whole image that appears in the form of many fragments a “non-numerical one.” Each fragment is the same one image. The one image is the many fragments. The fragments are not copies or examples of the one image, they are the one image. They all manifest the same non-numerical one. It is one and many at the same time.

It is important to understand why the *ur-phenomenon* is not a Platonic universal. Especially with respect to the morphology of living beings, Platonic universals cannot explain how difference arises, because they attempt to reduce the many to what is common to all. In the attempt to find what is common to all, the one is reached by excluding all difference. Once all difference is excluded, it is impossible for the resulting sterile oneness to either produce or account for how diversity and difference come into being. Goethe’s *ur-phenomenon* does not exclude diversity by reducing the many to one. The self-begetting concrete universal is many and one at the same time. Like the holographic plate, it can be divided into many plants without losing the whole. Materially and numerically there are many plants, but organically there is only one plant – a one plant, which is also many. Unlike a holographic plate, however, the *ur-plant* is not a fixed or static unity. The *ur-phenomenon* is a living, dynamic, self-begetting, ever-metamorphosing and evolving whole whose formative dynamic, by necessity, takes place in time. It is like a self-generating hologram in time.

In order to grasp the formative dynamic of the *Urpflanze*, Goethe declared “All is leaf.” This succinct statement does not mean that a plant can be reduced to a leaf or that all parts of the plant – petals, stamens, stalk, roots, flowers, etc. – have developed from a primitive leaf or organ. This simple declaration demonstrates Goethe’s method of finding that feature of the phenomenon that most clearly and fully expresses the being (*ur-phenomenon*) of the phenomenon. “All is leaf” does not say that the leaf is the *ur-plant*. Rather, it says that the being of the plant (the *ur-plant*) is most clearly and completely expressed in the leaf. It is also a way of saying that every

organ and every plant is the expression of one organ. All the organs of the plant are just variations or metamorphosed examples of one organ. The ur-plant is not an actual leaf or organ. Rather, it is one and the same form that is capable of manifesting itself in a vast variety of individual plants. When Goethe says, “we might equally well say that a stamen is a contracted petal, as that a petal is a stamen in the state of expansion . . . ”¹⁰, he is directing our attention to the metamorphosis of the omnipotent ur-plant. He is trying to counteract the tendency to see this process as one material thing turning into another, as, say, a petal turning into a stamen. “All is leaf” also sums up how all plants as well as the organs of any particular plant are expressions of the same thing – the same whole ever-metamorphosing formative dynamic that forms itself and all of its manifestations out of itself. It is not visible to the eyes alone, but only appears in the being of the observer who can integrate his sensory, cognitive, and feeling nature and let the being of the plant show itself from itself.

As a preliminary way to grasp this movement of metamorphosis, look at Figure 1, an illustration of silhouettes of the leaves of a flowering delphinium plant.¹¹ The leaves are arranged the way they appear from the bottom of the stem to the one closest to the flower. In an actual plant, each leaf form is repeated several times before the next form appears. But this illustration is a simplified schematic designed to help us to grasp how the leaves are an outward visible expression of an inward power that transforms the leaves into less and less elaborate forms as they approach the flowering top. This pattern of withdrawing elaboration is common to flowering plants. The movement of metamorphosis, which exhibits the polarity expansion and contraction common to all

things in the universe, first consolidates, condenses, and withdraws form from the leaves (contraction) so that the morphic potential can be more fully invested in the flower (expansion).

These silhouettes hint of a dynamic formative unity and movement, which, though not visible to the eyes alone, is perceivable to the eyes and mind together, when our sensory, cognitive, and feeling-nature are integrated. If you were presented with these leaves one at a time, you would probably not see them as belonging together. But once the leaves are arranged this way, it becomes perfectly clear that these apparently individual forms are somehow the visible manifestation of the same thing. The point is to move behind perceiving the sequence as the material transformation of one leaf into another to seeing it as the movement of one unified formative power.

This schematic can be used as a training exercise for learning how to perceive the metamorphosis of the ur-plant at work. The schematic is not meant to display snapshots of isolated individual object/leaves or a sequence of material forms transforming into other material forms. It is meant to assist us in cultivating the ability, when in the presence of the actual plant, to perceive the plant, the cotyledons, stem, sepals, petals, stamens, pistils, and so on, as all the same thing: as the movement of one unified dynamic whole – a whole in which the movement of metamorphosis itself is the form that generates the individual forms. When we are able to perceive in this way, what we perceive is not the visible transformation of one material thing into another but differing visible expressions of the inmost formative power of the ur-plant.

When you understand the world through the analytic causal-mechanistic quantitative

approach of physics, the world is seen as collection objects, and movement is always considered to be the movement of an object. But in the qualitative organic world the ever-metamorphosing movement of the ur-plant is not the movement of a body at all. The movement of metamorphosis is the unified formative dynamic ur-plant itself. It is transforming movement without any object or solid body that does the moving. The continuity of the ur-plant as it continually comes into being is the continuity of one and the same self-begetting form. It is not the continuity of some sort of material substance or object.

A good example of motion without there being an object moving is the experience of music. You hear a melody as the movement of one unified dynamic whole. You do not hear the melody as a collection of notes or the succession of objects. Perceiving the ur-phenomenon is much like perceiving a melody. If you try to break it down into its constituent parts, you will never hear the melody or perceive the ur-phenomenon. But if you forgo the attempt to reduce everything to a collection of causally interacting objects, the ur-phenomenon, like the melody, is utterly transparent to perception.

The following compelling image, although somewhat awkwardly stated, illustrates how the one plant is perceived using the above schematic. “If one could imagine a person walking through the snow, and leaving the imprints of its [*sic*] feet, but with every step changing the shape of its [*sic*] feet, and if one would behold not the trace in the snow, perceptible to the sense-organs of the physiological eyes, but the living being that is undergoing change while it is walking, one would see with the inner eye the organ [ur-phenomenon] of the plant that is producing leaves”¹² and, we should add, the same ur-phenomenon that is producing individual plants. Thus, we must transcend our analytic propensity to see the plant as a thing made of parts or as an example of a universal genus or species and learn to perceive the formative being of the one plant undergoing the movement of metamorphosis in manifestation of the individual plants, organs, and leaves.

The Tripartite Ur-phenomenon

With this brief explication of Goethe’s metamorphosis of plants behind us, we can now turn to the human ur-phenomenon. Unfortunately, we cannot simply



Figure 1: Pattern of Withdrawing Elaboration
(from Henri Bortoft, *The Wholeness of Nature* Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne Press; 1996, p. 283)

consult Goethe's writings to discover what he had to say about the human ur-phenomenon, because he really never managed to undertake a metamorphosis of the mammalian and human form. True, Goethe left behind some interesting insights and suggestive hints, but it took Rudolf Steiner's creative genius along with his intimate and thoroughgoing knowledge of Goethean science to expand and elaborate these morphological insights to the point of perceiving the mammalian ur-phenomenon. Drawing on both Goethe's insights and Steiner's work, Wolfgang Schäd finally was able to create a brilliant and thorough Goethean mammalian morphology.

The mammalian and human ur-phenomenon is an interpenetrating threefold organization consisting of the sensory-nervous system (structurally associated primarily with the head but obviously extending through the whole body), the rhythmic system (structurally associated mostly with the thorax where you find the activities of respiration and blood circulation), and the metabolic-limb system (structurally associated primarily with the limbs and the abdominal cavity).¹³ Each member of this tripartite nature is an expression of the whole. Since they are interpenetrating, they cannot be spatially separated into discrete parts. All members of the threefold are processes rather than simplistically considered parts; they do not lie side-by-side like the parts of a machine. They live in each other; they are found throughout the body; they exist for and by means of each other; and each enters into the constitution of the others.

Unlike human morphology, all mammalian forms tend to be adapted to a specific environment by making one member of the threefold the dominating feature around which the whole is organized. For example, the horse's morphology is characterized by powerful, impulsive, enduring, and quite differentiated movement. Hence, the horse's body displays how the tripartite mammalian type is morphed and organized around enhanced leg formation (metabolic-limb system), which expresses and allows for a greater opposition to gravity than, say, a mouse with its short and less enhanced leg formation. The enhanced leg formation of the horse allows for greater freedom in relation to its environment. But this morphing of the tripartite mammalian type is not limited to the legs alone, it is also

expressed in the organization of the whole organism. The horse's large chest illustrates how increased movement demands an increased oxidation process (rhythmical system). The horse's fiery movement also shows up in a greater need for food (metabolic-limb system). As a result, the horse's digestive system is organized to be able to metabolize fifty kilograms of grass and other vegetation daily. Accordingly, the horse's intestines reach a length of about thirty meters. The horse is also an extremely sensitive creature (sensory-nervous system). Its eyes, the largest of any terrestrial mammal, are situated on the sides of its head, allowing a full, expansive survey of its surroundings through which its organs are intimately connected and to which they are adapted.

Compare the horse's morphology to other mammals. Think of how the giraffe's whole body is morphed and organized around its head/neck. Imagine the intensely nervous activity of rodents as they scurry about, whiskers twitching, continually gnawing and nibbling on things – notice how their paws are more developed for holding things, and you realize that they are organized around the sensory-nervous system. Or picture a cow, blissfully chewing her cud and you see that such creatures are organized around their digestive processes. In all mammals except the human, one member of the tripartite nature dominates the organization of the whole organism. Human morphology represents the harmonious interpenetrating of all three systems, in which no one of the threefold is more dominant than others in the organization of the whole.

Not only does the tripartite form characterize the organization of the mammalian body, it also characterizes the organization of the entire class of mammals. Accordingly, mammals can be divided into three broad types depending on which of the three systems dominates. The rodents and ungulates are polar opposites, while the carnivores are the intermediate type. The rodents emphasize the nerve-sense system. Examples are mice, squirrels, rats, beavers, porcupines, etc. The ungulates emphasize the metabolic-limb system and include such types as horses, pigs, cows, deer, hippopotami, etc. Representing a balance between the two extremes of the rodents and the ungulate are the carnivores, which emphasize the respiratory-circulatory system. This type includes cats, weasels,

badgers, seals, etc. Categorizing mammals in this way is not a matter of imposing an abstract schema on them; rather it flows naturally from the *perception* of three-fold organization first discovered by Steiner. It also clearly does not try to reduce the diversity of mammals to the unity of a Platonic universal. Through this holistic perspective, the organism, in its unity and diversity, becomes its own explanation rather than being reduced to some other phenomenon, just as Goethe taught.

Just as there is only one plant that is also many, so too is there only one mammal that is also the many one-sided manifestations of rodents, carnivores, and ungulates. There is only one formative activity manifesting itself from itself in many one-sided forms as the same thing. We have already seen how Goethe's declaration "All is leaf" demonstrates his method of finding that feature of the phenomenon that most clearly and fully symbolizes or expresses the being (ur-phenomenon) of the phenomenon. Similarly, the human form most clearly symbolizes the ur-phenomenon. Since the human form is not adapted to any particular environment, it is not specialized in any of the ways all the other mammals are. As a result, it represents the most balanced harmonious interpenetrating of all three systems in which no one of the threefold is more dominant than another. For the same reasons that the leaf is not the ur-plant, the human body is not the ur-phenomenon. But since among all mammalian forms it represents the most harmonious balance of the three systems, we can say that the being of the mammalian form is most clearly symbolized by or made visible in the human form.

Goethean Therapeutics: Perceiving the Ur-phenomenon

The fundamental question of biology is the fundamental question of any holistic therapeutic discipline that has as its goal the enhancement of the whole organism: "What constitutes order and wholeness in a living organism?" This question is not a pressing one for the corrective practitioner. For the corrective practitioner, who is thoroughly schooled in mechanistic science, the body is simply a soft machine made of parts and therapy consists of treating the dysfunctional parts symptom by symptom. The organism is lost to this way of thinking and working. But to the holistic practitioner, the question is fundamental and imperative. For effective therapy

depends upon perceiving thwarts to the integrity of the organism in the context of the wholeness of the organism.

When the world is seen mechanically and analytically, it is nothing more than a collection of objects. When the world is seen holistically, it is perceived as a unity – an organized relationship in which all relationships are related. The wholeness of a living organism is also a relationship in which there is nothing more fundamental to the makeup and organization of the whole than the whole itself. But since relationship is not a collection of objects, it cannot be grasped analytically or modeled mechanically. It cannot be perceived in the way we perceive objects. Coming to understand, perceive, and facilitate meaningful change for this organized relationship, which constitutes the unity of the organism, is at the heart of authentic healing. The blueprint analogy is an attempt to grasp how the inherent organizing forces of the body reestablish appropriate organization. But it begins from the wrong inquiry standpoint. Blueprints and the things made from them are objects. But biological organization and the ordering forces that maintain and repair organization are not objects. They are relationships that must be perceived in a different way.

As we saw earlier, human perception involves the integration of the cognitive and the sensory. In a previous article, "The Disclosive Power of Feeling,"¹⁴ I showed that our feeling nature is capable of perceiving aspects of the world not available to our senses or cognition. I also demonstrated that perception involves not only the integration of the sensory and cognitive, but also the integration of our feeling nature. I then proceeded to describe in some detail how to contemplate wholeness and the thwarts to wholeness in the therapeutic context. The details of this discussion about how to contemplate your client are very relevant to our discussion here and will help point the way to how to perceive the ur-phenomenon. As I pointed out in "The Disclosive Power of Feeling," perceiving wholeness (and, by implication, the ur-phenomenon) of a client cannot be accomplished by the senses alone. Perceiving the wholeness of the ur-phenomenon is a special instance of aspect-seeing. It is a form of contemplation that demands the integration of our sensory, cognitive, and feeling nature as well as a shift in our intentionality or orientation to

allowing what is to show itself from itself. Since understanding aspect-seeing is central to how we perceive the ur-phenomenon, I restated in this article the essentials of aspect-seeing in footnote eight below.

In order to perceive the formative activity of the human body, you cannot analyze the body piecemeal. It is not enough to notice that one foot turns out more than the other or that one shoulder is lower than the other. You must be able to feel-perceive these patterns in the context of the wholeness of the person. You must be able to feel-perceive how these patterns are expressed uniquely by each person's unique form, because a turned-out foot or a low shoulder often means something quite different from person to person.

To feel-perceive the whole person, you must shift your orientation to one of allowing the person's way of being to show itself, from itself, to you, and you must do this without imposing any preconceived ideas or inappropriate schemas on your client. In the vernacular of Zen, you must return to zero. In a living whole every part is a uniquely shaped expression of the whole and the whole is manifested in every part. Just as Goethe learned to see the whole in the parts and parts as an expression of the same ur-phenomenon, you must learn to feel-perceive the whole in every nook and cranny of your client's being and how every part functions as an expression of the whole. To perceive the formative wholeness of your client is to honor it. And once you perceive it, you will not be tempted to impose any predetermined templates upon his structure. Rather, you will allow his being to express what constitutes order for his body in relationship to gravity.

If you contemplate your client's body long enough, you will perceive what Dr. Rolf and others call the essential blueprint. It often appears to perception as a kind of energy body that can be slightly larger or sometimes much larger than your client's actual body. It does not appear as a form separate from your client's body but rather as an intelligent, self-correcting form that is co-present with your client's body. At the moment you perceive it, your client's body begins the process of righting itself with respect to this more perfect form. It tends to correct your client's problems in the order and time-frame it chooses. When the ur-phenomenon finishes its work, you stop perceiving it, and the session is over. Perceiving the ur-phenomenon is a special

instance of aspect-seeing in which knowing and being are the same.

Conclusion

In suggesting that the ur-phenomenon is a way to understand and make sense of what Dr. Rolf and others mean by the essential blueprint, it may seem as though I have taken some liberties with Goethe's discovery. I would try to allay this suspicion by saying that the discovery of a healing dimension to Goethe's ur-phenomenon is not the same as taking liberties with it. Most would probably not find a problem with how I used Goethe's discovery of the ur-phenomenon to refurbish the blueprint analogy, especially since it preserved what the analogy was meant to illuminate. But if the ur-phenomenon preserves what the blueprint analogy was meant to illuminate, it means that the ur-phenomenon is capable of performing the very same activity the blueprint was meant to explain. As a result, we are brought face-to-face with a surprising and unexpected result: not only does the ur-phenomenon bear within itself formative powers, but when properly perceived by a holistic practitioner, it also manifests healing powers. If we had not undertaken this project of trying to understand the blueprint analogy, we probably would never have seen the ur-phenomenon in this new way. To those familiar with Goethe's work, but who are not practitioners of a healing art, this discovery might seem especially surprising. Perhaps to fully appreciate this point, you have to be a holistic practitioner who has experienced the ur-phenomenon at work. Otherwise, you would have no way of knowing what the human ur-phenomenon can accomplish when it is perceived during a session. In any case, learning to contemplate your clients in the way I have suggested, and patiently waiting for the human ur-phenomenon to appear, will in time not only enhance your perceptual skills, it will also make you a more effective holistic practitioner. It will also completely amaze you.

Endnotes

1. Rolf, Ida P., Rolfing: *The Integration of Human Structures*. New York: Harper and Row, 1971, p. 1.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 205-206.
4. Michael Kern, *Wisdom in the Body*. Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2005, p. 33.

5. Much of the discussion of Goethe's approach comes from Henri Bortoft's wonderful book *The Wholeness of Nature: Goethe's Way toward a Science of Conscious Participation in Nature* (Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne Press, 1996). The following books, from which I learned a great deal, are also relevant to this discussion: R. Steiner's *Riddles of the Soul* (Spring Valley, NY: Mercury Press, 1996), *Goethean Science* (Spring Valley, NY: Mercury Press, 1988), *The Healing Process: Spirit, Nature, and Our Bodies* (Hudson, NY: Lindesfarne Press, 2000), *Introducing Anthroposophical Medicine* (Hudson, NY: Anthroposophic Press, 1999); W. Schad's *Man and Mammels: Toward a Biology of Form* (Garden City, NY: Waldorf Press, 1977); J. Naydler's *Goethe on Science: An Anthology of Goethe's Scientific Writings* (Edinburgh: Floris Books, 1996); J. Bockemühl and A. Suchantke's *The Metamorphosis of Plants* (Cape Town: Novalis Press, 1995); D. Seamon and A. Zajonic's *Goethe's Way of Science: A Phenomenology of Nature* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1998); E. Kranich's *Thinking Beyond Darwin: The Idea of the Type as a Key to Vertebrate Evolution* (Hudson, NY: Lindesfarne Press, 1999); and C. Holdrege's *Genetics and the Manipulation of Life: The Forgotten Factor of Context* (Hudson, NY: Lindesfarne Press, 1996).
6. Naydler, Jeremy, *Goethe on Science: An Anthology of Goethe's Scientific Writings*. Edinburgh: Floris Books, 1996, p. 29.
7. Miller, Douglas, translator and editor, *Goethe: Scientific Studies*. New York: Suhrkamp Publishers, 1988, p. 307.
8. This point is especially important for understanding how we perceive Goethe's ur-phenomenon. For the sake of clarity and completeness, allow me to flesh out this point by repeating and expanding what I said in "The Disclosive Power of Feeling," *Structural Integration*, Vol. 36, No. 2, (June 2008), pp. 8-13.

One of the more amazing feats of our consciousness is found in the remarkable way we perceive the world. We humans do not perceive with our senses alone. In a very real way, our mind is also an organ of perception. We perceive by means of an integration of mind and senses. As a result, our perception of the objects of our world is cognitive and interpretive. Because of our great conceptual abilities, we are capable of what has come to

be called aspect-seeing. We not only see objects in the context of a foreground and background, we also see these objects as something. We see this thing as a chair, or that thing as a tree, and that as a mountain, etc.

Perhaps you remember reading the comic section of the newspaper as a child and enjoying the various word and visual puzzles. Often there were drawings that, on first inspection, looked like a random bunch of squiggles and lines. But the caption directed you to find a figure, perhaps a cat, in the drawing. As you looked more carefully, suddenly the apparently meaningless squiggles congealed into the figure of a cat. Finding the cat in the squiggles is coming to see something as something – something that was not purely available to the senses alone.

When you saw the cat, you didn't add the cat to the drawing or see something that was hidden behind the drawing. No new lines were added to the drawing. By means of an integration of the sensory and cognitive, you suddenly saw what was there all along. Your intentionality shifted and you saw the cat by means of the concept cat. You didn't see and then formulate the concept. Having the concept is what rendered the cat visible. In a sense, you had to focus not only your eyes but also your understanding to perceive the cat. At the same time, it is important to understand that when you first saw the drawing as a bunch of squiggles you were also seeing it as something – as a bunch of squiggles.

This simple example of seeing the cat in the drawing contains an important insight: every act of perception, whether looking, listening, smelling, tasting, or touching, is also already an act of understanding. Our very act of looking or hearing or smelling makes the world appear. To head off any possible misunderstanding, let me expand on this point, which I unfortunately obscured somewhat by using a searchlight analogy in elucidating the concept of intentionality. There is a reality that exists independently of our perception of it.

It is ordered, autochthonous, and indeterminate. Similar to the way in which the cat appeared when we went looking for it, by actively seeking meaning, our perceptual-understanding brings forth aspects of this indeterminate autochthonous reality and makes them more determinate. When our attention was first drawn to the visual puzzle we saw it as a bunch of squiggles, as an indeterminate form. Then when we looked more closely, the indeterminate squiggles became more determinate and we saw the cat. By taking what first appears as indeterminate and making it determinate, our perceptual-understanding makes it possible for these aspects to be perceived as *something*. By bringing forth particular aspects of our autochthonous reality, this pre-personal activity of perceptual-understanding renders the human world perceivable.

9. Although it is beyond the scope of this article, the discussion of a formative power that can be perceived hints of a formative power at the foundation of everything. This ur-phenomenon of all ur-phenomenon that can be experienced Buddhism calls the activity of the *Dharma*, or the *Dharmakaya*.
10. Bortoft, Henri, *The Wholeness of Nature: Goethe's Way toward a Science of Conscious Participation in Nature*. Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne Press, 1996, p. 279.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 283.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 289.
13. The following books are relevant to the discussion of the Goethean approach to the mammalian form: R. Steiner's *Riddles of the Soul* (Spring Valley, NY: Mercury Press, 1996), *Goethean Science* (Spring Valley, NY: Mercury Press, 1988), and *The Healing Process: Spirit, Nature, and Our Bodies* (Hudson, NY: Lindesfarne Press, 2000); W. Schad's *Man and Mammels: Toward a Biology of Form* (Garden City, NY: Waldorf Press, 1977); J. Naydler's *Goethe on Science: An Anthology of Goethe's Scientific Writings* (Edinburgh: Floris Books, 1996); J. Bockemühl and A. Suchantke's *The Metamorphosis of Plants* (Cape Town: Novalis Press, 1995); H. Bortoft's *The Wholeness of Nature: Goethe's Way toward a Science of Conscious Participation in Nature* (Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne Press, 1996); and E. Kranich's *Thinking Beyond Darwin: The Idea of the Type as a Key To Vertebrate Evolution* (Hudson, NY: Lindesfarne Press, 1999).
14. *Structural Integration*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (June 2008), pp. 8-13.