

Explorations in Body Image

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I. SEPTEMBER 1968

As a human being newly emerged from ten hours of processing in Structural Integration at the hands of Dr. Ida Rolf and one of her students, I am eager to set down some of the most dramatic first-wave reactions and impressions.

My initial reaction was moderate shock: apprehensiveness and confusion leading quickly to the initial propositions upon which I began to build in deep and permanent changes in the prosecution of my life. The main realization was that the manipulator was not inflicting pain so much as my own resistance was dramatizing a certain intensity of feeling, and interpreting it as anguish.

I became aware of a subjective faculty that acted to resist the manipulation as though it were outrageous. This stressful reaction was fed by a network of potential feeling divorced from the actual "pain" stimulus. Moreover I can remember no time when the reaction pattern I was exhibiting had not been present. I felt strangely childish when I responded that way, but I could not inhibit the reaction. At the same time I became aware of a rational "monitoring" faculty divorced from the infantile feelings which could observe, judge, compare, rationalize and order the subjective states. I took refuge in attempts at humor or wit.

At the end of the first hour the sources of my particular bodily anxieties had been tied in with particular physical areas of the body. Each segment, (chest, shoulders, pelvis, legs, etc.) had adapted itself to some less-than-adequate idea of the other and of itself. I perceived that the *body totality* functions as though normal, even though it may just be making do in a customary way with inaccurate or incomplete information.

I went home from the first session with a

rare sense of wonder at having glimpsed so much that was unfamiliar to me about my own body hiding just below the surface of my skin. I remember asking myself, "What sort of a creature am I?"

I am able to identify the following kinds of changes as a result of the ten sessions:

1. *Emotional release based upon recall of childhood experiences, involving learning a new reaction to old emotional stimuli.*

These were the most dramatic, though not necessarily the most basic changes. In these instances (i.e. recall of painful experiences relating to a broken collarbone, resulting surgery, and emotional traumas in family relationships at that time), I was encouraged to experience the infantile feelings as though I was five years old, yet to realize that it was no longer happening. In effect I was still responding as though these painful experiences were occurring presently.

2. *Changes in awareness of the bodily self, shifts in content of awareness, shifts in level of awareness, evolution of more adequate body imagery.*

From the very beginning I sensed proprioceptive changes. For example, the action at the knee joint felt "smoother," "freer," the leg felt "longer," my head was "straighter" on my shoulders, breathing was "deeper" because my chest, especially the left side, felt "bigger," etc.

In addition to these new qualitative feelings which were unmistakable, I began to have a firmer grasp of the "location" of my feelings with regard to a spatial model constructed along the lines of the human body itself. As the work progressed, I ceased to disassociate the unpleasant feelings from my body and began to find places for those feelings within a new context that was developing. I was devising something like a "map" or model of myself that corresponded to a contemporary reality, not to a five-year-old's fancifully disfigured

scheme.

'Deeper' feelings are elaborated according to older patterns, and ultimately reach back to reflexes. There is a correspondence in a figurative way to depth in memory (time) and tissue (space) as well. The body, like a landscape, reveals only its most superficial aspects to those who have developed *no* feeling for underlying structure and composition. As a science, Rolf's Structural Dynamics can locate the source of an aberration in the body perhaps, but the erasure of that source is where art may supersede science, with a lot of help from a highly motivated subject.

One of the most exciting kinds of changes was an evolving body-image concept. Phrases like, "I feel like a newly hatched bird that has been squashed," "crestfallen," "crushed," were later changed to, "I feel like I can fly," "the wings are strong enough to fly." One of my particular idiosyncrasies was a lower body that felt stronger and better-defined than the upper half. I had seen myself as a tree with strong well-developed roots, but with an underdeveloped top half - no foliage, no fruit, no shade, incomplete. This image has been changed to a more symmetrical one, top half balancing bottom half, and right and left halves gaining a well-differentiated equivalence. In one very clear instance I could actually get a picture of my spine (as though in an X-ray or negative) and I could "see" its characteristic torsion as pressure was being applied to straighten it.

The results of this kind of creative imagery are not imaginary. The spine actually did straighten measurably, and in one session the sensation of the vertical pelvis with thighs, knees and legs tracking in parallel groves developed consciously.

3. *Other physical and physiological changes.*

My vision has continued to improve since the processing. My jaw, which had been misaligned for many years was set into place and has stopped "popping out." My toes are capable of more articulate action as a result of the realignment of the whole lower leg, especially on the right side. My balance has been improved greatly as evidenced in the fact that I am now able to perform ballet turns that previously were clumsy at best. Most important, breathing is deeper and freer, and circulation has improved considerably.

In conclusion, the total effect of the processing has been to begin a remodeling process:

to help me to feel physically better equipped to meet the conditions of my life. Some of the most limiting conditions had been self-imposed, and can now be changed.

II. DECEMBER 1968

With practically no agreement as to the consummate uses of the human body, no way of estimating its ultimate function, its absolute limitations, or even its optimal form, we may come to entertain a most intriguing possibility: not a new one, to be sure, but one that sets the human body itself squarely into the context of evolutionary

“Body is the name for a series of changes.”¹

In the interest of understanding something of the nature of these changes, and of grasping their significance, I am proposing a study of the body-as-metaphor, a special case of the problem that has variously occupied others in psychology, philosophy and the arts as *body-image*.²

It has been proposed that the body *has* an image, i.e., that it represents itself to itself by means of a fairly stable postural model or schema. But I am suggesting that the body *is* an image as well. It projects itself into its immediate outer world along schematized lines through its posture and gesture and thus is perceived as the very image of motility and change.

As the body and its psyche endure in time, certain tendencies to action become formalized. The individual comes to recognize the effects of his own personality by the responses he elicits in others, or more precisely, by the images or facings which others present to him. How he comes to represent himself to himself, how he comes to differentiate his own image from the effects of his image upon others, or their effects upon him, has been the subject of much earnest study, which I cannot even begin to summarize here. It is safe to say, however, that body-image phenomena refer to a complex process of self-symbolization in which the world, body and personality have interpenetrated each other. The degree to which such interpenetration operates to materially modify the self is by no means a simple matter to ascertain.

Preliminary attempts to discuss the subject of the relationship of the physical to the psychic world often involve a predisposi-

tion to use metaphorical language, and to speak imagistically.

For example, Fisher and Cleveland's material on body-image involves the development of the concept of the body boundary as a "barrier."³ They developed a tool for measuring body image boundary in individuals based upon the Rorschach projective test. They found individuals with high barrier scores tending to more fixed body boundaries than those with low barrier scores. They related the scores to other personality indices: measurements of introversion and extraversion, psychosomatic symptoms, values, and vocational preferences, and found meaningful correlations in many cases.

Fisher and Cleveland were working with basic metaphorical concepts: "barriers," "boundaries," and "penetrability." They were not referring to anything as literal as the skin, or a literal permeability, and yet, based upon a rather simple set of images they managed to codify an important aspect of body-image phenomena.

But Fisher and Cleveland have by no means exhausted the metaphorical possibilities of the human body! It is entirely possible that the body itself is an image, or to use Suzanne Langer's word, an "apparition," especially in the sense that it sustains a constant array of constructive and destructive changes in the form of sensory-perceptive and motor-expressive acts.

It is my belief that seeing and using the metaphorical possibilities of the body may actually materially enhance the individual's ability to function in his world.

Let us examine some of the relevant symbolizations of the human body, which present a sense of the coordinated form and function of the body entity.

The body-image, figuratively speaking, of course, of the developing embryo may be simply that of a radiating center of activity with the capacity for generating polarities, and integrating structures. The influence of the field of gravity would soon modify this primary image to include that of a weighted mass of irregular shape.

The birth process itself might contribute to the next development: preliminary differentiation at the outer limits. The barrier metaphor is applicable to this phase. The function of a barrier is to close and to open selectively, and once parturition has oc-

curred the body begins to actively filter stimuli. Sleep, unconsciousness, is the original and primary barrier. The barrier images emphasize chiefly the defensive and protective aspects of the aura of contact between inner and outer spheres of awareness.

Boundary, on the other hand, implies a different kind of delimitation in space - emphasizing the outline around some kind of unitary entity. The body-as-land mass, or landscape suggests itself. As the effects of experience begin to accumulate in time an almost "geological" ordering of structures takes place. Thus the bounded dimension is replaced by the emphasis upon levels, or layers of activity "beneath" a surface, as well as "above." Differentiation of the self from its environment begins to take place definitively when the direction of changes can be perceived either from the surface inward, or from the center outward.

The unitary bounded entity can be seen as a bag, envelope, or container of some sort, even a vessel. Such containers can be moved. However, when a container actually moves, it becomes a vehicle, or a carrier

Once again, the emphasis shifts from the surface, and the exchange of products or energies at the surface, to the energies and products themselves contained and/or transported.

The vehicle metaphor is especially likely to shift attention from the thing contained to the information implicit in the image regarding the space or medium through which the vehicle transports, be it fluid, solid, or gas. And may the body not be considered to be a special class of medium itself, in the sense that Marshall McLuhan uses the term?

The inorganic world of forms provides another rich source of metaphor that can be elaborated to include abstract geometrical forms and mathematical relationships within the body structure itself. Research has shown numerical concepts clearly related to body-image phenomena (i.e., numbers in a series stand for fingers and toes in primitive counting).

In like manner, the organic-vegetative world is a most useful category. Plant life and growing forms provide an important way of characterizing human morphology. Religious literature is full of allusions to the human form as root, branch, flower or fruit.

Organic systems involving the ebb and flow of fluids and gases (i.e., river systems, weather) have often been identified with the glandular and vegetative changes within the body which are the concomitants of emotion.

Obviously animal forms and totemistic metaphors have repeatedly been used to epitomize certain characteristics of the human form. Whole classes of animals, or often, a specific bear, deer, snake or bird may become expressive metaphors in the self-symbolization process.

Structural images of an architectural nature comprise another important category, as do tools, instruments, mechanical devices, and even works of art themselves.

Nor can we overlook the idealized human as a metaphorical type. Human beings are especially aware of the archetypal characteristics of members of their own species, and become skillful in imitating the behavior of special classes of human beings, (gods, royalty, elite), or particular living individuals whose images become fetishes.

In each of these examples, the metaphor serves to emphasize certain salient features at the expense of conflicting possibilities. In every case, if the metaphor is examined carefully for content and applicability it is evident that the symbol or image stands for a high order of perception. In body-image phenomena we have, as Schilder suggests, a category of awareness in which it is possible to express with great economy more than we may actually "know" about the body. After all, in order to walk, or to behave in any complex way, it is not necessary to know consciously all that is involved, but it is necessary to have a postural model complete enough at least to begin the activity.

The metaphor then, as I see it, is merely a more consciously elaborated class of image or scheme, elements of which are present in behavior. Although it is highly unlikely that the postural model or body image be conscious, it is quite probable that it *has been* conscious at some time, and that it has receded into the background to form part of the stabilized image of the self. What distinguishes the body-as-image from the body-as-metaphor is habit. The image is an extension into consciousness of a motor pattern familiarized through previous usage, and adapted to the present instance. The metaphor is an entirely new possibil-

ity, often, it would seem, a rather unlikely one (the suit of armor, the flying machine). It is a goal to be consummated in the future, with a special symbolic significance to the individual. One of the most important sources for such metaphors is the material of dreams. If the subject succeeds in making the metaphor fully conscious, thereby realizing it in completed action, he succeeds in carrying himself beyond his present stage of development (taken literally, metaphor means to carry beyond). Thus, a person *is* his image, but he *may become* his metaphor.

A special kind of energy is required for such "symbolic behavior." How many times have we heard the phrase "creative energy" and wondered exactly what could be meant by it?

For a moment consider the human body as a transducer or a transformer of energy. All of the images so far suggested imply a characteristic disposition toward the field of energy surrounding and contained within the body. Within a system energy is neither created nor destroyed, it is merely transmitted or transmuted. The metaphors I have described group themselves relative to the kind of energy they involve. For example, the organic-vegetative images involve chemical transformations, largely, while those of the moving vehicle group imply mechanical energy as well. The barrier field in which impulses are conducted suggests electrical potential, since polarities generate static electrical or magnetic energy.

In the human body at all times the conscious experience of one or all of these forms of energy is possible. However the perception of one form of energy or another is somewhat arbitrary since, all three forms of energy are really the same when seen from the single perspective of movement. All energy can be reduced hypothetically to "particles" (or waves) in motion. Whether the energy is seen as chemical, mechanical, electrical or magnetic depends primarily upon the scope or the scale of the perception. For example, the body walking is an activity that involves mechanical energy in the action of muscle upon joint, chemical energy within the muscle, and electrical energy (combined with chemical) in nerve impulses. Now here is a good question. What kind of energy is involved in thought processes: in thinking, in willing, in desiring, in imagining? I am certainly not prepared to attempt an answer, yet I feel the question is a meaningful one, for un-

less we can begin to imagine the next stages of evolution they will not come about. The power to envision new forms and to create new possibilities is certainly a form of potential contained "within" living creatures. Therefore I believe it is important to increase the image-making capacity in man by all means. Since bodily experience is the primary source of imagery, and the body-image is the primary image (witness the fact that the human form is the foremost subject of art) it follows that the body-image must be developed and extended.

Schilder suggests that the body-image concept itself is developed in at least two main ways: through the perception of pain, and through the perception of voluntary motor activity. If we concede any validity to the body-image concept it would be especially important to investigate the phenomena of pain, and voluntary movement.

The process of structural integration as developed and practiced by Dr. Rolf is an excellent technique for enabling the individual to explore and to develop his body image concept to a highly conscious level. Obviously it makes use of the so-called "pain" receptors. It does not aim specifically at motor development. A study might be undertaken to assess its effectiveness in contradistinction to approaches that utilize motor pathways.

Certainly the matter of *how* the Rolf process works is still very much a moot question. While undoubtedly some of the release is due to the mechanical freeing of structures, and improved adjustment of the body to the earth's gravity, not to mention improved circulation due to the manipulation of the fascial layers, it is the opinion of some that the most notable results are achieved on the level of neural reflex. Might it not be possible that much "unconscious" material might be brought to light this way, since the neuromuscular system holds the key to information stored in the body for a lifetime?

NOTES

1. A saying attributed to Swami Vivekananda.
2. See Schilder, Paul. *The Image and Appearance of the Human Body*. New York: International Universities Press, Inc., 1950.
3. Fisher and Cleveland. *Body Image and Personality*. Princeton: D. van Nostrand Company, 1958.