

Symbol and Form

By Keith Eric Grant, PhD, NCTMB

"The global skill of drawing something that you see 'out there' (a person, object or landscape) requires only five basic component skills. These skills are not drawing skills, but perceptual skills: the perception of edges, the perception of spaces, the perception of relationships, the perception of lights and shadows, and the perception of the whole, or gestalt.

Teaching the principles of these skills means that the student can learn to draw relatively quickly."

- *Betty Edwards*.²

Along the road to discovering how people learn to draw well, Betty Edwards began to realize that the problem was not primarily one of kinesthetic skill, but of seeing and perception. Students who learned to draw did so suddenly, not incrementally. One week, their drawings were stereotypic symbolic images, and the next week they were drawing proficiently. Then she found a new clue.

"I have always done a lot of demonstration drawing in my classes, and it was my wish during the demonstrations to explain to students what I was doing - what I was looking at, why I was drawing things in certain ways. I often found, however, that I would simply stop talking right in the middle of a sentence. I would hear my voice stop and I would think about getting back to the sentence, but finding the words again would seem like a terrible chore - and I didn't really want to anyhow. But, pulling myself back at last, I would resume talking - and then find that I had lost contact with the drawing, which suddenly seemed confusing and difficult. Thus I picked up a new bit of information: I could either talk or draw, but I couldn't do both at once."

What Edwards concluded was that the brain hemisphere responsible for verbal-linguistic ability couldn't draw except in stereotypic symbols and that the hemisphere responsible for seeing in the way necessary for drawing was nonverbal. I am reminded of Edward's observation whenever I am demonstrating massage and

attempting to describe my methods or am Scandinavian dancing and trying to converse.

Kinesthetic/perceptual skills and verbal/linguistic skills simply come from different places. Doing both requires a lot of switching back and forth.

What has intrigued me further, however, are the differences Edwards noted between the detailed perceptions of shape and form needed for drawing and the simple symbolic caricatures offered up by the verbal-linguistic mind. There are other ways in which fixating on the symbol rather than switching our minds into the depths of the form can deceive us.

We often think of posture as if it had some independent existence. Yet, if we delve below the symbol, our posture is merely the relative positioning of parts of our body in the downward pulling field of gravity. If we simply lean forward slightly while standing, we can feel the posterior line of the muscles of our calves, hamstrings, and glutei tighten to keep us from falling forward. At the same time, our knees might lock in hyperextension while the intrinsic muscles of our toes contract to grip the ground.¹ If we were to hold this posture habitually, the muscles of our posterior line and plantar foot would be working continually. At the same time, the mobility of our knees and ankles and their ability to absorb shock would be reduced. Over time, anterior line tissues would become shortened and weak, locking our bodies in this effort-filled position. From just this small example, we see how many clues to lengthening and releasing specific tissues we receive in going from the symbolic idea of posture to the specific dislocations that have occurred. Sometimes we talk about injuries to soft tissues as if they came in standard packages at the store. Yet again, in working with minor injuries we need to examine the specifics. What type of tissue was injured: muscle, tendon or ligament? What has been the effect of this injury in limiting tissue strength and restricting motion? Do we best create a change by applying compression, a lengthening stretch, or a broadening stroke across the tissue? All are useful but quite different techniques.⁵ How do we best position our client to facilitate access while keeping our own body mechanics effortless and efficient? Do we want our client to move a joint to enhance either tissue lengthening or broadening? Again, moving our focus from symbol to detail provides the clues.

It's easy to get stuck in the terminology we learn and miss the nuances of its application. In working with the shoulder and hip we learn words for position like flexion, extension, abduction, adduction, medial rotation, and lateral rotation. As we get into the specifics of assessing dysfunctions, however, we begin to realize that position isn't everything; that motion also is present.³ What can be confusing is that the words for position and motion are the same. We can have a motion of flexion in a position of flexion and a motion

of flexion in a position of extension. We can also have a motion of extension in a position of extension or a motion of extension in a position of flexion. Similar combinations exist for abduction-adduction and medial rotation-lateral rotation. Again, it's in going beyond the terminology into the specific tracking of both position and motion that we begin to understand working with the shoulders and hips.

Beyond just shaping the work we do with our hands and hearts, the differences between symbol and form can shape our very perceptions of ourselves and of each other. People speak of having "high standards" for entry into practicing massage when what they mean is simply high requirements. In contrast, the Boston Marathon has clear entry standards based on a prior performance in another marathon. For the 18-34 age group, the required finishing times are: men - 3 hours 10 minutes; women - 3 hours 40 minutes. The conditions are measurable and unambiguous. They don't specify how many hours you have spent training, but they do specify what the result of that training must be. It is meaningless to talk about "high standards" apart from a specific context and a well-defined measure of attainment. Betty Edwards was right. The differences between symbol and form lie deep within the perceptions of our minds, and make all the difference in the world in how we draw our conclusions.

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