

# THE IMAGE OF THE SELF AND THE BODY

By

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Fellow workers in the field of human movement, colleagues and friends. The theme of this year's Congress Seeing and the Body, *Le Corp et le Regard*, is appropriate because it is at the very center of what we in this field are most concerned with the body how we look upon it, and how the person living in the body is seen.

I would like to talk about how our self image is constructed through being seen by those closest to us, from birth through the first years of our lives. We are born with a true self, however, a conscious image of that true self must be created. And only when that image is embedded and internalized in our ego can we live that true self openly and consciously.

As you can see, I make a distinction between the true self and the ego.

By the true self, I mean something like our full potential, our core, our soul. All those phrases and words that attempt to describe our essence the self that is most natural to us, the self that springs out of our genes and our bodies, the self that connects us to our evolutionary history, and to the ultimate meanings of life.

By the ego, I mean that part of ourselves that is constructed out of interactions with the outside world. That part that we are consciously aware of and accept as our identity. That part that makes choices and carries out our decisions.

The true self, the soul, may sometimes not be permitted direct conscious expression by the ego, yet it may continue to live in a hidden form, in a disguised form waiting until circumstances allow it to emerge into the light of day, and into the sight of the world. Of course, it could be living wonderfully out in the open, just as it is, moment to moment, with full acknowledgment by the ego. This is the goal, not only of therapy, but of all forms of education and religion which attempt to help us cultivate and enjoy the fullest meaning and experience of life.

But here, I would like to speak about the first, hidden, disguised, condition of the true self, because it is people in such condition that we see in therapy people who know in their hearts that something is wrong with how they are living their lives, and who feel that they are not totally real, or totally alive.

Further in my talk, I would like to demonstrate how we work with the ideas about the conflict between the soul and the ego in the process developed by my wife, Diane Boyden Pesso, and myself, called Pesso System Psychomotor Therapy. And then to show, in terms of seeing and the body, how the process is used to help people become who they are, to help them give birth to their true selves and to heal the rift between the soul and the ego.

When the true self is forced to exist in a hidden form, it hides not only from the outside world, but also from the consciousness of the person who is the carrier of that soul.

Such a person has to lead a double life, feeling one way on the inside and acting another way on the outside. You and I see them in our practices, tense and miserable, knowing something is wrong, feeling unhappy, and complaining of not getting much satisfaction out of their lives.

Clearly, in order for a person to be able to lead a satisfying, meaningful life, there must be a good match between the content and shape of the soul and the content and shape of the ego which clothes it. I use that metaphor, clothing the soul with the ego, because it expresses, in part, how I understand the ego soul relationship.

I consider the ego as a kind of skin of the self. This ego skin should match, point for point, the shape of the soul as it truly is. There should be within the ego, places, names, and images for all parts of the soul. Not only the traditionally well regarded, spiritual, pure, and beautiful parts, but also the so called, lowly, primitive, and seemingly ugly, parts.

Just as a well fitting glove should not hide the shape of the fingers, but be an open announcement of how the hand looks without ornamentation and exaggeration of its true form so should the ego not hide or exaggerate the true shape of the soul, but show to the world and to its own self, just how it truly is with all its panorama of power and vulnerability.

Being human, we are not perfect and must be accepted in our truth, or we will be forced to cover the true shape of our souls, just as overly ornamental gloves cover the hand, and present the hand as more, or different, than it truly is.

Let me give you another image that is very useful to me in my work in this regard shape, countershape. Think now of the shape of the soul, and the countershape of the ego. Now think of the ego countershape matching the shape of the soul point for point. In that image the ego acknowledges every fraction or portion of the surfaces of the soul as it touches upon it. Think now, that as the ego does this, it also validates, blesses, caresses and gives license to what it contacts.

Do you begin to hear as I do, the ego's softly whispered version of the booming voice of God in the book of Genesis? Just as God, in the old testament, proclaimed and announced the names of parts of the universe as they came into being darkness and light, heaven and earth and gave them license by declaring, "And it was good." So does the ego have the power to bestow names and give license to each part of the soul as it emerges from the depth of our genes, saying, metaphorically, and perhaps even neurologically, "And it was good".

And what if God did not say those accepting words to some unfortunate parts of the emerging cosmos? What if He said, "Begone, get out of my sight". Into what limbo, or netherworld, would those parts of the universe be cast?

And what if a non accepting ego said the same to some unlucky parts of the soul? Into what netherworld of one's personal cosmos does the ego cast those undesirable and unacknowledgable parts? Where does one look to find those miserable, banished fragments? Try the dust bin of the unconscious or look into the storehouse and catalogue of complaints and symptoms the aches and pains which those clients plead to have removed from their bodies. There you will find them, and paradoxically, there you will also find untold treasures. For all parts of the soul are precious and contain treasures that can be mined, even hidden in the far reaches of some personal hell. Yes, often the client must go through hell to become whole.

And where does the ego get its standards of what to accept or not accept? How does it determine what it will name as part of the conscious self and what not. How does the ego get a countershape that is not modeled after the shape of the true self? And where does it get the power to cast off parts of the true self?

We can look for those answers in the theme, "Seeing and the Body".

When and where is the body first seen? Of course it is first seen at birth. But even before birth, it has already been "seen", in the sense of being recognized and understood, inside the body of the mother that it has been conceived in. That "seeing", in the uterus, in the accepting womb of its mother, provides the fetus with the first countershape that acknowledges, licenses and validates that all of its body and the soul are worthy of existence. This uterine experience prepares it for entry into the sight and gaze of the outside world.

The walls of the uterus, and particularly the amniotic fluids that surround the fetus, provide it with the contact that is like a caress upon the surfaces coming into existence. The fluids outline a perfect countershape to all the shapes of the developing body. They softly lap the outside and even the inside of the fetus, for the fetus drinks the fluids.

The uterus and its fluids are the model and template for the future ego the creators of the infantile ego skin if you will. They provide the perfect matches to all the nooks and crannies of the becoming child. Like the ego that shall be developed out of the relationship with it, the fluids are the interface between the child and the rest of the world.

If the uterus and the amniotic fluids could speak, they might be heard to say, "We support and nourish all that you are becoming." a way of saying, "And you are good." The fetus does not hear words nor understand what it means to be seen, but it feels itself being caressed and accepted. In that uterine relationship it experiences the precursors for literal seeing and future verbal acknowledgment. These are first steps toward the creation of a conscious ego that accepts, caresses, and acknowledges the true self.

The uterus, in this way, is like the God of a child. What the uterus helps create what it accepts and embraces is born and becomes part of the existence, body and identity of the child. What the uterus

does not create and does not accept, does not develop and does not get born. If, for some reason, the rejection of the uterus is total, the fetus will be aborted, cast out of the possibility of life.

At birth, the parents take the place of the God of the child. And if the parents do not accept parts of the soul, those parts do not develop. Should the parents totally reject the child, it feels cast out of the world of meaning, and it may psychically, or, literally die.

Now we can see where the ego develops its powers.

The next shape and countershape that I wish to focus on is the shape of the child living in the embracing, loving countershape which is figuratively formed in the sight field in the loving gaze of the eyes of the mother. The child figuratively lives in the eyes of its mother. The mother's loving gaze is the emotional/psychological equivalent of the loving uterus. The loved child feels the gaze of its mother embracing it, just as the amniotic fluid caressed it earlier. Such a child is washed in light, the light of sight, the light of the mother's loving attention, the light of the mother's consciousness of the child's meaning and self.

The mother sees, acknowledges, and validates all that the child brings before her, with her accepting smile and behavior. If the mother does not smile or behave in an accepting way, the child takes it as a signal that something about itself is not right. It marks those parts of itself as unlovable and they drop from consciousness given no name or value. Those are the parts that go underground and become the material for some future therapist to work with.

A mother, when she sees her child, does not merely visually record the existence of the child, she also carries an image of the child in her mind. This image is imbued with meaning and value that include memories of the child's past, experiences of the child's present, and fantasies of the child's future.

She has carried the child in her womb, she has carried it in her arms. She knows every square inch of its body and every bit of its personality as it has emerged. She registers all that history whenever she looks at her child. With such a history, of an accepting place in the womb, in the arms in the heart, in the eyes, in the mind of the mother, the child gathers the sense of the principle of having a place. In contact with that principle, it knows it belongs in the world, and feels its right to live in it. When that principle is recorded on the child's ego, it becomes part of the child's image of itself and therefore, part of the ego's relationship with the soul. The soul as it truly is, can feel at home in the ego. This is a fortunate person.

We are not all so fortunate. Mothers who construct no image of their children in their minds, create children who have no image of themselves in their own egos. They turn off the lights in the child's mind and it loses sight of itself. That child lives in darkness and despair, without hope or meaning and, if it goes on living, it is with marginal satisfaction and maximum pain and difficulty.

Because of negative histories, our clients come to us with parts of their souls figuratively cut off, parts buried, crushed or damaged, parts distorted. Or with parts hidden, wandering with no name in unknown recesses of the unconscious. Their muzzled souls cry with soundless sobs, given away by small signs in speech and breathing patterns, and stare pitifully out of their eyes, with little conscious recognition from their carriers.

We see the wounded veterans of the wars in the uterus, the battles at the breast, the skirmishes in the nursery, the punishments in the playground, the terrors of education and socialization. These are the people who have suffered the loneliness brought on by mothers who did not hold or caress them. By fathers who never had time for them, by siblings who wanted them dead, by teachers who crushed the life and spontaneity out of them in the name of learning. Their egos record these negative events and internalize all the reactions of the soul, making negative images of the self and negative maps of the world. Their egos react to the war, by making war upon their souls.

How is such damage attended to in therapy? The client must experience new accepting countershapes to counteract the effect of the past. It can begin with a healing, accepting environment created by the personality of the therapist. In Pesso System Psychomotor Therapy, the conscious attentiveness of the therapist is part of the concept called the possibility sphere. This is an embracing, psychological countershape, an attitude, an atmosphere, so creative and accepting that it is reminiscent of the uterus. Through it, the client may be able to feel, "Here is a person who is truly seeing me, who is attentive to me, who understands me." The caring consciousness and attention of the therapist, then the group, and the process itself, become a holding place for the wounded soul and the misshapen ego. A body shop where the dents and bruises of the psyche can be repaired.

The possibility sphere is extended to the client, silently, non verbally, and without specific action by the therapist. Its existence is communicated by the way the therapist looks at the client, speaks to the client, and moves in relationship to the client. It is a space, fertile with the kind of emptiness that invites possibility.

The Pesso System Psychomotor process includes and expands the meanings offered in the possibility sphere, for it is based on the belief that life is possible, that hope is possible, that psychological rebirth is possible. Its technology teaches understanding of the meanings in the body, the symbolism of gestures, and focuses attention on micro movements. It assists the therapist in decoding the hidden soul expressions buried in the symptoms in the body.

Pesso System uses procedures called accommodation, which is a highly structured role play that presents the client with those interactions that precisely respond to each bit of soul expression, point for point, as they emerge from the body in action and behavior. Accommodation releases the soul expression from its paralyzed and frozen form as a symptom, as it welcomes the behavior locked within it, by responding to the shape of that behavior with its wished for countershape figuratively creating custom fitted gloves.

The group members participate in the healing done in the possibility sphere. In their accommodation/role playing function, they are like the resources available in the uterus. The uterus, through the environment it creates and by the nutrients supplied by the umbilical cord, provide the fetus with all the numerous and varied materials that are necessary for the fetus maintenance and growth, as each stage of its development demands.

The group members, in their willingness to role play all the varied figures, negative and positive, that the client requires, likewise provide all the necessary ingredients for the symbolic rebirthing of the soul. This takes place in what is called a structure. A structure is the structured re experiencing of old negative events, from which negative self images and negative maps of the world were created in the ego. This is followed by the creation of synthetic symbolic events that act as antidotes, which can neutralize the effect of the negative maps with new positive images and maps.

The group members role play the negative aspects of the hated and toxic figures of the past. As those figures, they may be symbolically attacked by the person having the structure and they act appropriately destroyed as the once hidden fury, frustration and rage are released in the body as punches, kicks, shouts, etc. Other group members role play the ideal figures who are the providers of the symbolic experiences which are antidotes to the poisonous experiences of the past.

The ideal figures are a perfect embodiment of the idea of the possibility sphere. With them, the client is given the possibility of experiencing and expressing the full range of the true self. All aspects of the personality, in their pristine form as actions of the body, can be met and seen by the permission giving eyes of the ideal parents. This results in what I call, ego wrapping. That is, whenever new parts of the soul emerge, they are attended to, validated and blessed therefore wrapped by the acceptance of the ideal parents, a license that is internalized in the ego. It is in this relationship that the client finds the satisfaction of old unmet needs, the validation of long buried soul fragments, the experience of living in the light and loving gaze of a mother long wished for.

In a PS structure, the clients re experience the effect of past events. They feel, there in the group room, all the feelings and emotional turmoil of those long gone times. One part of their consciousness knows perfectly well that this is a therapy session, while another part is intimately in touch with the history and sensations that were lived then the history and time when the conditioning of their present day ego was carried out.

The capacity of the structuring process to get the client in emotional touch with history, while still maintaining an observing ego, provides the therapist with access to what I figuratively refer to as the central map room of the psyche. There, one finds information about the time and events during which that particular shape of the ego was formed, as well as the emotional conditions that resulted in that ego formation.

Then, with the help of the ideal figures who provide new interactions, new countershapes, and new experiences that validate and accept those parts of the being that were banished, a new map is formed in the ego. And importantly, the new map is formed in juxtaposition with the affective level and historical events during which the original maps were made. This gives these newly formed maps created by synthetic symbolic events in the structuring process, some powerful emotional associations which help them to successfully compete with the original, historically formed, maps.

The therapist who first extended the possibility sphere is not the direct giver of the healing, nor the provider of the healing events. The therapist becomes more like a mid wife, overseeing the symbolic birthing process with the ideal parents. This shift has the function and consequence of diminishing the transference, and consequently, the dependency on the therapist. The client is in a position to crystallize the "principle of ideal parenting", not via the therapist, but via the efforts of the role players who enacted those roles. The client need not depend directly on the personality of the therapist for the healing.

To close, the concept of the possibility sphere and the Pesso System Psychomotor process presents clients with a flexible, multidimensional countershape that is responsive to all the emerging shapes of the true self. In this safe arena, this symbolic uterus, they can work to undo the negative effects of the literal uterus, and the negative effects of those literal contexts and events that damaged the soul and constructed ill fitting egos. The ego and soul need not be at war. Indeed, the soul can be expressed in the real world, with all the pleasures and pain it is heir to, with the full cooperation and assistance of the

ego. Living in the body and being seen by the world as we truly are is a possibility. Living the true self gives unparalleled satisfaction and meaning to life. Our efforts are directed to assist people in achieving that goal.

Thank you.

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