

Extrapolating Body Stories From the Feet

By Sherry Brouman

To assess clients for yoga therapy we must first choose a process that synchronizes our perspective with the clients' current circumstances. As a physical therapist for four decades, I tend to begin with a physical viewpoint. There are many ways to holistically assess bodies to gain an overall impression of movement patterns, which I use to compile a "body story." Much of this assessment can be read from the feet.

you can learn to discern in body shapes) and by messages from other anatomies within deeper *koshas* where, for example, shyness, anger, calmness, or openheartedness may be depicted in body shapes. Even Pixar's newest movie, *Inside Out*, uses body shapes to help depict different emotions and states of mind. In this article, I will describe some of the ways that I assess a body story by observing feet first to gain an overall impression of movement dynamics.

Picture feet as extensions of the body, the first receivers of gravitational pull. The degree to which the feet respond to gravity determines much about the directionality of all weight-bearing joints such that posture also reflects that interaction. Try feeling the difference between letting your feet collapse onto the ground and asserting them onto the ground. Notice beyond the structural if there is a different emotional effect between the two. Lifting through the feet causes a lifting



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Individual movement patterns reflect more than physical anatomy.¹ Our emotional, spiritual, and mental "anatomies" are also included in the picture. Physical anatomy is the most visually accessible and therefore easiest for me to assess and articulate. Body movement is always influenced by gravity (the effects of which

We must keep in mind during an assessment of foot shapes and contours that just about anything structural that shows on the outside has to some extent been derived from the inside. Shaped from inside by early models, injury, illness, and genetics, foot shapes are also influenced by proprioception (the brain's way of knowing where we are in space) and perception (how we imagine a shape or movement ought to be). To help clients balance themselves from inside out, consider the stories that the physical body tells as a partial reflection of what their whole being is telling us.

throughout the body, which is often experienced as a lifting of the spirit.

Most people's feet behave exactly the same during the various standing postures and transitions as they do in mountain pose. If the feet were pronated or supinated in mountain pose, they will also be pronated or supinated as they come to the ground for a new posture or to sustain one, and the same is true for standing and walking. With a little effort, regardless of the shapes our bodies assume, we can all lift up evenly toward neutral, creating what I like to call "energetic symmetry." Striving for anatomic symmetry or picture-perfect

¹ For example, see Nummenmaa, L., Glerean, E., Hari, R., & Hietanen, J. K. (2014). Bodily maps of emotions. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, USA*, 111(2), 646-651. Full text available: <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3896150>

(continued on page 12)



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postures is detrimental when a body is asymmetrical, and most bodies are. *Energetic symmetry*, in which muscles on all sides of a joint contribute to joint stability, works as well or better than actual symmetry in creating balanced fluid movement. In assessing our clients, we're looking for the particular ways in which they are deviating from energetic symmetry and how that affects posture, mood, and beliefs, and how it can even have profound effects on an individual's sense of connectedness to life and wellbeing.

Striving for *anatomic symmetry* or picture-perfect postures is detrimental when a body is asymmetrical, and most bodies are.

Take a good first look at the overall muscle tone of your client's feet. Some feet will seem strong and articulate, built for precision, while some are soft and plumpish, which could indicate that they are carried around more than they are used during walking and yoga practice (it takes extreme overweight to disguise strong feet). When carried like dead weights, plumpish feet will seem heavy to the user (albeit often unconsciously) and hip flexors and knee extensors must overwork and become tight to compensate. When used properly (i.e., when interacting with gravity), feet seem light because their muscles participate in lifting them.

Pronation and supination are the most common anomalies and they change the shapes of the feet as well as the ipsilateral (same side) Achilles tendons. In pronation, feet and ankles roll inward and the Achilles tendons usually make a medial "C" shape, removing some of the weight from the outer corners of the feet. Pronation tends to elicit medial knee hyperextension, a dropping down into the hips, excess anterior pelvic tilt with pelvic floor and abdominal muscle weakness, a high-chested breathing pattern (and this posture itself creates the high sternum), and a tendency for the head and shoulders to jut forward. Pride with insecurity in the background, a sense of having a weakened support system, or a lack of connection are some possible emotions and feelings that can go with this posture. Try pronating your feet and see whether you notice any of these arising or some other emotion or state of mind evoked in you.

In supination, feet and ankles roll outward and their Achilles tendons make an

outward "C" shape and remove some of the weight from the inner corners of the feet. This foot shape often elicits lateral knee hyperextension, a dropping down into the hips with posterior pelvic tilt, and weakened pelvic floor and abdominal muscles. There may also be a high-chested breathing pattern; however, unlike the high-chested breath pattern that comes with pronation, the posterior pelvic tilt in this case drops the sternum naturally so that the high-chested inhalations have a longer excursion upwards and seem more

effortful than those on pronators, who are already structurally high chested. There are some common postures with this group such as leaning back, perhaps with arms crossed over top of abdomen; these individuals may be someone lost in thought, brilliant at work, an insecure teenager, or someone who is experiencing shyness, sadness, or depletion.

Here are a few common foot shapes that may be uni- or bilateral and tell stories about the postures above them. Bear in mind that when shapes have a functional explanation they may (and usually do) have an emotional or spiritual expression as well.

- Bunions, whether on the big or little toe, mean that there is (or was) a "wobble" into that joint occurring in walking. That wobble is a split second of unsteadiness with every step. Bunions without pain usually no longer wobble and may be considered healed. People with uncomfortable bunions have to make an extra skirmish to find balance, and there may be a reflection of this in their emotional life.
- Squinching toes mean that there is (or was) a balance issue. Squinching toes are often used in lieu of abdominal strength and sometimes remain as a movement habit even after increasing core strength. Squinching toes may represent "holding on for dear life" and often depict deeper imbalance in other aspects of life. When you ask these clients to spread and lengthen their toes, they often report suddenly sensing more core strength and self-empowerment.

- Toes that have difficulty spreading often come with feet that are under-used and remain, no matter the activity, in their most narrow form, like walking on a tightrope through life. Toes that spread and lengthen with ease tend to come with broad-based feet that are accustomed to being used and usually represent a strong foundation in life.

Using shapes to surmise psychosocial connections provides a starting point for communication with our clients. Always bear in mind, however, that what you see may simply be left over from a past imbalance. The interconnections we think we see may not, in fact, be related to particular postures; they are merely common enough to consider as possibilities.

I'll finish with a brief client example to illustrate a way of seeing the body story through the feet:

"Josh" came in with plumpish feet, severe big toe bunions, extreme pronation, one knee fully replaced and the second in jeopardy of the same. He was a prosecutor who was grieving a case he had won, though in his heart he felt his win was unjust. In the process of strengthening the core of his feet, he resolved the pronation, healed knee #2, and took the time and space necessary to heal his heart and change careers.

It may be that Josh came in to the experience with minor structural weakness and his years in a career fraught with personal disharmony worsened that condition as he dropped down into his feet, knees, and hips. It may also be that as a youngster, he had relatively healthy feet that dropped as he experienced an emotional caving in. Foot shapes can be the start of structural developments or the result. Either way, they are a good starting place for body story interpretation. **YTT**



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