

The Ideal Body: How our Body Shapes our Character

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11-14 minutes

“ . . .the living organism expresses itself in movement more clearly than in words. But not alone in movement! In pose, in posture, in attitude and in every gesture, the organism speaks a language which antedates and transcends its verbal expression.”

Alexander Lowen, The Language of the Body

The connection between mind and body has long been a contentious point of debate and our understanding of it remains shrouded in mystery. But whatever its true nature, this connection is extremely powerful and it is one in which causation runs both ways. Our mind can help heal an ailing body, while our body can do the same for an ailing mind. In the West, this latter approach is underutilized. Mainstream psychologists and psychiatrists are far more oriented toward techniques that work at the level of our thoughts or emotions, or to altering the chemistry of our brain with drugs, than they are to helping us resolve our issues with techniques that work at the level of the body. But for many of us change at the somatic level may be the change we need to unlock a better life. In this video, relying on the work of Alexander Lowen, a 20th century

psychotherapist and medical doctor, we are going to explore how our bodies can be used to promote our psychological health and the development of a great character.

“ . . .so intimate is the intermingling of bodily and psychic traits” wrote Carl Jung “that not only can we draw far-reaching inferences as to the constitution of the psyche from the constitution of the body, but we can also infer from psychic peculiarities the corresponding bodily characteristics.”

Carl Jung, Psychological Types

The etymological root of the word character stretches back to the Ancient Greek word for a “stamping tool”. Our life experiences stamp their imprint on us and in conjunction with our genetic dispositions help shape our character. This stamp of experience, however, operates at both the level of the body and the mind and for this reason our character is expressed as much in our bodies as it is through our minds, or as Lowen explains:

“ . . .psyche and soma [are] two aspects of a unitary process, one mental and the other physical, much like the head and tail faces of a coin. Whatever one does with the coin affects both sides simultaneously.”

Alexander Lowen, The Spirituality of the Body

An example can clarify this point. Suppose in our childhood we had role models who demeaned or ridiculed us rather than teaching us how to live and how to flourish. Such an experience will undoubtedly influence the development of our character. Self-

inhibiting thought patterns and negative emotions such as hate, anger, and anxiety are likely to shape who we become. But these negative thought patterns and maladaptive emotions are not hermetically sealed off in the mind. Our thoughts lead to action, or abstention of action, and action is a bodily phenomenon. Emotions are felt in the mind but they also have a somatic form of expression and this expression influences the structure of our body. The baggage of our youth will not just weigh us down psychologically, but it can also weigh us down physically and inhibit the functioning of our body, or as Lowen explains:

“If a person has a strong and secure sense of himself, he will naturally stand erect. If he is frightened, he will tend to cower. If he is sad or depressed, his body will droop. If he is trying to deny or compensate for inner feelings of insecurity, he will stand like a martinet, and his posture will be unnaturally rigid.

Alexander Lowen, The Spirituality of the Body

That a human body is an expression of its character is intuitively known by each of us, as it forms the basis of our ability to read people by their body language.

“Wise men read very sharply all your private history in your look and gait and behavior. The whole economy of nature is bent on expression. The telltale body is all tongues.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson, The Conduct of Life

We also pay homage to this connection between character and body in the many somatic metaphors we use to represent psychic conditions – we call people

pushovers, we say they lack guts, that they are spineless, always on their toes, or incapable of holding their ground. But while we may rely on the bodily instantiations of other people's character to help us interpret who they are and how we should interact with them, relatively few of us take a serious look at our own body and the somatic expression of our character flaws. But ignorance is not bliss in this regard, for as Socrates stated long ago:

“ . . .it is a disgrace to grow old through sheer carelessness before seeing what manner of man you may become by developing your bodily strength and beauty to their highest limit.”

Socrates, As Quoted in Xenophon's Memorabilia

Developing our body in the direction of its highest ideal is one of the surest means to the cultivation of a great character. For just as our thought patterns and emotions affect the structure of our body, how we hold and move our body alters how we think and feel. If we want to be courageous, for example, we can change how we relate to our emotions, but in addition to this we can also start holding and moving our body in a manner that reflects and promotes courage. But in order to make use of this bottom up approach to character development, we need to understand the bodily ideal toward which we should aim – for only with such knowledge can we begin crafting experiments to help us move in this direction.

The first thing we need to recognize is that with the rise of anxiety disorders and depression in the modern West, the bodily expression of increasing numbers of

people is likewise becoming pathological. Normality should not be seen as a representation of health.

Rigidity, immobility, an awkwardness in movement, and either compulsivity or impulsivity in action, typify the somatic expression of the normal man or woman these days and all these traits are ones we need to move away from.

“Broadly speaking, the emotionally disturbed person moves compulsively or impulsively. The compulsive person is rigid, his ego restraints are so severe that his movements take on a mechanical, patterned quality, and spontaneity is missing. . . The impulsive person is hyperactive; he can neither sit still nor channel his energy into constructive activities. His inadequate ego is constantly being overwhelmed by his feelings. At the same time he is constantly frustrated since his feelings spill out without achieving anything. The compulsive person is afraid to let go of his rigid control, the impulsive person is unable to maintain control.”

Alexander Lowen, The Voice of the Body

In contrast to this picture of the emotionally disturbed, the healthy body, the body that is the reflection and promoter of a well-developed and high-functioning human being can be defined by two main traits: gracefulness and aggressiveness. Gracefulness is perhaps the most obvious sign of a body that is the home to a flourishing mind. The graceful individual naturally catches our eye and not just because such people are rare, but also because this type of movement is inherently attractive. Graceful individuals are not self-conscious about their bodies and they

move with a natural ease. Lowen suggests that gracefulness is found at the golden mean between spontaneity and control. Too much of either contributes to psychological disturbance, but a healthy dose of both is the recipe for grace, or as Lowen explains:

“Spontaneity is a function of self-expression. The more alive a person is the more spontaneous are his movements. The body is naturally expressive; it is constantly changing to reflect its inner feelings. In this respect, it is like a flame which is never the same at any two moments. While a body is more structured than a flame, it is not as rigid as a machine. It has a fluid quality and responds to the play of the inner forces. . . .When control and spontaneity are integrated in the body’s movement, the result is coordination. Coordination reflects the degree to which the ego is identified with the body and yet is in command of its movements. A healthy person is well coordinated in his movements, he is spontaneous and yet in control.”

Alexander Lowen, The Voice of the Body

But the flourishing human being is more than just graceful in bodily expression, he or she is also capable of aggression. Not aggression in the sense of committing hostile acts against other people, but aggression as the opposite to passivity. The aggressive man or woman does not sit idly by waiting for the necessities of life to be delivered on a platter, rather he or she is proactive. Such people move forward into life in search of what they need. Aggressiveness is a trait naturally embodied in all living creatures – and necessarily so – for without it survival would be

impossible. Man is the only creature who can deceive himself in the belief that passiveness is an appropriate way to live.

“A person’s natural aggressive impulses can be suppressed but they cannot be eliminated. Life, itself, is aggressive in that it is a forward moving, ongoing process that seeks to overcome all obstacles. A sprouting seed pushes its way very aggressively upward through the earth to reach the light. As long as the metabolic activities of life continue, energy is produced to power the aggressive impulses. When these impulses are blocked from expression, the normal flow of energy is dammed, creating an explosive situation.”

Alexander Lowen, The Voice of the Body

How does one embody the aggression that promotes health? According to Lowen aggression is primarily a function of our legs. Our legs are what move us forward into life and so limited strength or flexibility in our legs, and a more sedentary existence, will inhibit an aggressive mindset. Standing with the weight shifted to the balls of our feet and knees slightly bent is a pose that can imbue the mind with increased aggressivity. But aggressiveness is also promoted or hindered by our connection to the ground, or as Lowen explains:

“Having some ground to stand on has both a psychological and a literal meaning. Psychologically, it means that a person has a good reason or cause for his aggressive action. Without the inner conviction, right or wrong, that one’s aggression is justified, it would be difficult to move forward effectively. . . In

another sense, the term “having some ground to stand on” means that a person feels he has the right to be on this earth and to share in the life of the earth. He feels that he has the right to be (to want, to move towards, and to take). To evaluate how strongly a person feels this right we can measure how strongly he can hold his ground. Broadly speaking, we can say that the more grounded a person is in his legs, the more strongly he can hold his ground. He will feel that he has some ground to stand on and, therefore, some standing as a person.”

Alexander Lowen, The Voice of the Body

Aggression and grace. These are the traits of the flourishing body and the more we can mimic such forms of expression, the more we will develop in both body and mind. In our next video we are going to explore some practical ways to promote the bodily ideal we just outlined and one man who we will turn to for guidance is Friedrich Nietzsche. For Nietzsche well-understood how important the body is in the promotion of a flourishing life, so much so that he made the following bold proclamation:

“You say ‘I’ and are proud of this word. But greater than this—and which you do not want to believe in—is your body and its great intelligence: this does not say ‘I’ but performs ‘I’.”

Nietzsche, Thus Spoke Zarathustra

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