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The Feet Reveal the Human Will

by

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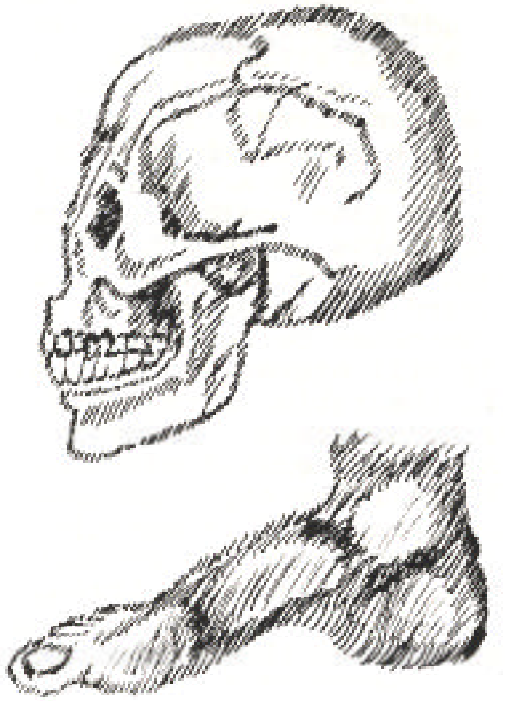
In my article *The Hands Reveal the Human Being*, I stressed again and again how the arms with the hands belong to the area of the rhythmical man. If we consider of Rudolf Steiner's indications of man as a threefold being, this is the region which has its center in the organs of the chest cavity. This "middle man" becomes the expression of the sentient soul. The hands visibly reveal it. Their essential area of action lies in the horizontal, even though they are capable of grasping upwards and downwards.

To the legs, the lower segment of space has been assigned. With a standing human being the legs and thighs are directed towards the center of the earth. The feet are needed to give proper support to the long limb bones. The soles establish an intimate connection with the soil. Our wandering on earth, as far as it has to do with the forward movement of the body, depends on the activity of the feet. Every action carried out requires from the soul impetus of the will.

Herewith we come to the significant viewpoint essential for a physiognomy of the feet: They are the most important visible expression of the human will. At the beginning of life, even if marked only from birth, continual growth is the most important occurrence for the infant. For this the lively metabolism in all the organs and tissues is responsible. It happens for the child, though he is completely unaware of it. Slowly light enters into this darkness as soon as the motion of the body is not restricted to the inner formation of the organism, and when the child brings his body outwards into active touch with his surroundings; this clearly begins with the lifting of the head, the grasping with the hands, the kicking with legs and feet.

From a developmental viewpoint these events express the manner in which the awakening will rays into the personality of the child. However, a feeling of satisfaction will only be attained when the young child has learned to stand upright and to walk. The exultation with which the child usually greets the achieving of upright posture is an indication of the sense of the well being caused by the penetration of the feet with the will of the ego. These first steps constitute the initial ones towards the important goal of humankind: to find the path to freedom and personal independence. It takes



a long time, as a rule, until it is reached. The way-stations necessary along this path leave their imprints in the wondrous structure of the human body. Some of it appears as if predesigned at birth. Many marks of the willing human are incarnated into the feet. It will be the task of this article to recognize and decipher these marks.

At the beginning of a discussion on the *Physiognomy of the Feet*, one must point out the difference that exists between the feet and the hands. The hands belong, as mentioned before, to the middle or rhythmic man and have thereby a direct relationship with the two activities of this region, respiration and blood circulation. In contemplation of the hands we notice a kind of twofoldness: we can talk of a finger region of the hand which is more related to the breathing and a thumb region of the hand more connected with the circulatory organism.

The feet lack such a division. Even at the first glance we notice a greater uniformity than in the hands. Compare the hand and foot of the same child. All the five toes belong harmonically together in their arrangement and mobility. In a delicate arc the bases of the first joints lie well proportioned and next to each other. In the hand, however, the thumb sticks out conspicuously from this association. Though without doubt there exists a relationship between thumb and big toe, the difference between them is significant, despite their connection with the blood circulation and the metabolism; the thumb-hand remains a member of the rhythmic system. This is clearly expressed in the physiognomy of the hands. It always holds true for the thumb that it must be regarded as a part of the hand. This is different regarding the big toe. It virtually assumes the leadership in the realm of the toes—for the foot represents after all an undivided whole. To each of its forms is stamped the affiliation with the willing human. All other influences, some meaningful ones as will be demonstrated later, are of secondary importance. In the spatial descent from the hands towards the feet, the twofoldness of man becomes simplicity in the truest sense of the word.

Another visible difference between hands and feet that is seldom noticed shows up under the following circumstance: put the hands palms down on the table in front of you, in such a way that the fingers are stretched out with

the two thumbs touching each other. In this position the hands diverge outwardly, the left one outwards left, the right one outwards right. In other words the direction points away from the body. This is the manifestation of the construction of the bones and joints of which anybody interested in anatomy may find proof. The possibility to assume the position just described is of physiognomic significance. It reveals how the left hand by its nature strives outward towards its own side and the right one tends to go out to the corresponding side. Therein lies the expression for the tendency of hand movements away from the body. But at the same time when the twofoldness of left and right is revealed, it is also part of the search for the proper equilibrium. For all feeling is swaying motion, never standing still, similar to music. With our breath to the realm of feeling rays the world of thinking; from the other side the power of willing wells up with the warmth of the blood.

Try now to bring the feet into a corresponding position and compare. The two sections of the big toes are positioned close together towards the middle. If this is done, the feet assume the opposite direction to that of the hands. The feet are turned towards each other, toward the middle of the body, not towards the periphery, and between the feet an angle opens in the rear. This is also a consequence of the anatomical structure. In the feet lies the tendency towards a uniform containment, as is the case with the will. Left and right are not of major concern. In the indicated position the feet point towards the body, not away from it, as do the fingers of the hand.

The starting point for a physiognomy of the feet is best taken from the most important movement of the legs, from walking. Steiner has examined in particular the process of striding in his elaborations for eurythmy and curative eurythmy. His presentation of threepart walking offers a most valuable basis for our considerations. In walking three acts can be observed. One should first imagine the standing man and follow step by step what he does in order to move forward. First, the heel of one foot is lifted from the ground. Thereby part of the body weight is shifted from the back to the front onto the ball of the big toe. From here the foot rolls a little further forward until the somewhat thickened cap of the big toe touches the ground. This action, threefold in itself, may be designated as the first phase of the walking process. The second phase begins as soon as the tip of the big toe as well as

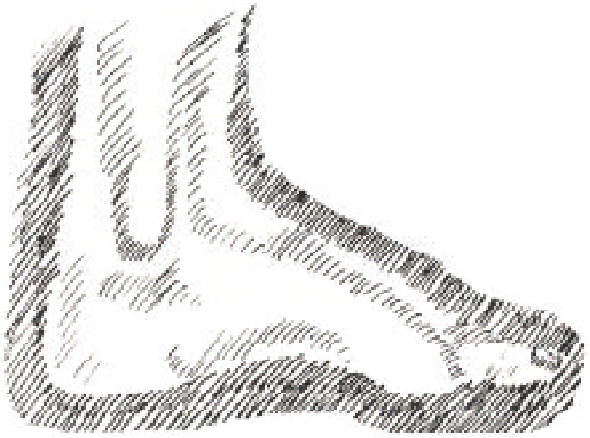
the other toes are lifted from the ground. Now the foot assumes in the air a more or less flat arc which ends where the big toe touches the ground again. With this movement the striding foot relieves itself completely from the weight of the body. The following third phase commences with the renewed positioning of the toes on the ground whereby the main effort rests again on the big toe. There follows the positioning of the ball of the foot and a roll back towards the heel. What happened in the first act from back to front repeats itself in retrograde manner—the third act also in a threepart motif. A step forward has been executed. Of course, the active leg needs the support of the other leg, the so-called standing leg, otherwise one would have to remain suspended in the air. It is important to observe how for the active leg the weight of the body gradually diminishes up to the middle of the second phase, and afterwards at the end of the third phase rests again entirely on the heel.

This description refers to an ideal, one could say, of a healthy step. Though all walking occurs under the influence of the will, it reflects definite soul activities in the human being. These emerge in the sweep of the willing act and are thus integrated into the will. The initial act lies clearly in the heel, and the first phase may be looked upon altogether as the archetypal picture of the will. It is understandable why Steiner has assigned this part of the striding motion to the will in particular. The center of the force from which the walking is immediately carried out lies in the round heel. With its help we attain the effort to push ourselves up from the ground. Important for the walking, of course, besides the heel, is the sole, mainly its outer rim. Furthermore the ball of the toe is particularly utilized in jumping and skipping. Finally the stream of the will works itself up from the end section of the big toe towards its tip. These three parts, heel, ball and big toe tip, belong formatively to one another. The round shape of the heel is repeated first in the ball and finally at the end of the toe. The discharge of the will occurs most strongly at the heel and subsides gradually towards the toe in front. One can realize this is so when a blindly raging man expresses his fury by forcefully stamping his heel. In this region lies a hidden or great amount of power for the action of the will. The force of expression diminishes towards the front because gradually other impulses of the soul, feeling and thinking, assert themselves in the will element and restrain it, as will be shown later in this essay.

An entirely new picture emerges when the foot, executing the second phase, overcomes the effect of weight. The foot frees itself from the influence of gravity. In the free-floating position a situation is created that to some degree may be compared with thinking: in thinking man is also able to free himself from gravity. This is even substantiated physiologically. In many of his writings Steiner stresses that it is of primary importance for the potentiality of thinking that the brain, as the instrument for thinking, is liberated to some extent from gravity. Indeed, this organ is kept swimming in the cerebral-spinal fluid. Thereby the proper weight of the brain is reduced by the weight of the displaced fluid. Even here Archimedes' principle holds true: a submerged body, in this case the brain, loses as much of its weight as the displaced spinal fluid actually weighs. If this were not the case, the small blood vessels on the underside of the brain would be crushed. This is prevented by the uplift that overcomes gravity. To this man owes his ability to think. In this context it becomes understandable why in eurythmy and curative eurythmy the second act of the foot motion is put into relation with the thinking process. We should also remember that Steiner in his *Philosophy of Freedom* describes how the thinking, which takes place above, in the head, is always accompanied by a willing which thrusts upwards. Our thinking is stimulated and influenced by the activity of the legs. This way it seems understandable why some thinkers find and collect their thoughts best when walking for hours. Jacob Grimm did until a ripe old age, as he himself relates. The famous School of Philosophy in Greece existed which even derived its name from the fact that teaching took place while walking about: the disciples of Aristotle were called the *peripatetics*, which means "the strollers."

After man has lived in a gravity-free state during thinking, he must descend again to earth. In soul life the realm of feeling helps to that end. Feeling, which belongs to our middle region, opens in two directions: up towards the thoughts through the force of breathing, or down towards the pole of the will by means of the blood circulation.

The third phase of walking consists mainly in descending from the realm of thinking through feeling into the, region of willing. What takes place in the soul has its physical counter-part. This occurs when during the third act of the walking process the big toe descends quite cautiously onto the



ground before the entire foot drops completely and the sole touches the base again. One can actually sense distinctly how, with the motion of walking, the feeling soul dips into the will. In this manner, Steiner brought this part of striding into relation with feeling.

In summing up, the following may be said about the threepart walking: in it everything is put into effect by the force of the will, but always an element of thinking and an element of feeling are connected with every step. One question could arise, from where does man receive the lightness in his thought life by which he is able to overcome gravity? To this one can give a clear answer founded on physiological fact. On the one hand, one becomes master over gravity through the uplift in the cerebral-spinal fluid, through which the brain as the instrument for thinking becomes buoyant and gives up the major part of its weight; and on the other hand, through the impulse of will in walking, this occurs as the heel lifts from the ground.

The significance of the particulars of threepart walking lies in the fact that many minor problems and difficulties of adults and children can be read by observing the walk and the position the feet assume in it. This is of medical and educational importance, and through relevant motion exercises of the lower extremities it becomes possible to exert a healing influence on various conditions of illness whose origins can be looked for in specific disturbances within the will system.

Considering what has been presented about each of the singular parts of walking, one could also try to understand certain dances. One is able to judge from the activity of the feet in what direction the dancing steps influence the human being. It is easy, for instance, to comprehend the well-known wild dance of the Cossacks, in which one squats low and stamps the foot forcefully with the heel in a certain rhythm. This gives rise mainly to willful fighting courage. In squatting one approaches the ground spatially, and is by virtue of that alone more strongly exposed to the earth forces. The Serbs of Yugoslavia have a similar folk dance in which the heels have the major part. Also the so-called Schuhplattler of the Tyroleans and other mountain people stresses the forceful stamping with soles and heels. Those people are of a very strong-willed disposition. Life in the mountains trains them to subdue the unwieldy earth. They have a strong relation with the soil. On the one hand, they have a desire to feel it properly underneath them and are tightly bound to it with their whole being; on the other hand, the activity of the heels expresses an intentional pushing away from the earth in order to assert themselves.

From an educational standpoint, it is important that one should not let small children participate in those folk dances that emphasize the willfulness. Too much stamping is apt to influence the development of the child up to, say, the fourteenth year, in a negative way. This forceful trampling on the ground can make boys and girls mature too early, pushing them towards forces too much tied with the earth.

From the physiognomic viewpoint of the feet it is worthwhile to consider for them a dance like the waltz. The dancer has to regard the particular movements. These are in themselves very harmonious already, the three-quarter beat is in sync with the essential nature of man. One can readily analyze the waltz step. We designate as number one the elevating of the heel and lifting onto the ball of the left foot. It remains in this position, turning slightly inwards. Following this the right foot, which also rested on the ball, is lifted a little, swishes in an arc sideways and somewhat to the rear in order to land on the tip of the toes and the ball. There follows for the left foot motion number two, the removal from the floor by disengaging the left ball. While floating freely in the air this foot swings sideways and forward in an arc. In our example this is the opposite direction to that of the right foot. And now there follows motion number three for the left leg: the left big toe with the ball touches the floor again whereby at the same time a cursory putting down of the heel and sole may occur. We see, in short, that here are all three parts of walking. Everything takes place in a very balanced form and is relieved from weightiness almost like a thinking winged by fantasy, one could say.

The healthy attraction of the waltz lies in the fact that although everything, mainly through the central activity of the feet, takes place in the realm of the will, there is at the same time a connection with the feeling. This occurs at first, because the big toe and ball are always in a state of gently sinking down. One is first of all reminded of that phase of walking when the feeling enters into the motion. This always occurs delicately, and is immediately lifted into the region of levity where the thinking should originate. From the interaction between these two soul impulses results the swinging pace of the waltz that is so appealing. The uniform turning in a circle throughout an entire dance hall enhances once more a lightness in the body.

Steiner showed how such a circling has not so much to do with the physical body only, but specifically with those living forces by which life is properly maintained, those parts in man which he called formative or etheric forces. They are polar opposites of gravity or weight and have to do with light, sound and warmth. Plus, the waltz derives its existence from music.

Steiner related the basic elements of music—melody, harmony, and rhythm, in the following manner to the three soul qualities—feeling, thinking, and willing; melody with thinking, harmony with feeling, and rhythm with willing. If we apply this to the waltz, it corresponds with what has been presented so far. Let us regard one of the most brilliant musicians, Johann Strauss, through whom in his time the waltz came to its prime. His bubbling, inventive spirit produced a wealth of melodies of such simplicity and ease as would really be desirable as an attribute of fantasy-endowed thinking. But Strauss was at the same time a magnificent harmonist. With complete artistry he accomplished the steadily changing, always agitated harmonies that keep

our feeling, as it were, in a certain balance. The will living with rhythm adjusts itself to the human being without force; the soul willingly fits itself into the three-quarter measure, because it is itself of a threepart nature.

When we look at modern dance endeavors, what is presently cultivated by youth as new dances stands in full contrast to the depicted waltz of the past. While in the waltz the feet are being liberated through the rhythm of the music from the element of gravity, a totally different goal prevails in the modern dances. The will, which can also becomes an expression of the lower instincts, connects with the earth and its weight. The legs and feet follow the pull of gravity with wild ecstasy towards a kind of underworld. The lower limbs attempt in their movements to spiral downwards, even to below the surface of the floor. In the corresponding music—if such tone sequences deserve the same name as that branch of the arts—the importance of melody is lost, precisely that which lies within the realm of weightlessness. This is true also for harmony; what remains is a hard and heavy beat that tends to bear the body into the depths. For this article this brief characterization of rock and roll and hip-hop as to their effect upon the dancer must suffice though one could say more about such manifestations in our present-day life from the point of view of psychology and morality.

After having spoken so far about eurythmy, about dances like the waltz, rock and roll, and hip-hop, and about ordinary walking, one should also consider various sports, which can have particular consequences for small children later in life.

Perhaps one would today designate the activity in question no more as sport but simply as a specific means of transportation. Under consideration is the bicycle and cycling. To my knowledge enough attention has not been paid to the dangers that arise for children who ride bikes to the extreme. In many countries it is probably hard to tell where it does not happen, for children receive already at the age of two and a half or three years a tricycle or small toy car which is put into motion by pedaling. After the little ones have occupied themselves for a while with these wheels, one considers the time ripe, say at five years of age, to put them on a small bicycle. Wherein lies the danger of the baby tricycles as toys and of the bicycle? In early childhood and youth proper walking is limited or severely curtailed.

It has been shown in many examples the significance walking has for human beings. It has been clearly explained what happens with each step. One should realize the difference between this foot movement and the locomotion by bicycle. In walking the will must be active, consciously or not. The gait that is peculiar to each single human being adapts itself exactly to his individual bodily conditions. The temperament already influences the manner in which one walks, whether in long strides or short steps. A special characteristic lies in the manner in which the heel, the sole, the ball and the toes are set upon the floor. In each movement there is a constant cooperation

of the will with the forces prevailing in the head and heart. Despite this intimate interplay, the willing stands in the foreground. Through the threefold division with every step in the activity of the feet, a delicate gradation in the execution of the movements results.

One must remember this in order to comprehend the great difference for the feet, and thereby for the entire man, between walking and cycling. On the bicycle we deal first of all with a thrust or pressure that is mainly executed downwards with the leg and through the ball of the big toe. The thrust is immediately transferred upon the mechanism of the wheel and causes a rotating motion of the feet. This happens to the rider, but more passively. Only the downward push is active. Usually only one foot is acting while the other one is just taken along. This changes when riding fast or when overcoming major gradients, in which case each foot executes pressure. Most often the right foot participates more strongly in the work. What is finally the main occupation of the feet in riding? The ball simply presses upon the pedal more intensely on one side; everything else happens mechanically. With locomotion on the bicycle all the many impulses that humans commonly receive while walking, and which they can incorporate into their souls, are entirely lost. Nothing remains but the forward push with the ball of the toe.

How two alternating movements of the ball of the toe take place in walking was described above: at the end of the "first phase" the sole begins to lift, rolling forward; and the stage set to elevate the foot into the lightness, which has more to do with the thinking element within the will. The other movement with which the ball is involved comprises the dropping down again of the toes to the floor, initiating the third phase; it sinks the feeling into the will. This twofold activity of the ball in striding already creates a beneficial equilibrium through which, in the realm of the will, feeling and thinking impulses may balance themselves. This resembles a breathing process anchored in the motion which, like the real breathing, promotes health. There lies in such a working of the balls of the toes first the lifting from and then again a gradual dipping into the weight of the body. This takes place not mechanically but through active human effort.

Now when a child rides a bicycle, everything is reduced to the simple downward push; the rest goes by itself, namely by the machine, without the human being. The rider is reieved of the remaining work. What effect will excessive bicycle riding have upon the soul life of the child?

In the realm of thinking, the capacity for lightness, for fantasy-enriched creative activity, is suppressed and the materialistic thinking which tends towards heaviness is promoted. In the realm of feeling, the delicate soulfulness, which lives in the breathing and which should be preserved in mobility, is extinguished. The will itself, a primary element in the movement of the feet, is engaged only to a small extent, because the heel, through which all our being's energy exerts itself in the act of walking, is not even employed in the movement.

In summary, one may say that extreme cycling, particularly at an early age, furthers questionable qualities in the human being and may even be the cause of them: inclination towards a narrow materialistic way of thinking, a coarsening of the soul life which appears as rudeness and lack of sympathy, and in the willing a tendency to laziness and indolence, which may show up in every sphere. The devastating result is not limited to the soul life. After some time there could also be some clearly physical injuries such as anomalies of the lungs and heart, known as troubles in respiration and circulation which can lead to organic changes in the lungs and heart, and problems with the genitals due to the ergonomics of the bicycle seat and the impact of a bumpy ride. Also, one must not overlook the fact that during prolonged riding there occurs congestion in the region of the abdominal muscles, even within the organs located below the diaphragm. In the course of time there can develop a cramping or a tendency to cramp. This has a bad effect during the years of adolescence—particularly, and may, for instance, cause disturbances in the monthly cycle for girls.

It is appropriate to remind ourselves of the significance of insufficient exercise of our feet in general. The rhythmical man is readily subject to harm when natural walking is avoided too much. The automobile has cut out the labor of the feet and has allowed for a variety of circulatory illnesses. Not only smoking but also the neglect of regular foot movement, due to the increase in automobile riding, plays a significant roll in circulatory diseases. The warmth which flows through the organism with the will impulse at every step affects in the blood vessels a partial dissolution of the deposits there, which otherwise can become the cause of sclerosis. The heart ardently desires, if one may express it in this way, to feel the upwards-flowing heat; the occurrence of the dreaded ailments originating from the narrowing of the coronary arteries could be reduced if human beings will move their limbs in an appropriate manner.

In conclusion, the rhythmic human being needs natural walking for health of body, mind, and spirit—for clear thinking, a rich feeling life, and directed will.