

Body Mapping: A Road to Accuracy in Hands-on Practice Workshop

Presented by Robin Gilmore,
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The Golden Ratio is a universal law in which is contained the ground-principle of all formative striving for beauty and completeness in the realms of both nature and art, and which permeates, as a paramount spiritual ideal, all structures, forms and proportions, whether cosmic or individual, organic or inorganic, acoustic or optical; which finds its fullest realization, however, in the human form.

-Adolph Zeising, 1854

What does the above quote have to do with the topic of this workshop? Perhaps nothing more than a flight of fancy by your presenter, but there is a chance that this point of entry may relate to F. M. Alexander's Universal Constant if we so choose. The Golden Ratio is a mathematical formula long used in architecture, music and art dating back to the Ancient Greeks. Without getting into a geometry lecture, the Golden Ratio is found throughout nature in such pleasing designs as a nautilus shell, sunflowers, and the human body. The Parthenon and the works of da Vinci and Mozart reflect the formula in human creativity. When something is made 'by hand,' the very structure of those hands affects the outcome. As an introduction to Body Mapping, let us consider our understanding of our own hands.

Where does hand meet finger? If you look at the back of your hand and move your fingers, there's a clear distinction at the knuckles. Now look at the palm side and find the same joint. If you first identified the crease that lines up with the web of skin, you have found a common mapping error. It makes sense visually, but once you move your fingers, you will find that the joint is farther down, almost to the center of your palm. To illustrate the power of body maps, try the following. Wiggle your fingers *as if* the skin crease on your palm were joints. Note how the movement feels. Now, throw out that idea, remap the joints accurately and wiggle your fingers. Did the quality of movement change? Imagine a pianist or computer programmer with this faulty mapping and the resulting misery. With this simple bit of Body Mapping, not only do the fingers magically grow longer, but repetitive stress injuries can be quickly and simply resolved.

Body Mapping is a term coined by William Conable, a master teacher of the Alexander Technique and Professor [Emeritus] of Cello at Ohio State University School of Music. Mapping refers to one's own idea and experience of structure, movement and size. Body maps can be conscious or unconscious, but they always govern how we move. Body maps often deviate from the reality of anatomic structure; even then, they govern how we move. When the brain has a concept of size, location or direction of movement, that concept is carried through the nervous system to act upon the body part in question. A faulty map can lead to inefficiency, distortion and injury. When the map is accurate, movement becomes efficient and clear. In Body Mapping, the information is embodied and is reflected in movement and appearance.

As we discovered in mapping our fingers, it is possible to have an intention to move based

consciously on faulty information. In attempting to place a joint where there is none, our muscles tighten up to try to produce movement *as if* there were a joint at that place. This type of experiment can be a fun and useful demonstration; however, problems arise when our movement stems from inaccurate maps that are unconscious. As Bill Conable often says, “The map always wins!” If an Alexander teacher has mapping errors in his or her own body, that misinformation gets communicated to the student through hands-on direction. We can have the best of intentions in conveying Alexander’s directions, but our guidance can only be as clear as our own body map.

In the limited time of the Congress workshop, I guided participants in mapping three major joints that share what I call the Golden Formula. By clarifying the atlanto-occipital, hip and ankle joints, the road to accuracy travels from the tactile (what we can actually touch) to kinesthetic perception (what we can feel). The journey begins with the initial contact points with the hands and extends, through clear intention, on a specific trajectory. What these three joints have in common is the relationship between bones that can be felt and the location of the joint itself. Another commonality is that the points that can be palpated are often mistaken for the actual joint. In this type of mapping error, muscles will stiffen to take on the quality of bone in order to match our idea of where movement occurs. Let us now separate fiction from reality in the atlanto-occipital (a/o), hip and ankle joints.

Whenever I teach an introductory workshop, I ask the participants to nod their heads as if to say “yes” and point to where they think the movement is happening. Typically about 90 percent will point to the backs of their skulls and in some cases to the back of the neck. Often there are a few people putting their fingers in their ears or pointing inside their mouths. These are the ones who have had some Alexander experience because they know the a/o joint is not at the back of the skull but is somewhere in the center. In Lugano the participants were all Alexander Technique teachers, but there was a surprising amount of discrepancy in their initial mapping. In a way it’s a trick question because we can’t actually touch the joint. We can ‘tickle’ the joint with vibration by clicking the tongue against the soft palette. Looking at drawings and plastic models of the bones provides further clarification. When participants have a better idea of where the top joint is located, I have them nod their heads from the accurate place and then go back and nod from their original idea. Mapping the atlanto-occipital joint in this way nearly always produces lighter, freer movement and provides an ideal point of entry for some hands-on experience. I make it clear that an Alexander teacher’s hands are not performing magic or manipulating the student. We are in fact combining touch with intention in order to communicate with the student’s thinking. Together, we send a message to make a change in coordination.

In sharing the “Golden Formula” with a group of Alexander teachers, I should say that I don’t necessarily use this method with beginners because there is a danger that they will start thinking of themselves in small pieces. It’s best to cultivate F. M. Alexander’s ‘altogether and one after the other’ before getting too specific. That said, the clarity of my own body map informs my hands at all times regardless of what I may be saying to the student.

We know that the atlanto-occipital joint can’t be touched directly. What *can* be touched are the transverse processes, the bony points that stick out to the sides. Pressing lightly underneath the earlobes, we find an intersection where jaw, skull and atlas can be felt using our fingertip. Sometimes the processes are hard to locate due to muscle bulk, but once they can be palpated, it’s time for a journey of thought. From these points that are as wide as the entire neck, we send our thinking *in* towards the center of the skull, slightly *higher* than where our fingers are touching and just a tiny bit farther *forward* toward the nose. Once those three directions register kinesthetically, the location of the top joint becomes crystal clear. When working in pairs, both partners will experience an instant of “There it is!”

Moving now to another commonly mismapped part of the body, we will apply the formula to the hip joint. Again, we launch from a bony point that can be easily felt and is often mistaken for the joint itself. It’s possible to do this on yourself, but having a partner is more beneficial. While standing, find the greater trochanters with the palms of your hands. These are the big bumps located at the widest point of the femur bones. Once again, in order to find the joint, we send our thought from the point of contact: *in* towards center, *higher* up and a bit farther *forward*. Once that thought hits the mark, ‘Hello,

hip joints!’ Notice what else moves once the hip joints are free. Take this opportunity to take a walk.

Before mapping the third major joint, let me say a word about proportion. Many people, when asked to define upper body and lower body, will point to the beltline. In terms of use, these people tend to bend from ‘the waist’ and walk quite heavily. Mapping the hip joints clarifies that our upper body includes the pelvis and our lower half is comprised solely of the legs. The hip joint is the great divide between upper and lower, and movement is free and easy when this distinction is clear.

Moving down to the ankles, we find another common mapping error. All too often, the visual and tactile points of reference will win out over anatomic reality. When asked to locate the ankle joint, many people will grab the big bumps on either side of the leg down near the heel. Individuals with this faulty map tend to stand and walk back on their heels and constantly overuse their back muscles. Again, these bony points are *not* the joint. With a partner, apply the Golden Formula from the contact points to locate the ankles: *in* toward center, *higher* up and a bit farther *forward*. There they are. Time for another walk to feel those ankles in motion. Notice the resonance between ankles, hips and top of spine.

To review with a pithy poem:

From Bony Points,
Think toward the Joint.
In, Up, Forward.

Let accuracy inform your touch and movement.

Many parts of the body mirror other parts in some combination of shape, function or trajectory of movement. When considered in relationship, countless pathways open up between various points. This way of thinking gets us out of the trap of being two dimensional or overly linear. There are no straight lines in the human body, and the material from this workshop shows that joints must be considered in three dimensions in order to function as designed. Golden, indeed.

The Ancients, having taken into consideration the rigorous construction of the human body, elaborated all their works, as especially their holy temples, according to these proportions.

Luca Pacioli, 1509

