

MYTHOLOGIES OF POSTURE

If I had ten thousand dollars for every person in pain who tells me, "I know I have terrible posture," I'd be a very rich man today.

Remember the 90s? I was a legal secretary in Midtown. I would sometimes follow a person from Grand Central and even go past my own workplace, because I was trying to figure out what was making one of their steps longer than the other (don't look at me that way -- I was never convicted of stalking!). In order to get paid for my unusual interest, I developed my current career, and I look at posture and movement every day as part of my evaluation of clients, students, and people on the street. It's hermeneutic!



Alignment is a term for posture that is used by touch and movement professionals. It concerns the way body parts stack upon each other when you are moving: doing ballet, reaching for a glass on a high shelf, or rappelling down the side of the Empire State Building. You know, your day-to-day activities.

Here are some myths about alignment/posture:

1. **Alignment is static.** Many people work to improve their alignment when standing still, e.g. when the elevator has a mirror and they're done fixing their hair. In fact, human beings are never static, and things we do while trying to stay absolutely still don't generally translate into our other activities. In other words, posture is an activity, not a position, and it is dynamic, not static. I tend to evaluate posture in stillness because it's simpler. But I tend to coach posture in movement because posture is a balance strategy in movement -- even in swimming. My favorite description of posture is the one that Eric Mosher, DC gave me: "Posture is the movement that oscillates around a given body position at any moment."

Another teacher of mine, Irene Dowd, sometimes describes posture as "dynamic equilibrium." That is also the definition of core strength, which is more related to alignment than to muscle strength. Core strength, in its purest sense, means the ability to support your ribs, shoulders, arms, neck and head from below, so that you're free to do stuff with those parts -- to breathe, gesture, sing, speak, turn your head, 'vogue' (remember the 90s?) -- all the essential behaviors of survival in a civilized culture.

2. **Experts Agree.** One of my most creative, generous and discerning teachers has been Iyengar Yoga teacher Genny Kapuler. In a recent yoga class, Genny told us that she thinks of alignment, and the pursuit of alignment, as mythology. Yes. Beliefs about alignment contain cultural values, vary from situation to situation, and are taught to us, directly and indirectly, through stories, which we then learn to tell ourselves and sometimes begin to think of as literally true, though they aren't. Our alignment stories are subject to interpretation and contain elements which are mutually contradictory. Alignment, for Genny -- and for me -- is a deep cultural (attitudes) and somatic (feelings) well that anyone can dip into for wisdom and power. And each time we dip in, we get something a little different from the same source. Working with alignment requires discernment and creativity.

3. **"Good alignment" is the same, no matter what you're doing.** What's "good alignment"? That depends. Are you reading this while waiting in line at the bank? Don't try to stand symmetrically on two legs. Look at the other people and you'll see that humans and flamingos are not that different. It's easier to stand on one leg when you stand for a long time, and everyone does it.

Sometimes it's helpful to think of your posture as your "gravity strategy." Use a full-length mirror to evaluate your posture the next time you are floating at the end of a tether in outer space or swimming the English channel. I'm willing to bet that your alignment won't be the same as it is when you wash dishes.

4. **Symmetry is the goal.** A way into seeing posture is to compare two sides of the person when they do a repetitive or symmetrical action such as standing on two legs or walking. Symmetry gives us a quick way to start seeing how life has cultivated the body. But symmetry is not really the goal -- it's a convenient fiction, a lie in search of the truth. You only have one pancreas, so you will never be symmetrical. If you have scoliosis, or are right handed, you'll be more asymmetrical. The goal is to do the things you want to do in your life with facility and efficiency. You don't need to be symmetrical to do that.

Whatever your goal, seek the "alignment" that can help you attain it with the greatest of ease, dexterity, and understanding. You can start now, since, as choreographer Deborah Hay reminds us, "Alignment is everywhere." Even at Grand Central. (Remember Grand Central?) Take a moment to evaluate its alignment sometime.