

Editorial

Where the Edges Meet: Drawing Contour Lines of Truth and Integrity

Lynn Kapitan, *Editor*

A woman takes up a mirror and studies the weathered lines of her face. She looks first in the mirror and then into her heart. As she becomes present to her thoughts and emotions, she begins a contour line drawing of the face she sees reflected in the mirror. Hand follows truthfully what the eye sees, moving slowly and courageously along the very edges of things, like a gentle caress.

Her drawings, at first, focus on the subject of death—of her son, her own death, and her visions of heaven and hell. These are followed by drawings about moral issues, guilt, and the sins of the world. They always start with her face in the mirror. She draws late into the night, often when her concerns lie heavily on her and she can't sleep. Her drawing is an encounter with herself, a form of truth telling. As the drawings begin to accumulate, she realizes that she has liberated herself from years of depression. "A miracle," as she often referred to her healing, had occurred (Ault, 1996, p. 8-9).

Like many art therapists, I heard this story of Elizabeth Layton from the late Bob Ault, remembered in this issue as one of the founders of the American Art Therapy Association. Ault observed that contour drawing gives concrete form to our difficulties and allows us to look at them from a distance, often with new insight. It provides an honest reality check. "Even when attempts are made to distort or hide information fed back via the mirror," he wrote, "subtle signals are responded to and incorporated in the image drawn; the muscles never lie" (1996, p. 43). Today, when many of us are horrified by the perilous decisions of our leaders and their obvious disconnect from those they lead, it is worth contemplating Layton's lesson of drawing the line between truth and fiction.

Contour lines appear as edges where two objects meet, or an edge where an object encounters the space around it. Perceptual awareness is always most acute at the edges of things; edges stop our scanning eye and bring focus (Paratore, 1985). Elizabeth Layton used this principle like a high-wire act to sort out and separate herself from the murky abyss of apathy and emotions that had engulfed her. She repeatedly "drew the line" to accurately perceive the real shape of things, to draw herself out and to create new figure-ground relationships on which to base her life. Like an archetypal crossroads, the contour line is a symbol of

encounter, boundaries, and the necessity of choice. Layton discovered that by making choices freely, she made herself.

Contour line drawing offers contrast, which is a key differentiating agent in art and in all human relationships. Unity is achieved by the juxtaposition of differences. Harmony, on the other hand, unifies through likenesses, uniformity, and a general tendency to merge and blend (Paratore, 1985). Much of our lives are lived along the yin-yang continuum of contrast and harmony. Among traditional cultures, harmony is valued over contrast, as a social organizing force that fosters acting "as one," where individual elements blend and are not allowed to stand out. In extreme form it is the tyrannical mindset of a collective that imposes decisions by fiat and smothers dissent: "Don't disagree with one another, never have an independent vision, and above all never have a conflict" (Minkowitz, as cited in Wolf, 1994, p. 109). In such groups, members learn that they must "go along to get along" and leadership is organized around insider sharing instead of the achievement of realistic goals. Harmony applied to the political sphere is naturally autocratic. If challenged, it sits pat. Trust us, it murmurs, like a soft wash of watercolor, we are here to take care of you.

Many years ago, the iconoclastic psychoanalyst Thomas Szasz (1974) drew contours around the therapist's basic ethical stance as upholding autonomy and freedom. He asserted that if therapists are to promote these democratic values for their clients they must strive above all to be truthful about themselves, about what they do, and about why they do it. This implies that they cannot accept anything "at face value...or in compliance with the institutional pressure of [their] profession" (p. 37). The therapist acts not as an intimate but as an autonomous professional with a critical and inquiring attitude. Without this understanding, neither leaders nor therapists can "take care" of those to whom they promise to be a particular kind of contractually reliable object (Szasz, 1974). In contrast with those whose professional identity is fuzzy or diffuse, Szasz describes a therapist whose identity is well defined and constant. The face encountered in the mirror is not a mask nor an impersonation but an expression of integrity.

The basis of this integrity is a contract, an ancient phenomenon grounded on the fundamental human ability to

make and break promises. As a relation of consent between equals, it rejects coercion and fosters freedom; its essence is restraint of power (Szasz, 1974). It is the tacit agreement among scholars and researchers that data must never be falsified; among therapists it guides professional conduct against manipulation and self-interest. In all spheres, the contract is entered in good faith and informs future actions, which cannot be based on lies. To the extent that a contract can be broken it is not a contract (Szasz, 1974). The chief betrayal perceived by members of societies whose leaders blend facts with fictions and belie their interests is this blatant disregard for the social contract.

“Like anything else in the world,” Szasz (1974) wrote, “human beings can be observed accurately or inaccurately and described honestly or fraudulently” (p. 37). He would have held that Elizabeth Layton, in her practice of contour drawing, was seeking freedom from a more or less fictional view of a reality that was smothering her. Through the silent, unbiased device of the mirror, she gradually and dispassionately became interested in those areas of her life that revealed discrepancies. These manifest in many ways: as symptoms and complaints, confused or delusional thought patterns, or inconsistencies between words and actions, thoughts and feelings. Contour line drawing was her way of looking carefully and recording information objectively, starting with small observable details and working toward larger relationships. To preserve the integrity of the therapeutic contract, the therapist likewise at times must act as an agent of contrast that challenges the plausibility of explanations, asks questions, and suggests alternatives to explain such conduct (p. 59). It was on this basis that Szasz understood therapy to be a socially subversive enterprise. He wrote that our primary task as therapists is to “demythologize personal and social fictions” (p. 60).

Thus it follows when applied to the larger realm of human relations that every successful organization needs “a

fringe to behave disruptively and make noise, and trained insiders to broker the new contract once the disruption has hit home” (Wolf, 1994, p. 115). Our desire for the muted edges of harmony may judge such disruptive activism as bad and fail to recognize its ultimate goal, which is a working and fair social contract. As Layton discovered, the places where edges meet bring focus and perspective. With new perspective, wholeness may be created from distinct, individual visions and true harmony restored anew.

Contour drawing demands contact with reality (Ault, 1996, p. 43). Ault recognized its confrontational aspect and advised that there must be enough ego function intact to tolerate the regressive pull. With the reality of the image in the mirror comes the inescapable moment of dilemma: whether or not it is time to draw the contours that help us perceive the true shape of things and to separate ourselves from whatever has us in its grip, keeping a certain reality intact. Where the edges meet is a place of challenge and the dividing of ways in service of integrity. When approached with care and sensitivity, it can be a place of renewed existence.

References

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