

S U G G E S S S T O R I E S

GETTING STRAIGHT

BY CAROLYN REUBEN

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“Your feet are easy,” Vance Bonner said to me, and I wondered if she were insane. I’d only just met the woman who had created the Bonner System of Structural Reprograming®, and here she was pointing to the bone that jutted awkwardly at right angles where it was supposed to be straight, saying, “This is only crooked because somewhere else is crooked. We’re going to change that somewhere else.”

“Oh yeah?” I smirked. “Without surgery?” “Don’t think of surgery!” she pleaded. “It’s totally symptomatic! It doesn’t correct the cause of the problem.”

The cause of the problem in my case, Bonner said, was that I lock my knees and have a weak, pronated foot (one that turns in, without much of an arch). This position puts such strain on the big toe joint, she said, that not only can’t it do what it is supposed to do, but it had to form a bump to protect the soft place hit by this awkward setup. Of course, a 40-year problem of bone and flesh doesn’t change with one-session, Bonner added. She warned me that correcting the problem will take a significant change in my stance, along with exercises focused on the supporting muscles in my foot and leg.

The idea of straightening bunions may seem magical to me, but Bonner has tested her system with far more challenging problems. There was the man with multiple sclerosis who’d spent six months at a Veterans Administration hospital unable to walk, a skier who had had surgery twice on each knee and was told he’d never ski again, and an Idaho farm woman who, when her arm was re-attached after a buzzsaw accident, had lost the ability to crochet. And then there was the 88-year-old in New York who said to Bonner, “You must work on my boyfriend - he’s 93 and is starting to walk like an old man.”

“More length is always the answer,” states Bonner, whose system of repatterning is based on careful observation of the compensations our remarkably adaptable bodies create in order to fulfill the tasks we give them. You want to ski bowlegged? Okay, the body says, you can do it - until years of deep bending, putting the thigh and the lower leg at an unnatural angle, wears down the knee joint. It’s likewise ineffective to demand that someone “stand up straight!” if the body is hunched over to keep itself from falling backwards due to an imbalanced pelvis, flat feet, locked knees, or compression of the lower spine. “Gravity,” Bonner points out, “has the upper hand.”

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The Bonner System of Structural Reprogramming first spotlights the muscles and positions that have been overused, then offers the body a “new range of options” by using previously underused muscles. Bonner sprinkles her directions with memorable images: “If you keep San Francisco and Sausalito lined up, the Golden Gate Bridge has a chance to be a bridge,” she says in reference to my feeble attempt to form an arch. Referring to the ache I feel in my legs as I try out a new stance, she says, “If you walked through a train station for three hours holding a suitcase up, and finally put it down, your arm would ache as you’re letting go of the pain.”

I’ve read the enthusiastic letters from hockey-team and figure-skating coaches, from a trekking-company president in Sun Valley, Idaho, and a member of a religious order in Albany, New York. I’ve heard Bonner’s own summation of her results: The man with M.S. walked after one session. The skier needed 20 sessions before he was back on the slopes. In three 20-minute group sessions, the farmer released what was preventing her from making subtle finger movements, and resumed crocheting. After five sessions, the old man loosened the tight ankles that were to blame for his stooping spine and replaced his shuffle with a more youthful gait. I’m almost convinced.

Bonner says that if I “open the raccoon eyes” behind my pelvis and “keep the pail of water from spilling” out of my waist, I may lose the little paunch that spoils my figure. That does it. If any part of me gets truly reprogrammed I’ll be ahead. And what if I really can stop hiding my feet!

Structural Reprogramming appeals to the innate desire of the body to be aligned, Bonner says. For those of us who are neither athletes nor suffering from any affliction, it appeals to something even more innate: vanity.