Signs of Life Preferential Shapes Activity by Angeles Arrien

FIVE SHAPES

There are five shapes drawn below: circle, square, triangle, cross, spiral. Draw these shapes for yourself. Then number the shapes 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, with number 1 being your most preferred shape, and number 5 being your least preferred shape. Do this preferential test before you go on to the following pages.

Unit One: Diagnosis, Vision and Change
UNDERSTANDING THE FIVE SHAPES CROSS-CULTURALLY

Note: Please work with the five shapes before you read these comments.

These five shapes appear in all cultures throughout the world. I began working with them as a result of a wondering. Are the same shapes found in all art? If they are, what does that say about the human psyche that wants to create those shapes? This wondering led me to a seven-year cross-cultural study in which I found these five shapes, and found that all cultures attribute the same meanings to the shapes. All cultures also have tests and the most prevalent kind of test is the preferential test in which choices or preferences are ranked. So, I tested over 6000 people with the five shapes and discovered that inner resonance with the shapes is a good barometer of current inner processes. That is the test you have just taken.

The shapes symbolize deep inner psychic process and appear externalized in many ways in the world’s cultures. As you become sensitive to them, you will see them used in many ways: they are announcements of the processes and values that are active at any point in time, for a person, a group, or a whole society.

As you learn about what each shape represents, remember that they describe universal processes, not character flaws. These processes are universal and are part of every person’s experience, although always in unique ways.

Defining the Shapes

The circle indicates wholeness and contentment. If it is in the #1 position, it indicates a high need for space and for “doing it my way.” The fear for a person who has the circle at the top of their list is of entrapment. The more space you give them, the more they will be there; otherwise, they’ll take space. The circle is associated with the journey of the hero and heroine. A Western equivalent is business logos (which reflect our corporate and cultural emphasis on individuality); the Eastern form is the mandala. The excess of this process is narcissistic self-preoccupation, with fluctuations between futility and grandiosity.

The square shows the deep inner process of stability, solidity, and foundation-making. A person in this process is very good on follow-through and has a keen awareness about how ideas and plans come into form. This person might be impatient with talking about ideas and will yearn to move into action and accomplishment. Immediate results are valued and commitment is looked for in other people’s actions rather than their words. The underlying fear is that “nothing’s going to happen, people won’t follow through.” The extreme of this process is rigidity, compulsiveness, control, not trusting others (doing everything oneself), and judging anything that is unfolding organically as “flaky.” The square is associated with myths of the four directions and the four elements.

The triangle represents vision-making and questing in known directions. The shape is associated with mountains, pyramids, arrowheads, and stories of vision quests and sacred mountains. The important factor for the visionary or futuristic thinker is knowing the direction and the goal; how long it takes to reach the goal is not important. A person who is strong in this quality will be able to maintain their focus and allow the necessary time and space, as long as they have goals with meaning. The underlying fear is the fear of having no vision. The worst thing in actualizing your goal before you thought you would; in that case, there is a strong need to continue vision-making and keep the dreams alive. A pitfall can be envisioning definite
pictures and outcomes but carrying them so long that they become dogma or "-isms." The excess in this process is nothing getting done in the present. (It is interesting to note a fundamental process difference between the East and the West. In the West, as noted with the circle, the characteristic desire is for results that are immediate, whereas in the East, the characteristic desire is for results, in any time frame.)

The *equidistant cross* or *plus sign* is universally associated with relatedness, integration, intersection, conflict resolution, the desire to center, connect, network. It is the symbol of the weaver, uniting the inner (the vertical line) and the outer worlds (the horizontal line), and seeking to apply inner learnings to outer situations. The underlying fear is of abandonment, separation, isolation, loss. In the extreme, this process can result in losing oneself through a loss of boundaries and merging with another person or with a group. A person who favors the cross will especially value and need quality time shared with self and other important people. The shape is associated with the journey of the twins.

The *spiral* indicates growth, evolution and a need for variety and change. It pictures an ongoing process of returning through the same points but at different levels. There is no definite beginning or end point in the spiral. Flexibility, curiosity, and ingenuity are strong, and there is a great love of being challenged and stretched. A person in this process will thrive on unpredictability and be good at starting things. He or she may not be so concerned with outcomes, but will just need things to be moving. The underlying fear is that things will become dull, boring, and routine. The excess is dilletantism, and stirring things up just for the sake of the mayhem. A person who has trouble staying with something may need to realize the importance of the ordinary and simple. The spiral shows up in myths of spiders and Ariadne.

(The star appears universally, but is not included here because it is actually an expanded version of the triangle.)

**Ranking the Shapes**

How you ranked the shapes will give you a picture of your inner processes at this point in time. Your #1 position reflects the process that is strongest in your self-identity now. It is the part of yourself that you are most likely to feel aware of and comfortable with. The #5 position will be the process within that you are most challenged by at this time; or that you resist or feel uncomfortable with. (Number 5 may also be a process that you have totally mastered and that is not important for you at this point in time.)

Together, the #1 and #5 positions will tell you what your inner tension points may be. For instance, with the spiral in #1 and the square in #5, the foremost psychic process is change and growth and this is consciously wanted. At the same time, another part of oneself is stable and secure, and may not want change, or this person may not know how to bring change into form. With the triangle in #1 and spiral in #5, a person may have very clear goals and directions, but carry a deep, unconscious resistance to change.

With the circle in #1 and the cross in #5, individuation is strong, but at a deep level, it may conflict with desires for relatedness. With the triangle in #1 and the square in #5, long-range goals will be strong and the challenge may be in making concrete steps toward them. With the circle in #1 and the triangle in #5, the tension point may be in needing to be yourself with enough space and time in conflict with long-range goals. The spiral in #1 and the cross in #5 may show a focus on change and transformation without adequate time to integrate and
The Signs of Life Preferential Shapes Test was designed by Angeles Arrien, who also authored this article. You can explore more in “Signs of Life” or visit www.angelesarrien.com.

Summary of the Meaning of Positions in the Preferential Shapes Activity

1. Where a person perceives she or he is at present. This is the process you most easily identify with at this time. Where you desire to be.

2. The inherent process that’s predominant in an individual at a given time. This represents your actual present strength. This is a process of which you may not be aware.

3. The work that is really going on at the core of your being. This process integrates the extremes of polarization that happen between the dissonance of #1 and #5.

4. Your most recent area of mastery. This is the process that has prepared you for the current process of core work at #3.

5. The process you are currently resisting, judging, or avoiding. Possibly also this is a process you have outgrown, or that’s not relevant at this time.