

The Five Universal Shapes

This material is taken from the book "Signs of Life, The Five Universal Shapes and How to Use Them" by Angeles Arrien (1992).

The Circle

Symbolizes: Wholeness, the experience of Unity

Meaning: When people are engaged in the search for wholeness they aspire to independence and individuation. What they need most is space, room in which to find themselves, and develop their own identity.

In Relationships: These people will feel loved and trusted when allowed plenty of space. If the space they need is not offered to them, they will simply take it. It is wise to wait and to allow the person who is in this process to initiate communication and contact.

Underlying Fear: entrapment, being caught in a situation that will restrict or restrain them

In the Extreme: When the process of individuation is resisted, or not allowed to come to resolution, it may become intensely self-absorbing, even narcissistic.

The Cross

Symbolizes: Relationships, Integration

Meaning: This is the coupling, synthesizing, integrating and balancing process. This process carries the need for connection – to a creative project, to a group, to another person, or to oneself.

In Relationships: People who favor the cross will place emphasis on the quality, not quantity of time shared with others. Experiencing balance will be an essential goal for them. These people will often ask for a specific meeting time, they love collaborative work, and equate quality time spent with close friends with love and trust.

Underlying Fear: loss, abandonment, and isolation

In the Extreme: Taken to an extreme, personal identity can be lost if the individual tries to live life through another person or group.

The Triangle

Symbolizes: Dreams, Visions and Goals

Meaning: This process includes self-discovery and revelations. People in this process are intensely focused on identifying and pursuing a goal. Attaining it is extremely important to them. They have an innate gift of vision and they need to follow their dreams.

In Relationships: People in this process feel loved and accepted when others share and value the visions they hold. They are happy when you express respect and tangible support for the visions and goals they pursue.

Underlying Fear: that there will be no dreams to pursue

In the Extreme: They become so absorbed in their plans for the future that they accomplish nothing in the present.

The Spiral

Symbolizes: Growth, Evolution.

Meaning: This is a process of coming to the same point again and again, but at a different level, so that everything is seen in a new light. This gives new perspective on issues, people and places. These people have a strong need for variety, novelty and change. They dread routine and are capable of doing multiple tasks well.

In Relationships: Flexibility is the major requirement for relating to people deep in this process. It is important that others be open to new options not previously considered. It is important to support change rather than hinder it. People in this process will feel loved and trusted when others share their excitement about the variety of options they are considering.

Underlying Fear: suppression of creativity, being smothered

In the Extreme: This can lead to the superficial exploration of many things at once. It may look like creating chaos to experience momentary excitement and to escape boredom.

(continued on the back)

The Square

Symbolizes: Stability, Solidity, and Security

Meaning: Drawing a square mirrors the process of constructing a foundation. These people are ready to build, to implement a plan, and to manifest ideas. They need consistency, accountability, and completion.

In Relationships: People in this process value integrity and authenticity, as well as responsibility and accountability. Actions speak louder than words in dealing with people in this process. They feel loved and supported when you are honest, direct, clear, responsible and dependable. Do what you say.

Underlying Fear: nothing will be accomplished and their efforts will be a waste of time and energy

In the Extreme: When too deeply immersed, they may become controlling, impatient, and suspicious of others.

The Meaning of the Positions

(the order in which you ranked them, in terms of appeal to you).

Position 1 – Where you THINK you are.

The shape placed here, in the most preferred position, signals the process that now has your attention. It describes the part of yourself of which you are most aware and with which you are most comfortable at this time. The shape in Position 1 indicates your idea of the future or, perhaps, your current source of inspiration. But – and this is important – it is not the most accurate indicator of where you actually ARE right now. It only shows where you think you are or where you would like to be. You may find that you often notice this shape in your environment, that you are strongly attracted to it, and that you admire the qualities of the process it represents.

Position 2 – Your strengths.

The shape placed here signals an inherent strength predominant in you at this time, whether you know it or not. You demonstrate this strength to other people without effort. The shape in this position indicates areas of your nature that are currently fluid, strong, and resourceful. This shape reveals the innate talents you are using to assist the growth occurring in Position 3. You may receive positive feedback and compliments that correspond to the qualities of this shape.

Position 3 – Where you really are.

Although the shape in this position is third in your order of preference, it is the most significant. The shape you put in this position shows your true current growth process. This shape stands for the work that is really going on, right now, at the core of your being. Very often this process is unconscious or overlooked, yet you must be aware of it in order to fully manifest the potential it represents. It indicates where your own gifts can be used correctly now. The shape in this position can be a source of unlimited creativity and healing when you support the process it signifies. Once you start paying attention, you may find this shape all around you, where you had not noticed it before.

Position 4 – Your motivation.

This position points to past challenges, tests, and circumstances that have motivated your current process of change. The fourth position and the shape within it show the motivation that triggered your move into the core work to be done that is symbolized by the shape in Position 3. This shape furnishes clarifying information about the underlying incentive that has provoked you to do things differently now. Many people find that the shape in this position also describes situations they have resolved or moved beyond.

Position 5 – Old unfinished business.

This shape, your least preferred, identifies a process that you have outgrown or one that you dislike, still resist, or are judging. It indicates old, perhaps unfinished, business. This position is associated with unresolved issues you wish to put aside for now. The shape placed here carries a process that you will reclaim and integrate at a later date. It is not work to which you should attend to in the present; instead it shows areas of boredom, patterns of denial, or disowned parts of yourself. When you see this shape around you, you may feel disinterested or even irritated.

This material was used at the 2005 IET Master-Instructor Retreat in support of the theme “Sacred Relationships”. The material is the original work of Angeles Arrien, a cultural anthropologist.