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On Gait

It's Hard Looking from the Inside Out

By David Clark, Certified Advanced Rolfer™

When first asked to do an article about gait, I wondered what could be added to what we already have recently said about Natural Walking[1] without "jumping the shark." Then as I fretted about this, it occurred to me that Natural Walking is really the "zero gait" in a potentially infinite series of possible gaits. The Natural Walk is the gait where there is no active holding against the action and, therefore, it is the most economical way for humans to walk. That is not to say the only way. The most economical is not the wisest choice when it comes to getting out of the way of a bus.

How would holding against the action help you get out of the way of an oncoming bus? It's like when an inexperienced person gets out of a small boat at a dock without first tying it off. As he steps forward the boat moves back (Newton's Third Law of Motion), sometimes with hilarious consequences. If, however, he ties the boat off first (holds against the action of stepping off), then he may step off the boat as if he were on land. So the muscles that act to "hold against the action" aren't holding back the movement of other muscles; rather, they are acting to stabilize a base of action so the other muscles can accelerate some part of the body, just like tying off the boat at the dock.

The holding against the action actually gives us a basis for a definition of gait. Rather than "the pattern of movement of the limbs of an animal, including man, in locomotion over a solid substrate,"[2] we could say something more useful to Rolfers: "Gait is the pattern of movement that develops in the whole structure, from the holding point outward from which the walk is launched." For Rolf Movement® practitioners, the action of the holding is the "pre-movement," the preparation for movement that we learn to watch for.

Do all humans, being bipeds, hold against the action of walking in the same place? Not at all. I love Gael Ohlgren's statement that ". . . our walk is our signature in space."[3] That signature is composed of many layers. Injury, both traumatic and degenerative, causes unique adaptive changes that influence the signature. (An example would be a limp.) While genetics may contribute a part of the signature – in the length of the bones and mass of muscle – body image/personality is a huge and preciously (though unconsciously) held part.

Our signature communicates not only our identity, but also our condition, to our group. Certainly culture has a huge impact that is at first difficult to see. The human tendency is to assume the self as the norm, and the enculturation process ensures that the "norm" gets spread throughout the subgroup. Some norms are very local, like accents, and some are very widespread, like holding patterns in the body. In western civilization there has taken root a holding pattern in the pelvis – a holding against the action that I assume is from our walking patterns, since that is the primary action of the pelvic girdle. This holding has spilled over to become a norm, and even a trademark, of western civilization. We have proof of this everyday in our Rolfing® Structural Integration [SI] practices, where all roads lead to the pelvis.

Since I believe this point to be important, I offer another proof from an entirely different field. The software program Poser® version 6, offered by SmithMicro,[4] is a three-dimensional CGI rendering and animation program optimized for models that depict the human figure in three-dimensional form. The program is easy to use, but it has one requirement: one of the segments into which the CGI body is broken up must be fixed. The default is the pelvis, betraying the underlying cultural bias.

So why all this in a piece to Rolfers about gait? Simply that we are looking at gait from the inside out. We are immersed in and part of the background of obviousness. If we are to offer to our clients something more than pain relief, something toward the promise of Rolfing SI, we need to become aware of our own gaits. Daily. We have the laboratory in our own bodies to experiment endlessly with our own theories of motion. We have to know our own assumptions, and it's hard looking from the inside out.

David Clark has been an Certified Advanced Rolfer/Rolf Movement Practitioner for thirty years. He lives and works in the Tampa, Florida area, occasionally taking time out to assist in teaching Rolfing classes.

Endnotes

1. Ohlgren, Gael and David Clark, "A Rolfer's Response to Gracovetsky." *Structural Integration: The Journal of the Rolf Institute®*, vol. 37, issue 4, Dec. 2009.

2. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gait.

3. Private conversation.

4. See http://poser.smithmicro.com.