

IDA P. ROLF, Ph.D.

HUMANITARIAN * SCHOLAR * INNOVATOR

Ida P. Rolf, Ph.D. received her Ph.D. in Biological Chemistry from Columbia University in 1919. Following her graduation from Barnard she was a member of the Organic Chemistry Department of the Rockefeller Institute for Medical Research where her special assignment was investigating the chemical structure of nervous system lipids. The conclusions of her and her colleagues were published over a period of a decade in the *Journal of Biological Chemistry*.

Seeking an answer to personal and family health problems, Dr. Rolf started intensive personal investigation into the effect of structure on well-being. The methods available at the time seemed inadequate for actual structural change. Slowly the technique known as Structural Integration ("rolfing") was developed. It became obvious that the method she had designed primarily for postural improvement was also a clue to better functioning in a human being. Soon the patent fact that structural improvement of the physical body contributed generously to psychological well-being was recognized. That fact is being subjected to scientific validation at this time.

Dr. Rolf has, for the past two decades, been training rolfers and has completed work on her forthcoming book *rolfing: The Integration of Human Structures* being published by Dennis-Landman Company of Santa Monica, California.

Editor's note: The measure of a personality is more than noting chronological events in an individual's life or even recounting accomplishments as much of the world notes achievement. We offer here a personal narration about who Ida Rolf is — as written by Jack Downing, M.D., a certified rolfer, member of the ROLF INSTITUTE and a respected friend of Dr. Rolf.

I first knew Ida as a sturdy, quiet, seventy-year old lady of uncommon solidness and alertness, present at Esalen in 1965 at Fritz Perl's instigation. Fritz said that her attentions were valuable. Since I was guided by Fritz at that time, I undertook to be 'rolfed,' whatever that was. Note that I was a psychiatrist and mental health administrator of some twenty years standing then, and that although I considered myself avant-garde psychologically consequent to my work in social psychiatry and my daring to use LSD and go to Esalen with Fritz, I was pill-and-scalpel-oriented as your average practitioner. To me, body manipulation was done by technicians called physical therapists, while massage was a pleasant trifle. (Generally, the higher one's medical standing, the less the body is seen and/or touched. Social standing is inversely proportionate to the amount of skin exposed, hence, for example, senators, bankers and expensive lawyers wear neckties, vests, and hose up to their knees. Cardiologists have more status than dermatologists; brain surgeons, than orthopedists.) So, Ida's thing involving continuous and direct manipulation of the body was obviously suspect. Of course, her equally obvious respectability and modesty vouched for her even in the humid atmosphere of the Esalen mineral baths.

And despite my foggiess about what this deep and often painful massage-manipulation of my muscles and sinews actually *did*, diverse experiences convinced me that this shrewd, muscular old lady knew what she was doing. For example, we reached the fifth of the ten basic hours of structural integration: in the process of opening and releasing the front of the torso she was stretching and releasing the lower left side of my belly, just above the groin, I experienced a stabbing, needle-like pain in an old scar on my left hip. With total, you-are-there recall, I relived an accident thirty years before, including being sewn up at home without anesthesia by our family GP. Both doctor and mother kept saying, "Hold still now! Don't move!" And hold still I did, and I continued to "Hold still!"

for thirty years, much to the detriment of my athletic ability, for restraint in the left hip area is not consistent with action sports. After this reliving, my entire pelvic musculature relaxed, and I danced with ease, grace and enthusiasm for the first time. (I won't say I danced my ass off, yet my feet were bleeding after one all night session on the Esalen deck.) In my own work as a rolfer, for I was a student in Ida's first formal class in 1967, along with Bernie Gunther and Bob Hall, I have seen this abreaction-release phenomenon many times.

To cite my own experience as further example; I gained somewhat over one-half inch in height, had to have my wardrobe remodeled as my shoulders dropped lower and my chest came up and became a convert to the notion that appropriate stretching and release of the structural tissues of the total body, the muscles, fascia, tendons and interconnected skeleton, can make a tremendous positive difference in life attitudes and function. (With typical wit and good humor, Ida calls herself the 'darling of the tailors' because most rolfees have to remodel their wardrobes.) For one, a great deal of what we call 'aging' is reversible, is needless, can be postponed for decades, by skillfully releasing our body from the straitjacket of overly tight connective tissue resulting from chemical deterioration. For another, many of the fears, pains, conflicts we suffer with greater or lesser resignation are held in our muscular systems, and are much more readily erased by rolfing than by tranquilizing chemicals, alcohol, or interminable verbal psychotherapy. This I say from my own experience as psychiatrist, psychotherapist, and rolfer.

Returning to Ida, when we first met and became friends, she was seventy; she confessed that she expected her system to die with her, for after nearly thirty-five years of teaching and practice only a handful of apprentices had learned and were practicing what she knew. Over and over again she had tried to interest the medical profession in what she had developed, only to meet repeated indifference and failure. She knew what her system could do, indeed had processed numbers of open-minded, widely known people, but couldn't get the medical doctors to listen.

Let me diverge again. Manipulation, using the hands on the body, is age-old. Most cultures have some form of health-enhancing, disease-removing process. In European and Russian medicine, this is formalized in the hydrotherapy, balneotherapy and massage therapy centered principally at the great spas. Here in the United States, the medical education revolution of 1907 following the Flexner report set our medical practice on the scientific, biochemical, surgical and laboratory model. The patient was seen as object and passive, rather than subject and active. Manipulation and massage were left to so-called physiotherapy and rehabilitation specialists, who humped themselves to be as aloof and scientific as their more prestigious brethren. The then flourishing system of treatment-oriented 'watering places' or spas withered and died. Instead of baths and massage, doctors prescribed bromides, later barbiturates, and now Librium and Valium. Manipulation as a *healing* process was almost entirely left to the non-medical specialists, the osteopaths, and the chiropractors. Since these worthies were not alleopathic physicians, the so-called MD's, they were not scientific; since they were not scientific, they were *ipso facto* quacks, and whatever they did was quackery, therefore manipulation was quackery. (So far as I know, few medical doctors have ever meditated on the intriguing fact that these manipulating osteopaths and chiropractors have survived and flourished despite the constant, vigorous and total financial, professional and political opposition of the highly potent organized medicine lobby.)

The fact is, manipulation is something besides quackery, as Dr. Ida P. Rolf, Ph.D. in chemistry, found out when she undertook to find someone to cure her older son of back pain unaffected by the most competent medical treatment. She was convinced that something could be done, from her research on bodily process at the Rockefeller Institute (now University.) Scientifically-trained, highly intelligent and a very stubborn individual motivated by mother-love, she took her boy to every healer she could find. 'For years, when I heard of a new healer, I'd drag that boy off to see him.' She observed that much of what she saw was quackery, and some was not. Some methods worked to relieve disability and promote healing. She began to put them together, to study the systems of osteopathy and chiropractics, of Alexander and Reich, to talk with the clinical practition-

ers about their methods, their successes and failures. I don't know that she will ever write her autobiography; I doubt she will, being far more identified with the evolution of rolfing today, than with the work and fatigue of Ida Rolf yesterday. However, I've questioned her in those Esalen days ten years ago and heard some of the stories about evolving the present system. Rolfing today is a coherent system marked by that high degree of internal consistency and rigorous external application that denotes the truly scientific, truly experientially-based process. As far as my own experience is concerned, the only comparable system I know is the psychoanalytic theory of Dr. Sigmund Freud. (Admittedly, the Alexander and Feldenkrais systems may be comparable, I personally don't know.) Ida Rolf found fertile soil at Esalen, in the evolving body-consciousness movement, and seized the moment. She gave up, for the time, her hopes of planting rolfing in medicine, and trained whomever she saw as having the wit, will and skill to learn: psychologists like Will Schutz and Ed Maupin, poets like Peter Melchior, actor-illustrator John Lodge, merchant Dub Leigh, Ed Taylor the Esalen baker, psychiatrists and aerospace engineers, Maurice Paulson — thirty years a train dispatcher with Illinois Central, chiropractors and veterinarians. All have in common love and respect for the human body, reverence for The Incredible Machine, as named in the recent series on public television. For rolfing returns to the concept of Leonardo de Vinci, the body as machine, as force, structure, and lever, as totally incredible integration of purpose and potential acting through protoplasmic structure molded by the totality of past experience.

To see Ida take a two month-old infant born with a wry neck, lolling helplessly in its mother's lap, and in two tender, skillful sessions convert that individual to sitting upright, head held high, moving arms and legs in the coordinated manner appropriate to its age, is to witness the rightful potential inherent in every human of any age. We students have only had to put aside our prejudices, to be willing to learn from her wisdom, to find much more in ourselves than we know exists. For rolfing moves from the central proposition that perfection of structure and function is potential within all of us, no matter how handicapped. By removing the blocks to that perfect structure, perfect performance, the innately perfect template comes into being. My experience confirms this, from what I have seen of Ida's work, and to the extent that my own skill releases that perfection.

Our culture, our American culture, in cyclic passage from *yang* preoccupation to *ying*, is recovering body awareness, as primary experience. The mind to a lesser extent rules over body as master over slave; sensory experiencing is more accepted for itself. Rolfing is mind-body, the synthesis that creates a higher level of being, as in the martial arts which project action and meditation as one function.

Ida herself, Grandma, the Elbow, Dr. Rolf, all names by which she is known to us and her students, is become that rare combination of scholarship, experience, wisdom and clarified self seen rarely in any age, unmistakable when met. Only Frieda Fromm-Reichman, the late psychoanalyst who practiced at Chestnut Lodge near Baltimore, is comparable in my acquaintance. At eighty, Dr. Rolf outworks, outconcentrates, dominates and plays harder than any of us half her age. She has created through herself an entire new profession, ethical, dedicated, shrewd, entirely self-supporting without public subsidy, and excited by new prospects of learning and service. That's a great deal, quite a great deal for one woman, still teaching, still practicing, and this year, eighty!