

Interview With Gael Switzer Ohlgren

By Bill Harvey and Aline Newton

BH: The only thing that I know about you is that you've been around forever! And that you somehow were tough enough to be trained by Ida and still be here.

GSO: So you want a history?

BH: Yeah, a history!

GSO: History, okay. So ... let's see, I was twenty years old, I had dropped out of college, I was cleaning cabins at Esalen Institute, I was also on their massage crew, and Ida Rolf was coming around Esalen. People were getting Rolfed. I was sort of sampling. You know, it was my smorgasbord there. And I was hearing Rolfig stories. Actually it was my mother who took a Robert Hall gestalt workshop and as part of the package - two Rolfig sessions, were given. Either by Robert Hall or Ida Rolf. Ida Rolf Rolfed my mother, fixed her fallen arches. My mother said, "This is really good stuff. You should try this. Here's the money for the first session. Ida was looking for a model because she had pulled in an auditor, whom she had heard had gone home and started practicing. So she hauled this guy back in for more training. If he was going to work at least she was going to train him right. It was cheaper, I signed up! She would be training him and they'd talk about my body, didn't make any sense to me, but I'd think "This woman sees where all the bones are in my body, this is really something. And then he would work and towards the end, sort of to prove to him, that he didn't know what he was doing, yet, she would push him out of the way and she'd finish the session.

Two things happened for me in that. One was this feeling like I knew I was supposed to feel like this! (Even though I had never really thought about it before.) And the other part of it was just, "What's this lady seeing?" Also just because I had never met an old woman like her before; with her drive, with her way she was articulating anyway, I came out of this experience, not thinking that I wanted to Rolf, I couldn't imagine doing that to people, but I had been feeling like I was learning T'ai Chi. I was learning massage. The things I was learning at Esalen, they were going to move into something that had to do with working with movement, working with humans. And I thought, "I want to be able to see like she sees." I didn't realize that my strategy was perfect. If I'd just said,

"Would you train me as a Rolfer?" I'm sure she would have said, "Go grow up for a few years." But I said, "Well, I don't want to be a Rolfer, I want to learn how to see like you do. Can I?" I didn't know about auditing! I didn't even know you were supposed to do that. So she said, "Sure, take the training." In the training by the time I learned the theory and watched all the changes then that's all I wanted to do. I asked and she said, "No." But Peter Melchior said, "Just keep hanging out!", you know. So I didn't exactly walk away. I kinda just made it known that I still wanted to train.

BH: I assume she said no because you were a skinny little girl.

GSO: Yeah and she had this thing you had to be a hundred and forty pounds. And she was looking for, you know, forty-eight year old psychiatrists, successful in the world. Somebody to add credibility to her work. She wasn't looking for twenty year-old hippies, you know, so ... so anyway, I just sort of hung around for awhile and then she asked me if would come over and clean her refrigerator.

BH: My, my ... (chuckle)

GSO: Okay, fine ... (chuckles) So I went over. Rosemary Feitis was there being her secretary, they were working, I cleaned her refrigerator and they asked me to join them for lunch. I ate lunch with them and she asked me some things about myself. I think actually she was ... think she'd decided finally, that I wasn't very impressive but my father was. My father, Huston Smith, had a name that would add credibility and I think she felt that, at least I wasn't going to hurt anybody and who knows, maybe she needed to fill up her class. But in any case, by the end of lunch, I was in the class.

AN: Hey ... !

GSO: So, I took birth control pills to put on fifteen pounds. And went through the training - terrified the whole way. Just terrified. And then, you know, I really feel like it took me ten years to get the competency Rolfer's have after a year of practice. I had to grow up and put a lot of other

things in place and so, I feel that, in terms of coming into teaching, I really came the way of having no confidence, really being scared, and, I think that's really much affected how I see trainings, some of where my urge to teach comes from. You know, Ida Rolf was brilliant and inspiring and not real empowering. She was like Thomas Edison with the light bulb. We weren't asking for empowerment. We were fascinated by the miracle. In some ways Rolfing is an everyday occurrence now like electricity. It wasn't like that then. For the rest of us it was an unknown. It's just interesting to hear this huge issue around empowerment now. People were not empowered when they studied with her. They didn't come out confident. And there was no place you could ever arrive. Ida Rolf could Rolf.

AN: Do you have any thoughts, this may be going in a funny direction but when you were talking in the forum about, you know seeing that so many Rolfers feel inadequate. And that's certainly my experience talking to other people. That that's like the dark secret that everybody feels and that it's a good day if you don't feel it. It's terrible about your work. Do you have any thoughts what's behind that? We weren't trained by Ida and I don't think our teachers made any effort to disempower us, so.

GSO: Well, my current thought watching my students now in training is that it's the way we lay out the goals. This is just, I don't know it's sort of a little off the top of my head, it's my latest. It's that we lay out these ideas, these goals for the sessions and we talk as if you arrive at some place at the end of Ten, where everything is just perfectly in order. It's like every anterior fiber in the body is in the anterior compartment. And every exterior ... (chuckles) and I don't know a way around it. I've looked at it and I said, well you know, I have to talk this way. If I just said well, you kind of do this and kind of do that, it wouldn't really be good for that sense of ... If I were to be a shaman and I wanted to get a cripple to walk I'm going to say, "Get up and walk!" I'm not going to say, "Well let's see if you can kind of try to maybe get out of your chair," You know? So there's no question that you have to be really specific with the language. But on the other hand, I think that there's a lie in it. The truth is, that you have conversation with tissue. And somewhere in that conversation you suggest an option that the tissue may take. And you leave the work not having completed those goals? You left it having offered a suggestion and walked off. Having worked with bodies over a long period of time and having bodies come back to me that I've worked on, I see that many of those options get chosen by the body, but it's not like you feel them. You don't feel and see that completion in one session.

AN: Under your fingers.

GSO: Under your fingers at that moment. You know. And I think that somehow, I think that's part of the problem. That isn't conveyed.

AN: Hmm hmn.

GSO: I had a dream while I was teaching this class. And in this dream I sort of came to the surface during my dream. And I had been pontificating for half the night, on how to slice bread. I think this is the other part about Rolfing. Rolfing is very simple at a certain level. It's extremely simple. But we tend to ... as I was waking up I said, "It's really very simple, you don't have to carry on and on about it. But this is the other happens, we figured out more and more complex ways to slice up the bread and you know, to make new puzzles and make new models and we get excited by this, when we have a handle on the work ...

BH: Right.

GSO: But then we want to give all this to new students and I think it's easy for them, the students to go, "Oh my god!" you know, the tibias internal and the fibulas external, and then there's conflict at the knee, and the femur goes one way and the muscles go the other way and before you know it, it's like, "Oh my god, I've got to change all of this in the fourth hour?"

AN: That makes a lot of sense and people will be really happy to hear that their not weird. You know? That that's what happens when you've got an ideal goal. But it's a goal like the North Star, directs you. It's not like you're supposed to get to the North Star.

GSO: Exactly! That's a great way to put it.

AN: Yeah, yeah.

GSO: Put that down!

AN: You can say she said it!

GSO: I think that that's part of it. That we all carry into our work, longings. You know we choose this work having these longings that...I don't know, partly when they're most dangerous is when we don't recognize them, and they have to do with fairly glorified idea of healing people, and changing the planet, and being met with the kind of profundity that we feel is potential. And I think that's another piece of how we end up feeling inadequate too. So we have this background of unrecognized motivating factors—driving us and leaving us unfulfilled. And what I I've been personally coming up against lately, to a certain extent is the feeling that I do get fulfilled doing my work. I do meet people at a level that is satisfying for me, up to

a certain point. And then I started to realize, that it's only within that format of work that I allow myself and other people allow me, to meet the way I want to meet. It starts to be a very funny road to travel there; where you have that sense of profundity and that sense of touch and it comes only in that work environment. Then you go to a party and ...

AN: Right.

GSO: And you know, you have no idea how to meet people. That kind of disparity is for me a feeling that my work is wonderful and I love it for those levels and I have to stop asking so much from work, from that vehicle. It is like it's time for me to start to find that satisfaction through vehicles other than the one where I get paid.

AN: Hmn, that's interesting.

BH: Yeah. (pause) I'm in the same place exactly. Interesting.

GSO: Hmn, yeah,

BH: You're forty?

GSO: Forty-four.

BH: Forty-four.

GSO: Hmm hmn.

BH: This doesn't need to be on the tape, but the idea to me, as I look at my life there was a ten year stretch of my life where I was a scholar and I was running off to do research and I was just desperately unhappy all that time. The idea that I might of somehow been exposed to Rolfing at a critical moment, it just blows me away. It just blows me away that you've been Rolfing since, you know ...

GSO: Since I was twenty-one.

BH: Yeah, it's completely mind-boggling.

GSO: It's been a great stable point in my life. While I went through divorces and all these other life changes. Yeah, yeah, I have a nineteen-year old daughter now. I'm watching her dealing with that sense of what's life about, what do I do, I also have to say that I was so scared, you know? I really was so scared and crying all the time and yet I just did it.

BH: So were you a movement teacher before you were a Rolfer?

GSO: Rolfer.

BH: You were a Rolfer and,

GSO: And Judith Aston was in my class. She was practicing. And Ida Rolf said to Judith, "I don't understand movement. You develop the movement." and then she said to me, "And you go study with her." So that's what happened.

BH: So...I don't know how many people know this history, so can you say more about ...

GSO: The history of the movement?

BH: Yeah the history of Judith and the history of Judith and Ida and how you fit in with that. Did you leave when Judith left? And ...

GSO: Right. Okay. So let's see, Judith continued to develop the movement. That was in the five year period when I went off and grew up, had a baby. So I was not real close. And then when I came back, and decided that I wanted to get back in track a little more, I took Judith's training, which had changed quite a bit in the five years and really liked it. Found it incredibly relieving that Judith was able to express the kind of ease and the joyfulness of the moving Rolf body. Before that, the idea of the Line was something pretty rigid. And people were really caught in this rigidity. Judith started to free people out of that with the work that she did. With that sense of not hanging on to your line at the price of comfort and joy, and moveability/mobility and she was also able to articulately layout how support works. Not just when you're standing, but when you're walking; dynamic balance, leverage and various things that were all in Ida's theory but it was being demonstrated and talked about in a way that I could get a handle on it and start to talk to other people about it. So I went into a second five year phase, training with Judith about once a year, taking the next step of her training. Towards the end of that five years I was starting to feel confident, in a certain way, this empowering issue is something that has been all the way along,...you couldn't arrive at a place of being a peer with Ida Rolf, neither could you arrive at being a peer with Judith. And when people started to show that independence, often they'd get cut off. Now what happened was that Judith was wanting to explore some of the concepts she was playing with. Which had to do with, I mean it sounds so funny it ran into so much trouble but some of it ha! to do with indirect touch, rather than direct. Some of it had to do with further explorations of letting go of the template of the line. She started to look very much at spirals in bodies and the comfort of spirals and the unwinding into spirals in order to come back out.

BH: So by now we're around 1978?

GSO: In any case, there started to be some contention that she was coming in with concepts that then students were kind of arguing with teachers. Judith was getting impatient, she wanted to change her training; it's a long arduous process to go through getting agreement from the faculty. It's a little bit similar to what Janie and Annie went through wanting to do what they were exploring. And then the faculty saying, "Wait a minute, wait a minute, we haven't agreed this is Rolfling. And we're going to have to take a two year process to figure this out."

BH: So at that point who would she be fighting with? I mean, it...

GSO: No it was the faculty. It was who was on the faculty at that time. It wasn't Ida. Ida hadn't been participating in faculty for a couple years before she died. So it wasn't about Judith and Ida fighting. It was about Judith wanting to explore things that she was tracking and the faculty saying, "Hold it! Slow down!"

BH: God, I'm stunned! Yeah

GSO: The faculty saying, "Wait. Wait. This is not what we agreed on for the curriculum. If you're going to do this you need to okay it through us." And there was a dynamic there where she was saying, "This is not the way to do it, this is the right way to do it, you know so she was sort of starting to gather around her that kind of ... It was very similar to the reflection of what happened during the movement wars that you remember, you know? Old way, new way, better way; which is the better way, who's in whose camp? So some of that energy was starting to come up and there was a sort of show down and Judith decided to leave. She demanded if you were going to work with her you had to leave the Institute. So what happened was she left shortly before she was to teach a lead-in class and the Institute called me up and asked if I wanted to teach it. I hadn't been in on any of these politics so I called up Judith, and I said, "I just got asked to teach the class you do and what's happening?" And she said, (basically she just responded out of some hurt) and just said, "Well, I don't think I'm your teacher and I don't ever think I've been your teacher and I got cut. And so that made my decision for me. Though I was also pretty clear that if it was going to come down to having to choose a camp I needed to be where I had more colleagues to talk to. I wanted to still learn from her, but I wanted to start to express my own work, in my own way and I didn't want to throw it out the window every time I went to take another of her courses. This is getting too long and complicated. So, in any case, so I said yes I'd teach that course. I was terrified. Peter Melchior sort of talked me through it in a certain kind of way. Held my hand. I taught the first course

shortly after that. Roger Pierce, Heather Wing, myself, Megan James. We kind of pulled ourselves in and said we wanted to stay with the Institute, we wanted to see the movement stay in the Institute. It has a place, we want it to develop. We wanted to make a movement training. We don't want any head haunchos. So that's what started to happen and my memory is that was like in 1982. That, was happening so I think while all this was happening in 1981-82

AN: WOW!

BH: HUH.

AN: That was right close, I had no idea that was all right before anything had happened.

GSO: Yeah

BH: Yeah. So um, I don't know if this is too charged to talk about and I don't need to talk about it. But what's your assessment through the years, you know, in this decade, that happened since then...on the sort of continuing stepchild status of the movement work and the fact that it's never gotten proper respect, I would say, from the outside, that it hasn't gotten proper respect because it hasn't given us a language that we can talk in. A verbal language that we can talk in. So you have to either have experienced it directly, in a profound way. And if you've missed the profound way ...

GSO: You don't know what you're going to get.

BH & AN: Right. Let me turn the tape over. Okay.

GSO: The struggles that come up in the Institute are very much just a reflection of what's going on in the culture. And to a certain extent the travails of the movement work have been very similar. Basically what I'm saying is that people would much rather pay their money and plunk their body down and say to somebody else, "Fix me!" just to have their state altered for them? They may not even know what has happened to them, but they know they got their money's worth. Okay?! This is a saleable item in our culture. What's less saleable is to say, "You know, you can fix that problem in your hip or your shoulder. It's going to require five minutes of your attention every day to do this exercise that's not too interesting for you. It doesn't change your state of consciousness, and on top of that you've got to be aware of what you're doing when you sit in front of your computer. This is less saleable. And the experience of training just movement teachers is that people could be passionate about their work, but what they found in their world is that their work was not as saleable an item, which was very demoralizing. I feel that there's been a certain maturity that's happened in our

culture in the last ten years which is helping the movement work, come along. People are far more interested in taking care of themselves at an essential level, and that helps, but you're still in a more powerful position in terms of having a profession if you've got both modalities. So I feel really patient about this stuff now. I've hit many brick walls and many frustrations. For example, when Roger pierce left the Institute to do what I wanted to do in the Institute, put the movement training in with the Roling. I've just had this thing that is sort of my mission to hang in there and make it happen, even if it takes my life time. And it seems like it is.

BH: Well it is.

AN: This may be a silly question but sometimes I get the impression that there is movement work in the Institute that Jane and Vivian always seem to be together and teaching together and doing something. And then my experience with you from the advanced class that I took where your movement work seemed to be relating to my work as a Rolfer, in a way that their work, from my experience in the Phase One class didn't. I mean, in your perception is there a movement work?

GSO: Right. Well, you know, ultimately, what it comes down to for me is that there isn't a separation between Roling and movement work. They always have been, have always belonged together. The Pilot Project is fairly successful in terms of teaching them together somewhat. But it's a strange thing to watch students in Roling classes learn so quickly, how to work with fascia and tissue. I see them geometrically progress over the weekend, in terms of their skill with that. Not so with how you put in into words, how do you evoke it out of somebody. How do you pick the moment and the thing to say that really transforms the pattern? It's a whole different skill and seems to need to be taught somewhat separately. I've tried many, many times to fold it in. And I run around and show people a new way to release an abductor, or something and they get it (snap), like that. I run around at this session and put the one thing in for the client that makes this transform how they walk so that they can walk with it ... students don't learn that from me. I don't know why. I don't quite know what it is that makes it something that you can just pick up and run with it. I think it has to do with ... I don't know.

BH: It has to do with seeing at a much deeper level. It has to do with seeing the person somehow.

GSO: And how they're put together and the pattern and ... what's the one thing you can say? And you can't make it a recipe because it has to relate to what's the one thing that that person is interested in.

BH: And that's the technique, I mean you can't teach life in a sense.

GSO: Yeah in a sense we've got Jan saying, "I do talk structure and mechanics, but I don't believe the person is a soft machine, there's a whole person there." Well, the movement work is about the whole person there. And it's very hard to break it down in terms of the structure of it. I think Jane and Viv are doing an incredible job. And I just taught the first two phases of their movement training as it came through me and Heather in Brazil, and it is a leading edge of our work. It's like changing somebody's computer program. It's like you fumble around. And you talk to them and they talk to you and you create a focus and you give them leeway and you backoff and all of a sudden you just see something change. It just goes through the whole system. And the look in their eye changes, the way they move, the foot changes, the way they walk across the room changes, where their voice comes from changes, the whole thing just changes like that. And it's powerful—really powerful! But it's not so easy to teach in steps, and you have to be willing to kinda ... I think we're in the process with movement, like Ida said, she worked for forty years and then the recipe came. And that's where we are. We're in our twentieth year, you know, we're workin' and it's working, but that thing where it comes crystal clear and you can pass it on like a recipe...we're really struggling with it. But people are learning it. They're getting it.

BH: Yeah, yeah.

GSO: But it just doesn't come across with the clarity.

BH: Isn't this wonderful?!

AN: It sounds exciting!

GSO: I don't know what you're going to do with this!

BH: Well, what I'm going to do is type it up and then I'll edit, and then I'll send you the original version and my suggestions for editing, and then you'll decide what you want, and then it goes to Anna.

GSO: Yeah, okay. I'll tell you...this is what I want to put out, is that I feel we have a template for the body. A Roling template. It has to do with somebody standing there and how their body relates to gravity as they're standing. What I'm trying to get a hold of is my sense of the walking template. Because ultimately I don't feel you've got your Roling until you can walk with it. And I feel that once your walking with it, you've got it. I feel strongly that walking is the activity that puts us together. Once you know how to carry whatever happened in that Roling session into your walk, and you know what it is and you know how to

come back to it, then you've got it! That's when flat feet get arches and that's when you don't backslide. That's where you take the Roling session and you keep going forward. But I don't think we have a clear walking template in the Roling community in terms of our vision of that. We have something we've called the psoas walk and nobody even talks about it anymore because it was so frustrating to try to evoke. There are quite a few more steps before you get to the psoas walk. And the other thing, and this speaks to the complication in the movement work, is that what the walking template would look like expressed in you and expressed in me, would be qualities that are similar but, based on our mood, on our energy level, based on the proportions of our body, based all kinds of different things, it's just not going to look like the same thing walking across the room. So that's what I've been playing with. What is the template and then with the leeway that it will express itself very differently.

AN: Some people talk, the Europeans especially, I know I've heard economy of movement. Like their goal seems to be this thing "economy of movement" and I, that seems really different from "a quality of richness" or I don't know. Where do you sit on that? Like when you talk about the individual are you looking for economy or are you, is there something else you're looking for?

GSO: To a certain extent economy (structural efficiency certainly—a lack of conflict) but the other thing that you're looking for is that the walk should express where you are right now. So in other words, if you're trying to catch the bus you're walk is going to look one way. If you just came out of your meditation retreat you're walk is going to look another way. So self-expression is part of what has to fit into the walk purpose.

AN: Right.

BH: What else would you like to say in your forum?

GSO: I just wish there were some way to communicate how much spaciousness there is in the Institute. It may look like there's no room at the top, but there's room above the top.

AN: Great line!

GSO: And I don't know, the faculty tries to send out these letters to say this but it somehow comes across so dry and people still feel so talked down to. I feel this sense of frustration; how much we suffer for a feeling of not being in communication with each other. But I feel such a spaciousness in the Institute, ways the work could develop and go. And it may not show up in terms of being invited to come teach a basic class at the Institute, but I feel like anybody who's got the power to articulate some

vision of the work and figure out how it's of interest to other Rolfers; I really do feel there's space for it. Part of what's been so exciting to me in this last year is the feeling that there's training beyond the advanced training. There are ways for Rolfers to specialize. When I hear about those specialized programs, personally, I want to learn every one of them. I want to know more about visceral manipulation and how it fits into my Roling practice. I want to know more about what Peter Levine and Bill Smythe are doing and how it fits in. I want to know more about joint mobilization and how to fix things and all of that. It's not going to come from me. It's going to come from people who have really taken that and grabbed a hold of a piece of it and then, brought it back in here. I wish that people understood that better. There's that sense of not ever being invited and then being pissed off.

BH: Well, our talent has been squelched for so long that it's...

AN: A lot of people are ... I've talked to fifty people. I definitely got the sense that they all wanted to communicate and many of them have been thinking about really interesting things. Many of them have had experiences of trying to put something out and got very bad response ten years ago, and they haven't tried since then. People are still experiencing they put something out and no one

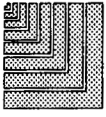
GSO: Signs up?

AN: Not only signs up but no one lets them know they did it. Like they send proposals and they don't get any response back because everybody is so busy. Some of that little stuff feeds into it, but more it just seems like it's from a long time ago. Like you said.

GSO: Yeah, well I'm subject to the same feelings. Like we'll have a faculty meeting and everything feels great and I think, "Finally, I'm not paranoid anymore!" And then I go off and it's six months before we get back and talk, if that. What happens in the meantime is that various decisions have to be made and they happen by phone calls and one-on-one and pretty soon I go, "Wait a minute! How come Jan talked to Michael, but Michael didn't talk to me? And how come this got decided and I didn't even get asked! And pretty soon I'm as paranoid as the next person and I feel like it's all a power trip over there. But when I come back for another faculty meeting I realize that it's not. The hardest thing about the Rolf Institute is that we're trying to maintain continuity when we're all spread out. Any other institution—the faculty lives in the same town, you meet once a month. We don't do it that way.

AN: No.

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Gael Switzer Ohlgren Interview

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GSO: Sort of like maintaining a long distance relationship, (chuckles) fifteen of them ! Fifteen of them at once!

BH: I'm stunned.

GSO: Done?

BH: Here. I'm just so pleased.

AN: Yeah, me too..

BH: I think everything you said gives a sense of you completely. And ...

AN: Quite a contrast to the other people we've interviewed, too.

GSO: Oh that's interesting.

BH: And what more can you ask for? That's the purpose of the interview.

GSO: Well, it's a little hard for me to be anything other than immediate. I feel that I'm reacting to the Annual Meeting forum that just happened and the women's forum and it's not necessarily what was on my mind yesterday. □