

# The Teachings of Anne Wilson Schaefer and Rolfing®

An Interview with Sharon Sklar

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by Bill Harvey

**M**any Rolfers may remember Anne Wilson Schaefer's keynote address during the 1988 Annual Meeting, the "fishbowl" meeting. Wilson Schaefer is a noted authority on addictive behaviors and the Living-in-Process model of emotional release. Sharon Sklar, 42, has been Rolfing since 1981 and studied with Anne for five years.

**BH:** Tell me about your training with Anne Wilson Schaefer. How has it affected your approach to Rolfing? Have you started doing counseling during your sessions?

**SS:** One of Anne's views which I've adopted and that I've found to really be true, is the belief that the body will innately heal itself. We as therapists, Rolfers, anyone who has that helper way of being, we don't need to steer someone to help. Basically, innately, people go towards what is healthy. It's like a rosebud that's tightly wrapped. When it hits the right components of sunlight and moisture and heat, it begins to unspiral. I believe that my work has taken on that quality, that if I provide the safe space, the arena of some hands-on to provoke, that people begin to unspiral and unwrap themselves. Because body/emotion/spiritual healing is not a verbal situation, I don't want people to talk. I want people to go inside and really begin to experience and come out from that experience. And talking is not what does that.

**BH:** How would it differ from what you did before? Presumably you weren't really that interested in idle chatting before you did the Wilson-Schaefer training.

**SS:** I was interested in my clients' processes because people's process has always been, for me, in the forefront of Rolfing. I used to say to my advanced teachers (Jan Sultan and Michael Salvesson) that I had this belief that something about Rolfing wasn't what we did with our hands. It was actually a time process of being with a committed person, like a guide. At some point in my training I had gone to workshops that said, "If the heels are pulled in and the feet are a certain way and the legs have a certain structure to them, you can bet this person was abused as a youngster. There are some fundamental things that didn't happen in their development."

When I started studying with Anne, I began to throw out all of those signals that I had learned, some of the things we were told to use as guide

posts, because it seemed disrespectful to people to second guess where they were coming from. Instead, I would allow them the space by touching them and allowing whatever comes up to come up. So people begin to speak a little bit more about their experience, or actually have more of their experience while they're on the table in terms of an unwinding process. That process could be anything from, "Wow, I just remembered something about my childhood" or (the client) beginning to cry and then coming out of a few seconds of crying and say, "this, this, and this happened."

What Anne Schaefer's work shows is that speaking to someone, or touching someone, changes their process. I might be working on someone's feet, not thinking, "Oh yes, look at the short heel," and then all of a sudden this person will say, "You know when I was young..." and then they'll go into this thing about how their father had done this, or uncle, or their mother or something like that. If they begin to say something, I stop working, because the minute you touch someone, or interfere with someone's process, that's just what you're doing. You're stopping their process. Now I certainly don't want someone flailing around on the table for an hour, I wouldn't call that

Rolfing, but I would call the emotional release, having to do with some physical manipulations, really their own inner process that I haven't led them to, I've just stayed out of their way.

I don't ask provoking questions really. I do chit chat with people a little bit and if they start on a track of something, I don't say, "Well stop talking and pay attention to your body," but I'll call them into their bodies a little bit more, like, "Why don't you take in a deep breath and feel that." And as soon as they get back into themselves instead of speaking, which brings them out of themselves, they begin to unspiral their process more. I've seen some really interesting things happen with people, of old memories coming up and getting triggered by touching a certain place. Then I'll take my hand away and all of a sudden, they'll go through all of these physical things, they'll speak a little or cry, and all of a sudden that shoulder is different. It's not so much me as a Rolfer making the manipulations but that person getting more in touch with "What was that?" "What was hiding in my shoulder?" And I would say that that's really different from what I used to do. I think years ago if somebody started in on some type of a process or began a few verbal thoughts about, "My brother hit me in the arm with a bat," I would continue to work and maybe ask them a little bit about it. I'd take it more into the verbal or get right into their body and Rolf that thing right out of there. But it's not what I do now. You could Rolf somebody until they're a jellyfish and if they're not willing to emotionally release what's holding them there, their shoulder will never get well.

**BH:** You said to me in a previous conversation that you have had the experience of having a physical

structure that was more evolved, this was my word not yours, than your emotional structure. How did that happen?

**SS:** I had been Rolfed a lot. I had first gotten Rolfed and then had a bad car accident and got another fifteen or twenty sessions to walk again, and

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then had advanced work, and then became a Rolfer and had more work so all of a sudden I had racked up around fifty Rolfing sessions. I realized that my body was working really well and was really clear, but I hadn't yet emotionally caught up to where I felt I was structurally. My structure was really sound. I went for an incredible amount of time without any body work, maybe three years. I didn't have any injuries, I didn't have any problems. But there was something that wasn't happening for me. It wasn't until I started tapping into some of my own process, my own emotional process, that I began to actually feel like my body and my being were together. I've worked with a lot of people who have done a

lot of psychotherapy and they say, "I want my body to catch up to where I know I am." And I had often thought of people needing to catch up if they've done their emotional work or their spiritual work. And then all of a sudden, Bang! I realized here I was walking around with a body that really wasn't a problem but there were some major, major things going on... a rage and an outrage of things in my life that were emotionally stuck in my body, even though my body felt very clear. I see it works both ways, that people have to catch up either way. That's why it's great to work with people who have been doing a lot of work on themselves. They can get more and more clear that they can go to a new level all the time.

**BH:** So, do you have a sense when somebody walks in the door they might be in that category of having a body that's beyond their emotional...

**SS:** I do, but that's not the important thing. It's not important what I feel. It's important that the person on the table begins to unite those two or three aspects of themselves. You know their physical, emotional, and let's say spiritual aspects. We think we know something and people just need to catch on to what it is that we know about them. For me to assume that I know more about that person than they know about themselves feels really wrong. I try not to hold myself as a person who knows. Each person comes in as whole as they can be. They begin to get Rolfed and experience the space from me accepting them for where they're at. Magic happens a lot of times. And I'm not thinking, "Was this early childhood trauma, or was this the divorce they were talking about two years ago?" It doesn't matter because people actually begin to unwind by doing very little work.

**BH:** Now when you say the term unwind, that means something quite specific to me in terms of tissue actually moving in a whirlpool, vortex pattern. Does it mean that to you?

**SS:** It means that as well as looking at the entire body, that all of a sudden, somebody will jiggle free from an old shoulder injury or their knee will begin to shift and in a larger context their whole body straightens. It's not just watching this tissue move so many degrees in one way, but it's that that whole piece fits into the bigger matrix. It's not real pinpointed. It's not real exact. It's all of a sudden that person gets off of the table and looks more whole. And as they begin to walk, they go, "Oh wow, my foot is hitting the ground in a really different way." And also what I've noticed is that if somebody goes through one of these cathartic experiences where all of a sudden their body has unwound they seem to hold onto the work a lot better than if I talk someone through it. It's like their being, their self, has released something.

**BH:** How are you using the word cathartic here?

**SS:** Well it's their own process. It's not something that I've done. I am not the catalyst. It's that all of a sudden in that time, and in that space, and in that moment, something has unlatched for them.

**BH:** You could also use the word discharged?

**SS:** Yes. I tried, when I took a workshop with Peter Levine and Bill Smythe, I tried to really pay attention to all the parasympathetic stuff that was happening, and notice the breathing, and notice the color of the skin and all that, and it didn't really seem to matter to me because that stuff happens anyway. And does it

really matter if I can track it? And then all of a sudden somebody says, "Aha, you know I really haven't been able to move this shoulder in years, now all of a sudden look" and what they did was really go deep inside themselves. I don't have to know what's going on, and I don't have to lead someone somewhere. And as I said before, I would never want somebody to just, all of a sudden an hour later emerge from the table and I haven't really done anything. I don't know that I'd think that that was Rolfing. I definitely do do tissue work, but what their experience is, is not important for me to know. They could be completely nonverbal in going through this process.

One thing I learned with Anne, is that the minute you start talking about an experience, the narration becomes the experience...that you're out of the experience. Years ago I remember, when somebody was going through this hard time we might touch them to show support, but that aborts the experience. Sometimes I'll take my hands away and let someone do what they were doing, and that leads them into a new place. I've seen when I worked with people through that Wilson-Schaefer network, that sometimes it's as though their body knows what it needs to do and I'm almost in the way. I think it's really neat to see that you can have the inner process and the manipulation together and just because someone fixes a neck doesn't mean the neck has resolved. I think if the person isn't emotionally resolved, that the neck is never going to really stay. To me it's really exciting because my work with Anne was about letting people go and bringing that into a Rolfing room. Allowing people to go, and with my hands being with them. This is really different from saying, "In this session we're going to do this, this, and this," and lead them to where I'd like to see

them at the end of the session. It's really about giving them the steering wheel.

**BH:** Just out of curiosity, Anne is not a body worker so, what would a session with her look like outside the context of body work, if talking gets in the way of feeling the feeling, if narration removes one from the experience?

**SS:** A lot of times, Anne's work is done in a group. There might be a group of people sitting around, and all of a sudden somebody begins to relate to something that has happened in their life. If somebody sitting across the room gets triggered by something that was said, that person would stand up, go over to a mat and lie there. And that person would be accompanied by a facilitator. The facilitator's job would be to make sure that if this person begins to thrash, or kick, or punch, that there are the appropriate pillows, or safety stuff around, and to be there to support whatever it is that they're going through. And if they need Kleenex, give 'em Kleenex, if they need to get up and go to the bathroom while they're still in this process, to make sure that the person is able to get to the bathroom safely, without really trying to break the train of thought. A person's process can always be put on hold for a while, so that their body functions can be taken care of. So the facilitator is not there to lead anything. The facilitator is there to respectfully sit there, observe and make sure that person stays safe.

How does it look? It looks like a bunch of people thrashing around. Sometimes it could look like twenty people on mats screaming and sometimes it could look like a somebody buried inside a bunch of pillows kicking, and then screaming or doing something. At first when I walked

into this training, I thought, "My God, this is like hysteria, there's no control here" and truthfully to the outsider, it looks like there's no control. Even the person going through the process is not in control...you don't sit there and say, "Now I'm going to cry" or "Now I'm going to stop crying" or "Now I'm going to kick." The control is taken away, and my experience when I've been in this work myself, is to go deeply, deeply, deeply within that vortex and allow whatever needs to come out to come out. When I tapped into some rage I had, something in my own life—I was raped years ago so I had done a lot of verbal therapy about it. I had done a lot of experiential stuff about it, I'd gone through rape counseling, I'd done the E.S.T. training, I'd done the Forum, all these layers and layers of stuff kept coming off but it wasn't until I tapped in to how really pissed I was, that it took probably five people holding up mattresses in front of me and me ramming into the mattresses and screaming and kicking and pounding to really get out the rage that I felt on a cellular level. It was an amazing experience. And no one said to me, "Now we're going to do rage work." It came up because someone in the group said something, and all of a sudden my brain began to unspiral in a certain way and I started to get pissed. I didn't even know what I was pissed about. I was clenching my teeth and holding my fist and about ready to kick someone's ass in and I realized I better get to a mat. And a lot of the times when something like that would have happened to me before, I would have said something either really stupid, or really pissy to somebody, and then I would have covered it over with a little humor, and I would have tried to get up and get out of the room. I might of stepped on someone and they would have maybe retracted and I would

have gone, "Well serves you right for being in the way, hah, hah, hah." And then I would have trounced around being pissed. Instead I respectfully removed myself from the group, put myself down on a mat and went wild. Feeling as though I wasn't losing control, I think there's a

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difference between having control and losing control. There's a lot of gradations there but that I allowed something deeper than my conscious mind to take over. So when all that stuff happened, I never knew that I was strong enough to have five people holding me back from going through a wall but that was the stuff that was really stopping me from going forward. And I think all the Roling in the world had not touched that.

When I first really experienced all this stuff and then Anne asked me to do body work in the sessions with people, I was scared because I really didn't know how I could integrate putting my hands on someone's body and allowing them to respectfully be

in their process. My contract with people before we'd start was, "You know you're here to get some information about your body and if something comes up, you have some choices. We can allow that process to happen during the session or you can begin to take that information, put it on hold until we're done, and then you can go off and let that information go, unravel, go into process about it." Because I think it's very expensive to pay for a Roling session and lie there kicking and screaming. Most people had that sophistication to be able to say "Aha, this is something, and you know what, I'll put a little reserve sign on here and I'll come back to it after the session." And I know that that's really what Dr. Rolf was talking about, that people would let go of what they needed to let go of when the time was right. I don't think that any of us as Rolfers were trained to really allow someone to keep doing that for an hour on the table. We would put a hand on them, bring them back to the present, give them more information, and let them take care of that between sessions. But this gave me a lot more freedom to give people the choice. And the training for me allowed me to step back and say, I was in awe of the human spirit, and people really know what they need to do.

**BH:** If someone were to call out of the blue, without the background of Anne Wilson-Schaefer but with the knowledge of Roling and with a certain expectation that their posture is going to improve, or they're going to have chronic pain somewhat managed, how do you prep them for the Sharon Sklar experience?

**SS:** I do a consultation with people before we get started. I do a full hour, hour and a quarter consultation to find out medical history, emotional history, I ask them to tell me what-

ever they think is important. I ask them a series of lifestyle questions because I want to make sure that someone is going to get as much as they need. If somebody comes home from work every night and drinks a six pack of beer then lies there eating Snickers bars, that's not someone I really want to work with. I want to work with people who are engaged in their own process, and not trying to drink it away, or negate it in some way. If someone came in and had all these expectations, I would need to remind them that, yes, Roling can allow you to find new places in yourself, but the expectations of managing chronic pain and things like that are really up to them. I can physically do manipulations with people but I never claim the responsibility of getting people well. I've seen a lot of people have the right *body work*, but they haven't gotten well because they haven't gone into their depths to get rid of some of the stuff that's clogging the way. I need to address with people in the consultation the idea that expectations can be detrimental. If you put ten people in a room and they talked about their Roling experiences, probably nine, if not ten, would talk about the fact that a lot of their pain went away. Not everyone that comes in can really look to that; that they have to be really aware of their own inner process. They're the ones who make the changes within themselves. It's not about what I "do." I'm there to be committed to that person, I'll do my best to help them in any way, but they innately need to heal themselves. It's not about me putting C3 back in. C3 will go in because I have some of the concepts of how to work that, but whether it stays in is up to their experience and their own inner process. Is that different from how you work?

**BH:** Sometimes yes, sometimes no. I would conclude that there is a lot

more "doing" in my sessions than there are in your sessions; I could be wrong.

**SS:** I do an hour's worth of body work with people. I'm a classic Rolfer. In the first session, we work to release the shoulder girdle and open

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up the breathing, and touch into the hips and the hamstrings to lengthen out the back. Second session, legs and feet and working on sitting, a lot of movement work. So it's classic in that regard, it's not a free for all, but within the context of that session, there's a lot of space for people to release something that's been buried. It's almost like if you take a plunger and you keep plunging everything down, one day all that stuff that's been stuffed down is going to blow up and you're going to get all this crap all over the place. That's what we're trained to do in this society. Every time somebody says "Oh not now," or "Please don't talk about that now" or "Be quiet," or "You don't really feel that way." It's "Oh, okay, they know better than I do. I should

really be quiet now," or "I should do this." All the 'shoulds' plug us up, and then all of a sudden one day, bingo, it all comes out. And I think what I do is keep that overview in my room to allow people to unplug that. I am a real classic Rolfer that then allows people to unplug.

**BH:** What do you think is important for new Roling training students to know about this domain? Anything other than your basic, belief system you've stated, empowering the client, having the client assume his or her responsibility...

**SS:** I believe that we have to learn a lot about just that: allowing people to have their own inner process. A lot of Rolfers are learning about manipulation and ways to release tissue as if they're the ones who are really doing it. We need to realize that yes, we have a direct interaction that we create by putting our hands on, but once we get that started, it is respectful of the person to step back and see that it's their job to be the one to release things. Anytime we put our hands on and do anything with pressure or manipulation or direction, we need to realize that we have to be humble; we don't fix people. People fix themselves. We can learn the tools of manipulation but we also have to learn how to step back and allow someone to unspiral themselves. For me, years ago, exploring movement work was really important in seeing the emotions that get locked into the body. I kept thinking, "If I do this, this, and this to this shoulder or this elbow, that person will get well." I began to see that some of these people with chronic tendinitis, they insist on continuing to do what they do. They're not getting well. That doesn't mean that I'm not a good Rolfer, it means that they're not really ready to take the steps to say, "Okay, I have to change my lifestyle." We can advise people, but we can't make

them do it. For years I received excellent, Rolfing. But until I was able to allow myself to unwind from the inside, I had a structure that I really didn't live in. Now when something happens, I feel it in my gut. I live more truthfully to my own perception of my body. We have to help our clients to be aware of their own perceptions of their own bodies.

I credit a lot of the people who have Rolfed me with doing great work. Until several months ago, I was running to Santa Fe to get Rolfed by Jan whenever I had a fall or something because he's a real master. I realized I had to do a lot of my own work to process his work. There's a whole arena that new Rolfers have to learn that's not just about what do you do with your hands. It's very exciting to me, I wish there was some way I could put this in a box and say, "Here, here's something for everyone." But I think a lot of this experience has to come from just experiencing it. If someone had said to me that day, "You looked really pissed," I don't know if I would have really tapped into that rage. It wasn't anything that anybody said, it was really feeling that gut feeling of "Holy shit, I feel like I'm going to tear the head off a chicken right now." Feeling my fingers clenching up, my jaw getting tight, acknowledging that, and taking the time and the space to lie down and let that happen. In life, we get so busy, we don't allow those things to happen, to stretch out on the bed and say I'm going to be here for an hour, and see what shows up. I've been guilty for not allowing myself to have that unstructured time to be with myself in a way that allows things to happen.

**BH:** You are amazingly articulate. I am enriched by your experiences.

**SS:** I'm still really formulating this for myself. □