

Rolfing® Ruminations

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As Rolfers, we struggle to explain what it is we do. There is an intricacy and complexity to the experience of our work that is richer than we can say.

I find that the most fruitful discussions are the ones in which I am actively engaged in trying to bring forth from that complexity a description of the work we do. This then is my effort to contribute to that discussion, a personal essay where I can ruminate about the experience of Rolfing.

“WHAT IS ROLFING”

On one of the first days of my training, Tom Wing wrote this question on the chalkboard, without a question mark, making it both a question and a statement.

“OK, what is Rolfing?” he asked. He seemed at first to be directing the question to us and then realized he needed to turn it toward himself. He paused for a few moments. Perhaps his daimon or muse would offer some insight. He finally said, “Well, let me start to say what Rolfing is by saying what it is not.”

WHAT IS IT THAT TOM KNEW BUT COULD NOT SAY?

We all know what Rolfing is. As was the case for Tom, it is obvious to us when something is not it. Tom did go on to state that Rolfing is not definable by its techniques. Our individual

styles of touch do not define the work. There is a unique feel to the experience of receiving Rolfing, but it goes deeper than the individual style of a particular practitioner. (And that crosses into other modalities. I remember reading about Peter Schwind’s experience of receiving work from Jean-Pierre Barral at the discussion on the core. He came out of the session feeling as “on the line” as after any Rolfing session.)

When I think about the times I have had work that has taken me apart versus work that has felt integrating the difference has had little to do with the style of the work done. With the work that has been integrating, there has always been a certain kind of patience and curiosity within the work, and, in particular, a curiosity about my form or shape. In contrast, when someone has just tried to put something somewhere else without being curious, the touch has lacked a certain intelligence and I end up feeling at minimum rearranged and at worst mauled.

This is not new information to any of us. We have all had experiences like this and occasionally wonder about the odd fact that there is a certain as yet unsayable link between the diverse styles of Rolfing Practitioners that makes what we all do something we can comfortably call “Rolfing.” Sometimes, an individual will push the envelope of the discussion further and attempt to articulate what this vague but complex quality is that

links all of our work (an example of this later). Individually, we are each trying to educate ourselves about this complex yet vague reality of attempting to improve structure. It is what we do in every session and series. We are trying to bring forth from the intricacy of a person’s physical reality something organized and knowable. As Rolfers, we are inquirers, systematically exploring the structure of physical effort. Whenever we touch, we have in the back of our mind or under the skin of our hands the question, (How) Is what I am doing improving the structural integrity of this person?

You may wonder, How can something be vague and more complex and unsayable all at the same time? Ignoring the pun, this is a complex question. In “Thinking Beyond Patterns: Body, Language, and Situations,” Eugene Gendlin discusses this phenomena beautifully. It is what occurs when a poet waves her pencil in the air waiting for the next line to come; she knows this next line will end the sonnet but she cannot quite say it yet. Our struggle to define Rolfing is a similar phenomenon. Like Tom Wing talking to my class, when we really bring ourselves to try and say what Rolfing is, we often fall silent. It is a silence that we feel bodily, that is both vague and more precise than what can be said with old, known phrases. Nature and our experience of it are inherently more complex than our sayings about it. As Gendlin says it is “vague yet im-

plied." What we do with our language, bodies, and situations is work to bring forth from that complexity a sayable, knowable pattern.

The poet looking for the next line, Rolfers trying to define what Rolfiging is, the act of Rolfiging itself — each is in part defined by an effort to bring forth a knowable pattern from something that is vague yet implied. In Rolfiging, we strive to have a sense of the whole, organic pattern that shapes a person. Rolfiging describes bodies in terms of how they work to maintain their shape and it acknowledges that different bodies get around in gravity exerting themselves along different planes of strain and effort. We sense the complexity of being human in the unique yet familiar patterns of shape and form we see every day.

Although as Rolfers we primarily focus on the physical aspect of shape, we have to be aware of the temporal aspect of shape, as well. In order to inquire into these forces that give form to the body, we have to acknowledge that the body is a living monument to its life experiences, a record of its and its family's history. The structural patterns within the body's tissues are the living fossils of previous actions and events. We are quite literally shaped by our history. Often, that history which shapes and still lives in our flesh extends into our ancestry. As Jan Sultan put it (over cyberspace) "Rolfiging is the only system around that even tries to get plasticity into that level of our ancestral matrix so that new choices can be negotiated . . . those that the grandparents could never even have conceived of."

In other words, when we touch the flesh, we are reaching into and contacting a person's past. We are able to experience a constellation of historical experience that is

pulsatingly alive in the present moment, in the tissue of our client. When we expand our sensing to include this larger temporal field that lies in and around a person, we engage a greater totality of the person, and therefore we are more likely to integrate more of that person when we work.

When we perceive broadly and deeply, we can sense how the fabric of a person may be caught both in space and time. They have experiences that are still unresolved somewhere within and some when in the past. In another work, *Personality Change*, Gendlin describes people as having "unfinished business," feelings that have not, for various reasons, been truly experienced completely, and that finishing this business is necessary for achieving a higher degree of personal balance and integration. This is not a unique perspective. Peter Levine's work is quite explicit about this. According to his model, trauma occurs when a person does not use up all the energy that has been mobilized to deal with a particular situation; there is residue left in the body of an uncompleted, unexpressed effort from a particular temporal event.

The therapist's job, then, is to create the necessary space within which the client can explore and renegotiate his unfinished experiences. For the client to be more truly himself, he relies on the therapist's support and assistance to the extent that his efforts have failed to carry his feelings forward. Any integrating system must manage these incompleting experiences of the client; one approach may focus more on issues caught in time (e.g. psychotherapy), another with issues caught in space, the physical field of the client's body (e.g. Rolfiging). And, in the end, the two cannot be separated from each other. All good therapy does the same thing: it brings a

person more and more into the present moment, where genuine transformation can occur.

The Rolfiging recipe plays an essential role here. It helps us to continue to be curious about the complex patterns inherent within a person. More than just a map, the recipe creates a context for each of us, on our own, to continue to inquire about this living form of a person and the structural changes we see and feel while we work. So when I get to a fourth hour, for example, I look at my client trying to understand what needs to change next and I see, "Hey, look at those legs right up into the pelvis. Those look twisted and short. And what a coincidence, that's the territory of the fourth hour. Now how did the work before prepare me for this thing that I am seeing now, which obviously has to happen next?" The recipe is a suggestive teacher. It helps us, including many of us who never even trained with Ida, to inquire into the various aspects of form, structure, and embodiment while we work.

Rolfiging occurs when we are consciously curious about the shape or structure of our clients when we look and touch. The recipe encourages us to ask these questions, to be curious. Just as a human being has a shape or form, so does Rolfiging. And like human beings, the form of Rolfiging occurs as an activity; it is not something static or inanimate but alive and effort-full. In creating the 10 session series, Dr. Rolf brought forth from the complex reality of human form and structure something sayable and knowable. We should utilize the recipe not because of some blind sense of tradition but because it has a depth of vision about profoundly difficult and important questions about being human - What is the form of being this person? Where is his potential? How can he change?

Like anything else, when we get lazy with the recipe, both it and our work lose their utility and vitality. We are more likely to just do some fancy myofascial release work (and very powerful and potentially overwhelming releases at that); pushing this, softening that but not working to have a sense of the whole. Jeff Maitland's points about differentiating between principles, strategies, and techniques is very helpful here in making intelligent use of the recipe.

Rolfing, then, uses a tactile approach ("what we can get our hands on") to bring forth into the present space and time the complex and often incomplete patterns that shape a body. Rolfing itself is always evolving in this way. One excellent example of this is Jan Sultan's internal/external model. In a sense, Jan's model "Rolfed Rolfing" because it brought out of the complex experience of what we do a clearer description of it. The internal/external model brought Rolfing to a higher level of organization; it articulated in more detail what the recipe was after and also added to the inquiry of each individual Rolfer.

The internal/external model clarified what many had been feeling here and there in their work, that certain bodies adapt in some ways and others adapt in, well, other ways. When I do my fourth hour, I am not just touching a leg that lies underneath a hip and a pelvis; I am touching a plane of effort, a neuromyofascial, circulatory, energetic plane of effort. And the internal/external model says that I can describe that plane. With Jan's help, when I touch this leg I now feel through it in a richer way. Does the strain go behind the trochanter and up the posterior hip or go the other way? Is it congruent through here or not? So a fourth hour is not just as simple or as abstract as getting horizontals below the pelvis or

lengthening the midline. The session becomes more complex and at the same time more concrete. The work becomes more rooted in the fleshy richness of physical reality, and the session becomes another intricate step in answering the question, Which way is this person wrapped in his effort to be a shaped, formed being?

People may have felt these particular planes of strain before but no one had organized that feeling into something sayable. And consequently, the work becomes organized at a higher level, more alive. All of a sudden, I can get more engaged with my client's self-organizing energy. I am able to be more present in my seeing, my touch and my work. My inquiry is more challenging and alive and therefore more on par with the person before me.

This shift that Jan created, his organizing something from the complexity of his work into something sayable and systematic, is a fundamental component of what our work is about: an active, tactile effort to bring forth a greater level of physical organization within our client. Rolfing requires us to ask, Where is this person active in his or her body? Where is the effort (or lack of effort) to hold this shape together? And we attempt to answer these questions by exploring the complex physical patterns within our client's body. The work occurs not when we answer these questions but in the act or effort of trying to answer them. Some of us say that Rolfing is not body work but somatic education. Jan's model captures this perfectly; it educated us, it brought forth (educare) from the intricacy of our experience something we can say and know.

As living beings, we are literally holding ourselves together all the time: that is the exertion of having a

form. In fact, it is the continual act and work of being a form that separates us from inanimate objects. Rolfing touches this natural, syntropic striving that we as physical beings are constantly engaged in. Work that does not take this into account — that simply tries to undo a restriction here or there or marches easily and thoughtlessly from one session of the recipe to the next — is not touching this shape giving quality and therefore is not Rolfing. To work from a third paradigm perspective is to be aware that you are entering a field of self-organizing energy, one that is simultaneously expressing its history of motion and at the same time working to manifest its next form of order and identity, to say in a richer way who and what it is. As Rolfers, we act as structural midwives, helping our clients manifest and own these complex patterns of shape that are waiting to feel and live. □