

Changing the Body and its Image

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Proponents of Structural Integration maintain that as a result of the introduction of specific stimuli¹ to neuromuscular structures certain changes can be brought about in these structures which move the total organism in the direction of better spatial relationship of bodily parts and better total adjustment to the gravity field. These proponents further hold that the balancing of muscle masses to improve the complementary cooperation of antagonistic (counterbalancing) groups in all planes of movement can be well begun, if not completely effected in a relatively short space of time. Deep-seated changes in the personality expression of many subjects have been consistently observed during and after ten hours of processing (five to ten weeks).

The specific stimuli are experienced as discrete physical sensations involving touch and pressure, often of great intensity. It is explained that as muscle masses are manipulated the function of muscle *vis-a-vis* connective tissue is altered. Muscles are freed to layer themselves in an easier arrangement, to assume their proper position and shape and to achieve a more efficient mechanical functioning spontaneously as the relationship to gravity improves.

Many independent observers are quick to point out that there are less painful ways to bring about changes in personality expression, ways which do not place great emphasis upon the adult physical body as a primary avenue for the reception of new information, or the re-stimulation of old information. In fact they do not hold the body responsible for any information at all, let alone for the establishment of new behav-

ior patterns. While they may agree that improvement of the physical condition could have important effects upon the personal style, emotional tone and energy level, they might attribute these changes to the motivation and / or suggestibility of the subject. Many would prefer cognitive techniques, involving intellectual discussion and analysis. Even those who grant that the three-dimensional body is an important *variable* in the total adult personality, and who prefer to work on the less rational level of feeling, still work with the body at greater distance — evoking motor expression by means of imagery, symbolism and suggestion in order to stimulate the process of self-awareness.

Dr. Rolf, while not denying the proven effectiveness of other ways of approach to the whole man, has merely asserted the unique importance of the body in personality development and change throughout the life span. She is attempting the most direct physical engagement with it, primarily and initially through sensory-receptive rather than through motor-expressive means. She, like many, has observed that the “body” quite often seems disengaged from the “mind” and instead of reinforcing this state of affairs has sought means for renewing vital connections between the various levels of functioning in man.

The method is educative in the broadest sense. It moves people from where they are to a new level of awareness. Since individuals begin on different levels, the results are not altogether uniform. It is safe to say that bodily awareness will be stimulated and improved in all cases, that the subject will probably gain a new respect for his body,

and that in most cases he will experience better emotional balance as a result of better physical balance. There is even some evidence in research that has been done, that intelligence can be improved by this physical means. It has even been observed that individuals with a high level of physical awareness, who are quite physically and mentally creative and active, are often surprised to find that they have been laboring under misconceptions about their bodies and the way they believed they “ought” to function. Dr. Rolf believes that in all cases it takes physical energy to stimulate physical awareness, and regardless of how “put together” the person is to begin with, the energy she applies can help bring about an even better state of integration.

The changes are not random. They proceed according to patterns implied by the structure of the body; they open the way for the individual to experience, perhaps for the first time consciously, the “normal” (or more nearly normal) position, relationship, balance point or movement. With certain habitual compensations removed, the more nearly normal position usually “feels funny.” It is a little like being naked, it is uncomfortable. And there is usually a great deal of discomfort and resistance until the new pattern actually proves itself to be easier, more efficient or less fatiguing.

While physical norms might seem easiest to agree upon theoretically, the Rolf school has encountered enormous resistance to the idea that the “norms” are best applied from outside of the individual energy system. The subject is unmistakably “manipulated.” The current vogue swings to the “client-centered” notion that the most meaningful norms are personal, inner, and individual, and the subject is encouraged to generate and activate his own personal physical style — evidence of his own personality and character structure. The Rolf technique poses several serious questions to these methods: How often will the individual choose to exaggerate his personal style at the cost of great physical and emotional energy? How will he become aware of “norms” as long as he resists the notion? How can he be shown the degree of his deviation when allowed, even encouraged to indulge himself in it? Are natural homeostatic mechanisms enough to bring him back to center? Judging from the technique itself, it would seem that the Rolf method is designed to make the person aware of his own resistance to change. It generally has

the effect of arresting him temporarily, in order to expose his deviation, and resistance, for what they are, mechanisms expensive of energy which the individual no longer has fully within his control. In abandoning his body to habitual attitudes (postures) the individual has reinforced his resistance to the natural forces of change. In "accepting himself" wholesale, he may actually be selling himself short. He makes what he calls an "adjustment to reality" for the time being which fails to pay him the simple dividends in increased vitality and well-being. It is fair then to ask: by what "reality" is he operating? Might he not be ignoring some important "norms" or laws?

The Rolf technique is based upon a number of observations and assumptions regarding the energy fields within and without the human being and the "normative" relationship of the individual personality or self to those fields. Some of these can be stated informally, as observations, assumptions and beliefs. For example:

1. Changes in the physical being of most people after the period of spontaneous physical growth are for the most part degenerative. This need not be the case.
2. A more nearly "normal" relationship in whole and in part of the bodily structure to the earth's gravitational field can promote a *regenerative* pattern of change.
3. In the healthy individual ("normal" as opposed to "average") the "bodily personality" is co-extensive with the "total personality." The separation of "body" and "mind" is a symptom of conflict based upon misconceptions. The self cannot be less than whole unless it insists upon denying parts of itself.
4. Since changes in the body are in effect changes in the total personality, and vice versa; and since beneficial changes are defined as those which enable the self to function more effectively in the total energy field, it is hypothesized that beneficial personality changes can be brought about by this method.

It seems to me that the Rolf method is largely based upon these kinds of assumptions and beliefs, which for the most part have gone unexamined — primarily because the method does produce change, because it does "work," and because those who have seen it work have not always been most interested in explaining *why* in the most definitive and concrete language.

Dr. Rolf admits that there is much that she does not know, so much so that she hopes that others will become interested enough to look for ways that will explain it more adequately. But explanations are cheaper than results, and any thoroughgoing analysis of this work must look both at the theory and at the practice, and resist the temptation to judge the one solely in terms of the other.

As for my part I see the need for a clearer, more explicit, statement of a theory of personality which would help to unify the material that has been presented so far. I would not pretend that that would be Dr. Rolf's theory, but it might still be valuable in that it might generate propositions that could be tested. If what I have written to this point is substantially a true representation of some of the issues raised by the practice of Structural Integration, then the following theory of personality dynamics may be consistent with it as well.

The individual's tendency to resist, and/or to accept change in the conditions immediately surrounding and within his life is related to deeply-seated survival needs; important among these is the need to sense some degree of control over that which changes, and that which stays the same in his experience. The self modulates the rate and kind of changes it can tolerate to achieve homeostasis, the optimum condition of balance.

Reality is never fully sensed by any one individual at any given time. While generally seeking to improve the quality of his partial reality, or to enlarge it, he is also capable of shutting out parts of it. This partial reality is presented to the awareness in the form of "images" which structure information to assist the self in establishing attitudes, and dispositions, and when necessary to initiate and justify activity based upon these orientations. These informative image-bits out of which the individual's reality is built up, fall into certain natural categories where they can be recalled to aid in higher stages of concept formation (language).

The self concept of the individual is the key to his personality structure; it is a regulating mechanism. In order for the self to change for the better, i.e., progressively, the self concept must be flexible and evolving. If the self-as-conceived cannot allow change within its own structure, the prospect of change will appear as a threat to survival, it will be interpreted as degenerative, and

it will be resisted.

The self concept draws upon image-bits, which represent the self to the self as he appears or appeared, or might appear in various situations throughout his lifetime. It can also be thought of as a "self-image" as long as the full complexity of that term is appreciated — not a single image, but many images sensed as a whole entity.

In early childhood when the self-concept or image is being formulated, and the structure of the personality is being built up, most of the information is coming through the body directly. As the body grows in stature and capacity, learning to handle itself in space, to express and direct the energy available to it, the self concept is strengthened and reinforced by the changes, which are taking place. However, as the personality matures, there is less physical experimentation; less information comes in directly physical ways, and more information comes in pre-structured code form, filtered through other individuals, institutions and media.

The relationship between the self-concept and the body concept which in effect, operate as one "bodily self-image" in childhood, seems to be altered in most individuals in later life. Self-awareness and bodily awareness are not synonymous to most adults. They have assigned specialized tasks to the "body" — mostly the automatic mechanical ones, and specialized tasks to the "mind" mostly the cognitive and communicative ones. Language becomes more exclusively a "mental" phenomenon. Poles of thinking and feeling are established with little connection between these two modes of processing information — with the result that behavior is often inconsistent. The person states one thing, and feels another, and communicates entirely another. Since the individual is no longer growing physically, his world stops expanding. "Growth" is a relative term for the adult; relatively little information is coming in, yet developments seem to take place within the "mental sphere" according to the need for continued stimulation and expansion. Old information is re-sifted, re-shuffled and re-structured, but the basic reality does not change much. This is "maturation" in the "average" person. Body plays ground to the figures of the mind. "Change" is only relative to the interplay between the two entities. I seriously question whether this illusory state of affairs is desirable, or for that matter, "normal."

Let us consider the bodily self-image of the growing child and the version of reality that it represents or maintains with relative stability in time. What if the information the child receives about himself is untested, incomplete, or false, due to some traumatic incident or injury that temporarily or permanently closed the avenues of reception? What if some fearful attitude superimposed from without, or some painful experience felt as a threat to survival affected a dulling of perception, a shutting down of impulses to and from the sensitive bodily area, and charged the area with an emotional energy barrier? What human being has not experienced the physical sensations of withdrawal, contraction, "withering" as the whole self shrinks from a present threat? And what human being has not seen himself reacting with the clear physical symptoms of fear or anger without "reasonable" cause in the *present* situation? In effect, the adult's world is, in these cases, being limited and controlled by the more limited person he once was, or felt himself to be. The bodily self-image is important in these considerations because an adequate self-concept is first and foremost a matter of bodily adequacy, of survivability, in the three-dimensional physical universe. The bodily self-awareness we experience as children, before the development of compensatory rational mechanisms, is an original, unitary mode of perceiving. This mode is gradually given up in favor of modes which offer more protection, and more control over the environment. The result is that the adult human being is in fact more physically secure (less vulnerable), more rational (less emotional), more in control (less victimized) than the growing child. He has stacked his images so as to render those gains over the child. However, when the child feels secure, he has a wholeness of perception about himself and the world that *the adult* cannot regain for all of his highly structured rational compensations. The "mature adult" (so-called) pays a great price for his maturity and his adulthood.

If these things are so, the question might well be asked: How can it be called to his attention that the "adjustments" he has made in achieving his present status are often compensations based upon childhood inadequacies that for various reasons could not be fully worked through or faced at that time. Especially with regard to the body and its ability to receive and transmit true and complete representations which serve as the basis for the whole self-concept, the adult

often finds it hard to believe that his body could change its shape, or its contours significantly, that it could move with greater freedom, with greater expressive options, or that the body could become a happier entity within him, more acceptable, easier to live with, more vital. Most people only become aware of their bodies when they are ailing. The whole physical side of experience becomes a burden from which they seek escape, either because the body is painful, or because it is limiting, dull, and monotonous.

The desire and consequent decision on the part of an adult to take his body with him through life, without attempting to drag it, prod it, or escape it is not an easy decision to make. It means being willing to re-stimulate and reactivate the whole historical self. It means being willing to look at present behavior patterns with an eye to changing them, if they should prove indeed to be compensations based upon faulty information. It means admitting that one has been wrong about oneself, dramatically. It means opening up channels of receptivity anew which may have been shut down by fear or pain. It often means dealing with fear and pain, not in the rational ways "adults" deal with such things, but in the uncomfortable, inarticulate ways in which children must attempt to deal with them. Children often fail, and stop trying. When this happens, the stage is set in later life for tragedy — unless that adult can become as a little child, accept the encouraging energy he needs to pick up where he left off and keep going. Because the child's self-concept is a changing, growing and flexible one, open because it has not *yet* been shut down, it is important that something akin to it be reaffirmed in the adult.

It is not preposterous to suggest that the child who failed to live might be resurrected. With the prospect of the whole healthy child fully alive within the whole healthy adult, there is a quickening of life, a freshness in the daily journey that no adult can afford to trade for any amount of bitter, disillusioned pride. □

NOTE

1. These stimuli and their method of application comprise the technique of Structural Integration (sometimes known as Postural Release or Structural Dynamics) developed over the last 40 years by Ida P. Rolf, Ph.D.