

# An Exploration of the Connection Between Traditional Osteopathy and Rolfing

By Steven L. Brown, Certified Rolfer™

I would like to use this article to discuss parallels between the philosophies of traditional osteopathy and Rolfing®, and how in my studies and practice they have influenced and informed each other.

The following well-known statements by Andrew Taylor Still, the creator of osteopathy, show fascia to be the basis of (or one of the most important components in) of osteopathy, giving it a common ground with Rolfing:

I know of no part of the body that equals the fascia as a hunting ground. I believe that more rich golden thought will appear to the mind's eye as the study of fascia is pursued than any other division of the body. One part is just as great and useful as any other in its place. No part can be dispensed with. But the fascia is the ground in which all causes of death do the destruction of life.

As this philosophy [osteopathy] has chosen the fascia as a foundation on which to stand, we hope the reader will chain his patience for a few minutes on the subject of fascia, and its relation to vitality. It stands before the philosopher as one of, if not the deepest living problems ever brought before the mind of man.

Still had other interesting comments on fascia – its universality in the body, and its relationship to function:

We write much of the universality of the fascia to impress the reader with the idea that this connecting substance must be free at all parts to receive and discharge all fluids. Thus a knowledge of the universal extent of the fascia is almost imperative, and is one of the greatest aids to the person who seeks the cause of disease.

When you deal with the fascia you deal and do business with the branch offices of the brain, and under the general corporation law, the same as the brain itself, and why not treat it with the same degree of respect?

I naturally wonder what A.T. Still would have thought of the philosophy of Ida P. Rolf, for not only do they both emphasize the importance of fascia, there are other similarities in their thinking. For example, consider these two statements:

Rolf said, "The human being is an energy pattern. A set of waves, a set of energy fields, which is the basic energy of the universe. Disease comes when the body's energy patterns go astray. Your job as a Rolfer is to understand which pattern gives good function."

Still said, "The Osteopath removes obstruction, lets the life giving current have full play, and the man is restored to good health."

It seems to me that Rolfing and traditional osteopathy share some of the same goals, although their primary objectives may differ. The primary objective of osteopathy seems to be to remove obstructions so that all fluids of the body can move and all channels are open to facilitate homeostasis. It is of prime importance that there should be no restrictions on the movement of blood, the nervous system, lymphatic fluids and fascia. Rolfing also accomplishes many of these primary osteopathic goals, albeit sometimes as a secondary effect or perhaps even unintentionally (as we do not profess to diagnose or treat pathologies, per se).

Rolfing's primary objective is to order the body around a vertical line with the awareness of that body's functionality in the gravity field. As Rolf said, "We

are a movement something, not a static something." In differentiating and integrating the fascial system, we certainly are having an effect on blood, the nervous system, lymph (to name a few elements) vis-à-vis the interconnectedness of the fascial system enveloping every blood vessel, every organ, nerves, bones, etc. This quality of fascia being everywhere in the body is why Certified Advanced Rolfer Louis Schultz called it "the endless web."

Due to this, we could speculate that fascial work, both osteopathic and Rolfing, has an effect on all systems of the body. Still went so far as to say "The soul of man with all the streams of pure living water seems to dwell in the fascia of the body." How far does our touch reach? I don't know. I do believe, however, in the importance of informed listening. To me, Rolfing is all about relationships. I'm aware that when, for example, I'm working on the psoas, there is a close relationship to the abdominal aorta, so I wonder how my work might indirectly effect the flow of blood. Or, if I work on the diaphragm, how might that effect respiration? I'm sure there are any number of systems that our work could influence through fascial structures, although this has not been part of the formal Rolfing inquiry.

Still says, "The Osteopath if he reasons at all finds that order and health are inseparable." He goes on to say, "My father was a progressive farmer and was always ready to lay aside an old plow if he could replace it with a better one constructed for his work. All through life I have been ever ready to buy a better plow."

I think Still would have seen Rolf's work in ordering the fascial system, while accounting for movement (on all levels) and the awareness of our relationship in gravity, as "a better plow." Certainly Rolf derived some of her inspiration from osteopathy, a field that considers the role of alignment and gravity. Perhaps part of Rolf's genius was the formulation of the Rolfing Ten Series as a physical reorganization experienced in the gravity field. This was not only revolutionary, but for the recipient an experience that has the potential to be evolutionary. As Rolfing Instructor Jan Sultan said, in Rolfing "we are dealing with the ancestral matrix" – creating potential for human transformation.

Learning more about osteopathy has been a worthy endeavor for me, deepening

my understanding and adding valuable elements to my Rolfing practice. For example, I recently received a treatment from an osteopath, and the majority of what he did after diagnosing various dysfunctions was basically two techniques, Muscle Energy (ME) and Facilitated Positional Release (FPR). Proficiency in those techniques requires (to start with) knowing the action of every muscle and knowing joint mechanics, most importantly spinal mechanics. With that basis, ME and FPR can be applied almost anywhere in the body. After receiving the Ten Series, this particular osteopath, Dr. Chmielewski, invited me to join his practice, because he sees osteopathy and Rolfing as natural partners. Incidentally, he doesn't like the name "osteopathy" because that connotes pathology of the bones. He prefers a term he coined, "Lever-opathy", meaning that he uses the bones as levers to facilitate structural change.

All the while I gather various resources and information, I remember that it is important to be aware that the way in which we have been conditioned to learn is not always applicable to the experience of Rolfing. Rolf would try to break the conditioning of academic abstraction by saying, "The map does not necessarily describe the territory. In Rolfing we are dealing with the experience of the body, not the way you think the body should be." So while I try to learn all that I can, I want to never forget that the experience (of Rolfing) is what matters. Ultimately, it is not a book that teaches us, it is through experience that we learn and grow. In this I relate my experience with Rolfing to my experience being a jazz pianist. I learn all the theory I can when I'm practicing, I learned all my chords and scales, but I'm not thinking about theory when I sit down and play, that's the time to create in the moment.

Recently I had a conversation over lunch with one our most esteemed veteran Rolfers, Rosemary Feitis, who is also an osteopath. As we sat in a New York City diner, I began to tell her of my admiration for osteopathy, and about various methods and techniques that I was beginning to learn. She let me go on and on and finally said, "I've heard you tell me how you love this and that technique, but you haven't said that you love the Ten Series." It was like she dropped a ton of bricks in my lap. At that moment I said to myself, "She's right,

and what does that mean?" Sometimes big truths come in small sentences.

Rosemary further brought her point home when she told me that after the six years that it took her to become an osteopath, she reached the conclusion that what works is the Ten Series. She then smiled at me and said, "and that's what I do." Since that moment I have been redoubling my efforts and thought into the question of what is the Ten Series? What is under my hands? And how can I do the best Rolfing possible in the context of the Ten Series?

I also asked Rosemary whom she considered to be a good osteopath in the area. She said she knew a great one and gave me his phone number. I arranged an appointment with Dr. Burruano and proceeded to have not only an amazing treatment, but also one of the most valuable learning experiences I have ever had. His touch was light, but his intention deep. Wherever he put his hands I could "feel" he was seeing deeply into my cells. I perceived this osteopath's vast knowledge and experience to be focused on whatever he was treating at that moment. This informed listening, attention, and intention made all the difference. It made me think, how deeply could I listen with my hands, and what must I know to develop that skill? I think of that session every time I have someone on my table.

I am now beginning to understand in my Rolfing® practice how the structure of the Ten Series provides the vehicle for exploration, creativity, and freedom. This is exactly what I strive for when I play music – freedom through form.

The scope and goals of traditional osteopathy are vast and complex, and I have great admiration for Still's wisdom and consider myself a student of his teachings. Concerning Still and Rolf and many of our teachers, truly we are blessed to be standing on the shoulders of giants! The great jazz musician J.R. Montrose once said to me, "Complexities are nothing but a series of simplicities." When you break it down, the Rolfing Ten Series is simple, yet put all together it is a complex orchestral composition with beauty and wonder.

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## REFERENCES

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