

# SING THE BODY ELECTRIC MY NEW CARNALITY

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THERAPY IS DEFINED by the dominant cultural vision of wholeness or maturity. When Freud defined maturity - and thus the aims of therapy - as the ability to work and to love, he articulated the ideals for the era we are rapidly leaving. In practice, the psycho-therapeutic method that evolved from Freud's vision has been antisomatic and anti-erotic. It has been so concerned with producing a strong, realistic ego that it has more frequently enabled men to work than it has liberated them to love. The body has been considered the special province of the medical pro-

cession. Thus the alienation between mind and body, which received its classical philosophical expression in Descartes, has been perpetuated by the division of labor made by the healing professions.

Faintly but surely a new era is emerging and with it a fresh bunch of therapies that promise to aid the seeker in attaining the new version of the full and authentic life. The new therapies are characterized by their reversal of the aims, methods and values that are dominant in the now-but-passing era. Since they reflect the desire for a lifestyle that is alien to the majority of the psycho-establishment, they are suspected of being less than serious, rigorous and respectable (as indeed some of the therapies are). Hence their status is that of a countertherapeutic.

PLAY. The defining mark of the new countertherapies is their attention to the body: they are primarily somatic rather than psychic therapies. They aim at the creation of a new man - sensuous, immediate, playful - whose prime vocation will be enjoyment, not labor, and whose best work will be very much like play. Thus they define the task of therapy as awakening the senses and returning erotic awareness to the total body. The new therapies, unlike those that depend on Freudian models, fear the damage that culture wreaks on eros more than they dread the terrors of the unbridled libido. They seem to have implicit faith in the morality of the body or in the self-regulative function of the free organism. Since they are disinclined to sublimate eros in order to create art, they are more inclined to praise the art of love than the love of art. Their goal is greater wonder and sensitivity rather than more rationality and control. "Lose your mind and come to your senses," said Fritz Perls.

The techniques of the new therapies are, consistently enough, the reverse of those used in psychotherapy. The dominant illness of our time is the obsession with control, analysis, and technological rationality. In its revolt, the new therapeutic makes more use of silence than gab, of sensation than analysis, of phenomenological observation than theoretical explanation, of touch than "therapeutic distance" - which arose because of Freud's personal phobia against touch. In addition, they center awareness in the present rather than in remembrance of things past and, generally, they doubt that one can liberate emotions without first getting the body into motion.

LOGIC. It would be too much to claim that the new therapeutic has attained a unified theory of the body, a consistent set of practices, or a self-conscious identity. At the moment it consists of a constellation of theories centering upon a vision of the fully incarnate and sensuous man and a group of therapies that share a family resemblance. It is possible to suggest the logic of the new therapeutic without categorizing all its flora and fauna.

Theoretical principles include:

- 1) The existentialist theories of man developed by Gabriel Marcel, Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty that reject Cartesian dualism and insist that man is essentially incarnate, that he is his body. Knowledge begins not with "I think therefore I am" but with "I sense therefore I am."
- 2) An understanding of the relationship between body and character structure, first developed by the renegade psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich (unfortunately better known for his theory of orgone energy) and carried further by the Israeli scientist Moshe Feldenkrais in his work *Body and Mature Behavior* (1949). Also important is the work on body types by W. H. Sheldon and on body image and personality by Seymour Fisher and others.
- 3) The speculative body apocalypse of Norman O. Brown who advocates an end to the tyranny of the genitally organized body and a return to the fully eroticized, "polymorphously perverse" body that is organized for play and delight rather than for productivity and seriousness.

Therapeutic practices include:

- 1) The revival of ancient oriental body disciplines - Yoga, Tai Chi, Zen awareness training - and their Westernized modifications as represented in the work of Charlotte Selver and Charles Brooks and in the sensory training of Bernard Gunther and Edward Maupin.
- 2) The rediscovery of the therapeutic function of dance by Mary Whitehouse, Ann Halprin and others.
- 3) The neo-Reichian approach of bio-energetics which is best known through the books of Alexander Lowen and the work of

Stanley Keleman. This approach makes use of exercises, stressful postures and symbolic movements such as hitting and kicking to increase awareness of the blockage and flow of energy.

4) The Alexander technique, which changes body alignment by increasing awareness of posture, the use of suggestion and gentle repositioning of limbs.

5) Structural Integration.

ROLF. Of this lush variety I will consider only Structural Integration. Because it is the most radical of the new body therapies and because its results have been submitted to preliminary research, it can suggest both the logic and the promise of the new therapeutic, as well as its peculiar problems.

The theory and technique of Structural Integration - rolfing, as it is called - is largely the creation of Ida Rolf. Rolf earned her Ph.D. in biochemistry and physiology at Columbia in 1920, was for 12 years an associate in biochemistry at the Rockefeller Institute, and has for the last 40 years worked in applied physiology perfecting the manipulative techniques that constitute the practice of Structural Integration. While her work has been slow to receive wide recognition - partly because most practitioners she has trained remain in California - it seems to be one of the more promising and revolutionary new therapies. At Esalen Institute in Big Sur, for instance, there are five resident practitioners.

POSTURE. Ida Rolf's thought is based on the principal that one can establish criteria for posturally integrated bodies. It is an obvious but neglected fact that human bodies are organized in space and are subject to the law of gravity. Since evolution has resulted in man's erect stature, the optimal posture must be organized around an imaginary line drawn through the ear, shoulder, hip bone, knee and ankle. A body so organized will have its major weight blocks - head, thorax, pelvis, legs - distributed in a balanced manner, will be subject to a minimum of stress, and will move in the most economical way. Any deviation from this posture will cause unnecessary stress. Thus, notions of balance, grace and economy define the postural norm.

TRAUMA. Rolf refuses to join the futile chicken-before-the-egg type of thinking that has plagued the advocates of psychological, somatological and psychosomatic theories of pathology. Since man is a psychophysical organism, one can seldom divorce psychosomatic and somatopsychic causes in illness. Some physical abnormalities in body structure result from emotional trauma, and emotional trauma causes some physical abnormalities. Chronic tension in neck and shoulder muscles, for instance, may result from suppressed anger or from a childhood injury.

The process by which an emotional or physical injury translates into chronic postural imbalance involves muscular compensation and eventual change in connective tissue. Since the body is an integrated dynamic system, injuries are never purely local. The body relieves stress in an injured muscle by a change in weight-bearing that spreads the strain throughout neighboring muscle systems. So long as such localized stress and the resulting muscular compensation are short-lived, the balance of the body is not seriously disturbed. However there is a tendency for temporary emergency solutions in the body (as well as in the body politic) to become permanent. Muscles shorten, thicken, and lose elasticity. Connective tissue joins adjacent fascial envelopes and makes an unresponsive mass out of muscles that should operate with democratic autonomy. A postural set and a style of restricted movement develop and become habitual. Free emotional and physical flow are no longer possible. It does little good to try to correct postural imbalance through brute exercise of will power once muscles have become set in patterns that make a depressed chest or drooping shoulders the only comfortable positions.

Thus far the theory of Structural Integration contains little that is novel. Rolf's axioms about the unity of body and character structure were anticipated by both Wilhelm Reich and Moshe Feldenkrais. Any eye practiced in the language of the body can read the biography of trauma in a man's misshapen posture and awkward movement. The argument arises when we consider the possibility of therapy: is it possible to reverse the effects of structural disintegration, to restore resilience, grace and economy of movement, to relieve chronic muscular patterns that are no longer functional, to erase the history of trauma from the human body? Ida Rolf has devised an unusual technique that allows us to answer affirmatively.

The clue that led Rolf to develop Structural Integration theory and practice was the discovery of the plastic quality of the myofascial system - the connective tissue that supports and provides cohesiveness and fluid exchange for the musculo-skeletal system.

Osteopaths traditionally have manipulated fascial tissue locally to relieve specific instances of stress or injury. However the idea of reorganizing a person's fascial structure as a whole and thereby realigning the entire body seems to have occurred to no one before Ida Rolf. She insists that random stretching of muscles can provide only temporary relief because the complex interrelation of all muscle groups will pull the body back into its habitual misshapen position. Only a systematic integration through manipulation of the fascia in all the major muscle groups allows the recreation of a supple and balanced body.

Restoring grace and economy to body structure requires stretching and making elastic the shortened and thickened connective tissue, detaching fibrils that have formed between muscles, and repositioning tendons and ligaments that are so bunched and shortened that joints cannot move freely. All this can be accomplished by palpation and direct manipulation. The rolf practitioner uses fingers, elbow, clenched fist or open hand to exert the necessary kind and amount of force. And on occasion the tortured client is called upon to cooperate in the manipulative process by moving, stretching, or providing muscular resistance.

THE HOURS. Each of the 10 hours of rolf processing has a specific goal. In the first hour, attention focuses on the muscles of the chest and abdomen that govern breathing and the muscles around the hip joint that control pelvic mobility. The second hour's work concentrates largely on feet and legs. And so the manipulation continues until the entire body has been forcibly untangled from its collected knots. In most every hour some work will be done on neck muscles or on areas of a person's body armor that must be dissolved before deeper layers of muscular tension can be released.

Deep emotional discharge and change accompany the process of Structural Integration. Manipulation seems to stimulate memories of old emotional and physical injuries that have been stored in the muscles, to release fears that the body armor has held in, and to trigger hopes for a freer more

ecstatic style of life. Rolf and the older rolf practitioners recognize the importance of this emotional component, but they do not work directly with the memories, feelings and fantasies evoked by manipulation.

Rolf acknowledges a reciprocal relationship between psychic and somatic therapies. The physical release provided by Structural Integration allows a great deal of emotional release that would not come about in pure psychotherapy. Conversely, psychotherapeutic release makes the softening of the body's muscular defense systems easier. Some of the younger practitioners - such as psychologist William Schultz who has been trained in Gestalt, encounter and fantasy techniques - make a more systematic effort to integrate the emotional and physical sides of the experience.

STUDY. The difficulties of evaluating therapeutic claims are legion. Most patients who have invested time and money in therapy will claim some improvement. To date, however, there is little conclusive research that will substantiate the subjective claims of any school of therapy. We have no evidence that will allow us to make conclusive judgments about the relative merits of psychoanalysis or behavioral therapy. Subjects who have undergone rolf processing, like the devotees of bioenergetics or the Alexander technique, claim substantial changes in posture, body flexibility and awareness. Fortunately, research is now being undertaken that sheds some light on these subjective claims. Preliminary studies seem to indicate that rolfing does indeed cause significant alterations in neural activity and brain functioning.

Valerie Hunt, head of the Movement Behavior Laboratory at UCLA and a pioneer in the use of measurement of the electrical activity of muscles in the study of movement patterns, is completing a before-and-after study of 14 persons who have undergone rolfing. She is using a telemetry pack that sends signals from electrodes attached to the shoulder, neck, back or hip to measure the duration and amplitude of neural activity involved in such simple movements as walking, lifting, sitting and throwing. She has found that after rolfing one performs these same acts with a shorter period of active muscle contraction. And the amplitude of energy expended is higher during activity and lower during passivity.

WORK AND REST. Hunt's data suggest that after rolfing there is less neuromuscular static, less random tension and more

efficient patterns of energy use. When the muscle works it works; when it rests it rests. Training in movement skills normally produces such an increase in the economy of energy, but in the case of of rolfed subjects there was no training. Hunt suggests that rolfing lowers the frequency spectrum of motor activity, which means that motor units fire in a smooth, rhythmical, asynchronous pattern. In these lower frequencies the controlling nerve impulse for the movement comes from the spinal cord. Thus, she interprets her data to mean that the controlling innervation (for the simple movements tested) is moved by rolfing from the cortex to the spine. The full significance of this shift is unknown; however, rolfing may reverse some of the motor patterns involved in aging, when motor acts tend to come under cortical control.

**BRAIN WAVES.** Julian Silverman, a research specialist with the California Department of Mental Hygiene, has worked with a team of researchers on the same subjects (minus one) studied by Hunt. They have used a combination of electroencephalograph and computer averaging techniques to measure brain-wave patterns caused by light flashes of varying intensities. In addition they have administered a battery of personality and biochemical tests. In 12 out of 13 subjects the EEG average of evoked responses was significantly higher in amplitude and variability after rolfing.

Silverman says: "The data from all our tests, combined with those from Dr. Hunt's study, seem to indicate that rolfing creates a more spontaneous, open, rhythmic reaction to the environment and to one's own kinesthetic and proprioceptive sensations."

A word of caution must be sounded about rolfing precisely because of its effectiveness in dissolving muscular and emotional defense systems. Disarmament is always risky. A wise man is not necessarily defenseless, nude and vulnerable at all times. Shells protect tender tissue. In evaluating therapeutic styles, it is well to remember Goethe's comment, "All sects seem to me to be right in what they assert, and wrong in what they deny." The new body therapies have a long-neglected piece of the truth. Authentic life must be fully sensual, erotic and rhythmical. One hopes it is also rational, productive and political. Perhaps the new therapeutic brings us one step closer to the time when psychic, somatic, political and philosophical therapies will cease to create a new vision of the complete man.

FIRST THINGS are usually discovered last. In the end, if we are lucky or wise, we may gain knowledge of the primal simplicities and return marvelously disillusioned to our native heath in the kingdom of the obvious. Therefore, being fully human and full of illusions, I have only gradually and lately come to acknowledge the indisputable fact of my carnality.

Long ago I studied existentialism, naturalism, behaviorism and such, and knew well enough the theoretical fallacies of all those forms of dualism - Platonic, Hindu, Christian and Cartesian - that would nearly divide man into flesh and spirit, or mind and body. But unfortunately theory and practice, knowing and doing, are not always so epoxy-bonded as Socrates would have us believe. (Otherwise politicians would be wise men and psychologists would have strong, erotic bodies.) Sadly, my belief in the psychosomatic unity of man did not suffice to overcome alienation and let me experience the unity of the self. The strange duality of incarnate existence abides. Indeed, it is the hidden assumption of the language: "my body" - as if I and body were separate entities, one owned by the other. Language reflects my difficulty in dwelling in my body with full awareness.

SHAME. I remember first experiencing alienation between myself and my body on that day, in the ninth grade, when I lost a fistfight. My consciousness seemed to regard my body from afar and to be ashamed. I immediately sent away for a Charles Atlas body-building course and constructed some muscles. The results weren't bad: I was trim at the waist and had good triceps, biceps and pectoral muscles. Then I tried, vainly, to learn first boxing, then judo, before I took up the gentlemanly sport of wrestling.

Not until my middle 30s, after much more body-building and physical discipline, did it dawn on me that I had organized my body around the mirror, the opponent and the job. The body I had fabricated looked good, competed adequately and functioned efficiently, but it was tensed against the invasion of tenderness. I told it what to do, and for the most part it obeyed like a well-paid, sullen butler. It was better at work than play; a good, stylish, serious, productive, disciplined, neurotic, death defying American body. But just when it got close to the body-image I held in my private Platonic heaven, I became painfully aware that it, - and I - had little direct sensuous or kinesthetic awareness. I lived in a tidy strange house of tissue and folding bones.

MIND AND BODY. Where does one learn to tease consciousness back into the body in a society that grants medical specialists a monopoly in dealing with sick bodies and psychotherapists a monopoly in treating troubled minds? I chose to explore some of the ancient and emerging techniques that concentrate upon integrating kinesthetic and psychological awareness: dance, massage, Yoga, Gestalt, bioenergetics, the Alexander method, and finally Structural Integration, or rolfing as it is frequently called after its creator Ida Rolf.

Thus I had already experienced a variety of body therapies when I presented myself for rolfing. When I lay my almost bare body upon a bed at Esalen I knew the 10 hours of processing (terrible word) would involve manipulation of the connective tissue of all the major muscle groups in my body. But I sought that latter-day Grail - growth - and was willing to submit my tender but sinfully distorted fascial tissue to the fingers, fists and elbows of a rolf practitioner. I well knew that redemption is never painless, but I was not prepared for the pain and panic when the work began in my chest. It hurt like hell. Later I was to understand that the chronic tension in my chest muscles formed a defensive armor that was both emotionally and physically constricting.

CONSENT. At the time, uniformed and unheroic, I moaned, cursed and wondered what demythologized quest for salvation led me to submit to such painful folly. Seeking a way out, I looked for theoretical objections to Structural Integration. Of course I found many. Honorable skeptics (masked Tories such as I) can usually find reasons not to pay the price that change exacts. But then after the trauma of the first hour, slight but unmistakable changes in my posture and stance in life began to be obvious. My feet made more substantial contact with the ground; my leg muscles seemed to be freshly lubricated; there were ball-bearings in my joints.

Encouraged by this freer movement and heightened kinesthetic sensitivity, I lent my total consent.

GRIEF. As the rolfing continued, it became clear that I was the cause of most of my pain. Anxious anticipation, suspicion and resistance made my muscles tensely rigid. I learned to relax, and most of the pain ceased.

However, my chest wouldn't yield. Each time a hand approached it I went into panic and felt pain. The disarming of the

emotional-physical defenses in this area involved both memory and manipulation. In the seventh hour of processing, pressure on a muscle in my shoulder released a memory of childhood conflict with a person I loved deeply - a memory that had become encysted in my chest. I wept. The release of the memory, and the grief it occasioned, ceased the panic and tension that had made me unable to bear manipulative work on my chest. At the end of that hour I was able, for the first time, to fill my lungs in one smooth movement.

LOOSE. With my release from this and other defense systems I experience a new openness, ease and expansiveness in my body. In fact, I feel that my body structure is looser than my character structure. My head holds, puritanically, that tension - perhaps even anguish - is necessary to creativity. Nevertheless, I find myself warming to opinions, persons and events that not long ago would have raised my hackles. Something new is happening and my head will have to get used to it.

There are other changes. I stand taller and straighter; yes, mother, it does feel better. The daily pain that an old wrestling injury gave me is gone. Most important of all, I have a direct sensuous and kinesthetic awareness of my total body. I no longer have to consult some spectral headmap to find my lower back.

As my consciousness has come to dwell in my body I have felt a heaviness that I first mistook for depression. A fully sensuous life-style involves knowing the essentially tragic character of the human condition - i.e., disillusionment. As I identify with my body I see the insignificance of all those substitute monuments to immortality - hoarded wealth, opulent machines, political empires, youthful facades - that we death-defying American Prometheans create.

Each is an evasion of the primal sorrow that comes when we learn that all we love and enjoy is terribly fleeting and vulnerable. All flesh does decay, and until that knowledge comes to root in our interior there can be no real dancing. It was no accident that the Greeks, who fused Eros and Thanatos, ecstasy and death, long before Freud, were ardent devotees of the flesh and fierce enemies of death. Thus the grounding of awareness in the body is both a joyful homecoming and a heavy trip downward into the humus, the ground and end of human existence, the first and last truth.