

The Passing of Ida Rolf

By Murray Korngold, Ph.D

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I had never laid eyes on Ida Rolf before that raw March 1979 Sunday afternoon when I visited her in a Pennsylvania nursing home. I had come to tape an interview. I had wanted to go directly to the source of the structural integration movement to report the original doctrine rather than someone's paraphrase. She lay, ravaged by rectal cancer, in an attitude of constant attention. Her sight and hearing were not quick and precise. She was immobile, yet at moments her energy would lick out like a tongue of flame. Like an old fighter who had the style but not the wind or legs anymore, she made every move count.

In the course of that first hour we spent together, I became aware of two Ida Rolfs. One was the Rolf who lay patiently and indomitably willing her work to proceed, always—every instant—on the alert waiting to advance her doctrine, her praxis. For this Rolf there was only one task of importance: to align all people with the gravitational field; to get us all erect, straight, and effortless. The other Ida Rolf was the viewing, feeling heart that lived in and out of time. She wondered and wandered and occasionally surfaced into the present. She grieved of a fragment of half-forgotten verse and remembered the sound of horses' hooves and bellowing seals and the look of old houses. This Ida Rolf dealt with sights and sound in the room where we sat as if she were peering through shifting fogs—all with wry, bemused amazement.

I admired Ida Rolf enormously. Aside from the substantive content of Rolfing®, the art and science of human verticality, which had taken her name, she had by dint of her own efforts, unaided (indeed, undermined rather than aided), promulgated, propagandized, demonstrated, taught, persuaded, organized—irreversibly brought into the world a thing of great importance. And she

did it all without money, without support, while rearing her children and living her life. Even as a girl, she had overcome great obstacles, leaving home because of paternal opposition to her becoming a biological scientist at a time when women Ph.D.s were virtually unheard of.

Our first hour was abruptly ended when Ida Rolf said, "I'm going to send you home now—come back tomorrow." And, after a pause, "Bring some samples of your writing."

Taken aback, I asked why and was told that if I had no samples that I should return the following day with Chapter One of Ida Rolf's biography. I read her my Chapter One on Monday, March 12th. She appeared to weep silently.

When I first met Dr. Rolf the previous day, two impressions were clear. One was that she was dying; the other was that she was exerting a huge effort of will to remain alive and alert. I was suddenly appalled at the prospect of conducting an interview. It seemed to me that under the circumstances I was obliged either to connect meaningfully with Dr. Rolf or leave as gracefully as possible. In her barely audible way, she seemed to welcome the idea of a visitor, so I found myself wanting to connect. Her attention came in bursts, there were moments when she was elsewhere or in other spaces (which felt like inner spaces) and the different contexts would overlap. In a way, at moments, it was like conversing with someone who dozes off from time to time and then wakes up talking in a dream. Yet it wasn't altogether like that, because throughout the two days in which I spoke with her, she seemed to be totally in command of herself, regardless of which spaces she was occupying at the time. It was simply that she lacked the physical means to implement her intentions. Yet one felt that she had clear intentions at any moment.

At some point during the second day Ida got completely turned on and began to talk about the beauty of the English language, how perfect it was for literary beauty as compared with every other language. She began to reminisce about the sounds and sights she had seen, about her first trip to California, and then ran out of steam all of a sudden, at which point she said, "Well, I think I'll send you home now, to think up some more questions."

I next saw Dr. Rolf the following Sunday afternoon. This time, in addition to Joy Belluzi, Dr. Rolf's friend and companion, a close friend of Joy's, Lorna Christianson, was also present. Dr. Rolf's condition had worsened considerably. She was not responsive, appeared to be comatose—for a long time she hadn't moved or opened her eyes. There was no sense of her presence in the room. She was absent, definitely not there.

About the same time I sensed Dr. Rolf had returned, Joy and Lorna came back into the room. I stood beside Dr. Rolf and told her that I knew she was there and could hear and understand what I was saying. "If you want to say yes to anything I ask you, would you please open your eyes," I said. "Do you understand me?" She opened her eyes. "Dr. Rolf, would you like me to read to you?" I asked. She said yes by opening her eyes. From that point forward our communication consisted of my putting questions to her which she either answered "yes" by opening her eyes, or did not answer by not opening her eyes, which meant either "no" or that she was indisposed or in another space or not available.

Later, after rummaging around, we came up with Itzhak Bentov's *Stalking the Wild Pendulum*, which I opened at random—as it happened, to page 80—and began to read a discussion of relative levels of reality. I read this to Dr. Rolf, slowly and clearly, pausing from time to time to inquire if she understood or agreed, and so on. Almost unconsciously I drifted from reading to talking to her. As I realized this, I said to Dr. Rolf, "Are you aware that there is more of you than there is in the bed?" She said yes. "Are you connected with the more of you than there is in the bed?" She answered yes. "Is it sometimes difficult to stay connected?" Yes. "If you have any difficulties at all, ask for help, sincerely ask for help, and help will come. Do you understand?" Yes. "Are there dark spaces?"

Yes. "Are there bright and shiny ones?" Yes. "Well, it's better for you not to hang out in the dark space. Go for the bright and shiny ones. Do you understand?" Yes. And so it went.

After about ten minutes of this, the room felt empty again, this time peacefully empty. After a long pause, Joy and Lorna and I laughed a little, wept a little, and hugged each other. A short time later, I returned to Philadelphia. Dr. Rolf died the next day.

Murray Korngold turned eighty-nine on New Year's Day 2009. According to his memoir (First Draft: A Life to Talk About; Valmy Press, Paris, 2005), he has been "a Detroit organizer of auto workers and college students in the 30s; an infantry soldier in World War II; a Hollywood poet, screenwriter, playwright and Communist Party member in the 40s; one of the original LSD researchers in the 50s; a pioneer in the practice of clinical psychology and traditional Chinese medicine; a founder of the

Los Angeles Free Clinic in the 60s; and...in the 70s, [a developer of] break-through techniques for the teaching of psychic healing." Of his encounter with Ida Rolf, he reports that "It's not often that one has the opportunity to see such an admirable person off... I felt honored and privileged to have had such an opportunity."

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