In My Practice

A Not-So-Straight Line of Work

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Editor's Note: In this issue, in keeping with the history theme, we profile two early Rolfers who helped carry the torch overseas – Michel Ginoulhac, who works between Mallorca, Spain and Southern France, and Pedro Prado in São Paulo, Brazil.

It was the summer of 1972 when I paid a visit to my sister, Véronique, who had recently moved to San Francisco. In those days, when Esalen, est, Gestalt and encounter groups were the trendy things to do, I gave myself a tour of all I could put my hands on in the field of personal development. Naturally Rolfing® was high on the list that Veronique had prepared for me, since she was already determined to study it herself. (Indebted forever to you for that, V!) So I went to see Michael Salveson across the Bay Bridge in Berkeley on my little Kawasaki – blissfully ignorant that I had no right to drive on the freeway, so I was never caught!

I was not too impressed by the results at first, and it took me several months to embody and perceive the changes I had gone through. Since I thought nothing was wrong with me to begin with, I needed the experience of daily life to progressively realize that I was looking at the world through a whole different body and different eyes. The amazement came slowly and steadily and has not stopped since. Having undergone the process without the faintest idea of what was going on, I was eager to get some rational explanation of this bizarre technique.

My curiosity had been sufficiently ignited that I went back the following summer, this time to Boulder where Véronique was training with the famous Ida! In those days Ida was making it tough for women to get into the training. You needed solid hands plus a good support structure and serious guts to get in front of her piercing eyes! But for myself, as a young doctor-in-training from a European country, it was a formality to be accepted by the Old Lady. I wrote my essay in a few days (thanks to my freshly acquired knowledge and passion for anatomy) and went through what was probably one of the fastest applications

processes ever – a big piece of luck when I later saw how much effort and work most of my colleagues had to put into it! (You know this kind of situation: sometimes when you are not expecting difficulties, things come easy.) I quickly went off to my first training. Richard Demmerle had a reputation as a rigorous and tough teacher. He did nothing to disprove it, but I liked his insistence on anatomy. Then Emmett Hutchins wildly expanded my horizons, introducing concepts I had always been hungry for, and I was hooked!

I believe Véronique and I were the first of a new generation of European Rolfers (Ida having taught informally to a number of English chiropractors and osteopaths years before). Back in France I started practicing my new skills on my unsuspecting friends and acquaintances. Boy! Did they cry! Not loud enough, though, to distract me from the changes that I was seeing happening in front of my eyes. In the meantime, the pursuit of my medical studies proved more and more painful, aware as I was of the total divide between the two approaches. I kept at it simply because I did not want to lose the many years already invested. However, I knew that I was never going to use my title in a conventional way, even as a trained homeopath as I had originally thought. This ordeal finally ended with a thesis on Rolfing in 1983 – an improbable subject in the eyes of the medical faculty, that I was only able to stuff down their throats thanks to the helping hand of my grandfather, Pierre Fabre, a then-retired professor of medicine. Hey, but I did it after all!

Over the years my style had softened up, to the relief of my clients. I had the usual encounters with yoga, tai chi, *qi gong*, martial arts, reflexology, connective-tissue work, auriculomedicine, Eutonie, energy balancing, Gestalt, Feldenkrais, and many others I am forgetting. In brief, the stuff that every Rolfer is bound to find on his road to understanding (!) how the body works. Oh! – and in 1977 I had gone to India and became Prem Vandan under the guidance of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, a story that deserves a book on its own. Meditation techniques and encounter groups were all the rage then at the ashram in Poona and quickly spread to the West.

Some approaches stood out for me and I studied them a bit more seriously. I trained several years in general and cranial osteopathy, which I advocated to the Rolfing faculty back in 1978. Although it had been one of the directions of Ida's explorations, I felt it had not been given its proper place and was sorely missing in the body of information that was transmitted at the time. I am very happy to see that over the years this body of knowledge has being woven into the very fabric of our work, thanks to the advances of Jean-Pierre Barral into visceral and fascial manipulation for instance. I met Peter Schwind during one of my advanced Rolfing trainings in Boulder – the start of a long friendship – and have been impressed ever since with his dedication to master and teach the fundamentals of such a subtle method.

Neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) is another such major pillar of understanding that I believe is a must for every professional in the teaching/therapeutic fields. I have to say that meeting John Grinder (one of the developers) and following his classes for a good while was an exhilarating and humbling experience. A genius in his own right! Brilliant but understated. Seeing him handling masterfully all the channels of communication at work in a group of people simultaneously was appropriately stunning! I learnt the crucial difference between context and content and other communication concepts that I tried to use and transmit when I organized the first Rolfing training in France with Michael Salveson in 1982.

Around that time I had become aware of my limited understanding of the body in movement and soon grabbed the opportunity to be among the first Rolfers to follow the Rolf Movement™ classes. Seeing the likes of Megan James, Heather Starsong, Jane Harrington and Gael Ohlgren decipher a body and transform its relationship to gravity with simple cues and exercises gave the proper humility to my classic structural approach!

I later became involved in a relationship with a fellow Rolfer, and we travelled and taught together for what will remain the best five years of my life. Working in Berkeley or teaching around the world at her side was a fulfilment I thought would never end. It did, unfortunately, and the breakup turned me away from the work. Since I was aware of the importance of the "field," (as Valerie Hunt beautifully describes), I was unwilling to impart to my clients the depression and heaviness I felt in my heart. Feeling like a mediocre therapist if I could not even take myself out of my own slump, I digressed into a very different career: managing a vineyard and making organic wines. This was a seriously tough job where I learnt a lot of things, including the fact that I was not particularly gifted at it! I quit after eight years, but persisted somehow in the same field: due to a lifetime challenge with fibromyalgia, Véronique had to quit Rolfing; she had developed an importing business for our wines, and needed help to maintain it. In any case, it took me ten years to digest the separation and another five to resurface emotionally.

Coming up to present time, it is rather funny to feel I have jumped from being among the youngest Rolfers to being one of the dinosaurs (hopefully not quite extinct yet). Where did all that time fly? When the journal asked me to write about my practice I thought: "Oh no! Not me with my ridiculous practice. What do you want me to say? I must be getting really old that you are interested in getting my impressions before I disappear!" I guess I have to look at myself in the mirror.

Well, the good thing about Rolfing only on the side for all these years, while engaged in the wine business, is that I find myself with a renewed desire to get into it again. I used to go with the wind, developing temporary practices in Paris, Geneva, or Reunion Island. Now I alternate between Mallorca (in Spain) and Southern France and wonder how to connect with the potential clientele. There is no doubt in my mind about the benefits of Rolfing, but everything seems to need more marketing savvy than ever these days. I work on demand, but with more time on my hands now I will be on the lookout for opportunities. Despite the certainty that I've lost a good chunk of my knowledge, I'm amazed that I am still witnessing surprising results when I put my hands on a client. I use the word "witness" because I am not sure how much of me is left in the process. Not that I have reached a blissful Zen-like state of being, nor left completely aside my inquisitive mind, but rather that I trust that something of my inner organization is communicated and elevates the other's (unfortunately I suppose not higher than my own!), like instruments coming into resonance. And this as much in spite of me as because of my brilliance, no doubt…

I am still in awe of the method that Ida has magically transmitted to me, still wondering how on earth the changes take place, but very satisfied and grateful to be given the opportunity to see them first hand. What

a blessing! I find I have an interesting mix of pride and certainty that the work will produce visible results, and a humility because I have scant understanding of the mechanisms of these changes. At fifty-eight, with my fair share of disappointments and betrayals received and given, with a litany of false starts and failures, with friends and family disappearing through death and attrition, with little to show apart from a superb thirteen-year-old son, it is extremely comforting to be able to engage a client's body and soul in a loving field and know that together we will win a battle against entropy and come out a bit ahead of the game every time!

Since 1975 the playing field has radically changed. Gone are the days of experimenting freely with new approaches. The public is a tad more educated and demanding. The current economic crisis does not provide a supportive background for a technique like Rolfing, a bit outdated in its format. People have less time and money and the Ten Series would be more palatable to many people in a format of twenty forty-minute sessions at half the price per session, for instance. I hate to lower my session fee below 100 Euros, but it has become a considerable amount for the average person these days. I love to take my time to combine movement awareness, and my sessions can easily reach ninety minutes. I feel both client and therapist need time to really go deep into the meaning of the process. That is part of the luxury of this approach. However, I may have to change strategy to adapt to the changing times.

Another question lingers in my country: Rolfing is almost invisible in France. The main issue is a legal one, since only medical practitioners (namely M.D.s and physical therapists) are allowed to lay their hands on patients here. It's a scam, but legally enforced! With the fierce competition and the development of alternative techniques like osteopathy going mainstream (i.e., being acknowledged and sanctioned in medical schools), there is no doubt that it would be more difficult than ever to set up shop without potential harassment from established medical practitioners. Hubert Godard is our main visible representative, but he works in a framework that keeps him out of trouble, as a university teacher. Years ago I was his Rolfer and gave him his first movement cues, a good example of the old saying about the student surpassing the master. (Well, guys, you owe me for not deterring him from pursuing his Rolfing career!)

There is a real demand in France among health professionals who genuinely seek to understand and learn the principles of Rolfing. But the French system makes it quasi-impossible for them to pursue Rolfing training as currently offered because of time and money constraints (leaving a practice for two months at a time and switching a clientele over to Rolfing are not simple propositions). So there is a serious risk that Rolfing in France could completely disappear from sight or only resurface in bits and pieces through various "avatars" (i.e., reinventions of the method through different approaches that may or may not claim affiliation to the original). I have no ready-made answer to this, but it would be nice to find a way to satisfy that demand without compromising the value and image of Rolfing – a bit of a challenge!

At the last annual meeting of the European Rolfing Association I was particularly happy to listen to Robert Schleip's presentation of the latest fascia research: fascinating and enormously stimulating. Our body of knowledge is vastly increasing, and keeping up with its rate of expansion is a lost battle, however titillating. Nonetheless, in the face of exceedingly refined and precise perceptions and new techniques, I'd like to caution against fascination with the detail, the symptom, the local event, and remind us that the essence of our work is to relate, harmonize and integrate a content to a larger context of many structures, some invisible or evading clear definition. It is our ability to reconnect the human being to these subtle realms that sets us apart, more than the capacity to solve tricky situations. What I have gradually lost in pure knowledge and technical ability, I have apparently made up with presence, compassion and the wisdom of my clients' and my own limitations. Armed with the intelligence of the body (like in the art of linking things together, *inter-ligere*) imparted by the genius of Ida, I am still able to elicit and marvel at the *Aha!* moments and the transformations that this good old Recipe churns out day in and day out. Ida, you are the best, I bow to the Master!