

# A Fifty-Year Perspective of Rolfing®

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*Editor's Note: This is an adaptation of a talk presented at the 2008 annual meeting of The European Rolfing Association®.*

I met and started studying with Dr. Rolf in 1968. My perspective now covers forty years. During that time I have witnessed a silent revolution in our collective field of inquiry.

What is a human body? What are its possibilities for change?

Although these questions are not the headlines in our news, there has been a radical shift in the ontology of human physicality. Contributions have come from many vectors, from the understanding of bio-nutrients and how they affect our physiology, to many holistic approaches that help heal the mind/body/emotional split. What has opened before us is a hitherto unrecognized potential for repair and regeneration. Taken from the long view, this trend is leading us toward a concept of the body that is far less fixed, far less destined for decrepitude than was formerly expected.

Cultures change rapidly; so rapidly that one generation can't understand another, so rapidly that twenty-year-old movies seem out of sync with the rhythms and manners of speech. It is hard for us to imagine the environment that shaped and influenced Ida Rolf's thoughts, the early 1900s. Looking back to the past is necessary, however, in order to imagine the social environment in which Dr. Rolf worked and struggled to communicate her premises. My purpose is to reflect on how much her ideas have influenced our current time, whether or not Rolfing is a household word.

Previous to the 1960s Rolfing was not gaining much acceptance. Fifty years ago, the general expectation was that physical decline began just past the thirtieth birthday, with mental decline following a

bit later. However, the baby boomers of this country decided to fight that concept, kicking and screaming, and it is that generation that made the health and beauty industry big business.

Meanwhile, other new ideas were beginning to come into cultural awareness. It was during the 1960s that words like "environmental," "holistic," and "tensegrity" began to be at play in the vernacular. These concepts, along with the interest in remaining youthful, made the public more receptive to Dr. Rolf's message. At that time, places like the Esalen Institute became laboratories for what became known as the human potential movement. The premise behind this trend was that regular, functional folk can be entangled with the past in ways that impair their potential for a full expression of who they truly are or could become. A desire ignited in mainstream culture: to flourish at all levels. Rather than merely getting ahead, there was an interest in achieving fuller expressions of health and happiness without years of classic therapy. Since then, many books as well as group and individual processes have proposed various techniques that augment self-awareness in order to change habitual perceptions and response patterns. All of them point to the possibility of being freed from the baggage of the past in order to become more uniquely and creatively oneself.

This environment became Dr. Rolf's proving ground. There were other human potential techniques that focused on the body as a viable portal for personal change. But, as far as I know, Dr. Rolf stood alone in proposing a "hands on" therapy as a means for relieving the body from the fetters of

past programming in order to distill the individual towards a truer expression of self.

It is startling to recall that "hands on" therapy basically did not exist at that time. There was a bit of Swedish massage, a bit of chiropractic, a few doctors of osteopathy who were dying out in the U.S., and there was the "red light" district. That was it. In a lecture that Dr. Rolf gave in 1971, she was saying that each major organ in the body had its own energy field and that one's wellbeing came from a summation of those energies. Then she paused to say that just twenty years before, in the 1950s, people were imprisoned for saying such things. As unbelievable as this seems now, it was not that long ago. Although we do not need to worry about persecution for our beliefs about the body, there are still concepts in our work that are neither understood nor accepted by the general populace.

With an awareness that I am speaking to the choir, I am going to name the most major components that make up the vision called Rolfing.

**1. Gravity can only give lift to a structure that is in alignment and has the principle of tensegrity at play.**

First I want to acknowledge Dr. Rolf's enormous compassion for the suffering that was largely taken for granted. Her vision was born from a belief that a portion of life's misery was unnecessary if we could only understand and embody a simple law of nature. Underlying all of her other perceptions, "random bodies," as she called them, could only be dragged downward over time due to the force of gravity. Inevitably this caused compression and further imbalance. This not only impaired the muscular/skeletal system but also compromised the viscera as well as the general well-being and lightheartedness of an individual.

**2. Humanity is still evolving.**

The norm of function and structure that we typically observe does not necessarily demonstrate the potential that we are hoping to evoke. Like seeing two lines on a paper and then imagining the convergence of those lines somewhere out in space, we need to be able to envision something beyond what is exhibited in the body in front of us. Dr. Rolf believed that this is an instinct that is developed. It does not come from the head but from the gut, from a sense of knowing when something looks

and feels more right. As our reputation has grown for our ability to resolve discomfort, it is sometimes easy to forget this aspect of the work. We base our success on the tangible results, but if we become too intent on fixing flat tires, it is easy to forget the larger goal of evoking a more efficient and intelligent vehicle.

**3. A body is not a closed system.**

If you ask me, we are still the only system of bodywork that has any awareness of this. Osteopathy increases inherent motion within the structure. Physical therapists and other somatic practitioners climb into the box to fix the problem within the box. As Dr. Rolf put it, "If you want new answers, pose new questions." A receptive client can receive new answers from a therapist, but Rolfing takes it a step further. Can we help the individual to become more intelligent when he or she leaves the treatment? Dr. Rolf answered "Yes!" – provided that a client leaves with a greater range of responses and more fluid awareness, not only of self, but also of earth, sky, and other. The body as an open system is participatory and responsive to the environment. The ability to respond, adapt, and change is the key to greater health from the world of the cell to the world of functional human interactions. When a closed system, such as a machine, has only its own resources available, by rote programming, entropy is the only possible outcome over time. We, too, become restricted in our ability to cope if we no longer can adapt and respond to the demands of our environment. Regeneration and healing require creativity.

**4. The dramatization of an emotional stance in life will, over time, affect structure and function, causing dysfunction and a closed structure.**

Some of this dramatization has been learned and copied unconsciously. To free a body from the restrictions that were caused by emotional stances allows a body to choose wisely and well-being is often the more attractive option.

**5. The body is a plastic medium that can be changed by touch.**

It is hard to remember that this was a radical and questionable premise fifty years ago. This concept is universally assumed so that it is no longer discussed in schools of physical manipulation. No credit is given to the originator or original spokesperson for this idea, Dr. Rolf. In spite of many

forms of therapy that are called deep-tissue, myofascial, or connective-tissue massage, scientific research into the nature and function of connective tissue is only now confirming and elaborating Dr. Rolf's theory. Here are some of the points that Dr. Rolf made about connective tissue in her day.

- a) It is tougher than the joint membranes of the body and therefore crucial in holding the body together. Its makeup is a combination of tough fibers in a gel-like substance; something like rebar steel in concrete that is in the gel state (before it sets). Without it, joints would be torn apart too easily when the structure endures stress and strain.
- b) That gel-like substance is a bed in which nerves, organs, muscles, and bones rest with support.
- c) Connective tissue is able to orchestrate movement between all layers of the body from superficial to deep and from head to toe.
- d) Connective tissue is an organ of shape. Because connective tissue connects everything to everything, it is crucial for our internal sense of spatial orientation; it lets us know where and how we are organized in space.

It is important to note that Dr. Rolf's vision of a more evolved human was not only about better alignment. She envisioned a more fluid, efficient movement that translated across joints via the connective tissue as opposed to a muscular lever/pulley model of segments.

Revisiting basic tenets of Rolfing, it is interesting to examine where these values have colored our current culture and where they have not.

**1. Alignment and symmetry are hallmarks of a more organized body.**

From Pilates to yoga to fitness trainings of all sorts, this statement is generally accepted. From my observation, the posture of the general population has improved, yet there seems to be a plot to get rid of the curves in the spine. And symmetry is often imposed, rather than revealed through reducing structural conflict.

**2. Humanity is still evolving.**

Some might make more of an argument for our devolvement as a species. Statistics continue to be equally dire and hopeful. If

quality of life over time is an indicator, then I guess we can observe general progress.

**3. The body is not a closed system.**

Outside of the Rolf community and the Continuum community, I don't find that this is on anyone's mind. Yet, the work of Hubert Godard, Susan Harper, and Emilie Conrad continue to bring this from the theoretical to the experiential and practical realm. So, the vision is still alive within our community.

**4. The dramatization of emotional stances affects physical structure and function.**

This perspective has really come along. The number of somatic-based therapies that teach the value of listening to the subtle sensations of the body as a mode of healing continues to grow. Fifty years ago, it seemed that only ancient esoteric traditions understood this. Now it is looking plausible that our war veterans might be able to receive this kind of therapy. If so, this will be an enormous step.

**5. Connective tissue is brilliant, moldable, and worth our attention.**

Although this is not in the news, connective tissue has caught the eye of scientific research now and we can expect the news to spread. In any case, the idea that bodies can be relieved of tension by hands-on techniques seems to be here to stay.

So how has this silent revolution changed our culture in the past forty years? And how have these changes affected our profession?

**Aging:** Some years ago there was a bumper sticker that said, "He who dies with the most toys, wins." If I were to update that bumper sticker to fit U.S. culture now, I would say, "She who dies looking the youngest for her age, wins." Far from going gracefully into old age, the fight is on to maintain vitality to the very end. We have many role models for this. Although this gets all mixed up with cosmetic surgery and the replacement or amplification of parts, there is still much more openness to the possibility that an aging body has a potential to move to a higher state of health or order. Aging is not completely synonymous with devolving.

**Exercise:** Twenty-five years ago, one could hardly give away movement classes to the general public. Now exercise is considered an essential ingredient to health. Science has proven that it benefits not only physical health but mental health as well. The "use

it or lose it" approach to movement has affected most every sector of society. I realize that other cultures may be different in this department, never having been as sedentary nor as obsessed as Americans, but from the perspective of my practice and my clients, almost everyone has some routine for physical self-care, and they are interested in learning more. These days old dogs do want to learn new tricks. This was not the norm even twenty-five years ago.

**Hands-on therapy:** In the past ten years, massage has been one of the fastest growing professions in the U.S. Rolfing has moved from being a suspicious modality audaciously claiming to improve well-being to being lost in the crowd. The proliferation of manipulation techniques is so rampant that I can no longer keep abreast with the marketplace. For almost every system in the body that we can name there is a modality to address it, from lymph to nerves to viscera to craniosacral, etc. Sometimes I feel as if I began as a pioneer striking out into the wilderness and now find myself living in the suburbs. And yet, this expansion of knowledge has brought greater understanding and precision to Rolfing.

**Trauma resolution:** Peter Levine, who studied with Dr. Rolf when I did, broke ground in our community by bringing our attention to the long-term psycho/physiological affects of unresolved trauma. His map for understanding what constitutes trauma and what is needed for its resolution has changed our school's approach. Rather than the "more is better" style of the 1960s and 1970s, Rolfing is now taught with much more sophistication of touch and pacing. Stephen Porges, Ph.D., Stanley Rosenberg, and others continue to create a strong interface between our field and these new developments.

**Gadgets:** Electromagnetic tools are only a few years old. Various tools for healing from cold lasers to bio-mats are just arriving on the scene. It will be very interesting to see what develops and how this trend affects our profession.

Here's my rant.

In spite of these huge progressive steps, I am still fired by an urgent sense of mission. The human race is still a questionable species. Are we destined to annihilate ourselves and much of the life on this planet? The statistics in the U.S. aren't looking good: 800,000 bipolar children are

diagnosed in this country alone; autism is on a sharp increase with no understanding why; depression, obesity, suicide, and mass murder seem to be getting more rampant. And standing up straighter is going to change any of this? Come on!

At her most visionary, Ida Rolf was hoping that humanity could become less self-centered, defensive, and war-like. For her, the physical manifestation of this was a human that could find center from the heart while being present to earth (a relationship to our planet), sky (higher intelligence or energies not manifest in the material world), self, and other (beings, human and otherwise).

The evolution that Dr. Rolf was hoping Rolfing would help evoke was not totally about physical ease and beauty. We *Homo sapiens* have been evolving the neocortex lately. Unfortunately, the neocortex is capable of operating in a completely self-serving way. In other words, a neocortex that is not integrated with the limbic system (or, said slightly differently, a mind that is disconnected from the heart) creates a very dangerous beast, capable of mass destruction. Dr. Rolf's use of the words "earth," "sky," and "other" were not simply symbols for "the Line." They were indicating emotional intelligence, the ability to care about and for something beyond self. Humanity needs to expand from a tribal consciousness to a global consciousness if we are to survive as a species. And our energy crisis bespeaks of a need to grow up in relationship to planet earth.

It is satisfying to help people out of pain, but at the deeper levels, the vision is still what drives me. I see blind spots in my culture and in most of the somatic field. To follow is a commentary that is personal and does not necessarily represent the collective views of the Rolf Institute of Structural Integration®.

The fitness/exercise industry is still in the lever/pulley muscular model that experiences a polarity of the muscular system that is either contracted, extended or released. Bulk and density are considered the hallmarks of strength. Connective tissue may have entered the massage field in a cursory fashion but, as yet, it has not touched the fitness field. Stability and flexibility are prized but mutability is ignored. Strength is practiced by stabilizing one segment and mobilizing another,

repetitively. There isn't an animal out there that moves in this fashion.

Since aging is mostly a process of stagnation and the breakdown of communication and nutrient flow between systems, it doesn't seem like a good idea to practice density and fragmentation. Furthermore, in my observations of bodies in trouble, the conflicts that show up create a lack of space. One force pulls the body right, another force pulls it left. This robs the body of territory. Like the Middle East, it is a fight over territory. We, as Rolfers, open up the tissue to resolve these conflicts. But our culture believes that contraction is the only way to strength.

Most of what is called core strength is another version of practicing "the Line." I don't wish to step on any toes here in terms of modalities that have served your process, but most core strength training does not understand the distinction between phasic and tonic function (or "extrinsic" and "intrinsic" as Dr. Rolf used to call it). The clients that I see who use this exploration as their main form of staying fit have tangled these two very different muscular systems. Phasic and tonic muscular systems mirror the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous system. They have a very different metabolism. When the abdominus rectus, psoas, and transverse abdominus are worked in phasic rhythms they lose independent function. I question the long-term benefit of this focus on a static core strength. The analogy for this practice, from my point of view, would be to practice hypervigilance as the key to safety. Since most injuries occur from sudden and unexpected divergences from center, the practice of staying close to center in a dependable form or even a reclining position does not necessarily create a more adaptable structure. Does one become a more resilient traveler by practicing staying home?

This brings back the subject of the body as an open system. As you recall, I see little evidence of this value in our culture. Much of physical fitness is a numbing practice relating self to self and self to machine in a completely determined and dependable fashion. This is a tricky subject because clearly there are health benefits to almost any form of movement. We need, though, to keep the question alive: Is exercise creating a more intelligent being? Alienation and isolation are the by-products of a closed system and the underpinning of

depression, suicide, and the other ills that I named earlier.

Now that there is a belief in the body's ability to change, our current culture is enamored with looking good. Perfect position, symmetry, and form are sought sometimes at the price of quality of life. Ideal alignment does nothing for the intelligence of an organism. Rolfing's original vision was an inquiry that posed the question "Could we become more self-referential while also being more attuned to others and our environment?" This is limbic resonance – at the core of emotional intelligence. It is a feeling state, not an appearance.

Rolfing simultaneously improves position and communication. Our tensegrity model seeks the spanning of tissue on the scaffold of a structure that is open to its environment. Condensed tissue causes stagnation on every level from lymph, nutrients, and waste material to neural information. Repetitive use of muscles coupled with speed causes a coalescing of tissue: in other words, density. To increase the conductivity of tissue Rolfers lateralize tissue. One way or the other, whatever the technique, we open tissue, which reduces its density, increases its conductivity, and thereby increases the flow of information. Our current cultural paradigm of exercise mostly works against this model. How would our culture be different if the goal of exercise was to increase the flow of information and refresh neurology rather than to fatigue muscles?

Dr. Rolf would point to the quality of movement that demonstrated this quest. Freshly Rolfed bodies often demonstrate movement that flows through the connective tissue rather than appearing segmented at the joints. I would like to suggest that a critical key to emotional intelligence is encoded in fluid movement. This is our primordial connection to all of life. When movement flows through the connective tissue we are looking at the intelligence of water, which functions as a "resonant organ of intelligence."

If we want to access our potentials for healing and regeneration, we definitely need to go to the source – the matrix of life and its mastery for recycling energy from one form to another. What does the biosphere have to teach us about the dance of life? Look at embryology, look at the

cells, watch nature, observe living fascia. The code is in movement, not in the culture.

Why am I jumping up and down about this? In 1971, I heard Dr. Rolf say that once nervous tissue has atrophied, we can help a body to feel more comfortable but we will not be able to affect the atrophied tissue. However, in Emilie Conrad's Continuum classes I have witnessed the innovation of movement through tissue that was atrophied and paralyzed for many years. This came about through participation in open-ended, non-patterned movement. This self-healing occurred by tapping into a regenerative, fluid force that was alive and well within the injured body. Along with the release of paralysis came the resurrection of sensation; in other words, the innovation of new neural tissue.

This other quality of movement, living side by side with utilitarian movement patterns, represents the language of the biosphere. Habituated, patterned movement is necessary and handy but is also a limited vocabulary for neurological possibilities. Staying in our usual up/down, forward momentum orientation will block other informing through movement.

To develop a global consciousness we need to live in our respective cultures without being bound and programmed

by them. The best way to free oneself from the trance of cultural programming is to develop a biosphere identity that is as predominant as our ego and cultural identity. The biosphere speaks in the flow of ever-changing relationships, not the perfect and predictable placement of parts. I hope to witness a change in my lifetime in which there is a deeper understanding of the healing capacity of movement.

In summation this is what I have learned in forty years:

1. The body changes so much more easily than we originally imagined. The more that we collectively understand this, the easier change occurs. Belief systems, blind spots, illusions, and habit patterns are the harder aspects of change.
2. Pleasure and interest are the most underestimated ingredients of healing and self-care.
3. Liquid movement, whether intense or gentle, is the body's language of love and relationship. It is also the hidden ingredient of strength and resiliency.
4. Valuing and attending to sensation are essential to the process of allowing our organism to reorganize at higher levels of order.