

Expansional Balance and the Line

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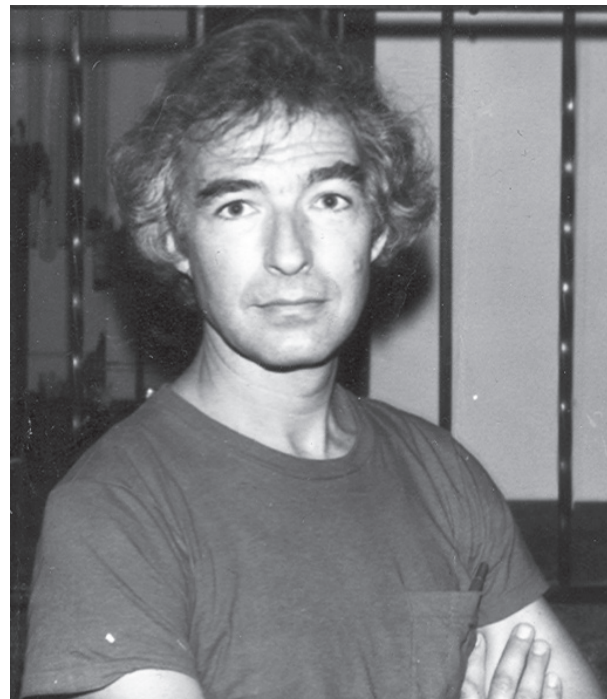
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I was quite inspired when I finished my classes with Dr. Rolf in 1968. As a psychologist I felt I had acquired a way to communicate with the core consciousness of a person through the body. Nine years earlier, in graduate school, I had had a *beginner's enlightenment* using a Zen Buddhist meditation. I discovered a point of witnessing from which I could observe the contents of my mind without attachment. For the next three months I could return to that state. One of my great discoveries was that my body *is* me in the realest sense, and that it is extremely intelligent and creative. The body seemed to me to be the key to authenticity and to developing consciousness. I decided I wanted to practice a psychotherapy that focused on the body. I worked with Mary Whitehouse, the pioneer of Authentic Movement, and later, when I lived at Esalen Institute in Big Sur, I had access to other pioneers in body techniques. It was when I underwent the ten sessions with Rolf that I found myself back in the state of witness. Frankly, it was the pain that made it necessary, but in witnessing I discovered much else. I asked her to train me. Four months later, in January 1968, I audited her first class and *practiced* six months later in her second.

I emerged, grateful for what I had received, but aware that I didn't know much. I could execute the ten sessions as a Recipe, but I couldn't see structure. Rolf told us to keep following the Recipe until we knew what we were doing. Fortunately my hands were better than my eyes (though heavy in the style of those days), and my clients and I sometimes had profound realizations of awareness and being.

Still, I knew I didn't understand the movement part. If structure and function were two aspects of the same thing, the function part was a bit skimpy for me. The key seemed to be to know more about



The author at age forty-four.

movement. I also felt the touch needed more refinement, but what I learned about that has been published elsewhere (Maupin, 2007). Here I want to describe what I learned about movement.

The Line—and Expansional Balance

When speaking of movement, Rolf emphasized the Line. The centers of gravity of each body segment should, most efficiently, align in a vertical column. Again and again she emphasized this as the fundamental concept of integrated structure. She sometimes talked about the balance of segments on this Line as if it were a static concept. That blocky boy, the so-fiercely defended Little Boy Logo, expresses this static quality.

But she also spoke of the Line in a more dynamic way, as a polarity expanding in two directions. She said the reflexive downward thrust of the feet against the ground could be translated into an upward thrust of the head—provided the pelvis, diaphragm, and shoulders are not interfering, but are balanced on the Line.

Communicating the full feeling of this dynamic expansion would have taken the skills of a dance teacher, which Rolf was not. I remember awkward scenes of our class sitting rigidly “keeping our heads up and our waistlines back,” lest she chide us for our lapses. Once she had us standing in a chorus line attempting to swing our knees forward from the twelfth rib. (This doesn’t do justice to the *patterning* movements she also taught and which Judith Aston so effectively elaborated.) But more developed movement work was definitely needed.

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Six years later I met Michael Neadon (known then as Oscar Aguado), an Argentine jazz dancer. He had had moments of such inspiring freedom in his dance career in New York that he had retired to find the true sources of movement. He spoke of open expansion so extreme that the ordinary sense of self was transcended. To him, the body naturally expanded “omnidirectionally” in response to gravity. I thought this seemed a lot like Rolf’s Line—only more clearly three-dimensional. He called it *Expansional Balance*.

At the time I met him, he was teaching students how to find their expansion in small steps by meticulously centering each joint across its functional planes. In this way, the body-sense shifts from outer tension to the center of the joint so that open expansion can take place out through it. One can then feel connection between adjacent joints until there comes to be an open, integrated state of the entire body. It sounded like a good strategy for structural bodywork.

In movement classes he often started with the arms, balancing each joint, opening the horizontal polarity from spine through fingertips and beyond. With the arms extended, we developed the pelvic extension down through the feet and related it to the balance front to back of the lumbar and up through the neck and head (the *upper pole*). My Line was taking on much clearer form in these classes, and I was learning to feel structure from the inside. Balancing joints across their functional planes became part of my bodywork strategy—still following the Recipe.

Four Parts of Expansional Balance

It seemed to me that “omnidirectional expansion in gravity” needed to be broken down into practical parts. Based on a variety of experiences, I decided there must be four parts: a lower extension from pelvis through feet, a front-back balance across the torso, a horizontal expansion of the arms, and (finally) an upper extension of the neck and head. Of course the upper extension is the other end of the lower extension, two ends of the same dynamic Line, but in practice the two seemed to develop separately.

These four parts of Expansional Balance can be stated as movement directives:

- “Find the Pelvic Extension,”
- “Relate it to the Lumbar Balance,”
- “Find the Horizontal Polarity,” and
- “Find the Upper Pole.”

It was obvious to me that everything we do in the Rolf work can be seen as pursuing one or more of these goals. Various details shifted, though, and my emphases changed.

Pelvic Extension

Like many fellow Rolf practitioners, I eventually came to feel that Rolf was excessively biased in favor of a lengthened lumbar spine. The illustrations in her book are extreme in this regard. I faithfully kept my “tail under and waistline back” for many years, until I discovered I needed more lumbar curve to avoid back pain.

Look at how Rolf coached the Pelvic Lift, that basic movement of pelvic extension: “Just turn your tail under . . . Now lift up . . . Now let your waistline come down in the back.” (She said the exact words were very important.) What did she mean by

“waistline?” I’ve heard she once said it referred to the whole back of the lumbar. But she also used it for the front of the spine at L5. Many of Rolf’s pelvic lifts emphasized this *sacral hinge*.

Nebadon’s concept of pelvic extension implied a subtly different sense of opening downward from the anterior lower lumbar through the center of the pelvic bowl through the feet into the ground. Less turning the tail under was involved. The upward extension involved a separation of forces, down and up, at the sacral hinge. The body can thus unroll all the way from the feet up through the diaphragm and all the way to the head. The arms can be open and balanced out across the horizontal plane, and the head can come up effortlessly.

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The Lumbar Balance

Nebadon was finding the functional balance of joints, and the torso was no exception. Each hinge of the spine involved three layers: the anterior abdominal wall, the anterior spine (psoas), and the posterior spine (spinal erectors, etc.). The anterior spine needs to be brought into relation with the posterior, and for this the abdominal wall needs to participate in the proper way. The overly-dominant rectus abdominis is only part of the picture: it needs to lift into each hinge (L1, L3, and L5), and for this it needs the transversus abdominis and abdominal obliques to be strong. The Rolf method is pretty good at releasing tissue, but not so good at strengthening it. Something else is needed. I began teaching an exercise of lifting the rectus with *fire breathing* and with tutoring the three lumbar hinges in bench work. This gives much more feeling of support in the abdominal wall. Contacting the iliopsoas in this context can be a lot less confrontational.

The Horizontal Polarity

Work with the arms and shoulders became much more important for me. Rolf’s initial arm work sought primarily to balance the shoulder girdle across the coronal plane. Not much happened with the rest of the arms until the integration sessions. With Expansional Balance it became clear that the arms and hands have an immense impact on the rest of the body. As a result I worked with them earlier and more often in my sessions. (I’m aware that many other practitioners have come to focus earlier and much more on arms as well.)

My recent work with walking (*Five-Awareness Walking*, a manuscript I have in preparation) has made the hands and arms seem more important still. Keeping the hands open and sensing has all kinds of effects, such as lightening the step, unifying the body, and even helping to organize the feet. It appears that we are quadrupeds even in our upright posture. The large area of the neocortex that registers sensation from the hands is within a synapse or two of four-fifths of the cortex, I have read. What a massive role it must play in our coordination! The hands especially seem to feed energy to the core, and when they are withdrawn from being in the world (for example, in the way elderly people often withdraw from contact through the hands and feet), the effects are obvious.

Greater attention to the counterrotation of shoulders and hips in walking also reveals a lot about rotations in the torso.

The Upper Pole

For the upper pole to extend effortlessly, the hinging of the cranium on the atlas is crucial. The cue from the Alexander method (“neck free to come forward and up”) is worth contemplating. There are essential reflexes in the neck such that when the head tilts backward, the neck tends to plunge forward at the thoracic hinge, and when the head hinges forward on the atlas (chin in) the thoracic hinge tends to release upward. The head has come “forward and up.” But of course, the neck must be free to allow the atlanto-occipital hinge to function, and the front of the anterior neck and upper chest must be free to respond. We can help with that.

These were the ways, some large and some small, in which Nebadon’s concept of Expansional Balance

modified my practice of the Ten Series and of integrated movement. After six years in practice I finally knew what I was doing, somewhat.

In the End

In the end I want to say something about how Rolf seemed to me. Whatever “improvements” I feel I have found, I never forget that I am following in the footsteps of a great teacher. She was a very spiritual, loving being. Compassion was behind it all: We knew “mama knows best,” and mama wanted the best for us. Sometimes I felt a profound spiritual presence in her touch. She had very little interest in the subjective experience of the person under her hands. She was very precise, but it was the precision of a surgeon. She was a material scientist, not a psychologist. That left much to develop in the touch communication. Nevertheless, hers was a vast compassion transmitted by a formidable intellect. To this day I carry an impression of her spirit and hear words that seem to come from her memory.

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Resources

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References

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