Reclaiming 'Pudeur': A Counterpoint to Rolfing® Culture

By Naomi Wynter-Vincent, PhD, Certified Advanced Rolfer™

I start with the strange word, 'pudeur'. It is, in truth, more a French word than an English one, and it is difficult to define. Nevertheless, and for personal reasons, I like it, and keep coming back to it. The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives the definition: "a sense of shame or embarrassment; bashfulness, modesty, or reticence."

I encountered the word for the first time when I applied to university: it was a big deal to get an interview, but I really had no idea what university was, or how to prepare. A male professor asked me about Jane Austen (we had studied *Pride and Prejudice* in high school), and then asked me, pop-culturally, what I'd thought of the recent BBC adaptation that (infamously) featured a scene (https://tinyurl.com/LakeScene) where the then little-known British actor, Colin Firth, as Darcy, arriving back at his estate manfully sweaty after a horse ride, dives fully clothed into a lake to cool himself down. As he emerges, glistening, he locks eyes with Elizabeth, who previously turned down his offer of marriage. The sexual tension is palpable.

"What did I think of this rendition of Jane Austen's world?", the professor asked. Pretty good, I thought: I was seventeen years old and frankly besotted with Darcy and Elizabeth both. "But do you think it respects the *pudeur* of Jane Austen's world?" The word danced in my brain: I thought I understood it (it sounds a little bit like *prudish*, after all), but really, I did not. There was a further strand to the conversation, a yet more personal one. I had been asked about my other achievements, hobbies, challenges. Gamefully, and honestly, I disclosed that I had been taking adult swimming lessons, which was challenging for two reasons: I was as terrified of being seen in a swimsuit as I was of the water. Professor Tony Tanner wondered whether my pudeur – modesty, discomfort (and unwillingness to be sexually rated: it was known that the male lifeguards at the pool rated women's bodies on a scale from one to ten) – bore some relation to Jane Austen's pudeur in leaving out what the BBC adaptation had made (frankly enjoyably) explicit: that even in the early nineteenth century, people were naked beneath their clothes. I don't know how I replied, but I didn't get in (that year).

Nowadays I am still nervous of water and only a little more enthusiastic about being seen in a bikini or other swimsuit or my underwear. This difficulty has put me on a collision course with some Rolfing Structural Integration (SI) instructors on more than one occasion, and was a major source of hesitation in applying to do the Basic Training. I simply wasn't sure that I could put myself through the exposure, the feelings of discomfort and shame, the dissociative horror of being looked at in my underwear, simultaneously over-exposed and socially vanishing: all the conceits of my social self (competent, attractive, stylish) undermined by my physical reality. One member of Rolfing faculty told me unpleasantly that if I was going to keep being this way, I shouldn't train to be a Rolfer. Then, as now, I thought he was wrong, and for the same reasons I gave to him squarely on that occasion: if you systematically exclude people who are less comfortable with body exposure from the training, you do Rolfing SI – and its potential clients – a disservice. Rolfing SI can be life-changing for every body, and it can offer something very special to people who don't always 'feel good in their skin', or who are less used to physical exposure. Knowing what that feels like helps me to be a better Rolfer.

There are some things I've observed around this topic. Firstly: gender (and the way that race intersects with gender), and the pressure that falls disproportionately on women to present as unchangingly slim and nubile across the lifespan and to minimize the cosmetic effects of pregnancy, childbirth, and menopause. I should add that I do not deny the reality of different bodily expectations placed on men, and especially young men. I used to say laughingly that the Basic Training was like "Weight Watchers times ten" (that business used to trade heavily on the motivating factor of having to 'weigh in' – literally – every week in front of a group of one's peers). I trained in Rolfing SI in a modular course, and I have never been so motivated to step up the exercise and lose weight. I remember the tall and lanky male student who offered unhelpfully that I might want to do some crunches to tone my abdomen; I remember the many, many visits to the beauty salon on the day before class, the waxing, shaving, the purchasing of 'Rolfing underpants'. (It cannot just be me who has so many clients who talk about their special Rolfing-day underpants!) There is a rich seam of what I believe it would be ungenerous to describe only as 'neurotic' behavior among our Rolfing clients, and among many Rolfers. But we run counter, by and large, to a prevailing discourse within our community that takes for granted the normalcy of 'casually being seen in one's underwear'.

There is, of course, a practical dimension to this: we do need to see our clients' physical structure, and we do (in a training context) learn from seeing the diversity of bodies and movement without the distractions of clothing and shoes; it is generally easier to work on bare skin than on clothed. Yet there is also a cultural, historical, and even a political dimension to the free-and-easy minimally clothed hegemon of our community. Rolfing SI grew up as an established body of work and as a profession in the context of the 1960s California counterculture, in a land of sea and sunshine that my cloud-bruised British eyes can barely imagine, with strong (and positive) values around the natural body and the countering of sexual repression advocated by Reich; around the cultures of yoga, dance, and outdoorsy exercise; and around notions of 'freedom' stamped first with an American tinge, and later (in the establishment of some of the major training institutes outside the US) with German and Brazilian accents: all three places, I'd argue, with strong cultures of naturism and body exposure.

As Rolfing SI grows in global public awareness, I argue that we may need to give more thought to what we, as Rolfers, can take for granted as the result of the prevailing discourse in our training culture. There are as many different reasons as there are people to feel challenged by bodily

exposure, and I'm keen to stress that not all of these reasons are pathological. What I like in the word pudeur is the way that it retains these multiple and intertwined senses in which preferring to keep one's clothes on – or feeling discomfited in contexts of greater exposure – partake both of aspects that one might rightly seek to address (questions of shame, questions of inadequacy), alongside aspects such as a personal, political, or cultural preference for modesty that is not necessarily to be wished away.

In my case I took up a strategy – but only after receiving my initial certification and gaining access to my chosen profession – of describing myself as *body dysmorphic*, but recognising that this tended to the further pathologization of something that is more complex, more cultural, more chosen – and actually more hopeful than the quasi-medical term of 'body dysmophia' conveys. The UK National Health Service defines body dysmorphia as "a mental health condition where a person spends a lot of time worrying about flaws in their appearance. These flaws are often unnoticeable to others. . . . Having [body dysmorphia] does not mean you are vain or self-obsessed. It can be very upsetting and have a big impact on your life" (www.nhs.uk/conditions/body-dysmorphia/).

I have found 'body dysmorphia' a convenient shorthand to communicate something to my colleagues. It says, in part: "Please take seriously that this is not just me 'being difficult'; this is something lifelong; this is something *managed*." It also says: "This is not something that I haven't reflected on in depth or sought help with." Using a label allows me a degree of modesty too in the moment of self-disclosure, a reserve or pudeur that is not only a token of my Britishness: the implication that there's more to say, but I don't have to tell you everything right now. The phrase has been met, on occasion, with incomprehension or even the admonishment that I should be done with my 'personal issues' and not bring them to class. I tried to explain that this was precisely what I was trying to do: that I was desperately keen to avoid situations where my 'issues' – my pudeur – made class difficult for me or others around me. "Don't pick me for the walking-in-underwear exercise," I explain; "I'll show up for the arm-work practicum or even the nose work."

So far, so individual a problem: perhaps. There is a place for discussion here of the broader societal effects of specifically gendered beauty norms as well as a 'lookist' culture that affects both men and women (and those who identify as neither) and which predates our selfie-obsessed times by several hundred years (or several thousand). Trans people – and we might argue (I intend this non-glibly) that all Rolfing bodies are bodies in transition – might be more likely to find this question resonant, as indeed might many other people who have experienced their bodies as sites of difference, pain, objectification, or judgement: among them differently abled people, survivors of trauma, and people who have lost or gained significant weight.

I also wonder about cultures where 'modesty' is hegemonic (encouraged, sometimes mandated), sometimes for religious reasons, and where having men and women undressing together would create an absolute bar to training. These are not niche concerns: one can imagine large sections of the African continent, of the Indian subcontinent, and the Middle East being affected by this. I remember an occasion in my childhood where my aunt (who was born and grew up in colonial India) rushed to stop me seeing her in the *nanga-punga* (a Hindu colloquialism for being naked), even while being (to contemporary eyes) fairly decently clothed in a petticoat.

I live in a town with a large Muslim population, and occasionally have female clients who wear *hijab* and other forms of modest dress. I can imagine that they choose to see me over my local male colleague for reasons of modesty, and I send information to all my clients in advance about what they can expect in their first Rolfing session, including the traditional body reading. I have no doubt that many clients find the first occasion of changing down to their underwear and standing in front of me a challenging one, and I invite clients to let me know if they find it stressful. I believe that the intimacy and exposure of the Rolfing experience can be deeply valuable, reassuring, and healing, and that we can offer our clients containment and information not only through our touch, but in our looking and seeing the body from the modern Rolfing perspective of the client's resources, strengths, and objective 'normality' (how many clients fear that they are not 'normal'?). To that I might add: their *beauty* – hesitating only out of the recognition that beauty is so laden with the baggage of 'good looks'. It is a cliché to say that beauty is more than skin (or fascia!) deep, but it is true: one of the gifts that Rolfers can give to their clients is a sense of their beauty, properly understood.

I want to end with the recognition that these issues are not unknown to Rolfers, and that I've met (and learned from) many sensitive and skillful practitioners who have discovered their own ways to meet their clients in their 'embarrassment, bashfulness, modesty, or reticence' around bodily exposure, be that for personal, societal, or cultural reasons. These include Rolfers who work primarily with clients wearing thin layers, or who recognize the value of blankets and sheets beyond the need to stay warm; they recognize also the role that may be played by lighting, window coverings, and the presence or absence of large mirrors in the treatment room. We might re-describe all of these as ways in which we respect and work with the client's nervous system to establish an environment of physical and emotional safety. In the busyness of the training practicum, I've found that we sometimes neglect these 'niceties', and this is, in part, an appeal for these questions to be taken more seriously, handled more sensitively, in the training context. As Rolfers, we aim to work transformatively with clients' habitual ways of being – and feeling safe – in their world. While we may disagree with what we consider to be their limiting self-beliefs, or lament the social contexts that lead to discomfort with body image or exposure, being just plain 'irritated' by clients who don't gladly strip down to their underwear is not a productive strategy toward building client trust and encouraging new ways of being. Over the years I have tentatively made friends with my pudeur, maintaining (as I told my interphase interviewers) that while I'd like to feel more comfortable in my body, I am unlikely to be converted to naturism any time soon.

Naomi Wynter-Vincent is a Certified Advanced Rolfer and holds a PhD in psychoanalysis and literature. Her first book, Wilfred Bion and Literary Criticism, *is forthcoming from Routledge. Her websites are www.londonrolfing.com and www.naomiwyntervincent.com.*