# The Gentry Notes as Critical Rolfing® History

## An Interview with Rolf Scholar Jeff Linn

By Szaja Gottlieb, Certified Advanced Rolfer™ and Jeff Linn, Body-work Practitioner and Rolf Scholar

**ABSTRACT** *The notes taken by Byron Gentry in a class with Ida Rolf circa 1955 give a bird's-eye view into the evolution of the Rolfing ten-session series (or 'Recipe') and the thinking of Dr. Rolf. Archivist Jeff Linn discusses the 'Gentry Notes' as the first historical documents that can be relied on in explaining the development of structural integration (SI) as opposed to what might be called hearsay evidence previously.*

**Szaja Gottlieb:**

I don't think a lot of people are aware of who Byron Gentry was and what the 'Gentry Notes' are. So, a general description of who Byron Gentry was and how the notes came about and then how you obtained them might be a pretty good place to start.

**Jeff Linn:**

Byron Gentry was a chiropractor who lived and practiced in Oklahoma. He was a member of that cohort of legendary early trainees that were a part of the contingent of osteopaths/chiropractors that Ida first took on as her students. Gentry was trained by Ida in the early 1950s. According to a handwritten note by his wife on the front of one of the sets of notes, Byron first trained with Dr. Rolf in 1953 in Dallas, Texas. That was the first class that he attended. He was also kind of an unusual character with some psychic ability, and this is part of what I think attracted Rolf to him. Of course, he had a chiropractic certificate or a degree so she might have also seen that as lending credibility.

**SG:** When did you receive the Notes?

**JL:** I was thinking about it. I'm pretty sure it was post-2005, around the time that Gentry's stepdaughter Jane Reynolds passed away. That would be about the time that I acquired them. Apparently Gentry's notes wound up where 99% of notes wind up, forgotten in desk drawers, file cabinets, and storage boxes. Byron maintained his relationship with Ida Rolf and later with the principals at the Rolf Institute®, primarily Richard Stenstadvold and Emmett Hutchins, for many, many years. When they went to the Guild for Structural Integration, Byron maintained the association with them. So, they maintained their contact and friendship over the years. When he passed away, his stepdaughter, Jane, who was a Guild practitioner, was in charge of sorting out the personal belongings of her recently deceased stepfather. She stumbled across the Notes.

**SG:** I see.

**JL:** So, being that she was associated with the Guild, she packed the notes up and sent them to Emmett and Richard. They forwarded them to me. At the time I was getting most anything of archival or historical interest at the Guild. This was largely because I was doing archival work for both the Rolf Institute [RISI] and the Guild at the time.

**SG:** Right. Okay. So how many sets of notes are there?

**JL:** There is one set of notes dated January 11th, 1955, a second set dated November 29th to December 18th, 1954, and a third set that are undated and only talk about the first three hours. Then there's a fourth set with the date April 30th, 1957 on the front page. The 1957 notes reflect what I'm now calling the 'modern recipe'. The 'modern recipe' is anything that is recognizable as what Rolfing SI was in the 60s and 70s. If we wanted to use an exemplar, we could say the description of the Recipe in the monograph *Psycho-logics and Posture* (Lawson-Wood 1958) would be a good source for what could be called a 'modern recipe'.

**SG:** Okay. When you peruse all the notes going from the earliest to the later, we might call this a formative period of development since there is a change in the the substance of the sessions, particularly sessions five, six, and seven between 1954 and 1957.

**JL:** It appears to be. Prior to this, our event horizon about Rolfing history with regard to the 'Recipe' was pretty much around 1956 or 1957. *Psycho-logics and Posture* in 1958 and the 1956 LA notes are the earliest notes that were in the RISI library. That was as far back as it went, but those both reflected a 'modern recipe' so they didn't really tell us anything about how the Recipe developed.

**SG:** Correct.

**JL:** The Gentry Notes inform us that the ten-session series developed in ways that are different than people are fond of reporting . . .

**SG:** The usual narrative being?

**JL:** The general narrative, which I'm going to call a linear-additive model, is that Dr. Rolf, influenced by yoga, started

out working with people with some kind of yogic techniques and goals in mind. The next step in the narrative is the influence of Amy Cochran. Because Cochran was an osteopath, what is implied is that Rolf learned some of her manipulative techniques with Cochran. Usually the genesis of the Recipe is described as something that Rolf came up with to teach her method. What follows is the idea that there were originally five to seven sessions that developed linearly, or successively, then others were added for various reasons until you arrived at ten. In this model, the 'container' of ten had no significance beyond being the number of steps it took to execute the process to Dr. Rolf's satisfaction.

The development of the Recipe may very well have been a linear-additive process prior to 1953, but it was also clearly established as a ten-step process by that year. The Gentry Notes suggest that somehow Dr. Rolf came up with the idea that ten sessions were the container that she was going to use. The recipes in the various notes are described somewhat differently yet maintain the consistency of ten sessions. She started out with ten sessions. She wound up with a somewhat different – not a radically different, but a somewhat different – set of ten. For example, the Seventh Hour was added after the establishment of the ten, but the recipe didn't become an eleven-session process, it stayed ten. The Gentry Notes suggest that the choice of 'ten sessions' had significance beyond coincidence or chance.

**SG:** Exactly. As you're describing it, I have to say it almost feels to me visionary in a sense, where an artist will see an image and then fill in the details driven by an original inspiration. That's really quite a different narrative than might be expected, mainly because we're looking at it from the front end backwards. I know you have some ideas about where that ten-session container came from.

**JL:** Can we get back to that question in a minute? Because I have something else I wanted to add here.

**SG:** Sure.

**JL:** We can't say with any certainty how she landed on ten. I really want to emphasize that, because I'm about to speculate about some of my own opinions about this. Some of this revolves around the Armenian mystic George Gurdjieff. We don't even know whether Dr. Rolf actually studied with G.I. Gurdjieff or knew his work. But since we know she spent time at Coombe Springs with J.G. Bennett [a prominent student of Gurdjieff], we might assume that her association with Bennett may have been as a result of her interest and/or participation in the Gurdjieff work. But we don't know it for certain. She never talked about it.

**SG:** I understand. I didn't know much about Bennett, so I went to Wikipedia and looked him up. Coombe Springs was founded by Bennett and his wife in 1946 and was called the Institute for Comparative Study of History, Philosophy and the Sciences. It seems that Bennett (and maybe Dr. Rolf also) was focused on integrating science and philosophy or metaphysics. As you indicated, he was a student of Gurdjieff. This metaphysical background to Dr. Rolf's development is not usually discussed. Recently, just out of curiosity, I typed in Dr. Rolf's name and Edgar Cayce, and there it was, an announcement in a Virginia Beach newspaper that Dr. Ida Rolf was lecturing at the Cayce Institute. This was around 1950.

**JL:** Clearly Dr. Rolf had metaphysical interests.

**SG:** Clearly.

**JL:** Years ago, when I first started doing archival work, I was listening to a set of tapes that I had acquired from Richard and Emmett. They were simply labeled "Ida Rolf" and they turned out to be this set of tapes from the River House classes around 1970 that were labeled A and B series (these were eventually released). I'm listening to these tapes and was surprised to hear none of the metaphysical content I was familiar with from some Guild classes. At the time I used to have lunch with Peter Melchior occasionally, just to kind of hang out and catch up and ask him questions. One day I said, "You know, these tapes are really fascinating. They're answering so many of my questions." I said, "But you know, the thing is, I don't hear her talking about this 'metaphysical' stuff that comes up in class." When you listen to Rolf's taped lectures and classes, with the exception of a couple of occasions, none of this stuff comes up. In fact, she oftentimes actively discourages it.

Peter's response was very funny. He looked at me and he said, "Well, I think most of that stuff came up over chicken fried steak at Abbey Place." Abbey Place was where Richard and Emmett lived and was, for a time, the headquarters of the Rolf Institute when they first came to town in the early seventies. Peter's implication was that when Ida was in Boulder she would go over to Richard and Emmett's house for chicken fried steak and private 'metaphysical' discussion.

**SG:** Yes. I know that. It never came up when I was certified in 2001 except a slight mention by Michael Salveson.

**JL:** What she hoped to do, and this plays into the idea of what might have been going on in the development of the Recipe; she seemed very invested in keeping the actual nature and origins of the Recipe's development under wraps and only wanted people to really look at the final outcome. She wanted people in 1970 to look at the Recipe in 1970, not to look at the historical antecedents, so she didn't talk about them much. Maybe she was a little embarrassed, as a scientist, about the development of this process. For example, if you look in various religious traditions, particularly in the West, ten is a number that represents various things but often is considered to represent completion. If it became known that she'd picked a number, like ten, because of its 'metaphysical', occult, or spiritual implications, the scientific community might dismiss her out of hand. If she had done this, if she had landed on ten sessions for psychospiritual reasons, it's distinctly possible that, as a scientist, there was a certain conflict for her. That could be the reason she played up the scientific aspect of her work and downplayed her metaphysical sources (at least in public classes) when presenting her work.

**SG:** You previously mentioned to me Dr. Rolf had metaphysical conversations with Emmett Hutchins

**JL:** Dr. Rolf once told him, probably because he was the most metaphysically inclined of all her students at the time, "Look in Western metaphysics, and look at the Recipe as a seven-step process plus three or a nine-step process plus one." Emmett, who was most familiar with astrology, focused much of his energy there. He eventually discovered the work of Arthur Young, most famous as the inventor of the Bell helicopter, and his 'theory of process', which is a seven-step process with astrological/Kabbalistic underpinnings. But there's a lot more to Western metaphysics and spirituality than just astrology, and my conjecture is that she may have wanted

him to explore Gurdjieff's concepts of the Law of Seven and the Law of Three, along with the Enneagram, which is a nine-pointed symbol with the whole symbol representing a unity of one. In Gurdjieff's system these laws and symbols describe universal processes that can describe (or govern if you wish) all phenomena. It is possible that Rolf wanted him to look into Gurdjieff's system, and this may be why she suggested that he study the Recipe as a seven-step process plus three or a nine-step process plus one.

**SG:** I can imagine that she must have been worried about the metaphysical background to her work becoming public. She certainly must have been worried about being considered a quack. Don't forget at this time, I think, also, she might have been afraid that what happened to Wilhelm Reich could happen to her. She didn't want to look like a total flake and yet she had to protect herself from a lot of different angles. She had this tightrope to walk, to be legitimate scientifically yet not threatening to the establishment. When I interviewed Michael Salveson a few years ago, he said she was definitely into the metaphysics but she didn't want people to know about it very much.

**JL:** To some degree, Rolf was influenced by these metaphysical ideas. To what degree . . . we don't know and probably, at this point, can't know. It's probably too late barring the discovery of her 'secret diaries' or some such thing.

**SG:** So, my question is whether . . . I mean, you automatically assume that it must be the Recipe that she was practicing already, or what's your thought?

**JL:** I don't know what she was doing. I've got some thoughts about what she might have been doing and we can get into those. Now, did it start with ten sessions? We have no idea. The story as told by Rosemary Feitis in *Ida Rolf Talks About Rolfing and Physical Reality* (Rolf 1978, 7-8) is that she started doing manual therapy with yoga as the context. But, to me, that's never completely held water. What part of yoga had a manipulative component? Even modern yoga 'adjustments' aren't anything like the kind of manipulation used in 1960-1970 style Rolfing! My own thoughts on this have to do with a little-known Ayurvedic physician named Dewanchand Varma.

When I was doing archival work for the Rolf Institute and moving the library into its new home, any number of small things fell out from between books and inside of books and out from behind bookcases. One of the things I discovered was a little booklet, actually more of a pamphlet or a monograph, entitled *The Human Machine and its Forces* by Dewanchand Varma, "Pioneer of Pranotherapy." I'm looking at this thing and thinking, "This is familiar." Then, I realize that in a workshop that I had done with the British osteopath Leon Chaitow, he had mentioned that Varma's work, as represented in this booklet, was the origin of his uncles' development of European neuromuscular therapy. I thought, "Now, that's interesting. What's it doing here in the RISI Library?" I mean, Varma is obscure, most likely even in his time, but, apparently, he was well known enough to be practicing and teaching in Paris and London.

Leon Chaitow reports in the forward that he wrote for the recently published book *Pranotherapy – The Origins of Polarity Therapy and European Neuromuscular Technique* that Ida Rolf studied with Varma in London. This was something that he got from his uncle, who had studied directly with Varma. So, we have a somewhat reliable report from a very reliable individual that Rolf studied with an Ayurvedic physician sometimes in the 1920s or 1930s.

When you look at Varma's pamphlet, he's promoting something that he called Pranotherapy. This Pranotherapy was a manipulative technique where he looked for what he called 'nodules' in the tissue and then using a particular style and kind of contact to, I don't know if he used this word, but essentially what he's suggesting is you're dissolving the nodules. So, after reading this I think, "Huh. This is proto-Rolfing!"

**SZ:** Interesting.

**JL:** Varma was apparently looking for tight places in the tissue. He had a larger vision that incorporated working with nodes or nodules to balance the prana (life energy) as it flows through the chakras and the nadis, etc. His vision of the body was something more than, "I'm going to fix your back, neck, or knee." He was thinking about creating a balance of energies out of which healing can emerge. This was certainly part of Rolf's original idea about her work, in her case the 'energy' being gravity.

She does make mention on various audio tapes of "yog medicine men." Emmett, in classes that I was in with him, actually repeated this, that she talked about "yog medicine men." I always kind of wondered, "What did she mean by 'yog medicine men'?" Then, I saw this pamphlet and I looked at it and I thought, "Oh, this guy was an Ayurvedic physician." That's a perfect moniker for an Ayurvedic physician in the 1930s: a "yog medicine man."

When I contacted Leon after I found this, he said, "I'm very surprised. That's a very rare pamphlet, but that is definitely the same pamphlet and the same man that my uncle studied with." So, when I look at this evidence, I think maybe this is what she was doing. Maybe she spent a decade or fifteen years or what not doing something along the lines of Varma's Pranotherapy. I can imagine that over time she began to develop something on her own, perhaps something emerged as she worked as it does for many of us.

**SG:** And then there is Amy Cochran, who everyone points to as the osteopathic influence.

**JL:** On all the hours of audiotape I've listened to I don't remember Ida ever mentioning Cochran, and yet Dorothy Nolte (an early Rolfer and movement teacher) reported to me that clearly the work was influenced by Cochran. Here's the thing. If anything comes out of this interview other than the world gets to find out there are notes that tell us more about the history of the development of Rolfing, I would like people to be clear that, first of all, Rolf did not rip off Cochran. The Rolf work is clearly an amalgam of a variety of ideas such as the Alexander work, yoga, etc. If you look at Ida Thomas' book *Physio-synthesis* (Thomas 1998), there are clearly techniques and ideas, like the pelvic lift, that Rolf adopted but there's nothing that indicates a ten-session process in there. Cochran influenced her but so did many others.

**SG:** Agreed. The thing here is there have always been these discussions about how Dr. Rolf arrived at her work; most of it, from a historian's viewpoint, would go under the category of hearsay, especially when discussing the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s. But the interesting thing to me is that the Gentry notes, along with the 1954 essay she wrote called "Dynamic Process Integrity," give us a line of demarcation, a line in the sand so that as historians and archivists we can refer to a primary source, documentation that substantiates new information about how

the Recipe was formed. Even though the contents of the sessions might have changed somewhat, you can see from both the notes and the essay that all her main ideas are pretty well formed. I mean, to me, that essay could have been written twenty years later or thirty years later. It still would have spoken directly to a potential Rolfer. Though some of the language is a little bit different, like words like 'homeostasis', 'equilibrium' – I don't think she used these terms so much later on down the road – but the ideas are fundamentally the same.

**JL:** I am particularly interested in how Dr. Rolf framed her idea. Much is made about Ida Rolf's association with general semantics. Everybody in the early Rolf trainings heard about general semantics. What they generally heard was the sound bite, "The map is not the territory." But general semantics actually had a significant cultural influence. *Science and Sanity*, which was Korzybski's magnum opus, was published in 1933 and had a very significant influence, but the thing is, people are confused or ill-informed about what general semantics actually is. This interview is not about that, but if people really want to know what it is, there's stuff out there. But the point is, most in the Rolf community, with a couple of significant exceptions, know nothing about general semantics. Yet, the fact of the matter is, this was a hugely influential idea system in Ida Rolf's life and the development of her work. We know that she studied it with Sam Bois in the early fifties. It is Bois' ideas that most commonly turned up in the early classes. If you look at many of the class notes from the early period, they frequently start out talking about ideas in general semantics, that if you start with the same assumptions, you're going to wind up with the same conclusions, so we have to start with different assumptions. So, for example, instead of thinking of the body as a bag for chemical processes, thinking about the body as a physical object in space brings you to a different set of conclusions. This was Rolf's basic idea, she was viewing the body as a physical object in, to quote how I have heard her phrase it in recordings, "three-space and gravity."

**SG:** I understand.

**JL:** I'm not arguing that you have to study general semantics.

**SG:** No. I get it.

**JL:** What I'm arguing is that this was an integral part of her teaching and how she framed it.

**SG:** I agree with you. I absolutely agree. I think your framing idea extends to even how she conceptualized the ten-session series.

**JL:** To me what's interesting is the fact that she was a chemist. She was a biochemist and she saw the limits of chemistry in explaining what it was that she was curious about, about bodies. This is part of how she wound up pursuing a manual project. Now, chemists traffic in formulas. That's how you get chemistry to work. They have formulas and they are precise. That's how you get a particular chemical reaction to occur. There's precision in the chemistry and people have formulas.

So, when she developed the ten-session series, if Rolf had wanted to say, "This is a formula," she knew what that word meant. She chose to use the word 'recipe'. This wasn't a convention that came along later; we can hear her talk about it on audiotapes. At least in the late 1960s or early 1970s, she talks about this idea of a recipe like a chef. Prior to becoming a bodyworker, I worked as a professional cook/chef so I think I have some insight on this.

From a chef's perspective, a recipe isn't a precise formula but more of a heuristic device that gives you a rough approximation of how to get a definable end result. It's flexible and adaptable based on the circumstances. It's a device to get you in the ballpark of a definable result while allowing you to adjust a host of variables. A cook will use a recipe religiously like a formula, precisely this much of each ingredient, cooked for precisely this long, etc. Whereas somebody who has a lot of experience, a chef, is going to go, "Oh, a little of this, a little of that. Let's back this out. Let's put this in. Let's make this a little moister by doing this," and so on. Being a chef (or a bodyworker) is a highly improvisational endeavor!

About three or four years ago, I took up the hobby of baking my own bread. So, for three or four years, I've been doing that kind of religiously, three or four loaves a week. What has emerged for me is that now I rarely use a recipe anymore. I'm paying attention to the consistency of the dough and that sort of thing rather than the precision of the recipe. I stop kneading the dough now when the consistency seems right, and that sort of thing. I haven't thrown out the recipe, but I have allowed it to evolve through observation and experimentation.

And again, she is the one that chose to use the word 'recipe'. We have to consider that she chose that word over the word 'formula' for a particular reason. I think it was because she wanted to get across that this was not a precise thing. I don't think she was saying that you use the Recipe until you cast it aside. I think what she was really saying was you use this recipe until you begin to understand what's embedded in the recipe, and that you can then 'riff' off of what's in there.

So, for example, if I was to try and make a loaf of bread by taking three cups of flour and putting it in the oven for two hours and then taking it out of the oven and adding the yeast to some hot water and dumping that into the flour and starting to knead it, I wouldn't get bread. I don't know what I'd get but I wouldn't get bread. There's a definable process that has to occur in order to get 'bread' that's embedded in any good recipe. If I don't do those steps in that particular order, then I'm not going to get bread, but within that larger vision of the necessary components of the process, there are variations that can take place and you still get bread.

**SG:** So, it's kind of interesting what you are saying that she approached her ideas more like a chef rather than a chemist. I wonder why that was. I mean, it's pretty obvious, particularly from some of the metaphysical concerns that she had, that she certainly was not a strict scientist after a certain point. Certainly, there was some shift. Sam Johnson in his article "Ida Rolf and the Two Paradigms" (2007) describes some of the forces going on in European science at the time and that it might have affected Dr. Rolf who was there. According to Johnson, Einsteinian physics led to the concept of 'wholism', which he implies influenced Dr. Rolf in the development of her ideas regarding health.

**JL:** Well, we often forget that Ida Rolf was a homemaker in the 1920s through the 1940s. This was a time before microwaves, prepared food, etc. Women who were homemakers (and most were to some degree or another) had to learn to cook, and learning to cook involved some degree of observation, adaptation, and experimentation. But if we want to understand Ida Rolf and how she may have developed this work, it's useful to expand our vision so it's far more culturally

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contextual, and we have to look at what else was going on in the world that might have fed into Ida Rolf's thinking.

**SZ:** Oh, absolutely!

**JL:** For me one of the first things that comes to mind is World War I. If we start thinking historically about Ida Rolf, one of the first things that comes to my mind is, "Wow! How was she impacted by the Spanish flu and World War I?" I mean, she has a front-row seat to watch the world go insane and slaughter tens of millions of people for a few yards of land. Then, she watches the biggest epidemic since the Black Death decimate a significant portion of the population of the world. These were viscerally impactful events at the time. As a biochemist, she must have felt particularly frustrated by the inability of science and modern medicine to stop the onslaught of the virus. She was most likely as disturbed as many were by the fact that enlightened, rational thinking had not prevented WWI. These events had a tremendous impact on both the personal and collective psyche of the time.

**SG:** It's easy to forget that Dr. Rolf was part of the Lost Generation. She was actually three years older than Hemingway. The post-WWI period was a time of extreme disillusionment with the achievements of Western civilization, especially science. She must have been part of that, especially since she traveled a great deal in Europe in the 1920s. She must have been looking for another way.

**JL:** Historical forces play an important role. Rolfing wouldn't even be a footnote if it wasn't for Esalen Institute.

**SG:** Agreed.

**JL:** Without the 1960s, what Ed Maupin likes to call 'the great neo-romantic renaissance', Rolfing likely wouldn't exist. Without the incredibly fertile ground of Esalen, Rolfing probably would not exist. I think that it's important to keep in mind that larger historical forces and contexts do play a role in any kind of historical development.

**SG:** Which is why, in my opinion, these documents are so important. They are concrete timelines and give us a bird's-eye view into events and also, most importantly, the thinking process of Dr. Rolf as she developed structural integration. It would be great to get the rest of the documents out into the community.

**JL:** I agree. The Gentry Notes provide a singular perspective on the early development of the Rolf work and inform practitioners of the documented history of the development of the work. For the record, a copy of the notes was placed in the RISI Library at the time I received them. So, like the Varma pamphlet and other material, they have been available; people just weren't aware of them.

**SG:** Well, maybe this interview is a first step. Thank you for sharing your deep knowledge of Dr. Rolf's history.

**JL:** My pleasure.

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*Jeff Linn began his studies in bodywork in 1986 at the Institute of Psycho-Structural Balancing (IPSB) in San Diego. This included studying structural integration with Dr Edward Maupin during this time. He continued his studies with Peter Melchior and Emmett Hutchins at the Guild for Structural Integration (GSI) from 1992 to 1999 during which time he was instrumental in moving the Rolf Institute® and GSI into the twenty-first century by developing a digital image comparison system to replace polaroid photos in the classroom. He became a Certified Rolfer in 1997 and a Certified Advanced Rolfer in 2001. He taught bodywork (including SI) at IPSB from 1988 to 1994 and at GSI from 2001 to 2013. During his time at both RISI and GSI he engaged in historical research and archival work with a focus on the development of the Recipe and Ida's contemporaneous teaching.*

*Szaja Gottlieb is a Certified Advanced Rolfer and the Research/Science Editor of this Journal.*