

Instructor Dialogue

Thoughts About the Ten Series

By Bethany Ward, Rolfing® and Rolf Movement® Instructor, and Larry Koliha, Rolfing Instructor



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ABSTRACT *Larry Koliha and Bethany Ward, Rolfing Structural Integration (SI) instructors and also a couple, share thoughts about the Ten Series, both in teaching and in practice.*

Larry Koliha:

I firmly believe that what Dr. Rolf investigated and came up with is a fantastic model. The Ten Series works with all the regions and layers of the body. It addresses not only the body, but also how clients perceive themselves and the actions that they take. It gives clients options for change that they didn't know existed. Our clients are literally taking a tour of their own bodies and exploring how things work and discovering new territories for awareness. I do not know of any other modality out there that works with people this way and has the same impact.

As you can guess, I use the Ten Series constantly in my practice and work with the 'Recipe' and Rolf Movement education in each session. I have almost all new clients sign up for at least three sessions to start with, and most go on to finish all ten sessions. There are very few people who have started a Ten Series who didn't find it beneficial in

some way or another. I firmly believe new practitioners should use the Ten Series for several years.

Bethany Ward:

As you know, I am also a huge fan of the Ten Series in my private practice and as a way of teaching this work. The Ten Series provides an ideal context for learning what the work can do and refining the manual and perceptual skills needed to be really effective. A Rolfing education is unlike much of the learning we encountered in [conventional] school. When we study math or history we use our rational, cortical brain to memorize and make connections, but when we learn Rolfing we need to tap into much more of the whole person, the body-brain, if you will. How do you teach someone to expand their sense of touch, interoceptive awareness, or the ability to sense others' patterns in their own soma? One of the best ways is to revisit the same material over a wide range and

large sample of encounters. When used regularly, the Ten Series gives Rolfigers the opportunity to assimilate kinesthetic data needed to refine sensorimotor skills and develop intuition.

Until you’ve practiced the Ten Series unadulterated, you can’t know what it can do.

BW: One of the great things about Rolfigers™ is the rich variety of our backgrounds. Many of us come to Rolfiging SI with other meaningful therapeutic skills. After completing the Basic Training, it is tempting to want to incorporate it immediately with other modalities such as physical therapy, chiropractic, or massage. While all of these modalities are valuable, and clients often benefit from a combined approach, I strongly urge new practitioners to practice this work unadulterated. It’s the only way to learn what is possible with our structural and movement approaches. When our skills are new, there’s no way to have the depth of knowledge or basic mastery to integrate the work in a meaningful way.

I don’t expect practitioners to forget what they’ve previously learned, but I’d encourage them to avoid mixing modalities too soon. For a couple of years, I’d advise practitioners to keep the Ten Series sessions intentionally distinct from those of other modalities in order to become fluid in the interrelationship between Rolfiging assessment, strategy, intervention, and reassessment in each session. Larry, I think one of the reasons we love the Ten Series so much is because we are fluent in it. It’s fun to speak a language when you’re fluent and immersion in a language is one of the best ways to learn it.

‘Selling’ the Ten Series

LK: Another thing I commonly hear practitioners say about the Ten Series is that they can’t ‘sell’ it. It’s too big of a commitment for a lot of clients. This can be particularly hard in some areas where Rolfiging SI is even less well known.

I recommend that practitioners emphasize doing the first three sessions [of the Series] with clients. Even after all of these years, I encourage clients to simply to plan on doing the first three sessions because they address almost all client complaints in some way or another. Then focus on the sessions. In each session, draw attention to how work in one area affects other

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areas of the body. From session one, use words and touch to teach the client about the interconnectedness of the body. So, if the client has pain in the neck, she learns to track how opening the chest, softening a holding in a shoulder, or easing pelvic strain impacts the neck. Over the three sessions, clients start to appreciate how each session builds on itself and how work in seemingly unrelated areas is getting them toward their goals. Without stating it directly, working with the interconnectedness of the body sells the Ten Series. I almost never have a client come in for one session and then quit. I think I’ve had that happen only a few times. While I work within the Ten Series, my focus early on is simply on the first three sessions.

BW: I’m the same. Unless a client comes in asking for the Series, I tend to take a one to three to ten approach. I explain why the ten sessions make sense, but encourage the client simply to try a session to see if the work and my approach resonate. If the client wants to continue, I usually recommend doing two more sessions and reassessing at the end. I explain that after session three is a logical place to stop or to decide to do the rest of the series. While most clients continue, I like to present it this way because it allows me to start introducing the idea that our work is client-directed. Giving options keeps the client from feeling pressured and creates a safe container. It also requires the client to pay attention to his or her experience and take responsibility for the process. Options, safety, and participation are all elements I’ll build upon in a Ten Series.

Will you do a single Rolfiging session that’s not in the Series? Do you do fix-it work?

LK: Oh yeah. Of course I do one-off sessions with post-ten clients, but I am

also happy to work with clients who do not want a Ten Series. It’s important to me to meet clients where they are. Often there are clients who only want one session, but who then feel the work and are motivated to do a whole series.

BW: Me too. But even when I do fix-it sessions, I educate people on how it relates to series work. I’ll usually say something like, “If our session addresses your concerns – and if it holds – that’s great. But if you get some change but it doesn’t last, it’s likely telling us it’s part of a larger pattern. Then, if you want, we can do a fuller intervention with a series of sessions.”

After Advanced Training, should one still do the Ten Series, or do nonformulistic work, or both?

BW: I’d say both.

LK: Yeah, me too. But I still prefer to start new clients with a Ten Series. In the past, I have swayed from the ten sessions with clients who said they just wanted a few sessions but not a full series. But after a few sessions, I usually found something lacking in our progress. It’s like cutting back on a recipe and only using some of the ingredients. You can still make a meal and people may be happy, but you know how good it could have been. Generally, the connections and integration weren’t at the level I expected for the number of sessions we’d completed.

Now I almost always start with a Ten Series. For me, nonformulistic work makes more sense for people who’ve gone through the ten. Even when I do nonformulistic sessions, I have the Ten Series in the back of my mind. As I consider session goals, I find myself thinking, “This person needs a [session] four, and that one needs work on the lateral line.” That said, if someone comes

in with a chronic situation, like migraines or back pain, I will do some work before the Series to ‘calm the beast’.

BW: I know what you mean. If someone is in a lot of pain and I see a glaring imbalance that is likely contributing to it – like a significant limitation in the pelvis or neck, or a unilateral appendicular pattern – I might take a session to address it. Another way of thinking about it is Advanced Rolfing Instructor Tessy Brungardt’s analogy of cleaning the kitchen before you cook a big meal. Sometimes it makes sense to do a nonformulaic ‘clean-up’ session that improves the overall order of the body before embarking on the Series.

Like you, I have learned through trial and error that I prefer to use nonformulaic work with post-ten clients. The Ten Series reminds me of an introductory course to a new subject. Introductory ‘101’ courses are demanding because you aren’t expected to know anything when you start, and a class covers a lot of territory. A good intro course teaches you the basic skills, concepts, and vocabulary that you’ll need for advanced studies. You don’t master the subject, but you get acquainted with it. Take an Economics 101 class – at the end, all of the students will have a basic understanding of the material, but some will want to learn more: so it is with a Rolfing Ten Series. Like any intro class, the Ten Series introduces a lot of information. Ongoing sensorimotor research supports the importance of blending functional education in our work. So, in addition to structural insights, the Ten Series provides a logical framework for layering in functional skills such as self-sensing; perceiving weight; yielding, pushing and reaching; arching, curling and hinging; dynamic sitting; spatial awareness; shoulder stabilization; and contralateral motion, to name a few.

When I don’t take clients through a Ten Series, I tend to skip parts and important groundwork gets missed. For me, a Ten Series establishes foundational experience and skills. The client won’t have mastered everything but will be fluent enough in Rolfing [SI] that nonformulaic sessions can be a much more sophisticated conversation. This was brought to my awareness recently when I saw a client who’d had fifteen Rolfing sessions with another practitioner before coming to see me, but who had never done a Ten Series. When I asked her to gently rock her pelvis during a

manual technique, she was confused. After trying several cues that normally work, we interrupted what we were doing and introduced pelvic rocking. (It turned out that her significant frustration signaled undifferentiated pelvic movement – a key factor in her complaints.) Later, she struggled to meet me in back work because she had never learned to connect through her feet. Again, we had to stop what we were doing and provide this education. At the end of the session, the client asked to do a Ten Series. The other practitioner is highly experienced, and the client shared that much progress had been made in their work together. I only share this example to illustrate how a Ten Series can uncover areas that are impeding embodiment and integration. Counterintuitively, a Ten Series is often the most efficient approach. Furthermore, it bolsters nonformulaic work because the Rolfer and client have a shared language.

What is hardest to teach?

LK: Patience – waiting for a change rather than pushing through. When we give in to the desire to do something right away,

sensing and resonating with each other. Humans are social animals and we’ve evolved to be always scanning for danger and seeking safety. Our systems are continuously communicating with each other. My body mechanics while working influence my ability to be present and the subcortical, nonverbal conversation I’m having with my client.

LK: Your comfort level is key. Clients definitely feel that. It’s about staying connected with yourself while you’re meeting the client.

Do you have a favorite session?

LK: I like the breath session. I often say that what we do boils down to teaching people to breathe and to walk.

BW: My students laugh at me because I tend to introduce each session as ‘one of my favorites’. I can’t help it. Each time I review my notes before I lecture, I’m struck by the genius behind that session.

LK: I don’t have a least-favorite session.

BW: No. But I did. Early on, I was intimidated by and uncomfortable with

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we lose the essence of the work. Other important topics are learning the body mechanics and sense of self required to impart the work. Maybe you could think of it as the three Ps – patience, posture, and presence.

BW: I like it. Patience is a given, but body mechanics and presence – some people might not immediately put those two together.

LK: But it’s huge. How you use and experience your body facilitates your sense of self.

BW: Furthermore, I think a lot about how the client’s body is listening to my own (and vice versa). We’re always

session four but eventually I came to really like the session. Session four works with regions and relationships that most bodyworkers overlook. When you work with key areas that are generally bypassed – in this case adductors and pelvic floor – clients often experience profound change. Getting good at session four made me significantly more effective at working with back pain, a super-common complaint.

I really like sessions that work with areas that other modalities don’t touch. The Seventh Hour is another session where I think Rolfers really shine, because few practitioners are trained to work with deeper relationships in the anterior neck, mouth, and nose.

Sometimes it’s not the how but the why that stops you from doing certain kinds of work. Rolfing interventions are personal and sometimes unusual. Unless you understand why you are doing what you’re doing, and are able to explain it to your client in a way that makes sense, you won’t be able to work with confidence and you won’t be able to get good at it.

LK: Not developing these skills is actually a detriment to your practice.

BW: Agreed. But not developing these skills is also a detriment to clients. If you became a bodyworker to help people and you have an opportunity to learn skills that are uncommon but highly effective, on some level you have a social obligation to get good at the stuff most practitioners don’t do, so it’s available to people who need it. I’ve had clients who suffered for years with pelvic-floor pain or TMJ disorder find relief with Rolfing [SI], only to lament that for years they hadn’t known where to go for help and never thought of bodywork. I think practicing the Ten Series pushes us to develop skills we might overlook otherwise.

In closing, is there anything else that you would like people to think about?

BW: I want to harp on with this idea of exploring what you tend to avoid. I’d suggest finding your old Ten Series notes and noticing what you’ve dropped from your strategy. Often it’s just something you forgot about and might want to pick up again. Or you might be unconsciously avoiding material because something isn’t making sense. Remediating it often isn’t that difficult if you know what’s missing.

On the surface, the reason I wasn’t crazy about the fourth session was because I feared the territory might make clients feel uncomfortable or self-conscious. But as I wrestled with the session, I

realized that I felt lost in the anatomy. While I could visualize the pelvis well enough in standing, I’d get disoriented with the client sidelying in the Fourth-Hour position. Two-dimensional anatomy images were of no help, but getting my own three-dimensional pelvis model did the trick (the same thing for a skull model with the muscles of mastication). Most of us are kinesthetic learners and do well to have something we can manipulate.

Sometimes it’s not the how but the why that stops you from doing certain kinds of work. Rolfing interventions are personal and sometimes unusual. Unless you understand why you are doing what you’re doing, and are able to explain it to your client in a way that makes sense, you won’t be able to work with confidence and you won’t be able to get good at it. So, if something doesn’t make sense, call a couple of trusted Rolfer friends or an old instructor and hash out the underlying theory.

LK: I guess my last thoughts are to reiterate the power of the Ten Series. There are lots of seasoned Rolfers out there who don’t use the Ten Series and they’re still doing great work. We all have to do this work authentically, in a way that makes sense to us. You and I are obviously strong proponents of the Ten Series, and this is probably due to our experience as instructors. Teaching the sessions has kept them fresh for us, and the organization of the Series supports the way we work. After you’ve been working for a while, you find an approach that

makes sense to you — that may include the Ten Series, nonformulistic work, or some melding of the two.

But I strongly urge new practitioners to use the Ten Series and trust the years of logic behind it. Additionally, I advise practitioners to start using the Ten Series immediately upon graduation and not take a break from it. Students focus on getting back home, setting up a practice, and finding clients – but they need to be practicing the Series with family and friends. If they don’t practice right away, it’s easy to forget a lot. Similarly, if you mix your Rolfing education too soon with other modalities, you won’t be able to tell what the Ten Series can do.

BW: Yes! New knowledge isn’t fixed. Unless you practice, nascent learning deteriorates quickly. After the huge investment expended to learn the Ten Series, you owe it to yourself to tend to your new skills and give them every chance of developing to their full potential.

Bethany Ward and Larry Koliha are Dr. Ida Rolf Institute® faculty members who have been working and teaching together since 2006. Bethany serves on the Leadership Council for the International Somatic Movement Education and Therapy Association (ISMETA). Larry is a member of the Dr. Ida Rolf Institute’s Board of Directors and serves as Faculty Representative. They live and practice in Durham, North Carolina.