On the Origin and Spiritual Dimension of Rolfing® SI

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ABSTRACT *This article describes the early influences that shaped the development of Rolfing Structural Integration (SI). Dr. Rolf's training as a biochemist and her commitment to a materialist view of the body is shown to be complemented or perhaps complicated by her interest in 'energetic' descriptions of bodily events. A review of her biographical details and her writing reveals something of the nature of this apparent contradiction in her view of the body and its influence on contemporary discussions among Rolfers™.*

In the advanced Rolfing classes I have taught, it has often been a tradition to create a t-shirt with a logo or motto reflecting the preoccupations of the class. I have quite a collection. I remember one class in particular that I taught with Jeff Maitland in Boulder. The motto on the t-shirt was: 'Rolfing – Helping Primates in Trouble'. This is humorous testimony to the fact that we have been working on each other, putting our hands on places of discomfort in order to relieve pain and promote well-being . . . since we came down from the trees. Working with our hands to promote the well-being of our fellow creatures is one of the oldest forms of healing and we are part of that tradition (Cyriax and Schiotz 1975).

This article is an attempt to examine some of the influences that shaped Dr. Rolf's thinking and how our particular school of 'hands on the body' began. While it is probably impossible to know the true nature of all the sources of Dr. Rolf's inspiration, we do know something of the historical details and the characters that are part of her story.

Her story is complicated by virtue of her wide range of interests. She was educated as a scientist, trained in biochemistry, and she maintained an active interest in esoteric teaching, spiritual training, and psychic phenomena. This unusual mix of interests shaped the development of Rolfing and contributes to our understanding of the nature of our work. When I began studying with her, it was evident that she was not your usual manual therapist – there was more going on – and being with her was to be in the presence of a 'Teacher', with a capital T.

Dr. Rolf was never completely clear whether Rolfers were healers or traditional manual therapists. In public, she came down on the side of rational, manual practice. However, the ambivalence between the rational education of a manual therapist and the more esoteric training of a healer has been a part of her and our story from the beginning. The healer is often 'called' or feels a natural knowing when it comes to helping people.

Rosemary Feitis, in *Ida Rolf Talks About Rolfing and Physical Reality*, describes Dr. Rolf's natural willingness and ability to help her children's music teacher who had injured her hand and arm in a fall. "I bet I can fix that," Dr. Rolf said. She had no training other than as a biochemist but she had been studying yoga and knew

she could help her. Later, Dr. Rolf said: "And that's where Rolfing really started. Because, of course, [the music teacher] had a friend who hadn't been able to get help, and this friend had a friend, and so forth . . ." (Rolf 1978a, 4). She naturally had the interest and ability to help relieve suffering, an early indication of her ability to heal others.

As a young woman during a family vacation in Montana, Dr. Rolf was kicked by a horse. The injury she sustained made it difficult for her to breathe. When no one in the hospital could help her, the doctor called an osteopath. She said: " . . . a young man came and after his ministrations I could breathe again" (Rolf 1978a, 5). He was her first encounter with osteopathy, which became a lifelong interest. She would sit in on osteopathic classes as a scribe, not being allowed to formally enroll because she was not a licensed osteopath. This is where she first learned that structure had a profound effect on physiology and function.

The osteopaths of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century developed manual techniques used to promote well-being and relief from pain. Many of the techniques were borrowed from the early bonesetters who had been practicing informally since the Middle Ages. In addition to manual practice, the osteopaths believed there was an animating energy in all beings, often spoken of as a divine presence, which could be, with the skilled application of the hands, released from the restrictions that had resulted from injury or illness. The free circulation of this energy and the associated fluids of the body resulted in optimum health. Dr. Rolf absorbed this view of the body, along with the early claims of the mutability of connective tissue in the osteopathic literature, and took it one step further.

Allopathic medicine works within the rational, scientific paradigm developed during the Enlightenment, based on the view that only the material stuff of the world is ultimately real. This led to a conflict with the early osteopaths who claimed there was an energy circulating in organisms that was unique to all life. The result was the Flexner Report of 1910 (sponsored by the Carnegie Foundation) that licensed only medical schools teaching a materialist, scientific view of the body and resulted in the hegemony of modern allopathic medicine. Because of the legal climate this created, Dr. Rolf was careful to speak publicly in ways that emphasized the rational, scientific view of her work.

It is clear from what we know about her study of yoga with Pierre Bernard (Rolf 1978a, 7) that her interest in the body went beyond the relief of pain or illness, the preoccupations of modern medicine. Dr. Rolf also studied with John Bennett in London, a teacher of the Fourth Way, a school founded by George Gurdjieff, who was an important spiritual teacher in the Sufi tradition and had a school outside Paris in the early twentieth century. It was contact with these teachers that solidified her understanding that it was possible to work with the body in a way that promoted not just relief from pain, but a higher level of functioning in many of the domains of being human. She was interested in making a better human being and it is here that her work bridges to what we could call the spiritual dimension of humans.

'Spiritual' is a word loaded with opportunity for misunderstanding. Merriam-Webster (1976) defines 'spiritual' as: "of, relating to, or consisting of spirit rather than material." In a world dominated by materialist science, to speak of the spiritual is to risk being considered 'soft-headed' or lacking in rigor or reason. And yet, the longing to be part of something larger than oneself persists. There are intimations in Dr. Rolf's work that she was aware of a nonmaterial aspect to our existence. Her approach to this issue is, however, conflicted.

The first chapter in Dr. Rolf's book: *Rolfing: The Integration of Human Structures* is titled "Twentieth Century Monism." In it she says:

> A new approach to man and his personality is therefore receiving at least a tentative welcome. Instead of examining the psyche, the newer insight looks at the physical aspect as a more practical, economical, down-to-earth approach to man . . . (Rolf 1978b, 22)

A little further on:

> . . . We are dealing with the idea that not only his body but also his environment is a projection of man's psychological personality. Essentially, this is monism, the belief that all manifestation is the expression of one substance. (Rolf 1978b, 22)

She makes the point that our personality is made of the same stuff as the body and therefore she is able to claim that our psychology is influenced by changes that can be made to the body. Thus, the results of Rolfing affect behavioral aspects of the person.

Monism is, as she says, the doctrine holding that there is only one substance and all things are derived from this one substance. Monism is the foundational belief of what we call materialism and the essence of the scientific worldview. Many who studied with her at Esalen can recall Dr. Rolf exclaiming, when a model was in the throws of an emotional response to the work: "There is no psychology, only physiology." She was not meaning to be harsh, only to emphasize her point that refining the integration of the body would refine the psychology and hence the emotions of the person.

Much of Dr. Rolf's thinking about making a better human is centered on this idea: that the material stuff of the body, if disordered, will disorder the personality. Integrating the body will have a beneficial effect on the personality, in all of its functions. There is nothing spiritual here. There is much that is profound however, as she is refusing the dualistic worldview that mind and body are of two different substances and claiming that organizing the body dramatically improves the mind.

On the other hand, Dr. Rolf proposes that there is an "inherent pattern" which is the blueprint for structure. "A joyous radiance of health is attained only as the body conforms more nearly to its inherent pattern. This pattern, this form, this Platonic Idea, is the blueprint for structure" (Rolf 1978b, 16). In the philosophy of Plato, a Platonic Idea exists in a realm separate from the material stuff. This idea is at odds with Dr. Rolf's promotion of monism and a world of 'only one stuff'. Further on in her book she says:

> Perhaps there is another, or several other, realities. Is balancing actually the placing of the body of flesh upon an energy pattern that activates it? The pattern of this fine energy would not be as easily disorganized and might well survive, relatively intact, traumatic episodes that ordinarily distort flesh. (Rolf 1978b, 205)

It is clear that Dr. Rolf had a foot in both worldviews: that of the monists (only one stuff), and that of the idealists (there is a world of eternal forms separate from the stuff of the world). The question for us is what to make of this contradiction.

Dr. Rolf's claim that working with the body will improve psychology was an emerging, influential idea, particularly in certain circles in Europe in the twenties and thirties. This tradition is chronicled in detail in Don Johnson's (1995) book *Bone, Breath and Gesture* which I highly recommend. The idea of improving human potential by working with the body was in the air during the formative time of Dr. Rolf's career and most probably influenced her thinking.

What is more unique and perhaps problematic in her thinking is the way she articulates her understanding of human structure. On the one hand she says gravity is the touchstone by which we assess the competency of structural organization. Optimal human form is balanced in gravity, a rational result of realizing that we as bodies suffer from the effects of gravity, as do all material bodies. This derives the structural pattern of the body very differently than saying that the pattern of the body is an independently existing energetic blueprint. She apparently holds both points of view.

The attraction of the view of structure as 'an energy pattern that activates it' is that it has resonance with a potential world beyond mere matter. And it is the world beyond mere matter that we often refer to as 'spiritual'. Advanced Rolfer Bob Schrei, in his recent article "The Energetic Foundations of SI: An Origin Story," suggests that the idea of Rolfing is 3,000 years old and that "the work . . . was channeled information from ancient Egypt" (Schrei 2017, 31). He is asking that we acknowledge this fact as the spiritual origins of our work.

The Egyptians developed some form of hands-on work, as has every culture from the beginning of recorded history. Hippocrates, writing in 400 BC, wrote an entire text on the manual treatment of human structure. His was the primary text on manual therapeutics for the next 600 years. Manual therapy is ancient. We are part of that tradition.

The question for Schrei seems to be how Dr. Rolf discovered the 'pattern' for organizing structure that has given rise to what we now know as Rolfing. One possibility, a rational deduction from the effects of gravity on material bodies and the segmental, anatomical grouping of myofascial structures in distinct compartments, and the other possibility, an energetic pattern existing independently of the body, contradict each other.

I do not believe that the origins of Dr. Rolf's knowledge affect the importance of her work. Whether she "channeled" the work from Egyptian sources 3,000 years old or whether she figured it out through the exercise of her significant intelligence, the value of the work is the same. In either case, I consider it a gift. I do not see that believing the work is channeled from ancient Egypt is necessary to view our work as having spiritual implications.

The term 'spiritual' means essentially existing separate from the material world, and is often used as a synonym for 'religious'. Dr. Rolf's stated interest in an energetic template, which is decidedly not material, could be the opening to the spiritual that I believe Schrei is asking us to be aware of. Dr. Rolf definitely had an interest in nonmaterial, energetic phenomena. For example, she authorized research using a psychic to correlate the psychic's observations of auras with changes to structure implemented by a Rolfer. Also, the Dr. Ida Rolf Institute® is located in Boulder, Colorado as a result of advice given to Dr. Rolf by a psychic.

We have all had experiences with our clients and ourselves that suggest an energetic presence in our work. This is the domain in which we could say the spiritual or nonmaterial is part of our work. Articulating just what the energetic or nonmaterial aspects of the body are is quite another matter (literally and figuratively) and, I believe, goes well beyond the presence of an energetic template to include many other manifestations.

There is too much to say regarding the energetic presence of the body and energetic phenomena in our work to include it here. The Advanced Faculty is working on a discussion of energetic events in Rolfing and may someday have publishable results. Discussing the spiritual aspects of Rolfing is an important task and understanding our experience of energetic phenomena should be pursued with intelligence and rigor. It should not, however, be pursued to the detriment of the more 'material' aspects of organizing structure. It is by manually releasing the restrictions in the flesh that structural change is implemented. As Dr. Rolf was fond of saying: "The great thing about the body is that you can get your hands on it."

We are confronted with the apparently conflicting views of our founder regarding not only the nature of the body but also the origins of the pattern of integration that is the hallmark of Rolfing. Obviously, Dr. Rolf found value in both the physical and metaphysical descriptions of her work. It is, however, well to remember her words: "All this metaphysics is fine, but be mighty sure you've got physics under the metaphysics" (Rolf 1978a, 206).

References

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Michael Salveson was trained as a Rolfer by Dr. Rolf in 1969. In 1971 he attended the first Advanced Training offered by Dr. Rolf. At that time, he was chosen by Dr. Rolf to be the third of the five instructors she would train. Michael was President of the Rolf Institute® at the time of Dr. Rolf's death in 1979. During his time as President, he initiated and taught the first European training and organized the drafting of the first standards of practice and code of ethics.

Michael has been teaching Rolfing for forty-five years. Together with Jan Sultan he restructured the advanced Rolfing class curriculum to include a more detailed look at the biomechanics involved in the execution of the basic and advanced 'Recipe' and initiated strategies to support a nonformulistic approach to advanced Rolfing.

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