

JAN SULTAN RESPONDS TO ARTICLES IN SOMATICS MAGAZINE

EDITOR'S NOTE: It seems especially fitting this month to share this article which is in response to the Autumn 1980 issue of Somatics. I say "fitting" since Dr. Rolf was born May 19, 1896. ☞

As a Rolf Practitioner of many years standing and a current member of the teaching staff of The ROLF INSTITUTE, I feel qualified to add to the discussion on the work featured in your last issue.

While Rolfing itself is primarily a system of body manipulation and education, its theoretical base provides principals for more universal applications. Our basic premises include the notion that by studying the structure of the body with an eye for its function, we can arrive at certain information about its design.

Dr. Rolf had a gift and a vision. The gift was, in part, the ability to see and touch trouble spots in the body. The places where strain had accumulated called to her, and being a practical person she did the simplest things possible to relieve the trouble.

By working directly on the body she pressed and stretched the displaced components, coaxing them toward a place of greater functional efficiency. "This belongs over here" she would say and then proceed to move "this over there". The approach was direct and effective.

Early on in the development of the work she attended to symptoms, fixing the sore elbow here and the backache there. Over time she began to realize that there were mechanisms of compensating for stresses on the structure that distributed strain over large areas, and that the painful "spot" was more likely to be the body's signal that it could not adapt any more, than the source of the trouble. She saw that once a stress

had called forth an adaptive response from the body then it was no longer possible to treat locally. Now you had to deal with the compensation as well.

From this observation there emerged for her a unifying principal, a bottom line. She saw that connective tissue acted as an organ of support. This elastic web was a system unto itself, capable of changing the density and direction of its fibers in response to demands from changes in body-use or function. Changes in balance are "absorbed" by the network of elastic fiber. Her stroke of genius lay in the recognition that this mechanism of adaptation would be utilized for moving the body toward a higher level of order as well. She saw that the connective tissue would respond to direct manual pressure, calling forth a response of support for a re-ordering process.

The next issue in the development of the work was in the definition of "higher level of order". It was not enough to get a release of strain and assume the body would naturally move toward where it belonged. She saw that often the release, if unsupported, simply allowed the body to settle to another pattern, not especially better than the one it was in before.

To define "better" she hit on the metaphor of gravity's influence on the body. Over time the effect of gravity is to stress imbalance. The fibers in the connective tissue arrange themselves along the lines of the gravitational imprint on the structure. The body and gravity interact in a patterned and predictable way. By moving the body toward better balance and symmetry, the connective tissue movement in response would act to stabilize it there. This meant that to visualize the direction of the body's evolution toward higher order,

one had to account for the effect of gravity on its present state and work from there toward order. The order being defined as an easy interface of that body moving with the gravity field.

Now we have a way to work along the lines that will increase the body's ability to use gravity for support, a definition of a "higher level".

Coupled with gravity and the mechanism of connective tissue response comes the third and final basic idea that Dr. Rolf's inquiry produced. This element is the recognition that the body is segmentally arranged: that the head, ribcage, abdomen, arms and legs constitute weight blocks that are hinged to one another and wrapped in an elastic connective tissue membrane. This means that gravity acts on the mass of the weight blocks individually, as well as on the whole structure.

Now Dr. Rolf could see that those local complaints in body structure were often an expression of these weight blocks, segments, struggling with each other in gravity. That these imbalances show up in characteristic holding patterns that are reinforced by any and all activities which the person engages in. All movement of an unbalanced body adds energy to the problem, fiber to the connective tissues, and locks the body into the form more deeply all the time.

Ida Rolf's work then shaped itself into a line of inquiry as to what constitutes order in the body and a system of direct manipulation and re-education to produce that result. Free the fascial network of compensation, allow the segments to move toward order, as defined by ease of movement through gravity, and so!! Simple.

To back up her vision she "rolled up her sleeves" as she used to say, and went to work. She didn't think anatomy, she thought form in space. "Look at the length come into that body" she'd say as a rotation between pelvis and thorax would yield under her hands.

During the years that these ideas were forming into a system for her, she took them to the chiropractors and osteopaths, her contemporaries. They saw some interesting manipulative technique and mistook that for the contribution, rather than this new definition of order, of normal as opposed to average. She found that they picked up her "tricks" and didn't "get" it.

It is history to relate that in the mid-sixties Ida Rolf came to Esalen in Big Sur to work on Fritz Perls. He was a psychiatrist with a vision of order of his own: the Gestalt or completed situation, a vision of a character that could be present to respond directly to the environment, and close with each situation spontaneously, in an unprogrammed way.

Well, Dr. Rolf fixed his neck or whatever was ailing him, and out of their meeting came a new and fertile change. The "Gestalt of character" idea of Fritz and the "balance of structure" from Ida began a whole new wave of exploration into the interaction of character and body structure. Now it was clear that the body dramatized character and that it was modifiable by direct manipulation. There was now available a means by which the "stuck" places that held and expressed neurosis could be reached.

This constituted a major new direction in the evolution of Rolfing. Up to this time, it had been developing as an adjunct to orthopedics (in Dr. Rolf's words). Much of the work's unfolding had had been done in response to pathology; and now this merger with people who saw the body work as a means to "feeling good" at the level of behavior. "It's all one," she'd cry. "Psychological problems are the outward sign of disordered physiology," she'd argue. This was a challenging and growing time for Rolfing and for Dr. Rolf.

The merger also created a need for more practitioners as the demand now far exceeded Dr. Rolf's capacity. Although

she had trained a few people over the preceding years, she had never before had groups of twelve and fifteen people in the process of learning at the same time.

Teaching the work made her clarify and define the system. In order to pass on the "gift" she had to build a bridge of understanding for her students to cross. She had to build a rational process for what was, to her, second nature. She had to justify her vision and create a map or template for the students to be able to find their way to the gift.

A school grew up around the ideas that Dr. Rolf had been generating. New minds took on the job, and dialogue developed. There was challenge, disagreement, growth and inspiration. All the fury that accompanies potent ideas were there. There were "psychological Rolfers" and "pathological Rolfers" and "classical Rolfers". Those people who took on the work as their own metamorphosed it through themselves.

Over the years Ida appointed teachers to carry on in her stead, and there is a formal school to carry on the job she started. Dr. Rolf died a couple of years ago, and we went through the inevitable changes that follow the passing of a strong leader.

What is now emerging is an expanded and clarified direction of where we want to take this work. We are actively exploring the various applications possible. We are evolving more sophisticated manipulation in the context of the theoretical principals generated first by Dr. Rolf, and now by all of us.

The wave of involvement with humanistic psychology has subsided, although Rolfing is still being sought for its efficacy in drawing out psychological material from the structure. We see athletes, dancers, accident victims, and paralysis. People use Rolfing for relief from accumulated strain. Many of them don't care about length in gravity or our more esoteric ideas. They just

want to be "fixed". "Less pain, more movement, and hold the theory, if you please". Within the context of this simple and direct system we can provide that.

We have a "hidden agenda" too. Our intention is that from this vision of normal, this meeting of human structure and earth gravity, will come an expanded awareness of what real balance is, both for us as creatures in relation to our planet and to each other. The bottom line here is that in this event, everything is related. There are no local problems for long, either in the body or in the world.

We are educators first, body manipulators second. We are carrying on the investigation. We are examining our premises constantly. The system is open. Information and ideas are flowing from, through, and to it. We live!!