

The Beginnings of Trauma-Informed Rolfing® SI

An Interview with Anngwyn St. Just, PhD

By Anne Hoff, Certified Advanced Rolfer® and Anngwyn St. Just, PhD



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ABSTRACT *The work of Rolfing® Structural Integration has benefitted greatly from the pioneering work of Peter Levine, PhD, and Anngwyn St. Just, who brought trauma knowledge into our work. In this interview, St. Just shares some of the story of how Rolfing® Structural Integration (SI) became trauma-informed and gets us up to date on her further work related to systemic trauma.*

Anne Hoff: We're thrilled to have this interview with you to learn how trauma work came into the Rolfing community. First, for those who don't know your name and background, can you share with us about our training in trauma modalities and somatic modalities?

Anngwyn St. Just: During the early 1960s, I trained as a registered nurse at Johns Hopkins Hospital and worked there after graduation in their trauma centers, then simply called emergency rooms. I met Peter Levine, PhD, in 1977 at a time when we were finishing our graduate studies at UC Berkeley, me as an art historian and Peter as a medical biophysicist. We met at a party for Dr. Rolf in Sausalito. Peter was already a Rolfer® and I was in my auditing phase of the training.

As the Somatic Experiencing® (SE) work was developed, Peter was the scientist and I was the historian, he more focused on individual work and I more on relationships. We needed credentials so that we could practice in the world with what we were developing, so we both returned for more graduate work, Peter in psychology and I in marriage and family therapy and higher education and social change. Peter and I also studied anything somatic going on in the Bay Area and at Esalen® in those days – craniosacral work, visceral manipulation, traditional Chinese medicine, acupressure, Reichian therapies and Bioenergetics, Ortho-Bionomy®, and so on. Eventually we launched the first SE training in my Berkeley living room with about fifteen people. Now there are over 15,000 SE practitioners around the world.

AH: When did the Rolfing community become aware of the SE work?

ASJ: During the late 1970s and early 1980s, Peter had begun presenting somatic trauma theory at Rolfing conferences in Boulder. Later, in the early 1990s as licensing laws changed in California so that therapists could not touch, we moved the SE organization to Lyons, Colorado, which was somatically friendly. With Rolfing backgrounds, we felt very welcomed by the Rolfing community and at home there. I practiced Rolfing SI in a family practice clinic in Boulder that had multiple practitioners, and both Peter and I did SE sessions there as well. Peter wasn't doing Rolfing sessions any more, and was focused on SE trainings.

AH: What was the Rolfing community response to bringing trauma ideas into the Rolfing paradigm?

ASJ: Reception was divided. While there was some interest, there was also some pushback from some of the more conservative Rolfers against too much emphasis on the nervous system and from Ida Rolf who focused on fascia.

Also, we were concerned that Rolfers were not trauma-informed and could be re-traumatizing clients, and there was pushback about that as well. There had already been concern expressed about unnecessary pain and possible re-traumatization from Rolfing work, with this viewpoint led by Judith Ashton, Rolf Movement® practitioners, and also some Rolfers. Dr. Rolf often said, "No pain, no gain." If a client was screaming, she would say, "This is *your* pain." I did all of my auditing and practitioner training with Michael Salvesson in Berkeley, and this was all exploding during my training. Michael did all he could, with his considerable diplomatic skills, to keep some perspective for all involved.

AH: Did you incorporate SE into your own Rolfing sessions? I recall hearing that you

also did dual sessions where there was another Rolfer and you did the SE?

ASJ: I always enjoyed four-handed Rolfing sessions with trusted colleagues. And yes, I did a lot of tandem work with Roger T. Jordan at a somatically oriented family-practice medical clinic in Boulder. I greatly benefited from his Rolfing-oriented somatic intelligence. It might be interesting to interview him about those times. My fondest memories are of the Rolfing work we did together with children at open-to-the-public Rolf Institute® events. The New Thinking Allowed interviews [see Resources at the end of the article] I did with Jeffrey Mishlove may be of interest since I touch on some of my experience at the family practice clinic in Boulder. It was a very somatic clinic. I did both Rolfing SI and SE, four-handed Rolfing sessions with some of the others on staff, and Peter did SE.

AH: When did you stop doing Rolfing sessions and why?

ASJ: For me, Rolfing SI is a somatic understanding of our human bodies and this will always be integral to my work. And there came a time, in this later life, when I needed to accept that I no longer had the physical strength and stamina to maintain a Rolfing practice along with trauma work and the demands of international travel obligations. Then the Covid agenda and the fact that I am nearly eighty explains a lot. Dr. Rolf used to say, "If anyone questions your decisions, just say, 'Well, I am eighty, you know, and that should put an end to it!'" Well, I am not quite there – but soon.

AH: Can you elaborate a bit on how the Rolfing paradigm of the body is integral to your work in other modalities?

ASJ: In essence, I am a trauma specialist and trauma is always a *somatic* experience.

AH: You have done Bert Hellinger's Systemic Constellation Work. Is there relevance there for Rolfing SI?

ASJ: Yes. Bert was a strong advocate of bodywork and craniosacral work especially. While he was a very important mentor for me, the five-day meetings with Bert, Peter, and me in Switzerland at a retreat center in Lucerne were especially important. We had ample time to explore SE, Systemic Constellation Work, and how they work together – somatically and in other ways – and sometimes not.

AH: As I understand it, Hellinger's work is about the shape of the group, how the individual constellates with family or groups, or how groups constellate. Is that an accurate description? And from your background in that work, how should Rolfers be aware of how families and other groups may play a role in shaping our clients' psyches and bodies?

ASJ: Bert Hellinger's work was about systems and the need for balance. Rolfing SI addresses issues in body systems that also have to do with balance. Rolfers would do well to be aware that every individual client is part of a family, and other larger systems; and that any intervention may have a significant impact on their relationships within those systems.

AH: What is your current work, and what are your own contributions?

ASJ: So far, I have published ten books and many articles, most are also now in Spanish since I have been working in Latin America for decades. There are many interviews you can watch on YouTube [see Resource at the end of the article]. Since COVID-19 restrictions started, I do not travel and am continuing my international systemically oriented training events on Zoom.

Also, together with my Spanish-language publisher and in response to COVID-19 restrictions, we have just launched a bilingual (English and Spanish) online university of systemic studies; traumauniversity.org, of which I'm the director and co-founder. I am also a frequent presenter at international conferences. My latest project is writing another book, *The House of Atreus*, about fate and family systems in classic literature.

AH: Do you think Rolfers should cross-train in SE and combine the work, or send clients out for SE? What would be the advantage and disadvantages to each approach?

ASJ: Well, since most somatically oriented modalities deal with trauma in the body at many developmental levels, why not learn about trauma? I don't see a disadvantage except for a need for more financial investment by a client who expected their

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Rolfer to ‘fix’ their issue. Trauma is, after all, a ‘somatic experience’.

AH: You’ve had a rich and full professional life, still ongoing. Do you have any regrets?

ASJ: Yes, now in advanced age, I wish I had taken advantage of more Rolf Movement classes. Aging often presents a series of challenges to resilience and mobility.

AH: Thank you, Anngwyn, for sharing this important history with the Journal. You and Peter brought a critical element into our work that changed it forever and made it more trauma-informed, benefitting both practitioners and clients.

Anngwyn St. Just, PhD, is a systemically oriented social traumatologist and cultural historian holding advanced degrees from the Western Institute for Social Research and the University of California at Berkeley. As founder and director of the Arizona Center for Social Trauma (ACST) she specializes in developing multimodal, cross-cultural, and body-oriented methods for trauma education and recovery. Through ACST-International she offers international seminars and training programs in systemic approaches to individual, family, and social trauma. Anngwyn is the author of ten books including Relative Balance in an Unstable World and Trauma: Time, Space and Fractals: Volume I and II. Dr. St. Just offers a compassionate and profound understanding of individual and collective responses to trauma, which opens a whole new and hopeful venue of work. Her website and blog are at <http://www.acst-international.com>. She is the director and co-founder of the virtual Systemic Trauma University (<https://www.traumauniversity.org>).

Anne Hoff is a Certified Advanced Rolfer in Seattle, Washington and one of the Co-Editors-in-Chief of this journal.

Resources

New Thinking Allowed with Jeffrey Mishlove. 2019, May 1. “Perpetrators and Victims with Anngwyn St. Just”. [video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kNDBOP7b7bg>.

New Thinking Allowed with Jeffrey Mishlove. 2019, April 22. “Time, Space, and Trauma with Anngwyn St. Just”. [video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ljg96k_npBE

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Signos Ediciones. 2020, August 21. “Trauma Global”. Anngwyn St. Just y Peter Levine. Aniversarios y repeticiones traumáticas. [Anniversaries and Traumatic Repetitions] [video in English and German, with Spanish subtitles]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=km7bbib8kcw>

Signos Ediciones. 2020, August 21. “Trauma Global”. Anngwyn St. Just y Peter Levine. Campo femenino y conexión a la tierra. [Female Field and Connection to the Earth] [video in English and German, with Spanish subtitles]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cvay06g3Alo>

Signos Ediciones. 2020, August 21. “Trauma Global”. Anngwyn St. Just y Peter Levine. El “don” de la herida [The “Gift” of the Wound] [video in English and German, with Spanish subtitles]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M-goo5VVIKU>