

Rolfing® SI as Strategy

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ABSTRACT *In this article, John Panter discusses what makes Rolfing® Structural Integration (SI) distinct within the professional category of manual therapy. He describes how the organizing work of Rolfing SI has strategy behind the myofascial interventions. Panter finds Rolfing strategy to mirror some elements that underlie military strategy, and he discusses several historical examples.*

A question arose lately in online forums, whether myofascial work is the distinguishing characteristic of Rolfing® Structural Integration (SI). My offhand response was so well received that I was asked to elaborate it for the Dr. Ida Rolf Institute® (DIRI) journal. Here it goes: the important, distinctive part of Rolfing SI is not the myofascial release. Lots of people are doing that, but doing it as therapy. The clue to Rolfing SI is in the second part of the name: Structural Integration. In other words, organizing the work so that the causes of the symptoms, misalignment in gravity, are undercut, so that the symptoms no longer arise.

To take an analogy from a different field, military history, consider the distinction

between tactics and strategy. Tactics is the art of winning battles; strategy is the art of stringing battles together to win wars. In the American Civil War, for example, Lee may have been a better tactician than Grant. (We note that some think Stonewall Jackson may have been even better. Jackson's campaign in the Shenandoah is used in textbooks as an example of 'Warfare on Interior Lines' that is being approached by several detachments of the enemy; he got between them and, moving rapidly from one front to another, fighting one and then another, he kept them from uniting their forces against him.) However, regardless of Lee's tactical superiority, Grant the strategist could string the battles together, even the ones he seemed to have lost, to bring about a final victory.¹



Photo by Wim van 't Einde on Unsplash.

Getting back to Rolwing SI, therapists using myofascial release are treating symptoms, but not necessarily the causes of the symptom. DIRI and SI schools are trying to keep the symptoms from coming back. The difference is in the thinking, not the manual work. Consider Jeffrey Maitland's schema of the three paradigms of bodywork: the first paradigm is relaxation therapy; the second paradigm is corrective therapy; and the third paradigm is integrative therapy or wholistic systems therapy (1993). Rolwing SI is a third-paradigm system; it takes the whole body into consideration. This is conceptually parallel to the military example, with 'relaxation' being the counterpart of military parades on National Day ceremonies. This makes people feel good, but resolves nothing! The second paradigm of corrective therapy is parallel with winning single battles. And the third paradigm, integration, wins wars - or at least campaigns within wars. An important note here is that integration or strategy works over time and has to take time into account. The others are focused on singular events, completed in an hour, or in the case of El Alamein, five days.

In my own practice, when people ask how Rolwing SI is different from chiropractic work or massage therapy, my answer usually goes something like this:

"A lot of people have had the experience of having a pain or discomfort in their neck, shoulder, or upper back. They may go to the chiropractor who gives them a thirty second quick *crunch* and they feel better. Next day they feel not quite better, and the next week they go back, and the next week they go back. Or they go to the massage therapist, who hammers on them for thirty minutes and they feel better, and the next day they feel not so better, the week following that they go back. A world without end, Amen!

"I'm not saying anything against those modalities. If the cause of the discomfort in the neck was the neck, those practitioners would have fixed them just fine. However, oftentimes the source of the problem was at a distance in the body. The client may, for example, have one knee that, for any of half a dozen reasons, doesn't straighten quite as much as the other. That makes that leg act like it is shorter than the other, which tilts the hips in that direction. Then the spine compensates in the opposite

direction, and then recompensates to that and so on. This will repeat maybe three or four times up to the neck, getting tighter at each bend. If the manual therapist doesn't work through the whole body, and integrate it, the client won't get a resolution to the neck problem."

This is verbatim how I explain this. When explained to potential clients like this it is remarkable how many can relate directly to this idea, as it resonates with their own experience.

Taking the military model a notch further, we could say that Rolwing SI is not a battle, or a series of battles. It has to be thought of as an organized campaign, each session conducted with an eye to the ones that have preceded it, and also the ones that will follow. Too much rigidity or concept can lead to errors compounding on each other, while flexibility permits agile responses. Grant, marching on Atlanta, fought and lost successive battles, but merely swung left, took on reinforcements and fought again, each time coming closer to the Confederate capital. He knew he had access to reinforcements, many of them new immigrants with European military experience, while Lee did not.

That illustrates another aspect of flexibility: sometimes a given session does not completely fulfill the goals of the session as laid down in the Ten Series. Sometimes, between sessions the client goes out and gets injured, or even just strains something, then the session has to be repeated. It may be necessary to go over the same territory again, while still remaining faithful to the basic concepts embodied in the Rolwing 'Recipe'. Some times the client goes to Florida for the winter between sessions and it is necessary to repeat the last completed session before rolling on.

Let's go to the other end of the world and examine the military teachings of Asia. The first chapter of the *Sun Tzu, the Chinese Art of War*, states some elementary principles (Giles 2002, 40): "The Art of War is of vital importance [to the state]. It is the province of life or death, a road to either safety or ruin. Hence, it is a subject of inquiry which can on no account be neglected."

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What does this say to Rolfers? The art of Rolfing SI is of vital importance to us as practitioners, and equally vital to our client population. Clearly, to both parties, it is a road to prosperity or misery. I would hold that we can never cease to increase our knowledge of the human being, body, and mind. We can never rest on what we learned in our initial training, but must continue to educate ourselves, both broadly and deeply, using whatever resources come our way.

Sun Tzu lists five factors that must be considered in estimating the individual case. The first of these Giles (2002, 40) translates as “the *moral law*, which causes the people to be in complete accord with their ruler, so that they will follow him regardless of their lives, undismayed by any danger.” In our work, the client and the Rolfer have to understand each other and be in agreement about the intent and goals of the work, and their expectations of each other and of the work. They must be willing to continue regardless of the discomfort of the sessions, on the part of the client, and regardless of the resistances of the clients’ tissues and emotions on the part of the Rolfer.

The second factor is “*Heaven*: night and day, cold and heat, time and seasons” (Giles 2002, 40). This, I think, needs no interpretation. These factors influence the conditions of the client, of the practitioner, and the circumstances in which the work can be carried on.

The third consideration is “*Earth*: distances; danger and security; open ground and narrow passes, life and death” (Giles 2002, 40). We could take this as geographical accessibility of the client to the practitioner, but also the difficulties and risks involved working with the individual client. Are there preexisting conditions that will constrain what can be done safely and effectively?

The fourth item in this list is: “The Commander stands for the virtues of *wisdom, sincerity, benevolence, courage, and strictness*” (Giles 2002, 40). If we don’t have these, or at least are working to develop them, we should turn in our diplomas from DIRI. (Sternly!)

The final item in the Sun Tzu’s list is: *Method and discipline*. This we spent six months learning at the Basic Rolfing Training, and should continue to broaden and deepen throughout our Rolfing careers through continuing education classes and other research. (Even more sternly!)

. . . Rolfing SI is not a battle, or a series of battles. It has to be thought of as an organized campaign, each session conducted with an eye to the ones that have preceded it, and also the ones that will follow.

Summing this all up, the critical features of Rolfing SI are not found in the manual techniques. These vary widely from practitioner to practitioner. With some, an observer might be challenged to discern that the Rolfer is doing anything at all. (Brag! I do a breathing session that visibly changes the client’s body without me having laid a finger on!) The apocryphal story about Ida P. Rolf, PhD, admitting that if ‘the Line’ could be attained just by standing clients in the corner and talking, that would constitute Rolfing SI, would be the idealization of my main thesis. Sun Tzu also remarked that merely defeating the enemy is not the highest form of the military art. The highest form is to win without having had to actually fight (Giles 2002). Or we could consider Caesar against Pompey on the Ebro: Napoleon at Ulm (Goodenough 1979).

Sun Tzu, regardless of the translation, Giles, Griffiths, or whichever, can be a great puzzlement to those who have ‘martial arts’ on their minds, because the general does not discuss individual tactics, and is restrained about army level doctrines. His whole work is really about how the leader should *think* about the tasks ahead and the circumstances in which those tasks are to be addressed. These thought processes are universally applicable regardless of the 2500 years since he wrote the book. Similarly, the critical features of Rolfing SI are not inherent in the fascia. Fascia is the medium through which the work is expressed. The goals, and the understanding that leads to fulfilment of the goals, form the heart and core of our work.

The summation of my thesis is that Rolfing SI and SI schools teaching the legacy of Rolf are differentiated from other manual therapies by the thinking processes more than the manual technique. Rolf On!

Endnotes

1. John Keegan’s books (1987, 2010) give pertinent accounts of both Jackson’s and Grant’s methods and achievements. Another example of Interior Lines warfare, from the Second Punic War, was Scipio Africanus, who got between Hannibal and his brother Hasdrubal, who was coming to reinforce him. About two millennia later, Napoleon achieved similar results against the Imperialists in the same territory in Northern Italy.

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