Sink or Swim

Lessons Learned in the Boulder Flood

By Hyrum Pratt Feriante, Certified Rolfer™

I got off easy in the Boulder County flood of September 2013, and for that I am grateful. I live in Niwot, Colorado, and as the joke goes, we live in an environmental bubble: while there was torrential rain on every side of us the day of the flood, and a mile and a half away homes were being destroyed, I would have never known if I hadn't gone to work that day.

I work as a cashier at a grocery store to pay the bills while I grow my client base. Because of the good weather in Niwot, we were still getting food and water shipments at the store. People from Boulder and Longmont and evacuees from shelters poured in to buy supplies. They shared their stories and described what they were doing to cope, where they had ended up, and who had helped them through the disaster. Some people were still in need, and their shock and stress were evident.

I was raised in the Latter-Day Saints Church, where service to others is a core doctrine and large part of our culture, so I immediately asked myself, "What can I do to help?" and "Is someone already organizing aid?" Halfway through the day a friend from Southwest Acupuncture College (SWAC) called and told me that SWAC's Acupuncturists Without Borders was working with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to treat people at its Disaster Recovery Centers. She asked if I would be willing to volunteer my Rolfing® Structural Integration (SI) and biodynamic craniosacral skills to aid the flood victims. It was a serendipitous conversation that fulfilled my desire to help out.

I graduated from The Rolf Institute® of Structural Integration (RISI) in April 2013 but had not had much business success yet. At the Disaster Recovery Centers I was able to put a lot of mileage on my hands over a very short period of time, doing approximately seventy hour-long sessions in just two weeks. The experience developed my understanding of what I had learned in school and exposed me to new tissues, issues, ideas, and sensations. It also raised new questions. I usually ended my evenings searching Google or the publications section of the RISI website trying to figure out what else I could have done to support each client's challenges. It was humbling to discover how much there was yet to learn and how much could be learned only through experience.

I found that each person expressed trauma – physical or emotional – and processed it in his or her own way. I found that I could never settle into a pattern with my work. Each session plan and each contact had to be adapted and adaptive to the individual's current state. Most people suffered from neck and lower back pain. Lots of people complained of numb arms or fingers. But in each case, the solution seemed to take a different path.

I knew I would see many clients only once, so I had to work outside of the Ten Series. I operated more on the Principles of Rolfing SI and tried to do fix-it work but with (hopefully) lasting results. I used anything clients seemed able to handle and respond to: direct/indirect touch, motility, biodynamic craniosacral work, movement, breath work, laughter. I often felt outside of my comfort zone, and I spent a lot of time working much harder to access the layers than I would have if the person had at the least been through sessions one through three of the Ten Series. There were only a few people whose pain I felt I was unable to relieve at least somewhat, but even they were grateful for the touch and presence that the work provided (and for the heated table too). In the end, there were lots of hugs, lots of happy tears, lots of smiles, and even a few joking marriage proposals.

Working on people who had been through so much often left me drained, so I had to be sure to spend time emotionally clearing between sessions (if possible) and after I left for the day. I had to ask myself questions like "What's mine?", "What's not mine?", "Why was my emotional response so strong with one person but not another?", and "How do I shield myself from being overwhelmed?" Many people were in shock at first, but as time passed the shock wore off and the reality of their loss really set in. What followed was a lot of sadness and anger that went unexpressed (or sometimes was very openly expressed) but that I could easily feel. Some people seemed surrounded by a field of static, heat, or pure emotion, which could be felt by a few of the other practitioners and from as far as four feet away. They were "bleeding out," and it was intense. Holding a space for such emotion was a struggle most of the time. I have always struggled with staying present, so to do so in the face of such intense emotion while also faced with practical questions like "What do I do now?" or "Why isn't this working?" made keeping a calm mind and broad focus difficult.

Many people came over to see me because they saw my massage table, but only about half had heard of Rolfing SI and far fewer actually knew what it was. I saw this as lucky for me because they didn't have expectations of the work and so couldn't be too disappointed. Also, I had been looking forward to practicing my thirty- to sixty-second pitch on Rolfing SI. Another advantage to their not having any preconceived idea of what to expect from a Rolfing session was that they were quick to plop, jump, or roll onto my table no matter what I said.

I also had to opportunity to work on practitioners from other modalities. They had a lot of questions, some of them challenging, and many expressed an interest in the Rolfing training program because they were so impressed with the work. This made me smile because I was less than a year out of the program and still struggling to feel that I had a clue about what I was doing. It confirmed that I was on the right path.

I believe I gained more from my time at the FEMA Disaster Recovery Centers than I was ever able to give, and I look forward to other opportunities to serve the community in the future . . . but not to more disasters.