

From Aerospace Engineering to Humanistic Psychology, to Structural Integration



Greer Bailey



Joseph Heller

An Interview with Joseph Heller

By Greer Bailey, Certified Hellerwork® Practitioner, LMT, and Joseph Heller, Founder of Hellerwork International

ABSTRACT Interviewer and Hellerworker Greer Bailey asks Joseph Heller to tell the story of creating the structural integration school, Hellerwork® International. Starting with his early life in Poland during World War II, to studying aerospace engineering at Caltech, to when Heller met Dr. Ida Rolf when he was already very interested in the humanistic movement in California in the 1970s. Bailey asks Heller to reflect on how he integrated the essential elements Rolf's structural integration with what he felt was essential movement and psychology theory to guide the client's healing experience.

Editor's notes: (1) This theme about the profession of structural integration has been a collaboration with Greer Bailey, Editor-in-Chief of the Hellerwork International Newsletter. We thank her and Joseph for generously allowing us to republish their conversation, which took place on May 22, 2023, and was first published as a video in their newsletter on November 10th, 2023. The text has been edited by the authors and SFI editors for clarity and style.

(2) Joseph Heller trained with Dr. Rolf in the 1970s and had her blessing to start his own school of structural integration, Hellerwork® International. Hellerwork Structural Integration is the brand of structural integration taught by Hellerwork International, one of the twelve recognized structural integration schools governed by the International Association of Structural Integrators (theIASI.net).



Joseph Heller in the 1980s.
Photo courtesy of Joseph Heller.

JH: After I graduated from Caltech, I went to work for the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, California. It was a NASA facility that Caltech was running for NASA, it was in charge of unmanned space exploration. I spent ten years at that laboratory working on lunar missions like Ranger, Orbiter, Voyager, and so on.

Greer Bailey: Hello, Joseph. I'd love to start at the beginning. Could you share with us about your childhood and how you came to be in the United States?

Joseph Heller: Okay. Well, I was born in Poland at a very bad time. It was in the middle of World War II and Poland was divided between Germany and Russia. My parents ended up on the German side and very quickly realized it was a bad side to be on and they smuggled themselves across to the Russian side of Poland. I was born on the Russian side. What was then the Russian side of Poland and nowadays is actually Ukraine.

About six months after I was born, the Germans attacked the Russians. And since we were very close to the border, we were very aware of it. And my father basically stole the truck that he was driving for a living, loaded up the family, and started driving east. We ended up deep in the heart of Russia after about four months of driving ahead of the advancing German armies, and we spent the war years in Russia.

Then in 1945, the Russians said to us, "You are Polish refugees here. You either go back to Poland or become Russians." My parents had no desire to become Russian, so we went back to Poland. But Poland had become a communist

country by then and confiscated all the lands that my parents had in the family. So we decided to get out of there, and the only place we could get papers to go was to Australia.

So, in 1948, we were on our way to Australia and took the train from Warsaw to Paris, and we decided to spend a couple of weeks in Paris as we probably wouldn't get a chance to come back to Europe very often. And during this time, my mother fell ill with what was first diagnosed as pneumonia, but then became tuberculosis. And Australia doesn't take people with tuberculosis, so that killed the plans to Australia. This was no big deal for us because we didn't know anybody in Australia. We just wanted to get out of Poland.

So we ended up spending eight years in Paris before getting papers to come to the United States where we had a lot of family that had come to the United States before the war. They were smart enough to leave Poland before it got crazy. So that's how we ended up in the United States in 1956. We arrived in New York and then drove across the country to Los Angeles, California. I had heard back in Paris that Caltech was one of the best schools in the United States. So I decided back in Paris that I was going to go to Caltech, and I ended up doing that.

Starting Out in Aerospace Engineering

GB: That is quite the adventure. And you studied mathematics at Caltech?

JH: Yes. That's right.

GB: What drew you into mathematics?

JH: Well, actually it was sort of funny. I was mostly interested in archeology. In France, I studied Latin and ancient Greek. I didn't realize when I applied to Caltech it was a science school only. Once I was there, I had to choose a major, and I went to the dean and said, "Well, can I get a major in literature or history or something?" He said, "No, we only teach science." So, I took a major in mathematics because it gave me the largest number of electives, and I took all my electives in philosophy.

GB: That's very interesting.

JH: After I graduated from Caltech, I went to work for the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, California. It was a NASA facility that Caltech was running for NASA, it was in charge of unmanned space exploration. I spent ten years at that laboratory working on lunar missions like Ranger, Orbiter, Voyager, and so on.

GB: Did you enjoy that work?

JH: Rolf was only doing physical work. She had Judith Aston [student of Dr. Ida Rolf, founder of Aston Kinetics™] start a movement part of the work, but I thought it was silly to have them separate. I wanted to join them together. I also wanted to add some psychological processing because I felt that a lot of tensions and holdings in the body were psychologically induced as well as due to physical trauma. That's how my work slowly evolved into what it is today.

JH: Oh, yes, I was enjoying it. But then I encountered Rolfing® Structural Integration, and I realized that I was much more attracted to that than to mathematics. So I quit and got trained by Ida Rolf, [PhD, (1896-1979)] became a Rolfer®, and eventually became the first president of the then Rolf Institute® of Structural Integration [now known as the Dr. Ida Rolf Institute®] after Ida.

Life as a Rolfer, Then Starting Hellerwork

JH: And after I'd been a Rolfer for a few years, I went to a workshop with a man named Dr. Burgh Joy, who was a spiritual teacher and also did energy healing. I thought that was a very good adjunct to the physical healing of Rolfing [Structural Integration], but the Rolf Institute did not like my idea at all. Not only did they not like it, they kicked me out for it. So that's how Hellerwork started.

GB: Well, it sounds like from your life story that you're meant to keep on the move.

JH: Yes.

GB: When you were the head of the Rolf Institute, were you incorporating some of these techniques with your clients? Is that what was part of the inspiration for starting your own school as well? Were you finding these aspects to be effective with your clients?

JH: Yes. Rolf was only doing physical work. She had Judith Aston [student of

Dr. Ida Rolf, founder of Aston Kinetics™] start a movement part of the work, but I thought it was silly to have them separate. I wanted to join them together. I also wanted to add some psychological processing because I felt that a lot of tensions and holdings in the body were psychologically induced as well as due to physical trauma. That's how my work slowly evolved into what it is today.

GB: I was talking with Don St. John, PhD [see page 52 for his interview with Greer Bailey]. He was talking about two aspects that you brought into Hellerwork that you were considering to be the core psychology curriculum for Hellerwork, one was Hal and Sidra Stone's voice dialogue¹, and the other, I believe he said was focusing-oriented therapy². I'm curious how you came to choose and develop the aspects of the psychological and movement pieces, and how that got integrated.

JH: The movement piece was due to my continuing to work with Judith Aston, even after she left the Rolfing world and started her own work, Aston patterning [now known as Aston Kinetics™]. And then, I did a lot of other movement workshops. The psychological work came from my experience of working with Hal and Sidra Stone, whose work I incorporated into the Hellerwork training because I thought it was very productive. By looking at all the different parts of us as being equally valuable and learning to combine them and be aware of them, this can deepen

the structural work when we talk about these psychological themes.

GB: Yes, I'm soaking that in. I've heard you speak about your "est training"³ having an impact on your business and Hellerwork. Could you speak a little bit about your experience with est training and how that influenced some of your work?

JH: The est training was another psychological approach addressing how we are formed, and I found it very valuable. That format was working with a huge group of people at once, two hundred people in a big room. So that was not feasible in the Hellerwork training. I applied the principles of est and added them to the psychological training of Hellerwork, which is by nature small group work by comparison.

GB: Interesting. Do you remember some of the specific aspects that came into the Hellerwork training?

JH: Well, the main aspect was that we are responsible for our own development and that it's time to stop blaming parents, siblings, and the world for being the way we are. Recognizing that we created the way we are through all of our experiences and that we have the power to change, we can make these changes without blaming and pointing the accusing finger, but just to see it as a process of life is changed.

GB: That's a beautiful life principle. Life is change. I'm also curious about the business side of things. You've

previously said that you were surprised when Ida appointed you president of the Rolf Institute. You didn't see yourself as a business person at the time. What was your business journey like in the development of Hellerwork International?

JH: I believe that Ida appointed me President of the Rolf Institute because I had some wealthy clients whom I could talk into contributing to Rolfing [Structural Integration]. She thought I would bring money to the institute, which turned out to be true.

My own experience in business actually came from a training that I did with a businessman from San Francisco named Marshall Thurber, but the training happened in Vermont. It was called the Burklyn Business School. I talked Marshall Thurber into having Rolfing sessions be a part of the training for the students who were enrolled in the six-week-long business training. He had some powerful people like himself as teachers. Buckminster Fuller was one of the teachers. Ida Rolf fit in with high-caliber people like this.

So, Don St. John and I went, and we delivered structural integration sessions to everybody at that conference in the same window of time. But I thought it was important to teach people about how to run a business because most of the people who came to us for training didn't have any business experience. And I knew from my own life that without some business training, it's very hard to start a practice.

GB: Yes, it is. I'm glad that you brought that into the training. I believe it was Don St. John who talked about those early years of your work together. I believe he said that you established an office across the street from a corporate building, thinking you'd get a lot of people to come over, and not only did they come over, but you actually had a few people leave the corporate world to become Rolfers.

JH: Yes, that's the heart of the story. If I were to add anything, I would say I had these bright ideas, and some of them worked out and others didn't. But this one you just described, that one worked because people would come and get sessions from us and say, "Woah, this is great. I want to learn how to do this."

GB: You basically stole their employees?

JH: Just a small percentage.

GB: I was talking with Mary Bond [posture and movement coach, who studied with Dr. Rolf] recently when she taught for our continuing education series on intuition. She shared her memory of when she first met you. She said that she asked you why Hellerwork was different, and she loved your response. The essence she communicated to me was that it was more about the person than the individual work. This makes me curious about – what was it about your experience in life that brought you to that feeling? What part of you drew you to Rolfing work over all the other types of modalities you experienced? What then drew you also to feel it is about the movement? And also, about psychology. What was the moment when you blended these elements together and felt like the focus should be on the person.

JH: Well, at the beginning, when I first got trained as a Rolfer, because it was new I was mostly concentrating on doing the work and doing it right. But as I got more confident and it started to become easier to do the work, I realized that what I was really dealing with was the whole person. That the bodywork was an avenue into connecting to the person inside that body and not just the body. So, I started incorporating more and more things that dealt with the person.

GB: Is that why you encouraged so much to be built on and to grow by inviting new modalities and things into the work?

JH: Yes, it was partly that, and partly, it was a reaction to Ida Rolf, who was very protective of her work, and she didn't want anybody to mess with it – that is the way she put it. I thought that was a shortsighted approach because, to me, it seemed like the work is an evolution. It had just started, and it needed to be able to keep evolving and changing as the circumstances of our lives change and as our world changes.

GB: Do you have any memories of your conversations with Ida Rolf when you were talking about your ideas or feelings about the school?

JH: She would say that the work needed to evolve, but whenever anybody tried to make some changes or suggest some improvements to her, she always reacted very negatively to that. So, there was not much encouragement in her field for change. Even though the work is about change. It's about learning to live with change.

GB: I like that, learning to live with change. When you first started the Hellerwork school, and it was your first day of teaching, what was that like, stepping into that role?

JH: Well, first of all, I decided to move. I was living in Los Angeles at the time. I decided to move to San Francisco because some friends of mine moved to San Francisco, and I started hearing about different bodywork schools there. So, it seemed like a ripe area for starting a new school. I started practicing there and it took about a year of practice before I got enough people interested in starting a training. I did some weekend workshops, week-long workshops, and so on. Interestingly enough, I found teaching to be very easy for me, even though I'd never done it before, and I never prepared any outlines or syllabuses. I would go into the class and talk. And as you can tell, I like to talk, so that wasn't hard.

GB: I've heard stories from different practitioners when you'd see something being done differently by a student, you'd stop the class and invite everyone to come take a look at how they were doing it. What do you think allowed you to feel so free without a syllabus or to jump in like that and allow creativity from the students in the room?

JH: Two things. One is, I don't like to write. So writing syllabuses and lesson plans and all that was not very exciting. Second, I like to talk. I come from a tradition where my dad would spend hours at the dinner table, telling stories and all that, so it just came very naturally.

Practitioner Owned Profession

GB: What were the planning sessions like in those early years? Did you feel like you had your team established when you started the school? What was it like interacting and playing off each other, working together?

JH: Right from the start, I wanted to create a profession that was owned by its practitioners rather than by some corporation or business. So, I started encouraging people to become trainers and start teaching parts of the training. Somewhere in the 1990s I turned the company over to the practitioners and let them run it. And I'm very glad that I did, and I'm happy that it's succeeding. I had my doubts at times, but they're doing

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very well. I wanted to keep it evolving, changing, and becoming new as things got added.

GB: Was there ever a moment where you wanted to protect the work or where you were doubting an addition or a change that was happening?

JH: No, I don't think there's anything to protect. It's not in danger.

GB: What was one of the struggles you had with establishing the school and running it in the beginning?

JH: The main trouble was money. Establishing and running a school takes money. And I think over time, I put about a hundred thousand dollars into establishing the school. I raised some money from friends and things like that. Also, I was not very interested in administrative work. So very quickly I started hiring people to be the president of the school and handle the administration part.

GB: Were you surprised when Don St. John said in the beginning that he would be your secretary before the school started?

JH: I was totally surprised. My memory is that I called him up and said, "I'm looking for a secretary in case anybody comes to your mind." A few days later, he called me

up and said he'd be the secretary. I am so glad he did that because he really helped get it started.

GB: In a past interview, you talked about having a psychic reading that also predicted you doing different work from Rolfling Structural Integration. Do you remember that?

JH: Yes. At the time I got that reading, I was puzzled because I had just become a Rolfer and I felt like that was going to be my career. Actually, I had just become the President of the Rolf Institute, so it seemed strange that I would be doing something else, but it turned out to be true.

GB: I've heard that Ida Rolf went to psychics and studied spirituality. Did you ever encounter that side of her or have any conversation that you remember having a strong impact on you?

JH: Oh, yes. She had many friendships with psychics throughout the country, and she didn't hide the fact at all that she was tuned into the spiritual and psychic world. I remember going with her to a psychic in Los Angeles named Bella, who told amazing stories about where all this got started. According to her, this type of work was around in prehistoric times with some healers. Rolf was interested in

everything. She also did the est training, by the way. She was very open to all kinds of information. She just wasn't very open to changing Rolfling Structural Integration in any way.

GB: What was your relationship with her like?

JH: She was a formidable figure. We didn't spend very much time together, but she would listen to the ideas that I'd suggest, and then she would make up her mind right then and there and say, yes, or no. And that was it. No discussion.

GB: What are some of your favorite memories with Judith Aston? And when you were taking the Aston patterning movement with her in the 1970s, what stuck out to you that made you want to continue that study?

JH: Judith was really attuned to movement. She had been a dancer, so her understanding of movement was exceptional. I wanted to learn that. At one point, she decided that she was only going to teach her style to her practitioners. So, at that point, we parted company. But I think she's a fabulous teacher.

GB: I agree, she is wonderful to learn from her. I saw that you had quite a journey trying to find a name, Hellerwork wasn't the first idea about what to call your school of structural integration. Can you tell us about that?

JH: When I had started a training, we still didn't have a name. We had gotten a class together and we gathered around a big board, started putting all kinds of possible names together. And "I", "N", "E", "R", "G", and "Y" was one idea, Innergy – pronounced like energy – was a favorite. But then we found out that it was already taken by some group. So, we ended up going with the Heller method, which was okay. In the first training, the parents of one of the trainees were advertising people, and they offered to look into the name. They interviewed practitioners, clients, and so on. They were the ones who came up with Hellerwork, which immediately became more popular.

GB: Do you like the name now?

JH: Yes, sure. But I'm not attached to it.

GB: You said that you weren't a fan of administrative work or writing. How did you end up writing your book (Heller and Henkin 2004)?

JH: I had a co-author – William Henkin.

GB: What was that process like?

I centered my focus on dealing with a whole person rather than just with the body. I think that's what the work is really about.

Joseph Heller

JH: I think that what we're dealing with in the body is all the accumulated stress: physical stress, emotional stress, and health stress. All those different things. My listening is tuned into hearing what is stressing people. It can come in many different ways. It can be relationship stress in their families and stuff like that.

JH: Well, that process was like we would get together, and he'd ask me questions, suggest things, and all that. I did a lot of talking, which he recorded, and then he would write up chapters and bring them back for me to edit. So that's how the book went. If I had to write the book myself, it would've never happened.

Gravity Dynamics

GB: I recently watched a video of you teaching gravity dynamics and I really enjoyed it. Can you tell a little about the material you were talking about with practitioners practicing in gravity and in movement?

JH: Yes, like I said in that video, I believe that the fact that our work started on the table has actually slowed down the evolution of it. It's obviously helpful for parts of the work to get people out of being vertical in gravity by laying them down on the table. Life happens in gravity, and we can do our work dynamically in gravity and in movement rather than just standing still, and laying our clients still. The exploration that I've done with this leaves me to believe that it's bound to be more powerful in the long run and will lead to new ways of looking at the whole thing. I hope practitioners take it up.

GB: Do you feel your background in engineering and working with NASA

affected your viewing of the work and your relationship with gravity?

JH: My background in working with NASA made it so that when I heard Ida talking about gravity as being an important force in human dynamics, that made total sense to me because I had been working with gravity all along. Gravity is obviously very important in holding all of the universe together, and it affects every part of our lives.

GB: Do you feel like we've just scratched the surface of understanding the impacts of gravity in relationship to the work that we're doing?

JH: Yes, I think that there's a lot more that we can find out about the influence of gravity on the body, and unfortunately, the health field is not very interested in that direction. Right now, it's more occupied with pharmaceutical interventions, which I think is a very poor thing.

GB: Do you think COVID-19 had an impact on how people view self-care and relationships to touch? Do you think that it had an impact on how people view the work?

JH: I think it got people scared. But now, people are scared of touching. People are more scared of other people. The biggest impact I think that COVID-19 has had is that we are now more afraid of our neighbors, which is unfortunate.

GB: What do you think your essence is that you brought to the structural integration world with the discipline of Hellerwork?

JH: I centered my focus on dealing with a whole person rather than just with the body. I think that's what the work is really about.

GB: How do you hold all the different parts when you're with a client? What is that like for you?

JH: It's like listening to indicators of stress. I think that what we're dealing with in the body is all the accumulated stress: physical stress, emotional stress, and health stress. All those different things. My listening is tuned into hearing what is stressing people. It can come in many different ways. It can be relationship stress in their families and stuff like that.

GB: Is stress different from restriction?

JH: Well, restriction is a response to stress. We hold back when we're feeling either afraid, threatened, overwhelmed, or whatever.

GB: I've had a wonderful time talking with you today. I love hearing about the history of Hellerwork and being able to share it. This video will be for our Hellerwork practitioners in our email newsletter, and the print version we are sharing with the readership of *Structure, Function, Integration: The Journal of the Dr. Ida Rolf Institute*®. We are sharing a theme focusing on our shared profession of structural integration. Thank you, Joseph, for sharing your thoughts with us.

JH: Yes, you're welcome, and thank you for the work that you're doing.

Endnotes

1. Hal Stone, PhD (1927-2020) and Sidra Stone, PhD, cofounded a talk therapy modality called 'Voice Dialogue' where the client is safely guided to bring different parts of their psyche into dialogue with each other. Together, they co-authored several books, including *Embracing Your Inner Critic: Turning Self-Criticism into a Creative Asset* (1993), *Embracing Our Selves: The Voice Dialogue Manual* (1998), and *Partnering: A New Kind of Relationship* (2000).

2. Focusing-oriented therapy was developed by philosopher and psychologist Eugene Gendlin, PhD (1926-2017) at the University of Chicago. He

studied with Carl Rogers, PhD (1902-1987) who is one of the founders of humanistic psychology and person-centered psychotherapy (American Psychological Association 2023). Focusing-oriented psychotherapy, in particular, helps the client find their own bodily sensed experience (The International Focusing Institute 2023).

3. Erhard seminar training is often referred to by its abbreviation, *est*. Werner Erhard is an American author and lecturer who founded *est* and offered courses from 1971 to 1974 (Wikipedia 2023). Erhard updated his teachings in 1985, retired the name '*est*' and developed a new program he calls, the forum (Hyde and Kopp 2019). During the *est* training era, there were personal and professional development workshops to help people transform their lives, increase their personal responsibility for what is happening in their lives, and with that accountability, people would experience an expansion of possibilities in their lives. It was contemporary with the human potential movement.

Joseph Heller founded *Hellerwork International* in 1978 [called *Hellerwork* initially]; he had been a *Rolfer* since 1972 and had studied with Ida Rolf, PhD (1896-1979). Heller was born in Poland in 1940, received his early education in Europe, and immigrated to Los Angeles, California, when he was sixteen. Before meeting Rolf, he had gained extensive experience with structural stress as an

aerospace engineer at the *Jet Propulsion Laboratory* in Pasadena, California, through the 1960s. Heller also followed his interest in humanistic psychology. For a time, he was the director of a center for human development that had year-long training in bioenergetics and Gestalt, as well as shorter workshops with Buckminster Fuller, John Lilly, and Virginia Satir. After becoming a *Rolfer*, Heller learned structural patterning from Judith Aston. He received advanced training with Burgh Joy. He became the first president of the *Rolf Institute* in 1975. Heller currently lives and works in Mount Shasta, California.

Greer Bailey is a Certified *Hellerwork Practitioner* (2021) and a Licensed *Massage Therapist* (2013). She is also the Chair of *Hellerwork International's Continuing Education Committee*. Bailey found *Hellerwork* at a continuing education class, it was so powerfully transformative that she signed up for the full certification. She feels it has given her the tools to better serve herself and her clients on their self-healing journeys. Bailey practices in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

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Keywords

structural integration; Hellerwork; Ida Rolf; psychology; movement; voice dialogue; focusing-oriented therapy; *est* training. ■