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ROLFING[®] FROM A BIODYNAMIC PERSPECTIVE

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I wrote this in 1987 as part of a series of articles. The first, about the body's response to injury and the second, about the nature of balance and how it changes when injury occurs, were published in the PT Forum, a journal for physical therapists. This was the third in the series but it was never published. The Forum considered it too unorthodox (which it was for them) but I think it is interesting as a precursor to the changes outlined in SOME THINGS ABOUT ME AND THE WAY I WORK. I've always liked it and I hope you do, also.

Further Reflections on the Healing Process

*"Healing is sometimes treated as a dirty word in medicine.
Some feel the term smacks of mysticism and quackery."*

Martin Rossman, M.D.

"We dress the wound, God heals it."

The Aesculapian Club Motto, Harvard Medical School

I suppose it's for the best: when something finally makes sense, a completely different idea breaks through. Perhaps not completely different, more like another step along the road. But I'm getting ahead of myself, let me begin a little further back.

For the last four years I've been giving lectures, taking part in panel discussions and conducting workshops throughout the United States and in Europe. A favorite topic—one that came through what I can only call the cauldron of personal experience—has been the nature of the healing process as it relates to back and neck pain. For approximately twenty years I, like a large percentage of us, suffered from recurrent back pain. Finally, having arrived at the decision that enough was enough, I got serious with something which had become increasingly uncomfortable, time consuming and, ultimately, career threatening. I went through a process of repairing my back and now, for the most part, I am pain free. Some of the realizations I came to while undergoing that roughly two-year struggle I have outlined in articles published by The Physical Therapy Forum.

In short, I said that in regard to chronic musculoskeletal pain, there was a difference between healing and curing; that curing was something from the outside, something that was given to the patient. Healing, I wrote, must come from the inside; it is something, which the patient had to do for him or herself. It was earned. I began to understand that healing was a process, which, by definition, took place over time.

I outlined a number of the components in that process and said that our role as therapists was to assist the patient as he/she worked through the list. That our job was to be “knowledgeable, skillful, compassionate, cheerleaders.” We are hired, I said, just as an attorney or carpenter is hired, to aid the patient in doing what is essentially his job and his responsibility. Our task is to help identify and remove any real or potential barriers to the natural process of repair.

Finally, I wrote about the patients who, exhausted, with tears in their eyes, can take no more and almost beg us, “Can’t you find me a miracle cure?” People who work that hard—if there is any justice in the world—deserve some relief. For us to say no, we’re sorry, there are no miracles out there is very sad. “We are not healers,” I’ve said to them. “We are facilitators along the road you must travel. We can help, emotionally and physically. But we can’t make something happen that is outside the natural course of events. We can support, we can guide, we can remove physical and chemical barriers. But we can’t heal anything; that’s for you to do.”

Which is where I was until about a year ago, when, as I said, something “broke through.” I must at this point enter a disclaimer. Although it may seem irrelevant to some, my personal history is, I think, worth noting. Even though as a Rolfer I am in a non-traditional profession, there has been a large part of me who felt I should stay within the mainstream, become “My son, the doctor.” For better or worse, I have never taken kindly to strangeness. Like William James, I feel I should be “tough minded”. It for this reason that advertisements for Gordon Group classes use expressions like “straight forward and orthopedically sound.” Spiritualism, especially pop-spiritualism, has been anathema.

What I have begun to understand runs counter to a great deal of what I’ve always wanted to believe. On the other hand, to deny what we have seen and felt, to not use what is available to us, seems, somehow disrespectful—if not foolish. Simply put, there is beginning to be more here that has previously met my eye.

It all started, probably in truth, many years ago but more specifically, about twelve months back. I have a client, a solid, kind, generous, intelligent woman who had been referred to me for help with chronic back pain. I describe her with words like “solid” and “intelligent” because what has happened to both her and me in the course of her treatment is, well, strange. My intention, I suppose, is to make clear that this woman is what is commonly described as “salt of the earth” and is not (out with it) a “flake.”

I had been using a technique, which I found very helpful over the years; I call it “structural stacking” and it is similar to osteopathic unwinding or John Upledger’s “vectoring.” During this process the patient is taken away from the barrier as opposed to direct techniques like joint mobilization where the barrier is encountered and overcome.

The principal here is to encourage or exaggerate the restriction and wait for the body’s natural righting mechanisms (more on that another time) to bring it back into balance. As sometime happens when using these kinds of indirect techniques, the symptoms may also be exaggerated and,

if there is any psychological component to the restriction, there may be an emotional discharge. The person may start to shake, sigh, cry, and speak about past emotional traumas. They may, and in fact often do, seem to go into a trance. Their eyes may roll upward, their breathing become shallow. Spastic motions in their hands and fingers, with characteristic rotations in their head and neck, may occur. After a while a release will happen, often with a series of deep breaths and gradual relaxation of the limbs. It was this kind of charge and discharge, which began to occur regularly in my sessions with this client.

She came to me six or seven times; the quality and duration of her pain steadily reduced. After about ten visits I asked her if there was any more need in seeing me. She said that her original reason, the chronic back pain, was pretty much gone and was no longer why she came in. She felt that something very important was happening to her during the stacking; that she was indeed going into a trance and that in the process she was discovering things that were critical to her. I suggested that she consider working with a psychologist I knew who is a highly skilled hypnotherapist, very experienced in trance induction. Because she felt it helped, I continued seeing her every other week after she began with the psychologist.

On occasion, when she would go into a trance, she would begin to speak in a kind of strange, slow, guttural voice. The words didn't make sense on a literal basis and when I asked her afterwards what she had meant, she would look at me as if she had been dreaming and say that she herself wasn't certain. What was clear was that whatever was happening was shaking her to her core.

We continued with the indirect approach sessions. One day she came in and soon after I began working on her head and neck, she went into a trance. I'd been having a minor cold and I sneezed. Suddenly her hand reached back and grabbed me by the wrist. "God bless you," she said. I was shocked, more, I was flabbergasted. This was no ordinary, rote invocation; no automatic response to a sneeze. I looked down at her, could see that she was somewhere else, and finally realized that I had been misinterpreting for months what was happening.

This woman, this completely sane, sensible, New England housewife, was one of those people I had been dismissing as cranks my whole life. This was not the National Enquirer and yet, there on my table was someone who was surely, at the least, not speaking with her own voice. She was transmitting (what else could I call it?) something from somewhere. Good Lord.

After awhile, she took five or six deep breaths. Some tears— as they often would—rolled down her cheeks; she slowly relaxed her arms and legs. I watched her with a look on my face I can only imagine. She sat up, glanced at me and said something to the effect of, "Well, now you know." She told me that whatever was going on had been happening since about the second or third session and that she'd been wondering how long it was going to take me to realize. We laughed about my vaunted sensitivity and awareness. To my question, she said that she had been discussing these trances with the psychotherapist and she again said that whatever I was doing was enhancing her work there. Finally, she looked at me and said, "There's another reason for my being here, it has to do with you, and I'll tell you about it next time." We made an appointment and she left.

I thought about her a lot over the next few days and was in a curious, skeptical and slightly awed state when she arrived. She said she wanted to tell me a story, that this story was not for me to try to understand, what was imperative was that I believe it. She said what I needed is what I seemed to lack the most: I needed faith. She sat down next to me; within a few moments I could hear her breathing begin to change, she was in a trance again. With that same, altered tone of voice, she began to speak:

“A young man—he is about thirteen or fourteen—is standing in a clearing next to a poor peasant’s hut. He has tears in his eyes and is clearly feeling very badly. Inside the hut his pregnant mother is dying. She is about to give birth but is very ill and probably won’t live through the night. His father has left them during the last few days. For years, his mother had been a healer and a midwife in the surrounding countryside. His father was finally unable to live with his wife’s calling. He felt she might be a witch.”

“The boy, feeling all alone, goes into the hut. He looks at his mother and knows she is going to die. He watches her for a long time and finally lies down on the cot next to her. Carefully, he picks her up and crawls underneath her so that she is lying on top of him with his chest against her back. He lies there and waits. Just as she is about to die he allows his life force to enter her body. It is a long, difficult night but eventually he falls asleep.”

“In the morning he awakes and finds that his mother is beginning to recover. He nurses her back to health and over the many years that she remains alive, he works with her as she teaches him to become a healer.”

I sat there for two or three minutes after she finished, waiting for her and thinking the idea of healers and life forces sounded ludicrous—hell, the whole thing sounded ludicrous—and yet undeniably true.

I remembered watching the movie Star Wars and listening to the audience reaction to Obie Ben Kenobie telling Luke about “the force.” People laughed, but there was a nervous quality to their laughter. The idea of a life force strikes every one of us at some very deep level. Call it collective unconscious, whatever, somewhere in there is a knowledge that we all experience. My client had reached past all my outward education and sophistication, all my reading of *The Economist* and travel to exotic places. She had connected with something that was at the very basis of my being. I felt both found out and found.

We sat quietly for another few moments. “What you’re saying,” I said, “is that it’s not enough to just remove barriers. Just to be a mechanic. I’ve got to share that part of me which is my essence. I’ve got to be willing to give everything—everything—I have. Everything I am. I’ve got to be willing, in fact, to die.” “You don’t have to,” she replied. “You’re a perfectly competent practitioner. People come from all over to see you and your reputation is deserved. It’s just that there is more. Your intellectual fear about being a healer is keeping you back. This is not some crazy, wild-eyed notion. I don’t understand it but it’s absolutely real.”

I thought about it a lot. She was right; there has been something missing. Since that day my work has changed, grown, deepened. It's been a revelation. Without becoming religious, "spiritual", or— God forbid— guru like, I've started to add something to my client's healing process. I am no longer just helping to remove barriers, I'm actually—in some way—giving something. I'm giving something of myself. I take a person into an unwinding position and instead of just waiting and observing. I'm able to push something out from within me. It doesn't feel invasive; the release seems to go in at a very different and deeper level. As in the story, I connect that person's holding place with something in the center—of my chest? I don't know what happens. I feel like the door to my soul opens and I'm filled with wonder. I can tell you that it's difficult and its effect upon me can sometimes be fear-provoking and exhausting. In order to do this kind of work I have to put myself in a psychological and spiritual place of what feels like great risk and vulnerability. At times after a session, especially in the early months, I've felt wrung out and almost weepy. Thankfully, that feeling happens much less now. It certainly isn't always appropriate or effective and there are some people, even when I think it might be appropriate, I don't seem to effect at all. I know it's vague. I know it. And I continue learning everyday.

For those of you whose eyes rolled back in your heads many paragraphs ago and have since written me off as having gone into the deep beyond, all I can say is that I understand. For those of you whom all this seems obvious and doesn't know why it's taken me so long, all I can say is that there must have been a reason. Writing this and submitting it for publication takes, I must admit, either courage or stupidity. (At this very moment I'm still not sure whether I will even submit it.) After all, I make almost half my livelihood teaching. Teaching to people who are, and I still believe, should remain, "tough minded." To have it out there that I've had some bizarre kind of conversion is a professional and personal risk.

So I'm in a bit of a bind, here. I could certainly let it go, just see what happens. But letting things go is unlike me. I guess the bottom line is that this is working, this is helping—my clients and myself. Treatment seems more complete; there is less of that uncertainty at the end of a session where I wonder whether the work will hold. It feels more finished, stronger, more solid. I still look at biomechanics; I'm still concerned with joint restrictions, fascial adhesions, inflammatory reactions, and the psychological implications in a person's structure. I haven't lost a perspective; I've added one.

For years I have been confounded by an issue, which is now starting to come into focus. It is a truism, almost a boring truism, that the people who come to see us are not "bad backs or dysfunctional shoulders" but human beings. Seeing them from a "holistic" perspective, a perspective that takes into account our client's/ patient's minds and spirits as well as their bodies, makes sense not only in terms of treatment but as the appropriate way to live our lives. And that's a key issue. What I am writing about is not the occult; what concerns me is not what is hidden but what I hadn't seen.

There is little chance that I will become a "mystical healer." I have no desire to "transmit" energies. While it is true that I have learned something of great value from a rather remarkable teach-

er, the purpose of this article is not to promote the esoteric. No, there is something even more important involved. More important because it is not esoteric; it is, in fact, not even that strange.

What I am talking about is something I believe many of use—without knowing it. And in not knowing, I am suggesting that we are not using it as effectively as we might. What I am talking about is not our education, our skills, our years of experience, not even our caring. What I am talking about is our spirit, our life force. There is a way, and there are people out there who are able to teach us, to use that force in our professional lives.

We can use our being not only to facilitate but also, in some circumstances, actually change a person's recovery. There is a way to use our spirit—whatever that is—which puts something in that wasn't there, which ups the quality and augments the healing process.

Some time ago an article appeared in the Forum in which the author said, "The Forum is where people share their clinical experience." It is the best place to let others know what we have discovered. I've discovered something: I'm forty-six, well trained, experienced, I hope knowledgeable and clear headed, and this is having a profound influence upon my work and life. I share it with you.