

Rolfing®: It doesn't hurt

Mark Powell

IF I HAD a nickel for each time someone asked me, "Isn't Rolfing® painful?" I'd be a deliriously wealthy man today. The answer, dear friends, is a resounding shout from the tallest mountain in the lands (would that be Afton?): "No! A thousand times no! Rolfing is not painful!"

Rolfing earned its "painful" reputation back in the late '60s and the '70s, and indeed, it was painful back then. And there are still some "heavy handed" Rolfers out there. Nevertheless, our discipline has evolved profoundly over the last 30-some years. The art and science of Rolfing Structural Integration has grown by quantum leaps, retaining its classical rigor yet becoming more and more elegant.

In brief, Rolfing is a highly sophisticated approach to aligning human structures in gravity. It's far and away the most stolen from and plagiarized system of myofascial work in the world. Rolfing achieves its powerful results by direct manipulation of the soft tissues of the body, especially the fascia, the connective tissue which enwraps every muscle, bone, and organ in our body, even each individual muscle cell. It is this connective tissue which gives us our shape; it is the packing material of the body.

Rolfers lengthen fascia--and other structures--which have become chronically shortened, hardened; we soften and open and differentiate what has become constricted and "glued together." We accomplish this in a very specific and organic progression, in a way which is designed to bring forth a natural organization and order in the body. Most often--but by no means always--we do this within the classic "10 session series" of Rolfing, with each session featuring its own particular principles and dimensions of the body.

The results are manifold: Chronic or even acute musculoskeletal pains often vanish; people report feeling more balance, grace, efficiency, and range of motion, more over-all ease. They breathe more fully and feel longer and more effortlessly upright. People tend to feel both lighter, and, simultaneously, more grounded.

And they don't just imagine these things: Rolfing literally changes people's shape. It's plainly visible in before-and-after photographs: Their shoulders are dropped back and down; their ribs move much more freely and expansively; they are taller; sometimes their shoe size changes.

There are usually moments in any given session where the work can be intense, but it is almost universally described by clients as a "good intense," the kind you don't want to stop because it feels so incredibly right and needed. And I'm not just trafficking in silly euphemisms; "intense sensation" is not a "code word" for pain. It is the great feeling of trauma leaving the body, as opposed to the bad feeling of trauma entering the body.

Client is in control

In addition, the client is always, but always, 100 percent in control. There is rapport, dialogue between us as we work together to lengthen, unbind, and organize your body. If the depth which my touch is approaching starts to become uncomfortable, the client just tells me, simple as that.

How can Rolfing still achieve its famous results without pain? One word: Anesthesia! Just kidding folks.

One of the ways Rolfing has become both gentler and more powerful is by greatly refining the art of preparation. This means we work with the more superficial wrappings before going to deeper layers. On the large scale, earlier sessions prepare in this way for later sessions. On the smaller scale, if I'm working on a client's shoulder, for instance, I'll first soften and "open up" the more surface tissues before working deeper. Included in the Rolfing principle of preparation is also simply the practice of proceeding very slowly, allowing the tissues to adapt and "let me in."

Another reason Rolfing has outgrown its old, painful ways is that through the decades of investigation into structural integration, Rolfing has become exponentially more specific. For example, before, we could indeed bring a person's head back more, so it floated freely above their spine, but we might end up working all over the place to do it. Now, our understanding of exactly which muscle, tendon, ligament, or fascial structure will "free the head" has grown very precise. A little pressure goes a long way when it's in the correct place.

A third evolution is that we make more extensive use of a client's movement while we work. If I'm working in front of your hip, to help lengthen the leg out of the pelvis or to horizontalize the tilt of the pelvis, we can do much more, and with less intensity, if we engage the entire neural system. We do this by having you move slowly and mindfully through the area as I work: We might use pelvic tilts, various forms of hip flexion and rotation, even breath movement.

Finally, on a much broader level, Rolfing is a gentler animal now because we've learned—and are always learning—how to trust and to listen. To me, this is where the real juice and excitement lies. This trust has to do with gaining a stronger and stronger feel for the perfect genius of each client's inherent health. Our tissues "know" where and how they need to adapt or release; our body "wants" to express the unique beauty and structural integrity that is our birthright.

Yet it's one thing to trust in the innate healing wisdom as an ideal we've heard or read about. It's another thing entirely to get a genuine feel for it, deep in our own hands and body.

When this organic, felt trust has begun to take root, then the work of Rolfing is more and more characterized by "listening." Instead of trying to enforce my preconceived "improvements" into a client's structure, I "listen" to their tissue, their rhythms, their qualities with my hands, even with my whole energetic presence. My way of working becomes more responsive and fluid. The session becomes much more intuitive.

Even though I'm always informed by all of my knowledge, training, and experience, at a fundamental level I cultivate the mode of "not-knowing," honoring the unfathomable mystery that is the human "bodymind."

It is essential that I become quiet within, to see the person's structure standing before me, then I must carry this same disposition into my touch, so that I can become a student of that client's body, allowing it to teach me: What depth? What vector of force? What pace?

Rolfing is non-invasive

A criticism people used to make of Rolfing was that it was "invasive." But invasiveness has nothing to do with depth of touch—indeed, most of us need some real depth of touch. Rather, "invasiveness" has everything to do with this issue of "listening" or not. The subtlest craniosacral move can be totally invasive if applied rotely or mechanically, or even if the practitioner's "energy" is wrong; conversely, the deepest work can be (and should be) experienced as non-invasive if it is appropriate to the moment. If the work is done sensitively and consciously, even the very tissues seem to draw the Rolfer's hand in.

Being open and responsive is not to suggest that the Rolfer doesn't have an intent; indeed, our clear intent is a large part of what makes us Rolfers. Rolfing is not about any technique at all; it is about how we perceive and understand human alignment and structure in gravity. It is not merely releasing things—anybody with an elbow can do that—or merely differentiating structures or layers. As one of my Rolfing instructors put it, our work is not just a matter of shaking the tree and seeing what falls out.

At the heart of Rolfing is our particular vision of structural wholeness, integrity, and freedom in relation to a dynamic "line" in gravity. This vision guides our every move; many believe that we even convey it energetically through our own energy field. This vision of structural wholeness was not "made up"; it was discovered, encompassing principles of biology, physics, gravity, joint shape, and function, and vast knowledge of how tensional forces and pressure systems play out in the body.

But this intent must be worn "as a loose gown." It must be applied artfully, sensitively, and humbly. This innate harmony of form must be brought forth from your bodymind in a living way, unique to your own structure. A sailor may have a very particular destination in mind, but to get there she must be extraordinarily responsive to the weather, the water currents, the winds and so on.

The kinds of evolutions I've described in this article go far beyond merely making Rolfing "not painful." My clients absolutely love the work. More importantly, they love the results they feel in their everyday lives: Feelings of buoyancy, effortlessness, uprightness, energy, and fluidity.