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Rolfing: Structural Integration as American Metaphysical Religiosity

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Rolfing: Structural Integration as American Metaphysical Religiosity

by

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B.A., Bates College, 2005

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This thesis entitled:
Rolfing: Structural Integration as American Metaphysical Religiosity
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The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we
Find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards
Of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline

Marsh, Sarahbelle Alyson (M.A., Religious Studies)

Rolfing: Structural Integration as American Metaphysical Religiosity

Thesis directed by Assistant Professor Deborah Whitehead

Dr. Ida P. Rolf and her life's work of Structural Integration or Rolfing is a product of early twentieth century American metaphysical thought. Rolfing is an American form of somatic bodywork that strives to overcome the Cartesian mind/body split. Through structural work via manual manipulation, Rolfing attempts to achieve physical health and emotional intelligence. This paper explores four major aspects of Rolfing as American Metaphysical religiosity, as defined by Catherine L. Albanese in *Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion*. The project also explores the origins of somatic bodywork and the metaphysical idea of spiritual transformation through physical change. The Esalen Institute is examined for its part in developing a secular American metaphysical religiosity that fostered and promoted Rolfing. Finally, the most current ideas in the Rolfing community and their development from their metaphysical roots are discussed.

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Introduction

For the last year I have been a student split between two different worlds. In one world I am a student of religious studies focusing on the body and dance in Western culture, and in the other I am a student of the somatic practice of Rolfing. At first glance these two disciplines do not seem to have much in common. However, upon a closer look it is clear that the study of religion and the study of somatic work are very similar pursuits. There is little boundary separating healing from spirituality.

Somatic work is a relatively new concept in Western culture. Its American roots can be traced back to the turn of the twentieth century and to the metaphysical thoughts of the day. From the very beginning somatic practitioners were fighting for a different concept of the human body and its possibilities for change. In a very simplistic definition, somatic work teaches the value of listening to the subtle sensations of the body as a mode of healing and change. Don Hanlon Johnson defines somatics as, “the field which studies the soma; namely, the body as perceived from within by first-person perception.” He goes on to state that somatic work incorporates “direct body practices of awareness and touch along with psychological and spiritual methods of work.”¹ Somatic systems, including Rolfing, believe that the key to emotional intelligence and physical health is an understanding of one’s own consciousness found through awareness of one’s movement. The pursuit of a less fixed concept of the body may not have been understood as a religious or spiritual quest by the originators of somatic work, however I argue that is exactly what it was.

As a student of both disciplines, I not only have the vantage point of being able to see how Rolfing and the study of religion intersect, but with my training in the academic

¹ donhanlonjohnson.com

study of religion I have the tools and knowledge to undertake a research project that explores the rich and under-researched area of Rolfing as religious experience. The Rolfing community is a very academically inclined culture. Rolfing has always appealed to practitioners, starting with Dr. Rolf, with academic backgrounds, and the field itself is not lacking in empirical and theoretical research. Many academic projects exist in the Rolfing community, however most focus on the scientific or psychological effects of Rolfing.² The work that does exist on the religious aspects of Rolfing addresses the work from a practitioner's point of view. In this project I approach Rolfing as a subject of religious studies inquiry. I argue that Rolfing is a manifestation of American metaphysical religiosity.

In her book *Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion*, Catherine L. Albanese suggests that there is a long and complicated history of metaphysical religion in America.³ I argue that Rolfing, as understood as a somatic practice, is part of this history and that American somatic work is a subset of American metaphysical religion. Like other branches of American metaphysical religiosity, Rolfing has a shared constitution of ideas that stem from ancient metaphysical beliefs, it appropriates Eastern philosophies of the mind and consciousness; and it strives for health by viewing each individual as a complete whole, not separate parts. However, unlike other forms of American metaphysical religion, somatic work's main focus is on the body and how the body can invoke consciousness. Rolfing is truly an American born concept of mind/body work.

² See the Rolf Research Foundation (rolfresearchfoundation.org) and the Fascia Research Congress (fasciacongress.org) for the latest research in Rolfing.

³ Albanese, Catherine L. *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion*. Yale University Press: New Haven, 2007.

The Rolf Institute of Structural Integration defines Rolfing as, “a form of bodywork that reorganizes the connective tissues, called fascia, that permeate the body.”⁴ Rolfing has many benefits including potentially releasing tension, resolving discomfort and alleviating pain. Some of Rolfing’s aims are to revive one’s energy, re-establish flexibility, and leave a person feeling more comfortable in their own body. In short, Rolfing is a therapy aimed at healing a client’s physical discomfort. However, it is more than just a type of bodywork. Rolfing, like other forms of somatic work strives to integrate physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual aspects of an individual to bring into being a healthier individual. Dr. Rolf, the founder of Rolfing states, “If, in our presentation to the world, enough stress can be laid on this...we are less therapists than we are educationists...This is my goal: an educational process.”⁵ By working with an individual on body awareness and sensation through experience, a somatic practitioner can help their client become more conscious of all aspects of their existence. Somatic experience is one form of a metaphysical expression of religion.

In this thesis I explore four major aspects of Rolfing as American metaphysical religiosity. I begin by looking at the origins of somatic bodywork and the metaphysical idea of spiritual transformation through physical change. The concept of transformation is an indispensable and ancient theme in metaphysical thought as well as the main goal in Rolfing. In the first chapter I trace the history of transformation in Western thought to its present day form in the shape of Rolfing.

⁴ www.rolf.org

⁵ Feitis, Rosemary ed. *Ida Rolf Talks About Rolfing and Physical Reality*. The Rolf Institute, Boulder, Co: 1978, 40.

The second chapter takes a deeper look into Dr. Rolf's personal history and explores the genealogy of her work. Dr. Rolf did not invent her life's work in a vacuum; she is a product of the broad metaphysical ideas present in American culture at the turn of the twentieth century. This chapter also gives a clearer definition of Rolwing from Dr. Rolf's perspective. In the third chapter, I discuss the Esalen Institute and its part in developing a secular American metaphysical religiosity that fostered and promoted Rolwing. Esalen brought Rolwing a new kind of student. Before Esalen, Dr. Rolf's work was at best "out of sympathy with mainstream cultural values."⁶ At Esalen, Dr. Rolf found like-minded students and together they helped create the now famous counter-culture that was Esalen in the 1960s and 1970s that gave somatic work a platform in American culture.

I end this project with a chapter devoted to the most current ideas in the Rolwing world and how they have evolved from Dr. Rolf's original teachings. The Rolwing community is not a homogeneous entity. Like all great religious expressions created by a dynamic leader, Rolwing is an ever changing and evolving tradition. Since Dr. Rolf's death in 1979, Rolwing has evolved and grown in the absence of its leader and in some ways beyond her original ideas. However, current Rolwing theories are aware of and make a strong connection to their incipient metaphysical tendencies.

⁶ Feitis, 19, 1978

Chapter 1

Metaphysical Transformation

Historically, metaphysics refers to a segment of scholastic philosophy, most popular during the Middle Ages, concerned with questions of being or existence. The word metaphysics is derived from two Greek words; *meta* meaning “beyond something” and *physis*, meaning “physical.” Also known as ontology, metaphysics was built on Aristotelian theory that contemplated what it meant to have being, or a study of being as being. Metaphysics as a subject has been an important part of academic study for over two millennia. By the end of the eleventh century a university education, developed from scholasticism, consisted of the seven liberal arts subjects, divided into the trivium or literary studies, which were grammar, philosophy, and rhetoric and the quadrivium or scientific studies.⁷ Metaphysics has been part of the curriculum since the beginning of institutionalized education.

Somatic ontology is the metaphysical investigation of our bodily being. It not only asks, “What is being?” it asks, “What is the bodily being of human beings?” Every question asked about who or what we are always brings us back to our human bodies. The body is the site in which being human is revealed. Metaphysics is not limited to the academic sphere. Throughout Western history the metaphysical concept of spiritual transformation through physical change has popped up in religious and cultural movements as well as in the academic study of ontology.

In *The Corporeal Turn*, Maxine Sheets-Johnstone suggests that the human sciences and humanities were the laboratories for two paradigm shifts in twentieth century

⁷ Miles, Margaret R. *The Word Made Flesh: A History of Christian Thought*. Blackwell Publishing: Oxford, 2005, 152.

academia: the linguistic turn and the later corporeal turn. She states, “With the corporeal turn, however, it was a matter not only of attending to something heretofore simply assumed and largely ignored, but of correcting something misrepresented for centuries.” She argues, “through its Cartesian legacy, the body was consistently presented as a mere material handmaiden of an all-powerful mind, a necessary but ultimately discountable aspect of cognition, intelligence, and even affectivity.”⁸ If Western academia has, until recently, ignored the body, the same cannot be said about Western religious concepts. In her book *Born Again Bodies*, R. Marie Griffith states, “Tropes on the order of purity and peril, virtue and vulnerability, for instance, have recurrently surfaced as Christians—along with the cultures they have helped to shape—wrestle with competing prototypes of the body. Within that tradition the flesh serves as a conduit of grace and temple of the Holy Spirit as well as an unruly repository of sin, temptation, and defilement.”⁹ Metaphysical ideas of the body, whether they are academic or religious are always present and changing in Western thought.

This chapter explores the metaphysical idea of physical transformation by examining medieval alchemy, nineteenth and twentieth century philosophical movements, the twentieth century German Gymnastik movement, and the metaphysical landscape of American religiosity at the turn of the twentieth century. As different as each one of these movements are, each one is centered on the idea that physical transformation is essential to human evolution.

⁸ Sheets-Johnstone, Maxine. *The Corporeal Turn: An Interdisciplinary Reader*. Imprint-Academic: Charlottesville, 2009, 2.

⁹ Griffith, R. Marie. *Born Again Bodies: Flesh and Spirit in American Christianity*. University of California Press: Berkeley, 2004, 6.

Alchemy: The Religion of Transformation

Alchemy is often credited with being the precursor to modern chemistry and medicine. However, Alchemy was much more than just the science of the day. It was the main expression of metaphysical thought in the Middle Ages, and it is where we begin our journey. In a very broad sense, alchemists believed in a natural and symbolic unity between the cosmos and humanity, or that the universe and everything in it was made of the same material. It was a combination of science, art, and religion. Alchemists believed that all things in the universe had the ability to evolve or transform into a more pure version of themselves because everything in the universe was made of the same source material. Due to this belief, alchemy can be labeled as the art (science or religion) of transformation.

Branches of alchemy are rarely distinguished from one another, however the best-known branch of alchemy is metallurgic alchemy. Its goal was to turn common metals into gold or silver. Metallurgic alchemy was not just chemistry; rather, like all forms of alchemy it was the art of transforming and purifying, in this case metal, in order for it to exist at a more virtuous state. Metallurgic alchemists believed that all metals were evolving, however slowly, into the perfected state of gold. Their goal was not to change the metal, but to speed up the natural transformation.

Philosophical alchemy, which is a little closer to our subject matter, focused on the spiritual transformation of the whole person, including the body. Like metallurgic alchemy, philosophical alchemy believed that everything, including people was evolving, however slowly, into a more perfected state of being. In metal this form was gold, but in living things the purest form was called quintessence. In *The Mirror of Alchemy*, Gareth Roberts defines

quintessence as the “essential and most refined part of a substance,”¹⁰ and quotes Gerard Dorn defining quintessence as a “certaine spirituall [sic] matter extracted corporeally out of...all things that have life.”¹¹ In all living things, including humans, the purest form was understood to be spiritual or divine. And it was understood that this transformation was not possible without also a transformation of the body or “metasomatosis.” Metasomatosis is defined as a metamorphic process by which the composition of a rock is altered. During metasomatism the rock remains in a solid state.¹² But when referring to a human it is understood as a spiritual transformation of the body.¹³

Philosophical alchemy and its theory of metasomatosis acknowledged that spiritual transformation is an embodied experience. However, by the seventeenth century academic currents were changing and leading this new era of thought was Rene Descartes. Descartes’ work favored Plato’s theory of dualism, that the mind and body were separate and unequal entities. Consequently the metaphysical theory of transformation and the importance of the physical self fell out of fashion and the predominant Western worldview of the mind/body split was championed.

In Plato’s doctrine of metaphysical dualism he argued that the body is the disfigurement of the soul and the true philosopher must seek unchanging, eternal truth free from the body. He compared the soul to a prisoner in a cell and argued that soul “is

¹⁰ Roberts, Gareth. *The Mirror of Alchemy: Alchemical Ideas and Images in Manuscripts and books from Antiquity to the Seventeenth Century*. University of Toronto Press: Toronto, 1994, 111.

¹¹ Roberts, 111, 1994, citing Dorn, Gerard. *A Chymicall Dictionary Explaining Hard Places and Words Met withall in the Writings of Paracelsus, and other Obscure Authors*. Tr J[ohn] F[rench] (1650).

¹² Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, 11th Edition.

¹³ Maitland, Jeffrey. *Spacious Body: Explorations in Somatic Ontology*. North Atlantic Books: Berkeley, 1995, 227

imprisoned in and clinging to the body and that it is forced to examine other things through it as a cage.”¹⁴ This metaphor suggests that the best service philosophy can give to the nature of being human is to unshackle the soul from its bodily prison.

Dr. Jeffery Maitland¹⁵ states, “Descartes, in his attempt to lay the foundations for the newly emerging science represented by Galileo, embraced Plato’s dualism and added the astounding claim that the body is nothing but a soft machine.”¹⁶ Descartes argued that the human body was comparable to any inanimate object (i.e. a stone, a rock, or a clock). He concluded that the body was distinct from the self. This led to the formation of Descartes’ famous phrase, *cogito ergo sum*, or “I think therefore I am.” Descartes, through this phrase was contending that as long as man thinks, whether he doubts or affirms his thoughts, he could not doubt his existence as a thinking being.¹⁷ Because he is able to doubt his body but not his existence, Descartes concluded that since his mind and body exist separately they must be distinct.¹⁸

Following the Enlightenment, continuing the line of thinking developed by Descartes, philosophical reasoning, including metaphysics to a large extent no longer explored or even acknowledged “the body” or “embodiment ” as a vital aspect to being. For the next few centuries scientific rationality and linear thought prevailed and metaphysical thoughts of transformation took a back seat.

¹⁴ Cooper, John Madison and D.S. Hutchinson eds. *Plato: Complete Works*. Hackett Publishing Company: Indianapolis: 1997. Phaedo, 82d-e.

¹⁵ Dr. Jeffery Maitland was a tenured Professor of Philosophy at Prudue University, now he is a certified advance Rolfer and Instructor of Advanced Roling. He was also the Faculty Chairman and Director of Academic Affairs for the International Rolf Institute.

¹⁶ Jeffrey, Maitland. “What Is Metaphysics?” *Rolf Lines*, July/August (1990): 7.

¹⁷ Descartes, Rene. *Discourse on Method* and *The Meditations*, trans. Laurence J. Lafleur. Liberal Arts Press: New York, 1960, 71-74.

¹⁸ Descartes, 74, 1960

By the nineteenth century metaphysical ideas began appearing again in American religious expressions and academic studies. Movements such as transcendentalism and American New Thought as well as occultism and spiritualism were sweeping the nation's popular culture. At the time, metaphysics was considered a pariah by intellectuals while agnosticism was held as a more conventional option.¹⁹ However, as early as 1872, a group of Harvard academics and Boston-area intelligentsia such as Charles Sanders Peirce, Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., Chauncey Wright, John Fiske, Nicolas St. John Green and William James began meeting in secret to discuss metaphysical ideas, calling themselves "The Metaphysical Club "half-ironically, half-defiantly," as Peirce said, "for agnosticism was then riding its high horse, and was frowning superbly upon all metaphysics."²⁰ In his book, *The Metaphysical Club*, Louis Menand describes the various trajectories constituting this group, and relates how within its meetings the young men discussed ideas about the origins, end, and meaning of life as well as rejected traditional European metaphysics in favor of more modernist and pragmatist philosophical perspectives.²¹ The philosophical tradition of pragmatism was founded within the meetings of the Metaphysical Club.

The Body is Back

By the dawn of the twentieth century, Western philosophy began to move away from the ideas of dualism and Rationalism. The body, as a subject of study, was beginning

¹⁹ Albanese, 412, 2007

²⁰ Peirce, Charles Sanders, "Pragmatism," CP 5.11-12, *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*. Vol. 5: Pragmatism and Pragmaticism. Edited by Charles Hortshorne and Paul Weiss. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, Harvard University Press, 1934.

²¹ Menand, Louis. *The Metaphysical Club*. Farrar, Strous and Giroux: New York, 2001.

to show up in social science and humanities research. A few schools of twentieth century philosophy, most notably the second generation of phenomenology, started to ask anew the essential question of metaphysics, “What is being,” with the body once again included in the conversation.

Marcel Mauss’ discussion of the importance of what he calls “body techniques”²² was one of the first steps in modern academia to acknowledge the importance of the human body in cultural studies. Mauss argued that all societies had their own “special habits” and that these habits were visible through the technique of the body.²³ Mauss writes, “In all these elements of the art of using the human body, the facts of education were dominant. The notion of education could be superimposed on that of imitation...The individual borrows [learns] the series of movements which constitute it from the action executed in front of him or with him by others.”²⁴ He did not believe there was a “natural way” for an adult to move, but rather argued that all movement was cultivated by society. “Body techniques” are embodied cultural identities. Mauss’s work suggested that a person is not just what he or she is thinking, a person is also the way their body is moving. The body, and not just the mind, can therefore constitute the subject.

However, it was the founding and development of phenomenology that brought the body back into philosophy. Phenomenology is a broad philosophical movement founded by Edmund Husserl that emphasizes the study of the conscious experience. Husserl’s work influenced many notable philosophers including Martin Heidegger and existentialist Maurice Merleau-Ponty. By the time phenomenology reached its second generation of

²² Mauss, Marcel. *Techniques, Technology and Civilisation*, ed. Nathan Schlanger, New York: Durkheim Press, 2006, p. 77.

²³ Mauss, 2006, 79

²⁴ Mauss, 2006, 81

thinkers, it can clearly be set apart from the dualism of the Cartesian method because its focus is on the lived-body experience or intentionality. Due to phenomenology's antithetical nature to the Cartesian world-view, phenomenology has become comparable to mystical or non-theistic forms of religion in that all three of these categories provide alternatives to the dualism of the Cartesian method.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty was the only phenomenologist in the first half of the twentieth century to actively engage his philosophy with science and psychology. Because of this exchange with other studies of ontology, his work is most often cited as influential in American metaphysical religion. Building upon Martin Heidegger's earlier work, Merleau-Ponty manages to resurrect the human form from its unresponsive stupor as a Cartesian object. Merleau-Ponty understands that the body is not distinct from the subject's life experiences, but is integral to these experiences. The body is the very matrix through which one lives life; therefore, because life is an embodied experience the mind and body cannot be separated.²⁵ In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty suggests that the principal origins of human action lie in movement and motility, and that the body is the universal medium of being. Consciousness, therefore, is not a matter of "I think," but rather "I can." The human body is not "in" space but rather it inhabits space, and this inhabiting of space allows for human actions and consciousness that are rooted in one's ability to move.²⁶ This ability to inhabit space and our ability to act and move in integrated ways is what Merleau-

²⁵ Merleau-Ponty, M. *The Phenomenology of Perception*. Routledge: London, 1962, 124.

²⁶ Merleau-Ponty, 139, 1962

Ponty calls a “body schema.”²⁷ It is through one’s body schema that consciousness is found.²⁸

The concept of body schema has been widely researched in the last few decades by phenomenology, psychoanalysis, and neuroscience and is rarely separated from the idea of body image. Body image and body schema are two different but closely related systems. However, a conceptual distinction is useful to help understand the complex dynamics of bodily experience. Shaun Gallagher discusses body image and body schema in great depth in his book *How the Body Shapes the Mind*. He defines body image as “a system of perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs pertaining to one’s own body,” and body schema is “a system of sensory-motor capacities that function without awareness of the necessity of perceptual monitoring.”²⁹ Or in other words, body image is the way we perceive our bodies and schema is how our bodies actually move.

Merleau-Ponty writes that habit is a restoration and reorganization of one’s body schema and that understanding habit is the key task in revising our thinking about the body and the ways in which we “understand” it. Habit expresses our power of widening our being-in-the-world or modifying our existence by appropriating new instruments. In other words, humans know how to do many things without ever being able to fully articulate these actions in words. We can ride a bike, dance a polka, or know the way around our own homes. We do not do these things through a process of intellectual synthesis, rather we

²⁷ “Body schema” is a concept that is used in many different fields including philosophy (phenomenology), neuroscience, psychology, and robotics. There is no consensus of a definition across the many disciplines that employ the idea. However, it can be regarded as the set of processes that register one’s body and all of its parts in space. This is typically understood as a non-conscious process and is used primarily for spatial organization.

²⁸ Merleau-Ponty, 148-153, 1962

²⁹ Gallagher, Shaun. *How the Body Shapes the Mind*. Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2005, 24.

perform these tasks through our ability to integrate them into our body schema and the world around us. Merleau-Ponty states,

Whether a system of motor or perceptual powers, our body is not an object for an “I think,” it is a grouping of lived-through meanings...Sometimes a new cluster of meaning is formed; our former movements are integrated into a fresh motor entity, the first visual data into a fresh sensory entity, our natural powers suddenly coming together into a higher meaning.³⁰

Thus, our body schema is constantly changing, learning, and adapting. We can develop new skills as well as lose unused skills. It is this ability of being-in-the-world without “thinking” about it that shows the wholeness of the lived experience.

Due to its very interdisciplinary nature, body schema and body image have no fixed status; they can be conceptualized in many different ways in order to help develop possible applications for their concept.³¹ However, research in all areas of consciousness leans towards the idea that life and thought are not possible without the body. There is no separation between one’s mind and one’s body. However, just because the fallacy of the Cartesian world-view is anatomically or philosophically understood does not mean that this recognition is embraced, exercised, or applied to our daily lives.

And so, while academics in the early decades of the twentieth century were grappling with the philosophical idea that consciousness is an embodied experience and its implications, body practitioners were beginning to try applying a non-dualistic method to their work. What is now referred to as somatic work can be traced back to the German

³⁰ Merleau-Ponty, 1962, 177

³¹ For further clarification and reading on body schema and body image see Preester, Helena De and Veroniek Knockaert ed. *Body Image and Body Schema: Advances in Consciousness Research*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2005

Gymnastik movement that began around 1900 and was predominately female.³² Bess Mensendieck of Hamburg, and Elsa Gindler and Hede Kallmeyer of Berlin³³ were some well-known faces that practiced their work in private studios in northern Europe and along the eastern seaboard of the United States.

They offered an alternative to the physical education existing in traditional schools, classical ballet studios, and the gymnasium that was stereotypically rigid and military-like.³⁴ Unlike the traditional forms of body education, which tried to fit everybody into a common and solitary mold, Gymnastik valued free and spontaneous movement and sought consciousness, freedom, and awareness as the main goal. They rejected the separation of the human spirit from its mechanical body that they saw in medicine and religion, and envisioned instead an intimate harmony of body, movement, health, and spiritual consciousness.³⁵ If one could not move freely, so they believed, then one is not free.

Just as the idea of body-consciousness was beginning to take shape its course was dramatically altered by the two World Wars of the twentieth century. The first war left the international and interdisciplinary followers of the Gymnastik movement, made up of dancers, artists, physical therapists, and scientists, intact but isolated. The second war almost destroyed the movement. Pioneers and practitioners were dispersed and forced to take up the more familiar aspects of the work. Most made a living by practicing what looked like psychotherapy or physical rehabilitation.

³²Other pockets of somatic work can be found throughout Europe at the turn of the twentieth century, most notable, the work of F. Matthias Alexander in London.

³³ These women were all trained by men including Francois Delsarte and Leo Koffler, however, it was these women that made the work known.

³⁴ Thomas, Hanna interview with Carola Speads, *Somatics*, Spring/Summer (1981) 10-13.

³⁵Johnson, Don Hanlon. *Body, Spirit, and Democracy*. North Atlantic Books: Berkeley, 1994. 16.

After the Second World War the Gymnastik practitioners scattered. Many fled to the United States, where they practiced and taught for years without much communication with one another. It was not until the 1960s at the Esalen Institute that many of these practitioners and their work found a place to gather, share, and explore. Teachers such as Alexander Lewen, Moshe Feldenkreis, and Ida Rolf generated large followers and brought their philosophies and theories about the body, movement, and health to a greater audience. At this time Esalen was also home to non-bodyworkers who were theorizing about bodywork. In the 1960s somatic theory and somatic bodywork met and communicated on a large scale. Esalen provided a physical space for great minds to exchange ideas and learn from each other. In Chapter Three we will look more closely at Esalen and its integral involvement in the development of somatic work in general, and Rolfing in particular.

Metaphysics as American Religious Transformation

In her book, *Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion*, Catherine L. Albanese argues for a metaphysical thesis, along with the already established evangelical and denominational-establishment theses, as a key to making sense of American religiosity.³⁶ She states that metaphysical religion or what she calls

³⁶ see McLoughlin, William. *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform*. The University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1978 work on evangelicalism and Butler, Jon. *Awash in the Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People*. First Harvard University Press: U.S.A, 1990, and Butler and Keith Harper. *Power Authority, and the Origins of American Denominational Order: The English Churches in the Delaware Valley*. The American Philosophical Society: Philadelphia, 1978. work on mainstream denominations.

metaphysics, both Christian and non-Christian, is as important as “evangelicalism in fathoming the shape and scope of American religious history and in identifying what makes it distinctive”³⁷ and as influential on American public culture as mainstream-denominational Christian traditions. Albanese contends that a metaphysical form of American religiosity differs significantly from both the evangelical and mainstream-denominational and should be represented in an academic understanding of American religious culture.

Evangelical forms of religiosity foster an individual emotional experience that is life altering. The core principles of evangelicalism are built on the idea of separation between the individual and the “source of spiritual power” i.e. God and overcoming that separation through a change of heart and conversion.³⁸ Evangelicals organized mass meetings and gatherings to help foster conversions. Albanese sums up the impact of evangelical religiosity in this way: “The secret of American Individualism becomes the secret of the evangelical heart. The direct and personal experiences of the revivals, in this history, have indelibly imprinted something that we can call American character.”³⁹ Evangelical forms of religiosity, throughout American history, have placed almost as much importance on the individual physical transformation as it has on the inner transformation of the heart.

In her book, *Born Again Bodies*, Griffith explores the connection between body and spirit in American religious history and contends that the body has long been thought of as an external expression of the inner soul. Griffith argues that American religion has been central to the historical creation of American bodies. She states, “The search for external

³⁷ Albanese, 4, 2007

³⁸ Albanese, 5, 2007

³⁹ Albanese, 5, 2007

somatic indicators of internal states of being is age-old.”⁴⁰ Examples of this line of thinking can be found throughout American religious history from Puritans, to Shakers, and Christian Scientists; all looked to the body in some way to provide evidence of one’s inner spiritual pureness. In some cases, including the New Thought movement physical “perfection” was intimately linked with spiritual perfection.⁴¹ Griffith writes, “New Thought writers and their heirs regarded the links between mind and matter, the body deemed not only the soul’s mirror but, often enough, the elemental ground of spiritual progress and perfectibility.” For many sects of Christianity one’s physical transformation was proof of a deeper, more important inner transformation.

On the other hand, mainstream-denominational religiosity emphasizes communal coordination and ritual. Formal ceremonies are performed in official sacred spaces at specific times for large congregations. This form of religiosity gives the believers a sense of security and makes the world comprehensible. Mainstream-denominational American religion harnesses authority through traditions and the socially and ritually educated body of the congregation. This narrative of American religiosity highlights the role of public power, organization, and hegemony. It suppresses the role of the individual and “discloses that the body that counts is the social body with its authoritarian head.”⁴²

Albanese argues for a metaphysical form of religiosity that offers something the first two forms cannot provide. Metaphysical forms of religion not only privilege the mind (rather than the heart) and reason, they move beyond reason into the realm of intuition, revelation, and universal wisdom. A metaphysical form of religion embraces an “often more

⁴⁰ Griffith, 7, 2004

⁴¹ Griffith, 69, 2004

⁴² Albanese, 5, 2007

whole and integrated universe, so that the material world is organically linked to a spiritual one."⁴³ There is no separation between the individual and the source of power and there is no authoritarian head. If there is a difference between the material and spiritual worlds it is in degrees not substance.

This cosmological approach to religion echoes back to the alchemists and their religion of transformation. If the material world and all it encompasses is organically linked to the spiritual, it becomes possible for the individual to evolve or transform into or become more connected to the source of power. American metaphysical religiosity was reaching back to and embracing the alchemists' theory of quintessence.

As Albanese points out in her book, metaphysical religiosity has a long history in American culture. In the first two sections of her book, Albanese traces its history starting with pre-seventeenth-century Hermetic and vernacular magic through the Revolutionary and Civil wars. In the third section she examines metaphysical religion from the post-bellum era to the present. Rolfing, as a metaphysical form of American religiosity, owes its roots to the full history of American metaphysical thought, however it is the developments that came after the Civil War that set the stage for Dr. Rolf and her work to emerge. Movements like the Theosophical Society, Christian Science, and New Thought all made great strides in incorporating elements of Eastern thought, philosophies of healing practices, and the importance of the transformation of the conscious mind into their metaphysical worldviews. Without their work twentieth century metaphysical ideas of embodiment would have had little ground to stand on.

⁴³ Albanese, 6, 2007

American metaphysics differs in form and function from its counterpart traditions in mainstream-denominational and evangelical American religiosity. Metaphysical religion lacks unity in practice and convictions in addition to an absence of central leadership or a single authority. In her attempt to organized the unorganized, Albanese divides American metaphysics into four major strands. Quickly summarized these four themes or principles are: 1) the preoccupation with mind and all of its powers. 2) The connection and adherence to ancient cosmological theories. 3) The belief in movement and energy and finally 4) the yearning for salvation as understood as healing, comfort, and solace. Albanese argues, "that metaphysics is a normal, recurring, and pervasive feature of the American spiritual landscape."⁴⁴ Indeed, each of Albanese's features of metaphysical religion are helpful to understanding Rolfing and can be observed in Rolfing whether they come directly from Dr. Rolf's teaching, or from the greater genealogy of American metaphysics in which Rolfing belongs. In the next chapter, I will highlight Albanese's four characteristics of metaphysical religion in the context of Rolfing.

⁴⁴ Albanese, 16, 2007

Chapter 2

Dr. Ida P. Rolf

Not much is known about Dr. Rolf's personal life. She frequently stated that she would rather be remembered for her life's work than for her life's story. This attitude has led to, at best, an enigmatic understanding of Dr. Rolf the woman. Dr. Ida P. Rolf was born in the Bronx, New York on May 19, 1896. She graduated from Barnard College in 1916 with a degree in biochemistry. After graduation Rolf was given a unique opportunity. Due to the fact that the United States was in the middle of the First World War and many of the young men of her generation were overseas, she was offered a job as a researcher at the Rockefeller Institute. Rolf used her work at the Rockefeller Institute as the groundwork for her Ph.D in biochemistry, which she received from Columbia University, through the College of Physicians and Surgeons in 1920.⁴⁵ Her dissertation was titled *Three Contributions of the Chemistry of the Unsaturated Phosphatides*.⁴⁶

Rolf married Walter Demmerle at age 25, but kept her maiden last name because she already had published work as Rolf.⁴⁷ The newlyweds lived in Greenwich Village the intellectual and artistic hot bed of New York City at the time. Rolf worked at the Rockefeller Institute until 1927, where she rose to the rank of Associate and published sixteen papers in scholarly journals, mostly in the *Journal of Biological Chemistry*. In 1928, Rolf left her position at the Rockefeller Institute for after the death of her parents and moved to Stony Brook, Long Island with her husband and also traveled extensively in Europe. During this period Dr. Rolf studied mathematics and atomic physics at the Swiss Technical University

⁴⁵ Johnson, Sam. "Ida Rolf and the Two Paradigms." *Structural Integration* (June) 2007.

⁴⁶ Feitis, 3, 1978

⁴⁷ Demmerle, Alan. "A Brief Talk About Ida Rolf." *Structural Integration* (December) 2007, 5.

in Zurich. She also studied homeopathic medicine in Geneva, and in London she studied under F. Matthias Alexander, inventor of the Alexander Technique.

Rolf began her life's work after returning from Europe in the 1930s. She was searching for answers to "personal and family health problems" and she found modern medical treatments inadequate.⁴⁸ Like the countless people that Dr. Rolf has helped, she began her investigation because she could not find relief from her chronic pain. According to Jeffrey Kripal and Don Hanlon Johnson, Rolf was kicked by a horse on a camping trip in Yellowstone in 1916, and shortly after she became very ill.⁴⁹ However, her son writes that it was his father that suffered the horse accident while camping in the Canadian Rockies that lead Dr. Rolf to a life of healing.⁵⁰

The horse accident, whatever the details were, had lasting repercussions on her life and lead Dr. Rolf to turn to more metaphysical ideas of health and healing. Albanese states that American metaphysical religion was "formed in the midst of a yearning for salvation understood as solace, comfort, therapy, and healing. In the context of metaphysical naturalism in the materialistically oriented United States, sin and loss were graphically reordered and re-understood in social, cultural, and somatic terms."⁵¹ In metaphysical terms, Dr. Rolf and other somatic practitioners' pursuit of health and healing can be understood as a quest for salvation.

Dr. Rolf researched and studied many different schools of thought in Europe and in the United States including homeopathy, osteopathy, chiropractic medicine, yoga,

⁴⁸ www.rolf.org History of Ida. P. Rolf and Structural Integration.

⁴⁹ Kripal, Jeffrey J. *Esalen: America and the Religion of No Religion*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007, 235. Johnson, 81, 1994

⁵⁰ Demmerle, 5-6, 2007

⁵¹ Albanese, 15, 2007

Alexander Technique, and Korzybski's work on states of consciousness. Through her explorations Rolf noted that proper alignment, anatomical structure, and physiologic function were related and at the root of many methods of health and healing. All of these schools strive for alignment of the body through their own method. And Dr. Rolf agreed that bodies function best when they are properly aligned. The two most influential forms of body alignment and metaphysical philosophy on Dr. Rolf's work were osteopathy and yoga.

Yogic practices and philosophies were present in American metaphysical thought throughout the nineteenth century, most notably in Transcendentalist writings and in the writing of the Theosophical Society. Metaphysically-minded Americans appropriated the mystical and meditative aspects of yoga willingly and easily. Helen Blavatsky, one of the founders of the Theosophical Society, had already used ideas of consciousness from Hindu rishis and Buddhist bodhisattvas as a major part of the theological synthesis that provided guidance along the spiritual path of the Theosophists in her first published work *Isis Unveiled*.⁵² The preoccupation with the mind and its powers is ever present in metaphysical thought. For metaphysicians the mind is a very powerful thing that is not limited to the brain or to abstract thinking; it has to be understood in a very inclusive and broad way. The mind in American metaphysics is about consciousness, or enlightenment of the body, and all that arises from it.⁵³ The quest for consciousness involves all the senses. Auditory, visionary, tactile, and kinesthetic manifestations must be taken into account when powers of the mind are of interest. In her book *The Secret Doctrine*, Blavatsky called yoga "mystic

⁵² Albanese, 278, 2007

⁵³ Kripal, 457, 2007

meditation” the source of “Supreme Wisdom.”⁵⁴ Yoga was a way to tap into the consciousness through all of one’s senses.

The bodily practice of yoga, or hatha yoga, was not as easily accepted into American metaphysical thought. Blavatsky believed that physical yoga was an inferior form of yoga and associated it with “torture and self-maceration.” She warned that hatha yoga was “injurious to the health and alone can never develop into Raj (spiritual and meditative) yoga.”⁵⁵ Blavatsky was not the only metaphysician that warned against the practicing of hatha yoga. As in academic philosophy, the body was often not thought of as a necessary piece to the metaphysical quest for consciousness. It was not until the turn of the twentieth century with the help of William Atkinson (better known as Yogi Ramacharaka) and Pierre Bernard that the physical practice of yoga was accepted into the greater vernacular of American metaphysical thought.

Dr. Rolf started studying yoga in the 1920s with Pierre Bernard, an American Tantric yogi. Little is known of Bernard’s early life other than that he was born in Iowa in 1875 and started studying yoga at the age of 13 with a Syrian-Indian yogi named Sylvais Hamati. By 1909, Bernard found his way to New York where he became was a successful yoga teacher and by 1919 he was teaching yoga to New York’s elite on an estate in Upper Nyack. This is where Dr. Rolf met Bernard and started training with him.⁵⁶

Bernard may have had a controversial, even criminal past (he had various legal and criminal debacles involving his sexual practices before the 1920s). However, he is a key figure and the first in a long line of Tantric gurus in American yoga. Unlike William

⁵⁴ Albanese, 351, 2007

⁵⁵ Blavatsky, Helen P. *Isis Unveiled: A Master-Key to Mysteries of Ancient and Modern Science and Theology*. Theosophy Company: Los Angeles, 1877, 2.

⁵⁶ Kripal, 236-237, 2007

Atkinson a.k.a. Yogi Ramacharaka, the other leading hatha yoga guru in the United States at the time, Bernard did not publish much work. Little is known about his yoga practice and philosophies other than that his teaching included both exoteric and esoteric features, and the esoteric aspect may have involved sexual practices.⁵⁷

What is known is that Bernard had a very solid knowledge of traditional asanas (poses) including inversions.⁵⁸ Whatever the details of his practice, Bernard's studio was full of students from around the world including yoga teachers from Asia. He also opened up other Tantric centers in New York City, Philadelphia, Cleveland, and Chicago.⁵⁹ Bernard was one of the first yogis that popularized hatha yoga to a wider American audience.

Dr. Rolf never shared how involved she was with Bernard's Tantric society, however it is clear that she was influenced by Tantric yoga, metaphysical philosophy, and the power of the asana. She often spoke about the evolution of the human body toward greater and greater consciousness. *In Ida Rolf Talks*, Rosemary Feitis addresses what Dr. Rolf thought about yoga. She states, "So-called hatha (gathustha) yoga is the yoga of the body; it has as its premise that work with the body will improve not only the physical but the emotional and spiritual life of the individual as well."⁶⁰ The theory of hatha yoga is that bodies need to be lengthened, and this is possible through different poses or asanas where the body is pulled, twisted, or stretched against itself. The primary intention of the yoga asana is to create space within the body and by creating space the person can develop physically and

⁵⁷ For more information on Bernard see Robert Love, *The Great Oom: The Improbable Birth of Yoga in America*. Viking Penguin: New York, 2010.

⁵⁸ Albanese, 363, 2007

⁵⁹ Albanese, 363, 2007

⁶⁰ Feitis, 8, 1978

spiritually into a superior being. Through yogic practices a person can strive for a higher level of consciousness.⁶¹

In the years that Dr. Rolf studied yoga she established the basis of her future work. By practicing and discussing yogic principles Rolf realized bodies need to lengthen and be balanced, and a balanced and spacious body will give rise to a better human being. While studying yoga, Dr. Rolf also studied other movement systems, incorporating what she found useful. She realized that the physical practices of the asana and other exercises could not create length and balance alone. All bodies are different and sometimes the actual body needs more than movement to balance it. Something else was needed, and that something came in the form of manual manipulations.

Her or her husband's horse accident, somewhere in the West, led Dr. Rolf to study the art of osteopathy, which greatly influenced her work. Early osteopathic philosophy and Rolfing are steeped in ancient cosmological theory. Albanese states, "American metaphysics signals a predisposition toward the ancient cosmological theory of correspondence between worlds as that theory was carried forward in the esoteric tradition of the West... American metaphysics has likewise embraced ideas of the correspondence between worlds implicit in vernacular traditions..."⁶² Albanese explains that correspondence between worlds can be understood as "macrocosmic-microcosmic equivalence." She states, "On this macrocosmic world, the microcosm—the smaller human world and/or mind—was modeled, so that the microcosm could be described as made of the same stuff, or 'material,'

⁶¹ The practice of asanas is one of the eight pillars of yoga. The purpose of creating space and length in the body is to enable it to sit still for long periods of time in meditation.

⁶² Albanese, 13, 2007,

as the macrocosm, like it in all things, except in scale.”⁶³ If the human body is made of the same stuff as everything else in the universe then the divine resides in the body just as it resides in the universe.

The adaptation of this “as above, so below” theory from medieval alchemy leaves the door open for physical transformation to be understood spiritually. Spiritual transformation via physical change is only possible through the metaphysical idea that everything in the universe was made of the same material and that all things were in the slow process of evolving to the purest form. The goals of yoga, osteopathy, and Rolfing are to guide the physical body on its path to a higher existence of being, whether health or salvation. By transforming the body by allowing for more length, space and balance, spiritual transformation will follow.

The founder of osteopathy, Andrew Taylor Still (1828-1917), was the son of a Methodist circuit rider who practiced medicine to supplement his income. Still began studying orthodox medicine alongside his father when they lived on the Wakarusa Mission in Kansas Territory. After the Civil War, where he fought as a Union soldier, Still returned to Kansas and his medical career. Alternative medicine was all around Still and he began to see that alternative medicine did far less damage to the patient than regular medicine.

In 1874, Still had severed all ties with orthodox medicine and promoted himself as a magnetic healer. Magnetic healing was based on the theory that health was a free and unrestricted fluidic flow, and sickness was the restriction of one’s fluidic flow.⁶⁴ The concept of unrestricted flow of fluids comes from the well-established metaphysical theory

⁶³ Albanese, 14, 2007

⁶⁴ For more information see Gevitz, Norman. *The D.O.’s: Osteopathic Medicine in America*. Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore, 1982, 1-15.

of the importance of movement and energy. Albanese states, “far from understanding mind and its correspondences in fixed and static ways, American metaphysicians have thought in terms of movement and energy.”⁶⁵ Ideas of magnetic healing can be found as early as the eighteenth century with the work of Franz Anton Mesmer.⁶⁶

In his early work Mesmer was occupied with the idea that energy could be transferred from body to body. As his work evolved, he understood the transferring agent of energy as mind. In his dissertation “On the Influence of the Planets,” Mesmer argued that the movement of the sun and moon affect human bodies. He stated, “There is a force, which is the cause of universal gravitation and which is very probably, the foundation of all corporal properties.”⁶⁷ Mesmer’s ideas evolved over his years of study into the belief that all animate beings had a magnetic fluid running through their bodies. He called this phenomenon “animal magnetism,” and it was the basis for his life’s work as a healer.

Mesmer believed that it was the continuous flow of this fluid (or energy) that was key to health. He performed controversial treatments where he magnetized trees and “then attached groups of patients to them by ropes in daisy-chain fashion, always avoiding knots, which created obstacles to the fluid’s harmony.”⁶⁸ However strange his practices were Mesmer’s theory of energetic movement as a vital piece to health was, and still is a fundamental metaphysical principle.

⁶⁵ Albanese, 14, 2007

⁶⁶ Mesmer received his doctorate in medicine at the University of Vienna in 1795. Ellenberger, Herni F. *The Discovery of the Unconscious: The History and Evolution of Dynamic Psychiatry*. Basic Books: New York, 1970, 56.

⁶⁷ Albanese, 191, 2007

⁶⁸ Darnton, Robert. *Mesmerism and the End of the Enlightenment in France*. Schocken: New York, 1970, 6.

Along with magnetic healing techniques, Still began practicing bone setting, a manipulative therapy of folk origins that forced bones back into their proper place. By 1880, Still was treating his patients by focusing on bones as a way to establish or re-establish a natural flow. According to Still, sickness came from an unorganized structure or disorder within the whole body. Osteopathic manipulation was created to treat strains to bone, muscle, or cartilage caused by repetitive force, called lesions. Lesions were physical evidence that the body, as a complete unit, was not functioning correctly. Addressing and correcting lesions liberated the body so its natural processes could defeat illness. Or in other words, structure determines function; in order to function at your best your structure needs to be at its best.

Dr. Still believed that the alignment of the body along the central spinal axis radically affects one's health and he focused most of his work on spinal manipulations. These manipulations change the way bones relate to one another. By freeing obstructions between bones the body is able to improve its well-being. In 1892, Dr. Still founded an osteopathic school and over time osteopathy evolved, as all things do. Eventually osteopaths were licensed to practice medicine.⁶⁹

Still's osteopathic philosophy was an alternative to the developing scientific medicine of the day. But more importantly, it is a version of American metaphysical spirituality. Early osteopathy believed that the cure for every illness or discomfort could be found within itself. The human form is a complete unit with the ability to repair itself.

⁶⁹ Still's osteopathic school was very progressive. It allowed women to enroll as well as made enrollment easier for poor and rural students. Information about Still school found at A.T. Still University website (ATSU.com).

Health is a matter of transforming illness, and this transformation was possible through structure and function. Modern chemistry or drugs were not needed to cure the body.

Albanese states, “Here was a practical metaphysic to theorize and explain healing success, a metaphysic that combined the eighteenth-century Enlightenment’s “nature’s God” with the immanent deity of the Romantic era whose law and power worked from the inside out.”⁷⁰ As Albanese points out, Still and his philosophy were not only influenced by ancient metaphysical thought, but also spiritual notions of his day, more specifically by the evangelical tradition of American religiosity in which he was raised. This is not surprising; he was the son of a Methodist preacher and as an adult he attended spiritual meetings.⁷¹

Still’s faith fostered his life’s work and it is clear that osteopathy was rooted in a faith with an embodied God. Osteopathic philosophy has a clear connection to the ancient Hermetic teaching that “God” or the divine resides in all creations as its very life because all creations are of the same material. In his autobiography Still states, “God had certainly placed the remedy within the material house in which the spirit of life dwells.”⁷² An unhealthy body could move towards health from within, it just needed the correct alignment, which could be found with the help of osteopathic manual manipulations. The osteopathic philosophy of the body is fundamental to Dr. Rolf’s own work.

⁷⁰ Albanese, 401, 2007

⁷¹ In her book *Born Again Bodies*, R. Marie Griffith explores the role of Christianity in shaping American bodies and varied forms of embodiment. Her third chapter, “Minding the Body; Divergent Paths of New Thought Perfectionism,” address directly the “Metaphysical Somatotypes” that existed in American culture during the first half of the twentieth century.

⁷² Still, Andrew Taylor. *Autobiography of Andrew T. Still with a History of the Discovery and Development of the Science of Osteopathy*. Arno Press and the New York Times: New York, 1897, 100-101.

Rolfing, as a model of somatic education, also views the body as a complete unit and maintains the idea that the body has the ability to heal itself if aligned correctly. Dr. Rolf believed in Dr. Still's theory that structure determines function. Rolfers, like early osteopaths, view their role in the healing process as a facilitator or educator. Maitland explains, "Symptoms tend to disappear [in the Rolfing process], not because the body has been manipulated symptomatically and piecemeal, but because the *whole person* has been engaged and educated to uncover his or her original place of dwelling bodily on the earth."⁷³ In the introduction to her book *Rolfing: Reestablishing the Natural Alignment and Structural Integration of the Human Body for Vitality and Well-Being*, Dr Rolf explains how Rolfing approaches and treats client as a whole being, not just a list of symptoms.

They [people today] look in their mirrors and do not like what they see. It does not occur to them that their real dissatisfaction is with their physical, corporeal structure, with the way they are put together. This lack of recognitions is understandable. Twentieth-century medicine, which has worked so many miracles, has been chemically, not structurally, oriented. Hence, the lay mind thinks of chemistry as the only outstanding healing medium—a drug for this, a shot for that. But any mirror or photography would reveal that a great many problems are matters of structure, of physics—of a three-dimensional body fitting very badly into a greater material universe (the earth), which has its own energy field (gravity). Help must be sought in the terms of the problem—in the physics of spatial relations, of man in his environment, of man-as-a-whole in the energy field of the earth, gravity. And help can be found. The war within can end in a lasting peace.⁷⁴

With her roots in philosophic osteopathy and yoga Dr. Rolf understood that in order for a person to be healthy the body must be balanced, and manual manipulation was needed to clear many obstructions that movement exercises could not. However, just putting the bony segments in their place was not enough for lasting health. Dr. Rolf

⁷³ Maitland, XX, 1994

⁷⁴ Rolf, 17, 1978

declared that the network of soft tissue in the body, not just the bones and joints, needed to be addressed to see long lasting, positive change in a body.⁷⁵ Dr. Rolf's work with fascia was revolutionary, and modern science has just started to catch up with it in the last five or so years.⁷⁶

Soft tissue manipulation was not the only deviation from osteopathy that Dr. Rolf made. She also believed that an overall sense of well-being could only be accomplished if gravity was taken into account. The body must be in balance with itself and with its surroundings.

In Rolfing, the goal is to not only to organize the body but also to organize the body in relation to its environment in gravity. Metaphysically speaking Dr. Rolf went one step further than Still by acknowledging the body as part of the whole universe. Rolfing not only helps a person feel more at ease and spacious, it organizes the body in space for a lasting effect.

Until her death in March of 1979, Dr Rolf devoted herself to developing her work and teaching it to her followers. In the 1940s, Rolf was working out of her apartment in New York with people seeking relief from chronic disabilities. By the 1950s her reputation spread to Europe where she spent summers working. Then, in the mid-1960s she was invited to set up shop at The Esalen Institute. Her years at Esalen were the turning point not only for Dr. Rolf and her work of structural integration, but also for the whole field of somatic work. Through its own journey Esalen came to the same conclusions as Rolf on metaphysical ideas of healing and general health. For nearly a decade Esalen and Dr. Rolf

⁷⁵ Soft tissue includes muscles, fascia, tendons, and ligaments

⁷⁶ For the scientific explanations of the importance of fascia and fascial work see Dr. Rolf's book *Rolfing*, 40-43 and for the latest research on fascia see fasciacongress.org.

worked together to advance the counter-culture of health and wellness in America. In 1971, Dr. Rolf left Esalen and formed The Rolf Institute of Structural Integration in Boulder, Colorado, as the formal organization for Structural Integration.⁷⁷

But Really, What is Rolfing?

So what exactly is Rolfing: Structural Integration? In her book Rolf states, “Structural Integration is a system that induces change towards an order in the body.” It is a hands-on therapy that strives to relieve the body from its restriction and discomfort due to past programming or training, in order to refine the individual into a purer expression of self. At her most prophetic moments Dr. Rolf hoped for a humanity that could become less self-centered and defensive and she saw this transformation of humanity possible through one individual at a time. An aligned body, to Rolf, was more than just better organized and healthy, it was a step closer to a more evolved, less self-centered human existence.⁷⁸

Dr. Rolf’s foremost aspiration for a more evolved form of human being through her physical work is directly in line with Albanese’s metaphysical category of ancient cosmology. Dr. Rolf may have never used the term spiritual, however her objective of transformation via physical change is only possible through the metaphysical idea that all things are in the slow process of evolving to the purest form. On a more immediate level, Rolfing helps relieve the body from pain through alignment; this echoes back to the metaphysical principle that movement of energy is vital to health.

⁷⁷ The Rolf Institute for Structural Integration quickly split right after her death due to ideological differences. This is the topic of the next sections.

⁷⁸ Ohlgren, Gael. “A Fifty-Year Perspective of Rolfing.” Structural Integration, June (2009) 14.

The physical aspect of Rolfing “is a basic ten-hour cycle of treatment that balances myofascial relationships.”⁷⁹ In theory, Rolfing is a complex and multifaceted somatic education based on three essential concepts: gravity and “The Line,” connective tissue, and the Recipe. “The Line” refers to the idea that all human structures are organized by gravity around a central axis. In the beginning, Dr. Rolf used the image of a line as a norm to assess her client’s progress towards a more organized body. Connective tissue, or fascia, was Dr. Rolf’s point of entry into the human body. Dr. Rolf believed that it was possible to affect the whole body through the connective tissue. This technique of touch is now called Myofascial Release and it is used by many different disciplines of bodywork. The Recipe was what Dr. Rolf called her ten sessions’ formalistic protocol. All three of the concepts have evolved over the last fifty years, however all remain central to the practice of Rolfing. I will address the evolution of Rolfing in the fourth chapter.

To an observer Rolfing may look like a form of body sculpting. A Rolfer uses her fingers, forearms, elbows, and knuckles to ease and lengthen fascial patterns of the body. Rolfing recognizes the body as an integral system, and therefore must understand it not as static pieces, but in moving relationships. Movement is key to transformation. Dr. Rolf often instructed her students to “put it in place, and ask for movement.”

Through Rolfing, the client with the help of her Rolfer, reorders and reshapes her whole body with the goal of better physical organization in gravity. Maitland suggest that Rolfing may be better understood as “a form of wholistic, integrative somatic education and manipulation that deals with the whole person in relation to gravity,” rather than a form of

⁷⁹ Rolf, Ida P. *Rolfing: Reestablishing the Natural Alignment and Structural Integration of the Human Body for Vitality and Well-Being*. Healing Arts Press: Rochester, Vermont, 1989, 15.

bodywork.⁸⁰ Kripal describes Dr. Rolf work as “a kind of cosmic mysticism,” that entailed aligning the posture of the body with gravity.⁸¹ And Don Johnson described Dr. Rolf’s understanding of the body and spirit not as separate metaphysical substances but as “something like different layers of energy or refinement. Or to manipulate and release the bodily tissue was to release the human spirit.”⁸²

Dr. Rolf organized her work into the ten-hour series. Each session lasted about 75 minutes and addressed different parts of the body. She designed her work this way because she found, over her years of studying, that when the body is addressed in this order the effect on the physical and then emotional state of the client is more organized and profound. Each session involved different guidelines that Dr. Rolf called Recipes. These recipes were more than just a to-do list and technique. The Guild of Structural Integration explains:

The Recipe is not technique. The Recipe is more than a discrete succession of myo-fascial goals and intentions. The Recipe is, rather, a process, based on a set of relationships, which establishes structural balance and order. These relationships are based upon sound theoretical physics as well as some traditional metaphysical hypotheses. Relationships belong to the realm of art, they are non-linear. Technique is better suited to scientific and linear analysis.⁸³

In order to teach her theories of the body and its need for balance within gravity, the Recipe quickly became the regime that Rolfers learned. In the early years there was not much discussion on the difference between Rolfing technique and the Recipe, and they were commonly understood to be the same thing.

⁸⁰ Maitland, XIX, 1994

⁸¹ Kripal, 240, 2007

⁸² Johnson, 87, 1994

⁸³ www.rolfguild.org

The ten series can be divided into three groups. Sessions 1-3 focuses on the “sleeve” or the more superficial layers of connective tissue. Sessions 4-7 are the “core” session and they focus on the deeper layers of the body between the floor of the pelvis and the top of the head. Sessions 8-10 are called integration and they give the practitioner an opportunity to connect all the work already done with smooth and more efficient movement.

Later in her career Dr. Rolf realized that teaching the recipes may have been the easiest way to disseminate her techniques, but the recipes alone lacked clear understand of the principles of Rolfing. Along with the Recipe, she began to teach a movement training component that she called Rolf Movement. The purpose of the Rolf Movement sessions is to work with the client’s natural movement patterns and identify the patterns that strain or no longer serve the client. Once the patterns are identified the Rolfer can offer different patterns for the client to try. These new patterns are more economical and promote greater balance and efficiency in the gravitational field. However, Rolf’s main focus remained the structural work. She passed the movement theory on to students Dorothy Nolte and Judith Aston and for many years it was seen as a supplement to the structural work of Rolfing. Nolte continued to work alongside Rolf, however Aston left the Rolfing community to develop her own somatic practice in structural patterning, which she called Aston Patterning.⁸⁴

A common image that Rolfers use to explain how their work is different from body workers like massage therapists or chiropractors is the image of your body as a river. Metaphorically speaking, energy is ever flowing through your body, like water in a river bed, and when you get work done it is like the practitioner sticking their hand in the river

⁸⁴ www.astonkinetics.com

to redirect the flow of water, however when they remove their hand, the flow goes back to its old pattern. The goal of Rolfing is to change the old pattern into a more useful new pattern. Or metaphorically, the goal is to rearrange the rocks on the bottom of the riverbed so that the water continues to flow in the new pattern long after the Rolfer has removed their hands.

It can be assumed from the subtext of Dr. Rolf's writings and teaching that she understood her work affected the client's emotional as well as physical health, though the emotional or spiritual effect of Rolfing was not at the forefront of her teaching. Rolfing may have a clear and traceable metaphysical lineage, but Dr. Rolf regarded her work as strictly scientific. She took her work very seriously and wanted the medical and scientific world to do the same. Mainstream Western medicine is not known for its focus on or even openness to the spiritual aspects of health, and therefore Dr. Rolf rarely spoke of this aspect of her work. She wanted to promote the verifiable physical changes in her client's health. The closest she ever came to discussing the more mystic aspects of her work was to suggest that one's emotions are intimately connected with one's physical form and by correcting one's form, healthier emotions would follow. In her own words, "Physical health and mental health: it's the same thing."⁸⁵ When directly asked about the emotional or spiritual side of her work she would answer with something like, "Make it clear that you are doing work to bring that person to a greater spatial integration; emotional release is like a pebble on the path. Respect it, but don't spend a lot of time analyzing it."⁸⁶ The take-away message was always that if the physical form is balanced everything else will fall into place.

⁸⁵ Feitis, 65, 1978

⁸⁶ Feitis, 151, 1978

However, off the record it is clear that Dr. Rolf recognized emotional and even spiritual changes resulting from her work and understood them to be integral to the process. Without the transformation of the whole person, spirituality included, her main goal of a more evolved, less self-centered human existence could not happen. This aspect of her work is unmistakably linked to the metaphysical philosophy she encountered in yoga and her studies of osteopathy, as well as the metaphysical ideas floating around the Esalen Institute during her tenure. However, she only shared it with like-minded believers. Dr. Rolf was at the forefront of a group of people demanding a radical shift in the ontology of human physicality. She was fighting for a more holistic approach to health, one that demanded the mind/body split be renegotiated. For this to happen, mainstream culture had to find her work useful and valid, so she did not want to scare them off with “new-age” talk of spirituality.

In her quest to be acknowledged by mainstream science, Dr. Rolf was very particular on who she let become a Rolfer. She insisted on her students having an extensive background in anatomy, biology, chemistry, and, physiology. She favored men with medical or osteopathy degrees, as well as men that had doctorates in the hard sciences. Rolf pushed for her students to conduct scientific studies on Structural Integration or related topics. She was passionate in “proving” the science of Rolfing. Notably her work with fascia was decades ahead of Western science.⁸⁷

Towards the end of her life, Dr. Rolf grew ever more dogmatic and rigid in her beliefs about the power of Rolfing. She believed and led others to believe that the “Truth” of the body was only accessible through her teachings. She began to make doctrinaire

⁸⁷ see Lindsay, Mark. *Fascia: Clinical Applications for Health and Human Performance*. Cengage Learning: Stamford, 2008. and Fascia Research Congress (fasciacongress.org)

statements about the “Template” or idea body, the Rolf Line, and the Recipe, all of which had previously been understood as metaphors for the alignment of the body and the consciousness she sought to uncover in her clients. She even began making statements about imposing the Template on a small elite group in order to create a superior race. In her last letter to the Rolf Institute she stated, “It is possible that we are seeing here the first conscious attempt at evolution made by any species in modern times.”⁸⁸

Dr. Rolf was relentless and not always kind in her quest to establish, teach, and promote Rolfing. Not all who studied with her were willing to follow her down the increasingly rigid and orthodox path her work was taking. Many left to explore broader ideas in the somatic field and others chose to distance themselves from her core followers. However, the real division in the Rolfing community did not come until after Dr. Rolf’s death, which will be examined in chapter four.

As stated above, Dr. Rolf did not invent her life’s work in a vacuum; she is a product of the broad metaphysical ideas present in American culture at the turn of the twentieth century. However, she did seek out a new or alternative way to achieve health through the then current metaphysical themes of the day. Before venturing out on her own, Dr. Rolf studied many different schools of thought, including yoga and osteopathy. In the end, Dr. Rolf invented a form of somatic work that embodied the four themes of American metaphysical religiosity outlined by Albanese. Rolfing illustrates the ancient cosmological theory that spiritual transformation is possible through physical change. Dr. Rolf believed that a balanced body was the next evolutionary step in human transformation. She also believed that through proper alignment of the body she could uncover one’s consciousness.

⁸⁸ “Dr. Rolf Says...”Rolf Lines Dec. (1977) 3.

And finally Rolf believed that discomfort and pain was caused by inadequate movement patterns and energetic blockage; healing or salvation was only possible if the blockages were removed and more efficient movement patterns were established.

Dr. Rolf's work advocated for a new scientific and metaphysical understanding of the body. She understood her work as, among many other things, an education of one's whole self via one's physical self. Rolfing, as a form of somatic education, not only has the possibility to release the body from its pain but to transform the whole person. Maitland states, "our human self is a psychospacial, psychotemporal orientation, and so the transformation of the whole being, at whatever level it occurs, is always a bodily event."⁸⁹ Dr. Rolf understood that the physical transformation of the body was intimately linked to the emotional or psychological transformation. With its roots in the metaphysical principles of ancient cosmologies, consciousness, energetic movement, and healing as salvation Rolfing truly is a form of American metaphysical religiosity.

⁸⁹ Maitland, xvi, 1995

Chapter 3

Esalen Makes Sacred Secular

Even though Dr. Rolf did not begin her work at Esalen, she and her work found a home there for almost a decade. In that decade, Dr. Rolf was influenced by the Esalen community and did her fair share of influencing it in return. The Esalen Institute is the birthplace of secular metaphysical theory and American somatic work and Dr. Rolf was its headliner for many years. This chapter examines how the beginning stages of The Esalen Institute and the counter culture it created influenced and collaborated with Dr. Rolf and her work to give a name, voice, and stage to somatic work in America.

In the simplest of terms, Esalen is a non-profit, residential, and retreat community that is devoted to “humanist alternative education.”⁹⁰ Since its beginning in 1962, Esalen has become a place where people can explore ideas from the sciences and humanities that furthers the full comprehension of what it means to be human. The Esalen Institute is dedicated to subjects like meditation, yoga, massage, Gestalt, ecology, psychology, and spirituality. It offers more than 500 public workshops a year as well as sponsoring conferences, research initiatives, residential work-study programs and internships.

In his book, *Esalen: America and the Religion of No Religion*, Jeffery J. Kripal focuses on Esalen and its influence on American spirituality. Kripal approaches Esalen “as an American mystical tradition that ‘changed the rules of the game.’”⁹¹ He explains that the founders of Esalen realized that the deepest issues of the world could not be understood or solved by just rearranging what was already in play in the realm of American spirituality and religion. Kripal states, “The old rules had to go. Esalen thus chose to operate with

⁹⁰ www.esalen.org

⁹¹ Kripal, 7, 2007

modern democratic principles, individualist values, a celebration of science, secular notions of religion as a primarily private affair of personal choice and creativity, and socially liberal agendas, all of which together effectively set it apart from any traditional religious system.”⁹² Esalen embarked on the task of embodying the “religion of no religion.”⁹³

The religion of no religion, a secular idea, can find its religious counterpart in the religion of all religions. The concept of “religion of no religion,” like its counterpart of “all religions” asserts that all religious worlds are symbolically “true.” Religious individuals that understand the world of “all religions” are categorized as mystics. Mystics can be found in small sects of many world religions throughout history. Famous mystics throughout the centuries have belonged to many religious traditions, whether they are alchemists, Christian nuns, Muslim philosophers, or Hindu saints. But what sets Esalen apart from the “religion of all religions” is that it was not founded nor locates itself within one tradition. It refuses to identify with any single dogmatic religious language and rejects the game of religion itself.⁹⁴ Because of this, Kripal states that Esalen is like an “American Mystical Constitution;” it provides a space where any religion or spiritual journey can thrive. This is only possible if no one spiritual path tries to impose itself on the community or to speak for everyone. In order for Esalen to exist, it is important that, “No one tries to capture the flag” and that everyone involved “Holds their dogmas lightly.”⁹⁵

When seen through the lens of Albanese’s metaphysical thesis, Esalen is a secular institution in America’s long lineage of metaphysical religiosity. Albanese states, that the

⁹² Kripal, 8, 2007

⁹³ A term first used by Frederic Spiegelberg, professor of comparative religion at Stanford Universities in the 1950s.

⁹⁴ Kripal, 9, 2007

⁹⁵ Two early mottos of the Esalen Institute

“Esalen Institute acted as an important cultural broker, a model of certain metaphysical themes, and a broadcaster of the new-enlightenment message of the Self/self and its embodied blissfulness.”⁹⁶ Esalen gave secular space for religious and spiritual ideas, space in which these ideas could be explored, investigated and then set free to permeate American culture. Esalen’s aims embody Albanese’s American metaphysical religious mentalities.

Esalen was founded, in part, as a holistic healing center with the goal of providing an alternative to mainstream ideas of mental health. Albanese states, “Metaphysics might be about what lay beyond the physical, but it was never totally abstract or theoretical. It always had a point and purpose on earth, always spent its attentiveness on salving wounds and making people whole.”⁹⁷ From its inception, Esalen has been dedicated to the blending of the spiritual and the scientific in the human experience. Esalen’s quest for salvation through healing and therapy is a metaphysical pursuit.

Kripal asserts that to understand Esalen one must first understand the human experiences that brought the place together. These experiences can be summed up by the Jungian category of synchronicity. Technically, synchronicity can be defined as a “meaningful coincidence” between two or more events. Synchronicity shows the world to be a meaningful whole that is created by the environment and the subject within a particular moment. Or in early Esalen language, the synchronicity reveals the world to be Gestalt.⁹⁸ Esalen must be seen through the understanding that it is neither subject nor

⁹⁶ Albanese, 371, 2007

⁹⁷ Albanese, 15, 2007

⁹⁸ Gestalt is a term used in English to refer to “wholeness.” Gestalt psychology or therapy is an attempt to focus on the patient’s personal responsibility and their experience of the present moment.

object, rather it is a whole that was created by personal experience and helped create those experiences. Esalen would not, and could not exist without its co-founders and the many guest artists, academics, psychiatrists, and body workers who came to Esalen. Each individual left her/his mark on Esalen and vice versa.

The Beginning

The property Esalen resides on in Big Sur, California, has its own rich history. Artifacts found on the property suggest human presence as dating back to 4,000 BCE. In 1910, Dr. Henry Murphy bought the land with the intention to open up a European style spa. The hot springs and ocean views were a perfect site for such a project. However, due to circumstance the spa never took off. The Esalen Institute was co-founded by Michael Murphy and Richard Price on Murphy's family land in 1962.

Murphy and Price were both students at Stanford University in the late 1940s and early 1950s. They did not know each other, but both were heavily influenced by the work of William James (1842-1910), the influential a Harvard professor of psychology and philosophy and the personal teaching and guidance of Frederic Spiegelberg, a professor of comparative religions and Indic studies at Stanford. James was one of the frontrunners of the emerging American metaphysical philosophy in the world of academia. James, shaped by his unorthodox upbringing, was a religious seeker all his life. His work in the philosophy and psychology of religion is a key piece in shaping modern American metaphysical thought.

Spiegelberg introduced his students, among them Murphy and Price, to the “religion of no religion.” Spiegelberg came to his “religion of no religion” concept over a lifetime of experience. As a young man, Spiegelberg was a theology student in search of a more adequate and deeper understanding of God. Kripal describes his journey to “religion of no religion,” as a process that began,

with monotheism (which denies the gods of every other tradition), breaks out in pantheism (which sees that God “lives in everything and everywhere”), develops further in an abstract impersonal mysticism (which denies any ultimate divisions between self, cosmos, and God), and finally ends in what Spiegelberg calls *psychological inversion*, that is, a certain Gnostic or mystical insight into how the gods are manifestations or psychological projections for the human spirit.⁹⁹

In the process of formulating his theory of “no religion” Spiegelberg drew on three historical traditions that he believed exceptionally model his idea: Zen Buddhism, alchemy, and Indian yoga. All three traditions influenced both men’s lives, worldviews, and their visions of what later became Esalen. All three traditions focus on the connections between mind and body characteristic of metaphysics.

Both Murphy and Price graduated from Stanford in 1952 with B.A.s in Psychology. Price went on to Harvard where he enrolled in the newly created program in social relations. Murphy joined the U.S. Army and spent most of his time in Puerto Rico until he was discharged in January of 1955. Upon his return to the States, Murphy started graduate work at Stanford in philosophy. Neither Price nor Murphy ever finished their graduate degrees. After leaving Harvard, Price joined the Air Force and then experienced an episode

⁹⁹ Kripal, 51, 2007

of manic psychosis. Murphy traveled to India in 1956 and spent sixteen months at the Pondicherry ashram of guru Sri Aurobindo.¹⁰⁰

It was Price's mental breakdown and recovery that led him to seek more holistic treatment for psychological problems. And it was Murphy's time in India that led him to want to create a place where metaphysical ideas, both Asian and American, could be explored and fostered. At Spiegelberg's suggestion, Murphy and Price met in 1961 and found they had much in common. They began to make plans to open up a place that supported ways of thinking that were beyond the constraints of mainstream academia. They imagined a laboratory for experimentations in philosophy, religion, and psychological treatments, but wanted to avoid the rigidity that can happen in groups organized around a charismatic leader with a single idea.¹⁰¹ The first official Esalen seminar took place on September 22-23, 1962, and the first brochures pictured traditional Buddhist and Hindu icons along with the mission statement:

A new concept of human nature is emerging in the field of psychology, a conception that is gradually superseding the views of classical psychoanalysis and strict behaviorism, a conception oriented toward health, growth and the exploration of our psychic potentialities. Creativity research, work with the 'mind-opening' drugs and the discoveries of parapsychology (psychical research) complement this development, pointing as they do toward a profounder human possibility.¹⁰²

From the first brochure and seminar series Murphy and Price proclaimed a vision for Esalen that had remained constant throughout the decades of its existence. Esalen became

¹⁰⁰ Sri Aurobindo died in 1950, six years before Murphy reached India, however, the ashram carried on his teachings. Sri Aurobindo combined Eastern and Western philosophy, religion, and psychology in his writings. The central vision of his work, in writing and at the ashram, was the evolution of human life into divine life.

Albanese, 371-372, 2007 and Kripal, 65-66, 2007

¹⁰¹ Excerpts from an interview with Dick Price conducted by Wade Hudson at:

http://www.esalen.org/air/essays/dick_price.htm

¹⁰² Kripal, 100-101, 2007

the clear authority of the human potential movement at its height in the 1960s. Albanese suggests that Esalen gave “the word” to a cross-section of Americans who otherwise would not have heard it and taught them to embrace “sacrality in a secular world.”¹⁰³

At the center of this sacred secular vision was the idea of healing that encompassed the whole being. Esalen approached the healing of the whole being from two angles, one of the mind and one of the body. Gestalt therapy and Esalen have a long and symbiotic relationship. Developed by Fritz (Frederick) Perls, Laura Perls, and Paul Goodman in the 1940s and 1950s, it was the psychological backbone of the Esalen Institute. Gestalt therapy is the psychology of constructivism. Unlike other therapies that focus on the forgotten past and the unconscious dynamics that it produces, Gestalt focuses on the subject’s construction of the here-and-now through their conscious experiences. Kripal explains, “Within this total field of social relations and perceptions, the self co-constructs both its own experienced reality “out there” and its own running narrative-of-who-I-am “in here.” ...Human experience works very much like the reading of a text—it is *interpreted into being*.”¹⁰⁴ There is no pure data when dealing with a person’s experience. Experience itself is an act of interpretation and Gestalt strives to construct or deconstruct one’s interpreted self through their personal actions.

Alongside and equal to psychological therapy at Esalen was therapy for the body. From its inception the founders of Esalen understood that no healing could take place unless one’s physical form was addressed. Kripal states, “Philosophically speaking, the healing practices of Esalen developed within an integral worldview that centers on the spiritualization of the flesh and turns to the union of ‘body’ and ‘soul’ as the most reliable

¹⁰³ Albanese, 372, 2007

¹⁰⁴ Kripal, 162, 2007

source of wholeness and health.”¹⁰⁵ Esalen has played host to a large array of somatic practices including, but not limited to many different forms of massage, Alexander technique, Rolfing, and Feldenkreis method.

Esalen, Rolf, and Somatics

Dr. Rolf came to Esalen in 1965. She was persuaded by Fritz Perls to come out West after Dorothy Nolte, a student of Dr. Rolf, suggested it. Nolte attended a lecture of Perls’ on Gestalt psychology in 1965. Nolte noticed that Perls was in pain and offered to help him. After his Rolfing session with Nolte, Perls felt much better, however, the pain returned. Fritz asked Nolte for some more work, and she referred him to Dr. Rolf. In 1965, Perls persuaded Dr. Rolf to join the Esalen family. Subsequently, her successful work with Perls made Dr. Rolf one of the more popular figures in the Human Potential Movement.¹⁰⁶

Dr. Rolf was a good fit for Esalen and for more than a decade she could be found working on other members of the Esalen family or teaching her technique and ideas to students. Dr. Rolf shared Esalen’s worldview that the “union of the ‘body’ and ‘soul’” was the correct path to health. Throughout her time at Esalen, Dr. Rolf influenced many people that went on to develop their own forms of somatic work. Some give credit to her pioneering work like Don Hanlon Johnson, Joseph Heller (Hellerwork), and Peter Levine (Somatic Experiencing). However, many schools of bodywork and movement education

¹⁰⁵ Kripal, 228, 2007

¹⁰⁶ Johnson, 86, 1994

rest upon Dr. Rolf's work and are not even aware that the basic techniques stem from Rolf's work.¹⁰⁷

In relation to Esalen, her most notable influence was on Don Hanlon Johnson. Johnson has been connected to Esalen for most of its history. He has been an active community member ever since he came to Esalen in 1967 and is a member of the board of trustees to date. Kripal states, "Although there are many impressive treatises here, perhaps no one has been more eloquent, prolific, and wisely critical within this specific enlightenment of the body than Don Hanlon Johnson...In Don Hanlon Johnson...we have a central Esalen player..."¹⁰⁸ In 1987, Murphy appointed Johnson to be in charge of Esalen's Center for Theory and Research. For over 25 years Johnson has invited groups of scientists, scholars and body practitioners to Esalen for weeklong seminars. The aims of these seminars are to refine such practices, reflect on their significance and articulate how they relate to the understanding of education and spirituality, in addition to exploring what helpful reciprocities are possible between these studies and the biomedical sciences.¹⁰⁹

Not only has Johnson been a central player in the intentions and direction of the healing arts at Esalen since the very beginning, he was also intimately involved in the founding moments of Rolfing. He states, "As one of the first students of Ida Rolf and a director on the board of her new organization, I had the privilege of seeing the emergence of a formal political and theoretical system from more primal, experimental

¹⁰⁷ The most notable of these schools that do not acknowledge the influence of Dr. Rolf's technique is myofascial release technique, which is very common in most forms of massage and physical therapy today.

¹⁰⁸ Kripal, 222, 2007

¹⁰⁹ donhanlonjohnson.com

processes.”¹¹⁰Johnson eventually left the Rolfing community, however, his experience with Dr. Rolf and her work formed the groundwork for his later explorations in other somatic work and the somatic direction at the Esalen Institute. He states, “Despite its problems, the Rolfing community continued to inspire me because of its common vision.”¹¹¹

The body-practices and healing arts of Esalen may best be understood through his writings and personal philosophies. In many respects, Johnson is a model for what Esalen strives to be. He is one of the somatic movement’s most prolific intellectuals with his knowledge spanning the entire movement. He has not anchored himself to one dogmatic theory, but rather he has a deep understanding of a broad range of body practices and he is sensitive to the body’s mystical possibilities.¹¹²

In his book *Body, Spirit and Democracy*, Johnson describes six elaborate shaping practices that created the skeleton of his own personal story.¹¹³ Three of these shaping practices can be found within identifiable institutions. Johnson was raised a Roman Catholic, and as a young man he joined the religious order of the Jesuits. After 15 years of service, Johnson left the Jesuits. Shortly after leaving, he became one of the first students of Dr. Rolf and was a Rolfing practitioner for many years. The other three practices are more difficult to discern. They are the ever-present forces of ethnicity, politics, and gender.¹¹⁴

Johnson understands Catholicism, the Jesuits, and Rolfing all to be communities “which believe that truth in its fullness was accessible through a single gate.”¹¹⁵ In his Catholic upbringing, he was taught that only the Catholic faith had the knowledge about the

¹¹⁰ Johnson, 75, 1994

¹¹¹ Johnson, 93, 1994

¹¹² Kripal, 223, 2007

¹¹³ Johnson uses the word “story” instead of religion, philosophy, or dogma.

¹¹⁴ Johnson, 15, 1994

¹¹⁵ Johnson, 2, 1994

true reality of things. Johnson describes his time as a Jesuit as being among “the avant-garde of the papal army charged with bringing that truth into the far nooks and crannies of what was thought to be a largely ignorant world.”¹¹⁶ The truth claim in Rolfing is found in the precisely defined alignment of muscles and bones. After many years, Johnson became disenchanted with Rolfing (or at least with Dr. Rolf herself) just as he had with the Catholic Church. After leaving, what was then a very rigid Rolfing community, Johnson went on to create and define his own somatic work. Johnson’s deep inquiry into the healing capabilities of somatic therapies has been the backbone of the Esalen Institute for more than forty years.

Johnson’s own somatic journey started with LSD experimentation, first within the confines of the Jesuits and then with like-minded academics. LSD is what drew him to Esalen in the late 1960s. In 1967, Johnson showed up at Esalen to listen to a talk by Huston Smith on LSD trips at Harvard. Kripal states that it was Johnson’s experiences with LSD that helped him “break down the division between the inner self and outer world and experience firsthand layer upon layer of bodily desire, subtle impulse, and philosophical idea, all somehow coded in his body-spirit.”¹¹⁷ The altered states of consciousness caused by LSD led Johnson to begin to understand one’s mind/body experience in a totally different way. By 1969, Johnson was near completion of his Ph.D in philosophy at Yale, and he was also assigned the duties of pastor and chaplain of the graduate school. He used his small budget to bring Esalen body workers to Yale.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ Johnson, 2, 1994

¹¹⁷ Kripal, 227, 2007

¹¹⁸ Kripal, 227, 2007

However, it was the physical transformation of Roling that confirmed what his LSD experiences led him to believe. In 1967, Johnson underwent the complete ten series of one-hour Roling sessions. This experience helped Johnson become aware that “matters of the spirit as well as memories, emotions and ideas are embedded in muscles, intestine and lungs. They are not separate things, but layers of the self, like the successive civilizations archaeologists unearth on a dig at an ancient mound.”¹¹⁹ Johnson’s understanding of the body in relation to emotions and spirit, which he affirmed through his Roling experience, fit right in line with Esalen’s metaphysical ideas of spirituality and transformation.

Esalen did more than attract wide attention and generate excitement for the body-practices and healing arts. It opened the door for ideas of the mind and body to be explored interdisciplinarily. It created space for psychology, philosophy, medicine, and religious studies to combine insights Esalen also created space for academics and non-academics to discuss metaphysical ideas together. It was this interdisciplinary atmosphere that led to the naming of its broad collection of body practices. Thomas Hanna, a contemporary of Johnson, coined the term “somatics” to speak to a field of work that approaches the body as an entire person.¹²⁰

Hanna took the word somatic from the related term *psychosomatic*, from the medical and psychological fields and from Husserl’s notion of somatology in the

¹¹⁹ Johnson, 69, 1994

¹²⁰ Hanna did not invent the idea. As I have already discussed the idea of somatic work can be traced back to the German Gymnastik movement.

philosophical branch of phenomenology.¹²¹ In his significant essay “What Is Somatics?”

Hanna states,

Somatics is the field which studies the *soma*: namely, the body as perceived from within by first-person perception. When a human being is observed from the outside—i.e., from a third-person viewpoint—the phenomenon of a human *body* is perceived. But when this same human being is observed from the first-person viewpoint of his own proprioceptive senses, a categorically different phenomenon is perceived: the human *soma*.¹²²

To further explain the lengthy definition Kripal suggests, “the *soma* of the Somatics movement is the human body enlightened by its own native consciousness, by a specific set of bodily practices, and by the professional discipline of philosophy.”¹²³ It is the enlightenment of the body that is central to all somatic practices, and it is this body enlightenment that bridges the gap between religion and science in our modern world. The bridging of spirituality and medicine that is vital for all somatic methods would not be as fully developed and understood without the Esalen Institute.

The Esalen Institute is a secular organization within a long lineage of metaphysical religiosity in America. It provided an alternative path to mental health that included the role of the body. Esalen not only embraced different theories on talk therapy, but also gave space for theories on body-practices and healing arts to develop and gain mainstream acknowledgement. Dr. Rolf and her ideas played a major role in the development of somatic work at Esalen through the influence of Don Johnson. Without the partnership of Dr. Rolf

¹²¹ Somatology was a project in phenomenology to try and integrate the mechanized body of medical science with the “lived” body of direct experience and consciousness. Kripal 230, 2007

¹²² Hanna, Thomas. “What Is Somatics?” in *Somatics*, Spring/Summer: 1986, 4.

¹²³ Kripal, 230, 2007

and the Esalen Institute in the early 1960s, the landscape of metaphysical somatic healing arts in the United States would not exist as it does today.

Chapter 4

Rolfing After Ida

Since Dr. Rolf's death in 1979, Rolfing has continued to evolve into a more openly metaphysically invested system of somatic education. Not only have Rolfing techniques evolved into more gentle approaches to the body, Rolfing now encompasses a wide array of different techniques taken from many somatic systems. Furthermore, the Rolfing community continues to explore the connection between its work and the spiritual experience within the greater arena of somatic work. Without its fearless leader dictating what is or is not Rolfing, the Rolf community has expanded into many different fields of knowledge that were not part of Dr. Rolf's original teachings, and into ideas in movement that were not as important to Rolf. This evolution did not come without its fair share of growing pains.

Dr. Rolf was the heart, soul, and last word in her Rolfing community. When she became too old to teach by herself, she started to train others to teach as her assistants. And when she became too old to teach at all, she still attended every class and was there to correct her teachers when they went astray or did not teach to her liking and/or standard. Tom Myers, a certified Rolfer writes about the last class Dr. Rolf attended before her death. He states,

By now eighty-three and being overtaken by cancer, her body was failing fast and seriously. Her mind was however still this sharp...As a teacher, she was neither kind, nor, in my experience, particularly helpful....She tested whether you were up to it by ignoring your first attempt at a question, belittling your second attempt, but often the third time around you felt the searchlight of her intelligence creaking around to bear on your question...her sally into the answer often seemed to come from so far out in left field that you were sure

she had misunderstood, until she began to weave enough threads that the tapestry began to reveal itself to you.¹²⁴

Many other students of Dr. Rolf paint a similar picture of her teaching style. She was tough, stubborn, and ruthless at times. Her word was the final say on all matters and this led many of her students to leave the Rolf Institute and strike out on their own. However, her uncompromising spirit also gained her the respect of all who worked under her. Even those who left the Institute sought after and valued Dr. Rolf's opinion on matters of the body and health.

Even though it was difficult to imagine the continuation of her life's work after her death, a few of her closest confidants and teachers began to prepare for this transition. In 1978, Dr. Rolf appointed Joseph Heller the first president of the Rolf Institute. This appointment did not go over well with many members of the community and their dissatisfaction angered Rolf. Chaos ran wild and it looked as if there would not be a Roling organization to carry on her work once she was gone. Heller and Marshal Thurber approached Rolf and proposed that the Rolf Institute buy the rights to the name and body of knowledge known as Roling, thus giving the Rolf Institute authority and control of the work after her Dr. Rolf's death. The decision to sell the rights to Roling weighed heavily on her, however just months before her death she decided that Roling belonged to the people she had taught and to the Rolf Institute.¹²⁵ In 1979, just before Dr. Rolf's death the United States Patent Office granted service mark rights for the word "Roling" to the Rolf Institute of Structural Integration (RISI). This trademark distinguishes "Roling" from all other forms

¹²⁴ Feitis, Rosemary and Louis Schultz eds. *Remembering Ida Rolf*. North Atlantic Books: Berkeley, 1996. 217-218

¹²⁵ Feitis, 176-177, 1996

of structural integrations and gives RISI the sole rights to the name Rolfing and all of its derivatives.

After her death, the chaos did not settle down. It was very difficult for Rolfers to agree on the direction that the Institute should take. They argued about what Dr. Rolf would have wanted and without her, it was now up to the very different personalities to come to some sort of consensus. After a while, two distinct groups within the Institute formed: the reformers, who believed they owed it to Rolf to continue to improve and grow her work, keeping her core values and theory in mind; and the smaller group of traditionalists, who wanted to continue on exactly the way that Rolf did, to stick to the Recipe.

The reformers understood the Recipe to be a useful pedagogical method. Students and practitioners alike repeatedly performed each Recipe and gradually they came to understand the true nature of the work and master its essentials along with the Recipe. Pedro Prado explains, “In other words, the clinical application of this formulistic protocol was a method of practitioner self-training.”¹²⁶ However, the influence of the Recipe was so great that many understood the Recipes as equal to and synonymous with the essence of the work itself. This confusion was not uncommon, especially in the early days of Rolfing; the techniques and tactics of the work were rarely differentiated from the larger objective. Many felt that the Rolf Institute needed to clearly separate the tactics from the overall intention.

¹²⁶ Prado, Pedro. “Advances in the Theory and Practice of Rolfing.” *Structural Integration*, September (2008) 42.

Along with the lack of distinction between Rolfing techniques and the process of being Rolfed was the fact that a formalistic protocol suggested that all bodies travel the same path on their transformational quest and that the same methods of intervention are appropriate for every body. The Recipe does not sufficiently account for differences among diverse body types. Therefore, a formulistic theory cannot address the details and experiences that are unique and specific to every individual. Dr. Rolf's own work was not always according to her own protocols. There are many accounts from her students that she would tell them one thing and then turn around and do another. She adapted the method to individual needs enforcing the understanding that the protocol of the Recipe was not mandatory but rather a way to facilitate instruction.

The schism between the reformers and the traditionalists, which formally started in 1986 came to a climax in 1989 when the traditionalists left the Rolf Institute of Structural Integration to form their own organization, which they named the Guild for Structural Integration. The Guild teaches Structural Integration to new students in the same fashion as Dr. Rolf did in the 1960s and 70s. The Guild's mission statement asserts:

The Guild is dedicated to the traditional teachings of Dr. Ida P. Rolf. The product of her life's work and teaching is the "Recipe"; a ten-session sequence of structural, fascial and educational goals which establishes order in the human structures. Due to its efficacy in symptom alleviation, both physical and emotional, there is little doubt that the Recipe will survive in various forms as techniques; it is not certain that it can endure as art and craft without the special dedication of those individuals who are inspired by the potency of intention and wisdom of the process concealed within.¹²⁷

The Guild and the Rolf Institute both exist in Boulder today as very separate organizations.

¹²⁷ rolfguild.org

After a long legal battle the Rolf Institute kept the trademark Rolfing. Students of the Guild call themselves Guild Practitioners of Structural Integration. However, the bad blood that once existed between these two schools is no longer at the forefront of their relationship. Time has healed most wounds that were caused by the split and both organizations have opened their doors to one another for continuing education classes and workshops.

After the great schism, the Advanced Faculty members of the Rolf Institute were now able to create principles for a non-formalistic approach to Rolfing, in which a revised version of the Recipe is considered as one of many potential approaches. In 1992, Rolf Institute faculty members Jeffrey Maitland and Jan Sultan published “Definition and Principles of Rolfing,” which clearly laid out the new direction of the Rolf Institute.¹²⁸

The Current Landscape of Rolfing

The Rolf Institute of Structural Integration has continued Dr. Rolf’s insightful investigation into ways to improve the whole person by organizing the body in gravity. Today, Rolfing is still based on Dr. Rolf’s ten series; however, the Rolf Institute has further articulated the philosophies on which the original series was based. By clearly defining the goals of Rolfing and separating them from working tactics Rolfing is no longer restricted by its beginning and it is able to continue to evolve with the latest theories of the day from the greater somatic world.

¹²⁸ Maitland, Jeffrey, Jan Sultan. “The Principles of Rolfing.” Rolf Lines, April (1992): 16-20.

In “Definition and Principles of Rolfing,” the Rolf Institute’s philosophies were clearly defined in five principles. The Five Principles of Rolfing are *Adaptability*: order is a function of the whole person’s ability to adapt to the ever changing environment, *Palintonicity*: unity of opposition back/front, side/side, and core/sleeve, *Support*: allows the whole person to accept and sustain the work, and *Closure*: every session has a beginning, middle, and end. These four principles exist under the fifth meta-principle of Wholism.¹²⁹

The principle of Wholism governs how the other principles function together. Every Rolf session should be constructed so the principal of Wholism is met. This involves more than just following Dr. Rolf’s Recipe. For a Rolfer to achieve Wholism, she/he must decide “what strategies, tactics, techniques, and goals are appropriate and possible for each particular person given that every intervention, session, and series of sessions are uniquely determined by their own set of changing and unchanging limitations.”¹³⁰ The Rolf Institute believes that by understanding these five principles, “it is now possible for practitioners to develop strategies of intervention that recognize the unique needs of the individual client and to work outside of the Ten-Series when appropriate.”¹³¹ These five principles may seem vague, but it is this open ended set of principles or guidelines that allow Rolfing the room to expand and to discover better ways to achieve its goals.

From its beginning, and mostly due to Dr. Rolf’s influence, Rolfing as a profession has attracted an educated, inquisitive person. Many practitioners find Rolfing as a second or even third career. Leading Rolfers have backgrounds in medicine, osteopathy, and some

¹²⁹ “Maitland, 16-20, 1992

¹³⁰ Maitland, 19, 1992

¹³¹ rolf.org

were professors of philosophy or research scientists before they found Rolfing. Given that very eclectic and academically inclined individuals become Rolfers, there is a large compilation of writings on Rolfing. In 1971 *Rolf Lines* started as a bulletin for the Rolf community. It quickly became a forum for Rolfers to write and discuss their professional experiences. As the Rolfing community grew and expanded to Europe, Brazil, Japan, and Australia, *Rolf Lines* transformed into a more scientific journal with articles, research reports, and interviews of leading Rolfers. In 2001, *Rolf Lines'* name was changed to *Structural Integration: The Journal of the Rolf Institute* with yet more rigorous standards. Rolfing publications also exist in Brazil and Switzerland.¹³² Some of the more prolific writers in the Rolfing community include Carol Agneessens, Mary Bond, Stan Spector, Kevin Frank, and Jeffrey Maitland. These authors have published various academic works and formal research projects that not only pertain to Rolfing, but also connect Rolfing to other fields, in which they are knowledgeable.

In 2005, Advanced Rolfer Tom Findley, M.D., and other academically accomplished practitioners formed The Rolf Institute Committee (RIRC). Its main goal is to build a research infrastructure within the structural integration community so that structural integration will be recognized in the larger arena of complementary medicine.¹³³In 2006, Pedro Prado in accordance with his doctoral dissertation, "Exploratory Studies of the Psychobiological Dimensions in Rolfing: Creation, Development and Evaluation of Questionnaires," created an on-line virtual library that made all existing intellectual products relating to Rolfing available and easy to access. The Ida P. Rolf Library of Structural Integration is available and free to the public at www.pedroprado.com.br.

¹³² Prado, 40, 2008

¹³³ Defilippis, Jason. "And They're Off," *Structural Integration*, March (2006), 22-24.

Having been relieved of the limitations of the formalistic protocol of the Recipe, Rolfing became a resource for more people than ever before. The idea of the “ideal” body also changed. Now “ideal” or normal is recognized as a more internal and personal referent, respecting each individual’s process of learning and healing. Prado explains, “The vertical line thus came to be seen as a result rather than a norm. Without the external referent, the search for what is natural for each person in relation to the person’s environment transformed Rolfing into a far more complex and fascinating process.”¹³⁴ All body types can benefit from the effects of Rolfing, however, each Rolfing session is tailored for the individual and no one benefits in the same way.

The development of the Rolfing principles made non-formulistic work possible. Unlike the Recipe that was always the same, non-formulistic work requires constant monitoring and reassessment to recognize the various dimensions in which the work has already happened, and to inform the Rolfer’s choices of technique for further interventions. These modes of monitoring, reassessing, and choosing further steps are called taxonomies. In 1993, in his article “Das Boot” Maitland set forth four categories of taxonomies: segmental/structural, geometrical, functional, and energetic.¹³⁵ In 2004, Prado reorganized these categories and further defined them as: physical, functional, energetic, and emotional.¹³⁶ Prado goes on to suggest that, “This [re]organization advances Rolfing by explaining the different dimensions of the person that are present in the context of the work and facilitating the organization of existing techniques and those that will be

¹³⁴ Prado, 42, 2008

¹³⁵ Maitland, Jeffery. “Das Boot.” Rolf Lines June (2003) 3.

¹³⁶ The original 2004 work of Prado’s is in Portuguese, I used: Prado, 44, 2008

developed in the future.”¹³⁷ It was the move away from the strict Recipe and the creation of the more lenient taxonomies that has allowed Rolfing the room to express its work in more metaphysical spheres of inquiry.

The physical taxonomy addresses the more traditional aspects of the work. It looks at the geometry and biomechanical alignment of the body from a very scientific perspective. By not strictly adhering to Dr. Rolf’s Recipe, the Rolfing community has been able to implement many of the scientific advances in the realm of somatic work since Dr. Rolf’s death. The Rolf Institute strives to be on the cutting edge of research in areas that affect somatic work, including research in fascia, biochemistry, psychology, and bio-nutrition, as well as discovering and exploring new techniques of touch that will make the work more effective.

The energetic taxonomy also falls in the domain of the scientific advances toward a more metaphysical outlook in somatic work. The idea of energy and its need for an unrestricted flow has been an ever-constant idea in non-traditional healing practices. Dr. Still based his theory of osteopathy on it and most other forms of somatic practices understand energetic flow as an important concept in their process. Maitland states, “The energetic taxonomy relates to the energy fields and flows that are transmitted through the body. The energetic taxonomy can be operationally measured as direct microcurrents that are transmitted through the connective tissue network. Autonomic activity, as operationalized by heart rate variability, has also been used as a measure of the energetic taxonomy.”¹³⁸ Starting in the late 1980s, research has been found that supports this view.¹³⁹

¹³⁷ Prado, 44, 2008

¹³⁸ Maitland, Jeffery. *The Art of Rolfing: Principles, Taxonomies, Techniques*. Boulder: Rolf Institute of Structural Integration®, 2000, 121.

It was the advances found in the functional and emotional taxonomies that brought Rolfing back to its metaphysical roots. Both of these taxonomies give space to address questions about the mind, consciousness, and one's relationship to the greater universe through Rolfing. The functional taxonomy refers to the evaluating of quality and efficiency of movement in the client. Dr. Rolf understood movement to be a very important piece of her work, and used it to enhance the results of her manipulative interventions. The fundamental idea was that correct movement helped to balance the connective tissue. However, it is now understood that movement can do so much more.

In the 1980s practitioners Megan James, Heather Wing, and Gale Ohlgren used movement work to help their clients find better options for daily movements as their bodies adapted to the Rolfing process.¹⁴⁰ This work emphasized the therapeutic relationship and a more process-oriented perspective began to take shape. The movement gave the client a sense of ownership in the results of the work. At the same time practitioners Annie Dugan and Janie French were developing a more introspective aspect of the work, by helping the clients perceive their own complex movement patterns. Through techniques of micro-movements, gentle stimulation and light touch the client was able to recognize and then control their own patterns that had up until now been only subconscious. Or in other words, this development in Rolf Movement brought one's awareness to their body schema, which in turn allowed for physical as well as emotional

¹³⁹ See Cottingham, Porges, and Lyon 1988, and Cottingham, Porges, and Richmond 1998.

¹⁴⁰ Wing, Heather. "Movement is Not Patterning." *Rolf Lines*, 21-22 1982a and "Rolfing Movement Integration: Movement Education for Everyday Life." *Bull Structural Integration*. v. 8, n. 3, pp9-13 1982.

Ohlgren, Gael and David Clark, "Natural Walking." *Rolf Lines* v. 23, n. 1 pp21-29, 1995.

patterns to be unearthed. Dugan and French later left the Rolf Institute and formed the Dugan-French Association.¹⁴¹

However this thread of movement theory was continued on and further developed in the Rolf Institute, most notable by movement theorist Hubert Godard. The interest of the therapeutic relationship and the client's internal process that was highlighted in the functional taxonomy supports a more phenomenological vision of the work; a vision that was until now under the surface but never valued as an important and distinct tool for a Rolfer. Today most Rolfers do not make a distinction between structural and functional approaches to their clients. The functional taxonomy gives space for the therapeutic relationship, the client's internal process and their conscious experience of the work to be explored and valued. These developments not only gave the work room to expand but they also brought Rolfing closer to its metaphysical lineage.

With the proper attention given to Rolf Movement, the functional taxonomy not only improves the client's balance and mobility, it cultivates many aspects that later developed in the emotional work. The emotional taxonomy addresses what Maitland termed the psychobiological aspects of Rolfing.¹⁴² Prado explains, "This taxonomy considers the self-sensing nature of the body, as well as how the client's emotional and perceptual orientation influence how the client perceives his own movement, self-image and place in the world."¹⁴³ Valuation in this taxonomy is done by way of the client's reports of their personal and internal experiences. The affirmation of this terrain makes room for

¹⁴¹ More information on Dugan and French's work of Somatic Pattern Recognition can be found at www.dfainternational.com

¹⁴² Maitland, 1993.

¹⁴³ Prado, 47, 2008

discussion that Rolfing occurs on many levels of awareness and consciousness that cannot be “proven” by scientific means (yet).

Most importantly, within this taxonomy the spiritual and existential aspects of Rolfing can be tackled. As we have seen throughout this project, the metaphysical notion of transformation has been implicit in Rolfing since its conception. However, the spiritual and existential side of this transformation was subdued in order to help Rolfing become more mainstream and accepted in popular culture as a healing therapy. The redefining of the philosophical heritage of Rolfing in the early 1990s via the articulation of Rolfing’s core principles provided space for the more existential aspects of the work to come to the forefront.

Today there are over 1,700 certified Rolfers and each one’s work is as unique and individual as each practitioner. The Rolf Institute not only trains Rolfers in the Ten-Series, it offers certifications and continuing education in many different schools of somatic therapy. Certified Rolfers are required to take continuing education classes to keep their certification. This can include, but is not limited to workshops in manipulative techniques, in related subjects such as Visceral Manipulation and Craniosacral Therapy as well as further certification in Rolf Movement and other movement education.

In this vein of exploration, Maitland suggests that Rolfing is a somatic ontology, “the inquiry into the nature of being through an investigation of our bodily being,” or rather an investigation into the nature of being through our own embodiment.¹⁴⁴ Rolfing offers fascinating prospects for working with transformation in and beyond the physical world. Many scholars in the Rolfing community understand the work to be spiritual. Some

¹⁴⁴ Maitland, xxiv, 1995.

understand it as a meditation while others categorize it as a path towards spiritual refinement. Prado states, "The symbolic line suggests an organization between the sky and the earth in which the human phenomenon exists, and that working to organize what exists between these dimensions supports and enlarges the human experience."¹⁴⁵ Through this line of thinking, Rolfing can explore more openly its incipient metaphysical inclinations.

¹⁴⁵ Prado, 50, 2008

Conclusion

In this project I argue that Rolfing is a manifestation of American metaphysical religiosity. In her book *Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion*, Catherine L. Albanese suggests that there is a long and complicated history of metaphysical religion in America. By examining Dr. Rolf's personal history and influences on her work I have shown how Rolfing fits into Albanese's definition of American metaphysical religiosity.

Albanese's four mentalities of metaphysics are 1) the preoccupation with mind and all of its powers, 2) the connection and adherence to ancient cosmological theories. 3) The belief in movement and energy, and finally 4) the yearning for salvation as understood as healing, comfort, and solace. In this project, I have argued that Dr. Rolf and her work of Rolfing engage all four of these ideas in one way or another.

Dr. Rolf's original work does not strictly adhere to Albanese's first mentality of the preoccupation with the mind. I argue that Dr. Rolf did spend some time on the possible powers of the mind, however she downplayed this aspect of the work during her lifetime. Dr. Rolf wanted her work to be taken seriously by the mainstream culture and felt this aspect of the work would not serve her well. But it is clear from her background in yoga, osteopathy and the philosophical branch of phenomenology as well as from her writings that she understood that one of the ways to consciousness was through the physical form.

Rolfing has a deep propensity and adherence to the ancient cosmological ideas of transformation, both physical and spiritual. Dr. Rolf believed that her work had the possibility to not only change one's physical form, but also that transformation could lead to a more conscious individual. This understanding of physical and spiritual

transformation can be traced back to the ancient cosmologic beliefs of alchemy. Philosophical alchemy focused on the spiritual transformation of the whole person, including the body. Like metallurgic alchemy, philosophical alchemy believed that all things, including humans were evolving, however slowly, into a more perfected state of being. In humans, the purest form was understood to be spiritual or divine. And it was understood that this transformation was not possible without also a transformation of the body or “metasomatosis.” Dr. Rolf’s aspiration to Rolf a new generation of bodies into a more refined race is a clear example of this ancient cosmological theory.

Albanese’s last two indications of American metaphysics concerning movement and energy and salvation through healing can be observed in the actual work of Rolfing. Dr. Rolf believed that by physically changing the human structure through manual manipulation of the connective tissue, energy would flow and move through the body more efficiently. And finally, Dr. Rolf started her life’s work because she was looking for healing and relief from physical pain, which she did not find in traditional medicine. This is an example of the metaphysical characteristic of the yearning for salvation as understood as healing and solace.

The Esalen Institute shared Dr. Rolf’s quest for salvations through healing as well as the goal for providing alternative ideas on physical and mental health. Esalen gave space for practitioners like Dr. Rolf to develop and gain mainstream acknowledgement for their theories on body-practices and healing arts. Dr. Rolf spent nearly a decade at Esalen helping to develop the landscape of American metaphysical somatic healing. And through her influence on Don Johnson, who was a central player in the intentions and direction of

the healing arts at Esalen, continued to effect secular metaphysical theory at Esalen long after she left.

It is clear that Dr. Rolf and her life's work of Rolfing are steeped in metaphysical ideas that are found in the greater culture of American religiosity. During her life, Dr. Rolf tried to downplay her metaphysical background to gain more respect from mainstream culture. However, since her death many of her students and followers have reclaimed the work's metaphysical implications, namely in the work of the Rolfing Institute for Structural Integration. The contemporary Rolfing culture places itself in a metaphysical understanding of human existence and continues to explore and embrace all that metaphysics implies.

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