

An Unlikely Pairing

My Time with Ida Rolf

By Robert Toporek, Certified Advanced Rolfer™

Prelude

It was December of 1964. I was seventeen years old and failing eleventh grade for the second time. My mother gave me three choices:

1. Get a job.
2. Go to a trade school.
3. Join the armed service.

The first two options weren't particularly enticing, and since my friend John Lockwood had led the way when he joined the Army, I found myself at Ft. Jackson, South Carolina in basic training. After that I went to advanced infantry training, and just to prove how tough I really was, it was off to jump school at Ft. Benning, Georgia. I was a member of the 173rd Airborne Brigade, which was being sent to Vietnam for ninety days 'temporary duty'. Well, we all know how that turned out.

I stayed for another tour of duty, not for any patriotic reasons, but because I felt that staying in Vietnam was better than doing infantry drills in the snow at Ft. Carson, Colorado. Nonetheless, it worked for me. I was appointed the noncommissioned officer in charge of our battalion's civil affairs program. I was responsible for a team of wounded soldiers that built a number of schools, a Boy Scout lodge, a playground, and a health center. I took about fifty to seventy-five kids to the dentist every Saturday. I was nineteen years old and reported to the battalion commander once a month. My relationship to the refugees and the children in this village helped me unwind from the year before, where I spent most of my time in the jungle hunting or being hunted.

After returning home I went to college for a while, but sitting in a chair learning about things that I had no interest in was not exactly my cup of tea. I managed to get a part-time job that turned into a full-time job, working with illiterate adults teaching them reading, math, and job skills to help them become gainfully employed. My first claim to fame came when *Glamour* magazine wrote an article on this project and mentioned my name. My high school history teacher read it and told my high school civics teacher, Bob Williamson, and that led to us getting reconnected. Bob was then working for Representative Jim Clyburn of South Carolina (who now is the most senior Democrat in the U.S. House of Representatives after Nancy Pelosi). Bob hired me to create a similar program for them working with rural farm workers. While it was fun for a while, the project came to an end and Jim Clyburn let me go. However, before that I was introduced to Will Schutz who led the encounter- group movement at Esalen Institute. Simultaneously, I discovered a program the Ford Foundation sponsored where they gave fellowships to future educational leaders like me. I applied, was accepted, and was paid \$15,000 a year to study methods of personal growth and their relationship to public education. So I was off to Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California. It was there that I first met Dr. Ida Rolf, the developer of Roling® Structural Integration (SI).

Esalen and Dr. Rolf

So here I was, a decorated Vietnam veteran from a nice Jewish home in Charleston, South Carolina, in the middle of Esalen in its heyday. Massage, yoga, people meditating, long hair and robes, women without bras, getting into the hot tubs naked, and acting like it was all just a part of normal living. I went to Esalen thinking that I wanted to be trained as a group leader. There was a yearlong program that had started two weeks before I got there and Ken Price, the manager of Esalen, told me that I was too late. Ken suggested I develop my own program and see how it went. So my first class was a massage workshop with Debbie Meadows, one of the most wonderful women ever to hit the planet. I remember getting my first massage: she was holding my arm and kept saying, "let go." "I am letting go," I said. Then she gently shook my arm and, well, I entered the other side of life. I spent that first month going from one workshop to another. Seeing that I would run out of money really quickly going on this way, Ken and I created what is now called an 'open residence program'. I would work in the kitchen, in the gardens, and on the facilities in exchange for room, board, and workshops. During this time I met a woman named BJ who had joined the residence program. I then met BJ's friend, Sandy, who was getting Rolfing sessions and swore by them. Sandy kept begging, pleading, and cajoling me to try Rolfing SI. One day she got right up in my face and said, "Bob, just try it!"

After my first three sessions I had this amazing experience of letting go of tension and for the first time began to experience something called 'feelings'. You see, I grew up learning to hold my emotions in, being tough. In Vietnam I perfected this. Seeing friends killed or badly wounded, I learned to suck it up. When I left Vietnam there was no debriefing, nothing to help us return to ordinary life. Rolfing SI certainly didn't feel like the massage I was used to, but it was opening me up to a different way of being.

During this time I became aware of the fact that Ida Rolf was one of the leaders at Esalen. There were Will Schutz, Charlotte Selver, and Charles Brooks doing Sensory Awareness. Fritz Perls had died but Dick Price, one of the founders of Esalen, was carrying the banner of Gestalt Therapy. And then there was this Ida Rolf person.

My first encounter with Dr. Rolf was when I was going to 'babysit' a former group leader whose wife wanted to go to town. This man had had a mental breakdown, and they were experimenting with not treating him with drugs or hospitalization. As I was walking up to the room, Dr. Rolf came walking out. She had been doing some Rolfing sessions with this guy and she seemed quite content on leaving his room. I was struck by something that, in looking back on, I can only call 'presence'. I gave it no more thought, though, and went on with my adventure.

A month or two later I remember Dr. Rolf, then in her early seventies, walking spryly around the grounds with that ever-present twinkle in her eye. Sometimes I would see her from my porch overlooking the Pacific Ocean, walking along the trail through the Esalen garden with a pack of the Institute's heavy hitters in tow. A few weeks later, I was leading a two-week open resident program on Gestalt-Encounter Experience of Esalen. At one of the sessions there was a woman who was sitting on the carpet all hunched over and looking very uncomfortable. The realization hit me that I could probably be more helpful to her with my hands than with what I was saying. In that moment, I decided that I wanted to learn Rolfing SI.

I'd been told that the person to talk to was Rosemary Feitis, and I soon found her in the Esalen lodge, talking to Ken Price. I sat beside them and introduced myself, "I'm Robert Toporek and I want to be a Rolfer." Actually I had decided that I wanted to apprentice with Dr. Rolf. I firmly believe that being a master's apprentice is the way to mastery, and by then I had realized that Ida was one of our planet's masters. I mean, I'm a Vietnam veteran, I had received a fellowship from the Ford Foundation, and, at twenty-five years of age, was anointed by the people who ran the residence program to be a group leader. Needless to say, I was confident about my decision.

Rosemary glanced up at me. "You are disturbing my lunch," she said. I thought she was joking, so I laughed and said, "No you don't understand, I'm Robert Toporek and I want to study with Ida." Surely she would recognize my greatness. She met my eyes and said, "No, you don't understand, you are disturbing my lunch. Now don't ever have the thought of becoming a Rolfer again, either in this lifetime or the next." I slunk off with my tail between my legs. So much for being a Rolfer, or so I thought at the time.

Thankfully for me, Rosemary didn't have the final say on the matter. A few years after she had so emphatically dismissed me, I was taking the Arica® training and living in what was called the Arica House in San Francisco. We all were doing lots of massage work and many of the people in the house had received some Rolwing sessions. They all told me I had "great hands" and should become a Rolfer. At the time, what would become the Rolf Institute® was just getting organized. With my friends' encouragement, I applied and was accepted into one of the first programs.

My first class was with Ida Rolf's son, Dick Demmerle, who would eventually become a close friend. As the end of the course drew near, I told Dick how eager I was to study Rolwing SI with his mother. I wanted to learn the method from its original master. She was preparing to teach her final beginner's class in Santa Monica, and although Dick would have preferred that I take his class the following summer, he acquiesced. I was going to learn Rolwing SI from Ida Rolf herself.

In Santa Monica, Ida was also teaching an advanced course, so many of the more experienced Rolfers were often buzzing around. There were supposed to be six practitioners in our class, but there were only four. My student partner, who was a lawyer, decided after two weeks that he had had enough and quit. One of the two other students was Dave Robbie, a physician. Dave knew all the answers to all of Dr. Rolf's questions. As a matter of fact, she later asked him to write a paper on how structural tension and Buckminster Fuller's understanding of the tensional patterns in a geodesic dome related to Rolwing SI. The other student was a guy named Noel (I cannot for the life of me remember his last name) who, after failing a previous practitioner course with Ida, had spent a year in Big Sur studying with other Rolfers, and could now also answer Dr. Rolf's amazing questions. I, on the other hand, was still not exactly sure what Rolwing SI was. At the end of the class, the advanced Rolfers who formed the selection committee told me that I had the makings of a good Rolfer, but something intangible was missing. That something, it turned out, was Erhard Seminars Training®, or est, an intensive two-weekend seminar intended to help one unlock one's full human potential. I wasn't interested in attending, and angrily told the selection committee so. They were unmoved. The choice before me was to attend the est seminar or go home to South Carolina and spend the rest of my life explaining why I decided against becoming a Rolfer.

With the financial and moral support of my friend Harvey Ruderian, I attended the sessions with the purpose of demonstrating how I was right, how I would get nothing out of it, how it did not make a difference, and how they were all wrong in making me go. That lasted about half of the first day. The est trainer, Landon Carter, was talking to this woman who kept getting up and arguing with him. After a while he said, "Why not just be here to see what is possible." So I uncrossed my arms and legs, looked around the room, and realized that I did not know anyone there. I did not have to stand up and talk, and nobody but me would know if I got anything out of it. You could say I started taking Dr. Rolf's coaching right there.

Dr. Rolf's 'East Coast Business Manager'

Right after I completed the training, Dick Demmerle arrived in Los Angeles for a teachers' meeting. We met to catch up and he extended a very generous offer to me: come back to New Jersey with him and assist him in working on three of his Rolfig clients. Then I could take his class and get certified, as he'd originally proposed before I insisted on training with his mother. I eagerly accepted and Dr. Rolf and the powers that were agreed to this.

While living with Dick, I discovered that Dr. Rolf was constantly asking him or his wife, Bridget, for administrative assistance. She wanted them to find her secretaries, take her shopping, set up classes, and handle various other errands. I told Dick that I could take all that off his plate. When Dr. Rolf returned to the East Coast late that summer, I picked her up at the airport and proudly announced that I'd appointed myself her East Coast business manager. She gave me an appraising look. "Okay," she said, "Do you have five dollars for the porter?" I did. That was my job interview, and I passed. I loaded Ida's bags into my pickup truck and we began a rewarding four-year professional and personal relationship that taught me all the values that guide my Rolfig practice today.

Dick introduced me to some people in Philadelphia who had taken the est training. Dub Leigh, as the rumor went, had introduced Dr. Rolf and est founder Werner Erhard to each other. Werner loved the Rolfig sessions and became a big fan and supporter of Ida and her work. He highly recommended it to all of the people he was training as seminar leaders. Dr. Rolf, on the other hand, was recommending the est training to everyone she trained. With Dr. Rolf's blessing I joined a small group of people, including Werner's mother and father, and started doing Rolfig sessions on all of them. This became a big source of support for my practice and my relationship with Ida. I took the Est Guest Seminar Leader Training and began to master registering people in just about everything I could. I also moved into a big brownstone with a bunch of people that I met through the Arica training. Soon they all moved out and I was left with a small group of women that I had done some Rolfig work with, and together we created a sort of Rolfig SI / est headquarters in Philadelphia.

My first job for Dr. Rolf was to find her a secretary. Adrienne Carlee, who was a friend of my housemate Marilyn Hall, had gone through the Rolfing series and had taken many est seminars, and became one of Dr. Rolf's best assistants. She also moved into our house, so I got daily briefings on how it was going, what Dr. Rolf was working on, and what support she needed. One of my first big breakthroughs came when Dr. Rolf decided to have an advanced class on the East Coast. Adrienne, Dick, and I helped put it together. In the advanced classes back then we spent a few weeks receiving the basic ten sessions and then spent the last four weeks on the advanced sessions. I knew I was too new to be in the advanced part of the class, but begged Dr. Rolf to let me review the basic Ten Series. "Absolutely no" was the answer Adrienne brought home. Then towards the end of the first part of that class, she said I was invited to sit in. In class that first week I had a revelation that shaped the rest of my relationship with Dr. Rolf: I noticed that people in the class were working really hard on proving how smart and great they were. Dr. Rolf, on the other hand, was only interested in teaching them as much as she could. Since I had no investment in the class, I learned to just surrender to Dr. Rolf and learn and absorb as much as possible from her about both Rolfing SI and life.

I learned another lesson one day when Dr. Rolf asked me to go to the market in Philly and get her a chicken. She explicitly explained to me what kind of chicken she wanted. Once I got to the market I was a little confused about exactly what she had asked for and picked out a chicken that I thought was best. I went back to her apartment thinking that she would joyfully welcome me for doing this errand for her. Well, I'm sure you can guess what happened next. She resoundingly rejected my chicken and told me to go back to the market and get her exactly what she wanted. Another lesson in listening.

Then there was the "do you know what you are doing or where you are going" lesson. I had become the president of the Northeast Rolfers Association, and one of the Rolfers in Washington, DC had set up an initial meeting between Dr. Rolf and this important physician, Francis (Frank) Wenger. Now I was still driving around in my old pickup truck with a homemade camper on the back, not exactly the limousine ride you would think Dr. Rolf should be in, but she never batted an eye. So we started on our way down to DC, and having been there before I was certain I knew the way. We were joking and talking and having a grand old time when, after what seemed to Dr. Rolf to be more time than it should have taken to get to DC, she asked me this simple question: "Do you know where you are going?" Indignantly I said, "Of course," while on the inside I immediately began to doubt if I did. "Oh yeah, Ida, we should be there real soon." About half an hour later she asked that I get off at the next exit for a rest stop and she insisted that I get my bearings. This was fortunate, for if we had kept going the way we were going we would have ended up in Ohio. She never let me forget that one. We finally got to DC and, yes, she let me drive her back home.

We were all having a rollicking time during that period. My house was great, my friends loved Dr. Rolf, and she loved them. She met Werner's parents, whom I had worked on, and from time to time she would come visit and talk about Rolfing SI to my clients. As her eightieth birthday approached, my housemates and I decided to throw a party for her. The details escape me, but I do remember the beam on her face with so many of our friends and other Rolfers from up and down the East Coast in attendance. Dr. Rolf loved being loved just for herself.

The next big event was the Explorers of Humankind Conference put on by Thomas Hannah, assembling some of the greatest names in the human potential movement for a two-day conference in Los Angeles. Each person was asked to give about a forty-five minute talk about his/her work and then, in a somewhat casual format, Hannah would interview him/her. At first Dr. Rolf was reluctant, but we all encouraged her and I promised to go with her. The other people presenting were Moshe Feldenkrais, Alexander Lowen, Charlotte Selver and Charles Brooks, Hans Seyle, Barbra B. Brown, Ashley Montague, Karl Pribram, Carl Rodgers, and Margaret Mead. I believe that Dr. Rolf was both honored and a bit intimidated being included with these extraordinary pioneers, yet her presentation was both stunning and brilliant. While there, she was invited to dinner by Feldenkrais and Lowen, but that afternoon she was tired and asked me to take her place. Well, it was an amazing dinner, listening to two giants each passionately argue why his method was superior.

Another opportunity appeared when I somehow became involved in setting up an interview with Dr. Rolf by *Psychology Today*. Once again, initially she was reluctant, but after some heavy coaxing she agreed. The interview was by phone and Dr. Rolf was once again brilliant.

Then one day we went together to Florida for a board meeting. Dick and I had had an uncomfortable encounter, and there was a lot of tension among the Rolfers of the Northeast region. It was a sticky situation. As Dr. Rolf and I were sitting next to each other on the plane you could have cut the tension between us with a knife. This was one of the few times, if not the only one, that we had a conflict. I broached the subject with her and she listened to what I had to say. Then she said something profound: "None of the people that I have trained as teachers are perfect. You have to do the best you can with what you've got." It was in that moment that I got the depth of this amazing woman.

The Children's Project

From the very beginning of my career I had worked with children, especially kids with developmental challenges. Somehow I saw this as the real power of our work. Dick had asked me to work on his children since he felt he did not have the emotional clarity he thought was necessary. (I felt quite honored that he would trust me with Dr. Rolf's grandchildren.) Then I asked Adrienne if Dr. Rolf would let me come over and watch her work with a baby. "No, absolutely no!" was the response, but one day I was at her apartment in Blackwood, New Jersey and this baby was in her office standing by the desk. I could see that the baby had developmental challenges, but since she had had a number of Rolfing sessions, she was better able to deal with them. From that moment, I was committed to having Dr. Rolf teach me how to work with babies and children.

Dr. Rolf wanted to do a special project working on babies and children, but not with me. The singer John Denver was supposed to sponsor it in Denver. That did not happen. Joe Heller was supposed to put it together in California. That did not happen. So one day in late 1977 Adrienne came to me and said Dr. Rolf wanted to do the project in Philadelphia and wanted me to manage it. My housemates and I went to work on making it work. Dr. Rolf picked the Rolfers, I helped shape the plan, people contributed money, and my housemates accommodated the out-of-towners. I lined up the babies and children, Dr. Rolf did a demonstration for my clients and their children in our living room, and somehow it all came together.

The Children's Project was a frolicking success. We turned our whole house into a laboratory. Dr. Rolf was there every day. What I did not fully realize was exactly how sick she was; there was no sign except for the fact that she needed a nap every afternoon. The Rolfers associated with the project were amazing. The fact that so many strong, powerful people could work so well together was incredible. I felt that each person got the best that Dr. Rolf had to offer us.

It was during this time that I went over to Dr. Rolf's apartment on a quest to find the truth about how she started Rolfing SI. When I posed this question she took her umbrella out of the stand and started swatting me with it. "Now get out of here with that question. That is the problem with you. People like their stories so leave them alone." So if any of you are wondering if I know the secret to how Dr. Rolf started Rolfing SI, the answer is "No."

The Final Chapter

A few months later Dr. Rolf decided to do another advanced training in my house, and once again she was there every day. Adrienne was burned out by this time and Dr. Rolf's health was declining, so it was time to find another person to assist her. Joy Beluzzi lived around the corner with Mary Thorp, another person with whom I had worked and attended various est trainings. I thought Joy would be the perfect person: she was amazingly competent, and one of the most pleasant people I have ever met. The next day I went to Dr. Rolf's apartment with the big announcement: "Ida, I've found a replacement for Adrienne and her name is Joy." "I hope not," she said.

Joy was the perfect person for Dr. Rolf's final chapter. She took care of her joyously, competently, and lovingly. She gave her everything she had to give. During this time, to my surprise, Joy and Dr. Rolf's other son, Alan Demmerle, became chummy. Shortly after the funeral, Alan, Joy, and I went to dinner to celebrate Ida's life.

Joy and Alan have been married now for what seems like most of my life. Alan had two children from a previous marriage; one became an osteopath doing amazing bodywork in her own right. All of the Demmerle children, now adults, are pursuing their dreams. Dick and Bridget moved to Switzerland, where Bridget is from. We are all of us living a different type of life because of a little old woman with a twinkle in her eye, a flower in her hair, and an amazing gift to humanity. *[Editor's note: Dick Demmerle passed away shortly before this issue was published.]*



Figure 1: Ida Rolf and Robert Toporek begin The Children's Project (now www.teamchildren.org) with an introduction to Rolfing SI for babies and children led by Dr. Rolf in Philadelphia in 1978.

Epilogue

I kept waiting for Dr. Rolf to finish the Children's Project and write up the results, but it became clear that it was not to be before she passed away. I knew how much she saw working with babies and children as the future for Rolfing SI, so I promised her I would both complete the initial project and continue on with it. She gave me a look similar to that when I told her I was going to be her East Coast business manager, "We'll see." Although it was not exactly the prettiest of monographs, *The Promise of Rolfing Children* was completed and 10,000 copies distributed. I went on to produce an award-winning documentary with the same title. Both can be found on my website www.newbabymassage.com.

Since 1975 I have worked with over 300 families and documented the results, often going as deep as four generations. Many of the children I worked with, after growing up and having their own families, have had me work on their children. I will start working with infants as early as the first day, as I did with my son, Bryan. And on his wedding day when just the two of us were together, I asked him if he would like me to work on him. When I asked him if I could share the story about how I worked on him the day he was born and then this latest time on the day he was to be married, he said ok, as long as this was not going to be the last time I worked on him.

I have taken Rolfing SI to many different places and worked with many different people and am now working on funding a major project to train Rolfers to work with children and to create the Children's Rolfing Center in the Philadelphia area. I want my great grandchildren to have someone who can convey the wonders of this work to them. Who's in?