

# Rolf Movement Faculty Perspectives

## *Orientation and Empathic Resonance Considered as Psychobiological Elements in Structural Integration*

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*Rolfing® [Structural Integration] is about good technique, and rapport, and rapport,  
and rapport, and rapport . . . .*

Gael Ohlgren

**O**rientation is the basis for how we (mammals) do anything at all. First, without exception, we need to know where we are in relation to gravity or “up and down.” Then we perceive. We assemble our perceptions. With our perception, we build and populate a world to which we orient, and then we go about our business. As we do our business, communication is also critical.

Communication in somatic (body-oriented) therapies such as structural integration (SI) is about more than words. Communication, in the somatic context, embraces all the channels of sensory awareness: skin takes part in communication, the breath is part of communication, the intellect participates in communication, and movement is part of communication. Sounds (not limited to words) are part of communication. Silence is also filled with communication.

The back and forth of communication links necessarily back to orientation – gravity orientation and general orientation – how we locate this body in space. We literally “hold the space” for our work through orientation. Successful negotiation of orientation and sense perception is a central ingredient in client-practitioner communication and rapport. Successful communication and rapport is worth examining when we think about the process of educating SI practitioners.

A body-oriented look at communication between client and practitioner highlights what has been called the psychobiology of SI – “biology” because we work with gravity

response, orientation and the physiology of motor control, and “psychology” because we work with perception, meaning, and the belief construct around “having” a body.

The SI process is a format where we can examine and evoke what are normally invisible threads of communication. Synergies of communication around body awareness are themselves shifts in consciousness. These shifts of consciousness are opportunities to remake the inherent sense of body, to loosen beliefs about body limits, and to revive body-friendly coordination. Communication that supports shifts in belief, and change in body shape, is necessarily a cooperative event, one where client and practitioner manage somehow, consciously or unconsciously, to share awareness with each other or to resonate with each other. Thus, resonance suggests itself as a metaphor, a way to refer to a phenomenon that can't be fully explained, but is nonetheless a vital part of the work.

### **Resonance**

Resonance, in the language of physics, is a matter of waves and specific harmonies of movement that can occur within a system. If you pluck a guitar string, other strings move. You hear the harmonics as other strings vibrate. A key feature of resonance is the specificity with which one object has the freedom to respond to certain wave frequencies exclusively from others. All objects are filters of energy. An object effectively “filters out” those waves passing through it that don't resonate, and resonates

with those for which its physical shape, length, and density are appropriate.

With biological systems, resonance is different than with inanimate objects. One can describe many forms of resonance between and within cells, plants, and animals. We watch life forms mimic and dance with, or repulse away from, other nearby life forms. Two plant stems may grow around each other. A dog and a cat may learn to share close proximity, but perhaps only at certain times and places. Resonant behavior in biology is selective and specific, like guitar strings.

Resonance relevant to somatic work is the combination of psychology and biology (psychobiology) called empathic resonance. Empathy is a capacity to feel in one's own body what another is doing or feeling in his/her body. Empathic resonance is when two persons (or a group of people) sense the empathic exchange, consciously or unconsciously, and find mutual interest in the exchange. This can, in turn, evoke a sense of “shared attention.” This quality of shared attention, this resonant state, can be sustained as both people allow it. An empathic resonant state supports somatic work because it is a state where body patterns that are normally fixed are more plastic.

### **Empathy**

We live at a time when empathy between animals and/or human beings finds scientific credibility. There is, for example, the “mirror neuron” effect. Neuroscientists observed, first in monkeys and then people, brain activity that indicates empathic activity. We now know that a person observing another person's movements will exhibit sensory and motor brain activity that corresponds with the brain activity of the mover. We see a movement and we feel it, at an unconscious brain level. We can also learn to feel another's movement consciously, at a sensory level. We can, in fact, learn to empathize specifically and somewhat reliably. Skillful empathy is part of empathic resonance but the latter is a step further along in the skill set. As structural integrators we learn to empathize with another person's experience as a part of learning to do the work.

An example of empathic skill in SI is “body reading.” Empathic body reading is a skill that structural integrators develop to determine what needs work, what effect the work has had, and what to do next.

It helps to be able to “see” what is alive and differentiated, and what is less able to move in a client, so one can assist the client to move more freely, and with more clarity of function. We “see” or “see/feel” another’s places of ease, or places of effort/compression because our body senses subtle motor activity within ourselves that imitates the person observed. The capacity to imitate gives us a capacity to see. The goal is to acquire the capacity for the process to become conscious and deliberate.

Empathic body reading is meaningfully enhanced through differentiation of one’s body map, the motor and sensory mapping of one’s body at conscious and unconscious levels. My map of you can only be as good as my map of me. If I can’t notice an articulation, a plane of movement, or a spatial awareness in my body, I probably won’t be able to see it present or absent in yours. Mapping is another way to speak about embodiment. We can define SI as the work of differentiating the body’s map of itself – the body/action space. Whether we call it embodiment or mapping, the goal is the same: to restore the body to operate more intelligently by opening to better data.

### **Empathy’s Role in SI**

Before going further, it must be acknowledged that one can use empathic body reading as a tool of “power” over clients, certainly, or for any number of self-interested purposes. Such pitfalls are briefly mentioned later in this article. As a therapist, however, the best use of this skill is to help evoke new places of aliveness/awareness in the client or student, as a “listening” skill, and for modeling differentiated awareness in oneself.

SI practitioners often demonstrate to a client how it looks to evoke or inhibit particular sense perceptions. For example, one might demonstrate perceptually inhabiting a specific region of kinesphere, such as the space above one’s head, to show the client how it looks to move with this perception. This, in turn, stimulates the client’s empathy to see/feel the practitioner’s sense perception and movement.

Here is another aspect of empathy at work in SI. The client is effectively asked to empathize with the practitioner. Client capacity to “body read” the practitioner depends on the client being open to doing so. The client, in effect, has to allow the practitioner’s movement to touch him/her, for the demonstration to have any impact.

What evokes willingness to allow this level of intimacy? What evokes empathy? What qualities of attention in the practitioner hold a container for empathy-based work? Does the way we orient and attend affect those in our presence? These questions lead to considering one’s attentional field.

### **Shapes of Attention**

Empathy is affected by the shape of our field of attention. Every moment our “movement brain” maps the space around us with a combination of conscious and unconscious orientation. We can’t turn this off. Orientation happens as a background to our other forms of consciousness. We can, however, influence parts of orientation through conscious perceptive attention.

How we orient, or formulate our shapes of attention, can be described geometrically: for example, as a sphere, an ellipse, a line, plane, or as a shape with missing or enhanced quadrants. Geometry is used to describe the shape of space that includes our orientation. I can ask, “Does the shape of my attention feel spherical, equally omnidirectional, or does it feel like an ellipse in one particular direction? Does my attention include space behind me or behind the one I face, or does the attentional space close in around my body, or my partner’s body?” “What is the shape of my kinesphere?” would be another way to ask these questions.

The geometric shape and perceptive details of our orientation influences how others feel in our presence. An omnidirectional field of attention to the space around oneself, a bidirectional sense of axis, and balance of weight and space orientation transmit the message that the practitioner is stable, because he/she is present in his/her own gravity orientation. Similarly, sensory awareness in the hands and feet signals stability. A broad spatial orientation, in contrast to pointy reactivity, offers a place of ground for the work. As with the physical ground we stand on, we want our practitioner’s ground to feel reliable and stable.

Stability of attention especially matters when we meet sensitive moments in the work. As a client opens to a new experience, pleasant or unpleasant, how do we, as practitioners, respond? Optimally, we maintain a broad, self-referential orientation; a stable background to the client’s new experience. Attention to gravity orientation is an essential part of holding

the container. Stable orientation tends to reduce ungrounded reactivity. Ungrounded reactivity means my personal reaction to your experience, which is not relevant to your process (and not relevant to my support of your process). Reactivity, such as eager enthusiasm or subtle recoil, tends to pull clients out of their experience. Reactivity is typically the enemy of resonance.

### **Inclusive Attention**

The capacity to empathize while simultaneously sustaining a broad and stable orientation to context supports deepening of the re-mapping process that is at the heart of SI. To grow a new map, one needs continuity of direct observation, which most people are not used to. We support the client’s sustained observation through sustaining our own attentional field.

As the process continues, clients recognize that the field of inquiry shared with their practitioner is a space that, at least at times, helps open new dimensions of awareness. As clients get used to a quality of shared observation, a feeling we call “resonance” or “empathic resonance” develops.

Clients can also start to feel the power of “inclusive attention,” in which one balances awareness of one’s own body sense with awareness of the other person. Inclusive attention isn’t unique to SI. However, the skill can be named and taught as part of the somatic set of skills one learns in SI. It is, in fact, part of reviving core stability in which psychology and biology are not separate.

### **Our Varied Availability to the Idea of Somatic Resonance**

Many factors affect rapport. Some have to do with mirroring, or with simple listening and pacing, and some are as basic as good practice/office habits. Empathic resonance is a particular quality of rapport that makes somatic education possible. At the same time, we come to this aspect of the work with different backgrounds. Some practitioners come to somatic trainings strongly developed in skills of grounded empathic resonance. For others, it can feel new and unfamiliar. Some students feel understandably suspicious of the terminology, hearing terms like somatic or empathic resonance. The label can sound “new age” and distinctly ungrounded, for example. In fact, empathic resonance is a way to describe how all mammals, including people, develop social bonds,

and is increasingly recognized in the behavioral and neurological sciences. Empathic resonance is a quality that has been cultivated in many cultures far back in recorded history. At the same time, it's helpful to respect the pace at which SI students are ready to learn about orientation and the more subtle levels of communication.

The good news is we can develop empathic resonance through training and practice. Our brain is eager to be exercised in this way. We learn to differentiate our map of body and space by having course time in which practice is part of the curriculum. We learn to build skill with our attentional field through partnered tracking exercises: exercises in which the tracker's perceptual posture is a tracked parameter observed, ideally, by a third person. We learn through skillful feedback, feedback that is delivered in language that separates observation from inference (observed facts from assessment or judgment). Feedback, too, is more helpful in a field of empathic resonance.

### **Empathic Resonance and Integrity**

As mentioned earlier, empathic skill does not automatically confer therapeutic integrity. There are many examples of empathic skill gone awry, when used by unhealthy personalities. How do we define integrity in somatic work, a field that is all about subtle and intimate communication? What do we teach students as a basis for safety and appropriate boundaries?

Simply put, empathic resonance is a grounded activity. We are grounded when the ground of our orientation is stronger than our focus on the client. Adequately grounded, we offer a container that is less susceptible to unconscious projection and transference because our clients don't substitute for our ground. The client stays figure, as in the phrase "figure and ground." A broad attentional field – one informed by gravity orientation, a backfield and side field, and differentiated perception of bodily sensation – is not an attitude that "leans on the client." Grounded resonance is a field of inquiry; inquiry is an attitude of curiosity. With stability, one doesn't lean forward to look for stability, physically or psychically. We notice the ground beneath the work – the client, for all his/her fascinating details or dramas, is not our ground, but a figure within it/upon it.

Can we fool ourselves? Yes, the thinking/emoting mind is often fooled. To clarify orientation, practitioners benefit from feedback, feedback from partners and observers in courses that embrace psychobiological aspects of the work. We may not notice "leaning in" to the client until it is pointed out to us. We may not notice loss of gravity orientation and sensory awareness of our own body until we are asked, kindly and with curiosity, to notice what we sense in our body. Invited in such a way, we may actually be willing to look and see what can be noticed in this moment.

Can we still fool ourselves? Yes. Somatic work is inherently risky. Stacey Mills, one of the early Rolfers, and a Rolfing® Structural Integration teacher, said, "Rolfers are [people] willing to take all risks." We are hugely vulnerable, in large part due to our eagerness to do work that is deep and fundamental to improved function. For whatever reason, there are times we "go to sleep" and wake up in trouble. What is the answer? There is, of course, no answer. Daily practice of perceptive and coordinative skills and daily opportunity to become present to oneself helps. Yet there is no passive security we can relax into. We all benefit by collegial support and continuing education in a mode that allows us to receive safe mirroring, along with any other choices for self-care.

### **The Role of Empathic Resonance in SI Education**

Empathic resonance is a theory. It is based on the science of empathy and the subjective experience of resonance when two people share attention, when two people attend to a somatic experience in a nuanced way. Educating practitioners about empathic resonance offers skill sets that are straightforward and specific. These skill sets overlap with the basic skills of being a structural integrator: we differentiate the map of our body and the space around us at a detailed level, and we come back again and again to gravity orientation. We develop the capacity to describe our map of sensory awareness, and to ground our experience in sensory language. We develop the capacity to hold "fields of attention," meaning background orientation to weight and space and to dimensions of space, of inside and outside, so there is a broad and stable container for our inquiry with people. Finally, we practice with each other to build

stability and confidence in our perceptual and postural attitudes. We find out how perceptive attitude affects our own posture and how perceptive attitude affects the experience of our practice partners and, ultimately, our clients.

### **The Psychobiological Idea**

Empathic resonance points to dimensions of SI that involve supporting perception, coordination, expressivity, and self-regulation. We ask clients to explore themselves in ways that are new and unfamiliar. We ask them to walk, or sit, or feel in ways that put them on the spot. How do we support this challenging learning situation, so that a client feels safe enough to sincerely explore? All of us are, first of all, animals. We are expressions of mammalian biology and, as such, we orient. And primarily, we orient to gravity. We want to track how our client/creature is orienting and we will do this best by observing how we, ourselves, are orienting – at each moment. Psychology is informed and supported by the biology of empathy and orientation. We don't have to do psychological analysis to do psychobiological work. Psychobiological work happens as we support the conscious and unconscious work of empathic resonant exploration, and by bringing sensory perception to conscious awareness.

### **An Exercise with Orientation**

Imagine you are about to meet a client to do an SI session. What is your orientation? Notice your orientation without edits. To what does your mind associate? What captures your attention? How does your body feel? Start from your actual baseline, without judgments.

Then, take time to notice your gravity orientation. Where do you find a sense of weight in your body? Take time to allow weight to register in your system. What is your sense of body volume? Breathe into your volume.

How do you notice your balance of "back space" (space behind you), front space, side space, overhead space, and "below you" space? Is the shape of your kinesphere a rounded bubble or an ellipse? If it is an ellipse, what direction does the ellipse elongate to? What helps you to balance your shape of spatial orientation? What makes it easy? How might you invite rounding awareness toward an omnidirectional

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sense of the space around you? Follow any impulse that feels easy and interesting.

Where are the places of finely differentiated mapping within your body? Where are the places you can sense bony articulations, easily? Where are the places where you can make fine movements, easily?

How is your axis differentiated and oriented? Is there a directionality of head and tail into space? Is there a bidirectional sense to your axis?

Return to the question: How do you notice weight, in any part of your body? How do you notice breath? How does your breath land? What is the quality of post-

exhalation pause, in the absence of effort? What supports inspiration, inspiration for inhalation? Is there a sense of interest to space, to horizon, to sky?

How does breath touch your body? How does your body respond to breath, in standing or sitting? How does your body respond to the anticipation of breath?

What movements follow easily and naturally from what is alive for you right now, in sensation?

Let yourself move as an expression of what you sense. Can you permit yourself to allow sound? How does the resonance of sound land in your body and in the space? What

is your sense of body and orientation to weight and space?

Now imagine: How might it feel to greet your client from this sense of body, weight, and space, this sense of up and down that you notice at this moment? How might you imagine finding this broad orientation, at times, during your work? Can you invite this possibility?

What was most easy or interesting to notice in this exercise? The most easily noticed details may be your best entry point to orientation, places to which you can check in during work.