

## Ask the Faculty Column for Journal of Structural Integration, March 2017

### Cross-pollination of Roling® SI and Other Endeavors

**Q:** Can you speak to something in your own life that has cross-pollinated with your Roling Structural Integration (SI) practice, leading you to a particular perspective, understanding, or way of working?

**A:** There is evidence to suggest that we can consider Roling SI and Rolf Movement work as pathways to subcortical processes – brain processes below conscious awareness. Rolf’s work allows us to influence parts of ourselves that aren’t changed easily or directly; parts not changed by will power, imitation, or ‘figuring it out’. Subcortical processes aren’t the point of traditional education – education, for example, to acquire knowledge or exercises to strengthen muscles. Rolf education, by contrast, involves communication with parts of the brain that govern posture, coordination, and nervous system regulation. We can, for simplicity, call those parts of us the ‘movement brain’. The phrase is, among other things, less geeky. Then, a way to describe SI is that it improves conversation between the thinking brain and the movement brain. We call the result structural integration because behavior changes – how people navigate life, physically and psychologically, changes in ways that continue to deepen and integrate into life. But before any of this made any sense to me, I had to do some homework.

I grew up in an extended family comprised of, and networked with, social scientists, psychologists, and psychoanalysts. Thinking and talking about human behavior was a household pastime. That had some advantages probably. But, by high school, in the 1960s, I perceived troubling limits to ‘intellect-only’ ways to meet life’s deeper issues. I looked and stumbled into the Zen option. I found a Saturday morning class taught by one of Huston Smith’s students at MIT. (Smith was a professor of religion at MIT and had written the introduction to Kapleau’s *Three Pillars of Zen*.) The class introduced us to Zen, which involves a lot of sitting (zazen). The sitting crossed legged and staying perfectly still part was intimidating – as in, the hardest thing for me to even imagine doing. But, it also felt like maybe a good choice – maybe because it threatened everything familiar and everything for which I had some sense of competence. It turns out that even an overly intellectual, physically stiff, and moderately fearful person can participate . . . eventually.

Later, a takeaway gleaned from zazen – and before experiencing Roling SI – was that body posture is a precious and miraculous event. The body knows how to hold itself up, effortlessly. As the body stabilizes and finds support, there’s a platform for investigating being simply present, and also for gnarly questions – questions like, “Who am I?” or “How do I die?”; stuff like that. It’s ultimately movement-brain territory (below thought), at least after a while, because one’s struggle to think of answers fails. Something other than thinking has a chance to kick in.

Roling SI and Rolf Movement Integration offer people ingredients to access movement brain wisdom as well. In addition to an experience of plasticity in shape and movement, the work helps one distinguish what Jeffrey Maitland terms ‘pre-reflective’ experience from ‘thought- about’ experience. (Maitland has written lots of good stuff about the relation of Zen and SI.) When I started Roling practice, my go-to, for clients in distress, was to invite them to notice that when things are hard, thoughts don’t help much – and so I asked them, “What can you notice that isn’t thought?”

As I entered Practitioner (what we now call Phase 3) of Roling training, the universe was kind. Gael Rosewood assisted the course. (It was interesting to discover that Gael is Huston Smith’s daughter.) Gael offered a free Continuum class each morning before the ‘official day’ started. Continuum helped me reboot an “I can do this” feeling during training. Why? I would now describe the reason as that it promotes body security. Continuum helps one deal with psychological challenge – challenges like those that can occur in Roling trainings – in a movement-brain way. At times one needs better resources than thoughts and memories of former success – one really needs a quality of adequate body security. Body security helps one do the work, independent from the ideas about oneself – a way to step out of local identity and, at the same time, become more present. Specifically, Continuum offers ways to replenish the rich sense of body – a bodily sense of volume, density, and substance. The

intensity of the (Roling) training, for me, had the effect of erasing that important sense of substance. It’s a movement-brain issue. We can’t will ourselves to feel our substance. But we can invite it, through playful improvisation in movement, imagination, breath, and sound expression, which, in turn, provokes sensory experience, and thus restores a welcome felt sense.

As the years of Roling practice unfolded, Continuum retreats helped differentiate my body maps. Better mapping permitted me to see/feel a more differentiated perception of client bodies. Freshly back from doing extended Continuum in a group, it was easier to see what was going on in people, and to better feel what to do about it. (Much later, while attending a Continuum-based workshop, a seasoned Zen teacher commented to me that it might be helpful for Zen teachers, in general, to do the sort of sensation integration and tracking that those workshops provide.)

Along similar lines – differentiation of maps feeding the movement brain – two other pieces fit this story: the experiential anatomy and the evolutionary movement curricula of Caryn McHose. After experiencing McHose teach and experiencing her private sessions, I came to appreciate other, perceptual, dimensions of SI. McHose’s early self study, drawing on, among other things, Mabel Todd’s *The Thinking Body* and, later, Rolf’s *Roling: The Integration of Human Structures*, led her to perception-based approaches for shifting body maps. Her work produced (to me) impressive change in how people experienced their bodies, and how they moved. It would take me some time to articulate what I felt and observed, or speculate about why this happens. I would say now, however, simply that experiential anatomy demonstrates that the body is, effectively, ‘hungry’ to feel and know itself better, to know its bony architecture and articular capacities – to differentiate its maps. Better information gets recognized as such. Evolutionary movement demonstrates that body image is very plastic; the body hungers for morphological plasticity. The body is responsive to invitations to embody non-human life forms and shapes. In fact, these ‘other’ life form shapes are implicit – embedded within human morphology and movement.

The lesson to me is that movement-brain (subcortical) potentials lie dormant until called upon – until called to come alive through introduction of imagery, playful improvisation, embodiment of anatomical detail, and creative expression. The integration of thinking and movement-brain parts of our beings has, historically, either been largely implicit within traditional culture or explicit when pursued by fringe individuals who chose to separate from the larger societal context to study and live as shamans, yogis, mystics, monks, etc. The domain of persons who choose to separate has been considered religious or spiritual in nature. Roling SI has, in its own history, had trouble finding adequate and appropriate acknowledgment of these esoteric or spiritual implications of the work. We now have secular opportunities to learn what was formerly less available, and scientifically validated ways to talk about those previously elusive realms.

We never fully capture wordless consciousness with words, or represent the totality of personal or intersubjective experience in standardized categories. Nonetheless, grounding the cortical/ subcortical integrative process in modern concepts from brain science and motor control helps allow our work to at least appear reasonable to a broader audience. When we support students to engage in processes that lead to deeper embodiment, their confidence improves. These sorts of processes foster practitioners who are better prepared; practitioners with critical skills for differentiating what they see, and for how they educate and find appropriate language to support a more varied spectrum of people within clinical practice.

The challenge remains: how do we translate the serendipitous processes many of us experienced over the past decades into user-friendly education that meets the contemporary student population for Roling SI and Rolf Movement Integration? Developing effective and accessible approaches to somatic education at the Rolf Institute®, education that fosters depth of embodiment, is a fertile investigation.

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