

STRUCTURE - A NEW FACTOR IN UNDERSTANDING THE HUMAN CONDITION

By Dr. Ida P. Rolf

Those who nurture human bodies are aware that at present we seem to be operating in a dichotomy, an "old medicine" and a "new medicine." The "newer medicine" has gained its leadership by virtue of the additional factors, which it takes into account; one of these being the ever-present environment, and second the consideration of basic physical structure. Both of these factors have been ignored until recently. The "older medicine" seemed to have a certain relation to "magic." It depended on the properties of various "healing" substances introduced into the body and seemingly "magically" efficacious. Some few of these substances were inorganic, many more organic, from mineral, vegetable, and animal sources. Introduced into the human body these produced specific results; sometimes in their irrelevance it looked like magic. The "good" doctor was the man who intuitively knew how to get the greatest relief of symptoms. This was his "magic". At this earlier stage much verbal attention was directed sometimes very loudly toward "causes". But in actuality the attention was focused on antecedent conditions. That which had happened just before the symptom appeared was all too often called its cause. In this period, the greater reliance was on the introduction into the living system of something from the outside to effect a curative change.

Humans have been changing this assumption and now tend to believe that the responsibility for healing and curing lies within the individual himself. This may almost be regarded as the hallmark of the "new medicine". We now say it has been the individual's error which introduced the problem, it must be his responsibility to recognize the error, correct it, and thus remedy the condition. In short, modern thinking places the responsibility for this well being squarely within the suffering individual and very often within his mental approach to life. It categorically denies the efficacy of alien forces to be the basic causative agents of ill, a notion that literally bedeviled our predecessors.

With the entry of the therapies of Still (of Osteopathy) and Palmer (of Chiropractic), therapists began to look for something they felt was more truly a cause. It was from the searching's of these men and later their followers that the idea was introduced that physical structure, its order or disorder, might have a great basic significance as cause. In response to this search for causes and with the identification of structure as a possible contributing factor, the "newer medicine" used manipulation as logical means to modify structure. This type of intervention has been tremendously successful in many places, but it was still recognized, especially by its practitioners, that something more was needed.

Let us look at this added premise, the idea of structure. There are many ideas about structure. Used in a material connotation the word implies the presence of space; the three dimensions of ordinary space and sometimes the four dimensions of space/time. Therefore, it is apparent that structure always implies relationship. The dictionary definition of structure is "the interrelation of parts or the principle of organization in a complex entity." (American Heritage Dictionary).

Sometimes the relationship implied is between material particles, sometimes between the changes undergone by material particles in time.

The word structure is not limited to matter; it can also apply to ideas. But the kind of structure, which we are considering here, has to do with the sort of energy aggregates, which constitute the matter of our material world. Meditation on "structure" gives rise to some very strange insights. We see that even in the densest material, an energy system is basic and, therefore, the system has attributes, which can be called behavior. In all living systems, structure manifests in behavior. We might say in a sense structure actually is behavior. This is true at any level of matter, be it organic, inorganic, or vital.

What does all this philosophy have to do with life in Los Angeles, New York, San Francisco, or Chicago? Actually a very great deal. What we have implied up to now is that badly misplaced or malformed structure might be expected to result in unfortunate behavior. Here we must remember that we are using the word behavior not in the ordinary sense of human conduct, but to designate the full range of what any material system expresses or is able to demonstrate. Thus the "behavior" of salt includes the elevation of the boiling point of water when it is dissolved in water. When we see a man unfortunately deformed either in gross structure or mien, we may well consider that here is evidence of a situation, which may well result in possible poor behavior. By the term poor or bad behavior we ordinarily mean that he uses violent or otherwise inappropriate conduct to obtain his ends. But in accordance with this newer viewpoint, it is more appropriate to say that part or parts of his body are not functioning properly, and the outward manifestation of this is, as we call it, poor behavior. So as we go around the streets of our cities, our towns, our homes, we may look around us with a newly seeing eye and a more understanding heart at the visible evidences of poor structure manifesting as behavior, sometimes physical, sometimes mental, sometimes emotional.

All of this offers interesting material for observation, but what does it mean to us as therapists? To us who call ourselves Structural Integrationists and who by our friends are sometimes called Rolfers, it means something very dear to our hearts; it means hope. For we know that we Rolfers are able to change body structure. We can change body structure in a way and to a degree, which up to the relatively present time has not been thought possible. We know that we can direct and change the body toward a balanced vertical. As we look at what has been added when such a change has been made we are suddenly aware that we, in practicing the Rolf process, have been dealing, even though unconsciously, with the great energy field of the earth, which we call gravity, in addition to the more obvious smaller field of the individual, which people have always expected to be able to influence to a degree. As we change the physical body, the energy field, of the man, the larger field of the earth is able to act differently on the smaller energy field of the individual.

In considering this we find certain assumptions helpful for our understanding of what we see. One such assumption tells us we are taking into account a more comprehensive view of man than was included in the purely Aristotelian definition of Homo sapiens. Here we must see man as an energy field, rather than as a mass of matter; a field, which lives within a greater energy, field, the field of the earth. These two fields like two energy fields necessarily interact. In any competition the greater field of the earth will necessarily win. There is an old Peanuts cartoon, which I love. Linus is meditating having just seen Lucy fall down and come up crying: "For hundreds of years there have been sidewalks, for hundreds of years there have been little girls. The little girls are always falling on the sidewalks, the sidewalks always win."

This last sentence sums up everything I have said up to now, the gravity field always wins. But this purely intellectual discussion fails to take note that realistically in winning, the environment, the larger field, steadily undermines the integrity of the smaller field. If there is no appropriate intervention, this undermining will continue to a point of eventual breakdown in the smaller field. But fortunately there is a hopeful aspect in this rather grim situation. There is the happy possibility that we can restore the undermined structure, because incredibly, the human body is so outstandingly a plastic medium. As Rolfers we use this fact to great and unexpected advantage.

The definition of plastic is a substance, which under stress of pressure can be deformed and on release of the stress can be restored to its original state. This is the message proclaimed by Structural Integration, one important system of which is called Rolfing. Any real integration (including Rolfing) must concern itself not merely with the structure of the body as such, but with the structure of the body and simultaneously with the effect and influence of its energy environment, the gravitational field, on that structure. In school you were probably taught that all the chronic ills of a human came from his attempt to stand on two legs instead of on the four for which they told you he was originally designed. But man is a species that is emerging, not static. He is emerging inexorably toward verticality and when he reaches verticality the energy of the earth's field automatically supports him adding to his personal energy and he reports this in all his "behavior"; how he feels, how he stands, how he walks, how he acts, how he digests, how he thinks, how he relates to the world and to his fears and his feelings.

As Rolfers we know that through a combination of manipulation and particularly of education in the understanding use of his body and its movements we can bring any man to a more nearly vertical stance. The structural support of a man in his collagen, his myofascial system--fascia, tendons, ligaments, bones. It is because of the unique chemical and physical properties of collagen that we are able to bring man toward the vertical. At this position of verticality gravitational forces reinforce him because at the surface of the earth gravity acts as a set of vertical lines. Gravity no longer tears him down or pulls him apart. Then he says, "I feel good. I feel wonderful. What have you done to me?" But it is not we who have created this well being, it is gravity.

Gravity, man's name for the energy of the earth, is the never-sleeping therapist and teacher. All we men and women as Rolfers can do is to prepare the body of the individual to receive and respond positively to the effects of the gravitational field. This is our sole contribution. And therein is the message of structure.

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