



An Open Universe

An In-depth Look at Ida Rolf's Structural Integration

By David Davis

Structural Integration (SI) is the culmination of a body of work developed by Ida Pauline Rolf — a true Renaissance woman who changed the field of bodywork and the way we as practitioners and clients perceive ourselves, perhaps, forever. Rolf received a Ph.D. in biochemistry from Columbia University in 1920, was a research associate in organic chemistry at the Rockefeller Institute for 12 years, and studied mathematics and atomic physics at Swiss Technical University in Zurich, Switzerland, augmented with studies in homeopathy, osteopathy, chiropractic, philosophy, yoga, and transformational mysticism.



The body's transformation begins with opening vital capacity.

Original art interpretations of the 10-series by Christo Carson.

Rolf looked at the human condition as it related to the environment and chose to look into the relationship of parts to the whole. Rather than working on symptoms, she evolved a series and sequence of manipulations to change how structure relates to the planet. The gravity of this decision led to developing a sequence of manipulative sessions known as the 10-series. When she first began developing her approach, osteopaths and chiropractors were among the few medical professionals who believed the body could improve with fascial manipulation. The model of osteopathy, that structure creates function, was a key in the development of her work. She also explored man's relationship to gravity as pivotal to structural and functional patterns, problems, and prospects. The insight that connective tissue holds the body in space and that bones act as spacers brought new relationships to light. And Rolf's work is all about relationships: soft tissue to hard, matter to energy, structure to function, and connective tissue to health and well-being.

This series of 10 sessions, which cohered in the mid-'40s, organizes the body in the field of gravity — at the time, a new territory for bodyworkers. Fascia, the collagenous protein matrix of connective tissue, is the medium of manipulation in this sequence and series. SI is a process of organization,



Grounding the spine with a coherent base of support.

bringing order to the connective tissue through structural alignment with Earth's gravitational field. Establishing this proper relationship, the energy of the client is reinforced by this field. Gravity becomes *the* therapist. Being cognizant of our relationship to this natural force opens our senses and expands awareness of how we move in, and occupy, space. Order is maintained by awareness. Appropriate movement in spatial freedom leads us to new patterns of understanding in stillness and motion. Understanding old and new patterns is vital to reaching a more harmonious sense of well-being. Rolf regarded her work as giving new options to perception, proprioception, movement, and being.

In Alignment with Gravity

Rolf's recipe is a contextual package relating the intention and principles of SI to the series. The beauty of the SI vision is a direct, incisive system, organizing the body for improved function. The primacy of gravity plays an essential role in how we age, collapse, and compensate the hologram of structure from the macro to the cellular level. We grow up under the electromagnetic pressure of the planet. All living things and beings are subject to magnetic compression and its exaggerating influence upon structural patterns. But only humans have the potential to evolve in vertical intention. We receive support by organizing around a central vertical axis. Understanding this line of intention is central to Rolf's work.

The line refers to the gravitational influence moving from above one's head, down beyond one's feet, to the center of Earth. It does not stop at one's head or at the feet, but implies larger spatial relationships and polarized energies at the ends of the spine. From the ground up, the line passes through the floor of the pelvis, rising anterior to the spine, up through major body segments, passing through bone only at the crown of the head. The line is a profound construct for observing bodies in stillness and motion, living where the medial/sagittal and lateral/coronal planes meet.

Alignment in the gravitational field integrates the human structure with the planet by being upright at a right angle to Earth. Earth is the horizontal plane, and we can unify in the vertical. "Verticality" is its own virtue in balance of form. The segmented nature of the human body and its joint system renders us vulnerable to falling out of balance. Joints need to work like horizontal surfaces, but none of them are horizontal or flat. The narrow aperture of the ankle acts like a ball bearing distributing weight laterally, medially, anteriorly, or posteriorly. That base of support may be quite different relative to the structure above and from one leg to the other, depending on rotations and weight distribution right to left. Imbalance in the base strains segments above, requiring fibrous knitting to splint, hold, and stabilize unstable relationships. Tilting or tipping of joint surfaces accompanies rotation at the joint and counter-rotation in the joint above and below. Rotation and strain are reflected throughout the



Continuing core-base opening up in the pelvis and spine.

joint system. Holding transmits up and around the spine, transferring into the ribs and myofascia, stabilizing the pattern through the thorax up into the cervical spine and cranium.

Soft tissue stabilizes and moves the skeletal framework in space. We are a sea of connective tissues performing critical functions. Rolf called this the “organ of form,” the *prima materia* from embryological formation through life, cohering fluid, matter, and energy in a three-dimensional continuum. Fascia envelopes each cell and fibril, organizing into larger functional structures, including blood, bone, organs, muscle, tendons, and tensional layers or planes. Myofascial continuity does not begin or end with insertions, origins, or bones. Fascia organizes in directional layers following tension, compression, and structural, functional, and compensational demands from deeper bony and joint layers out and from superficial to intrinsic, myofascially. Adhesion, gluing, and lamination in myofascial layers limits motion, function, mobility, and motility by desiccating tissues and limiting blood, fluids, and vital energy to and through constrained areas. Everything slows in the fibrous knitting repair of adhesions, pulling on adjacent structures, literally reaching out to secure and stabilize by spreading regionally toward bony foundations. Fascia adaptations in length and flexibility support resilient movement or compensation falling away from center, altering structure, energy, perception, and proprioception.

Fascia is organized in three continuous envelopes and multiple layers interwoven into planes. Organizing layers is central to unwinding, relaxing, and releasing structure. Fascia subcutanea is the web beneath the skin. This “greasy” protein fabric is removed in anatomical dissections to expose muscles and familiar landmarks, but ignores the essential character of fascia in the formation of muscle, bones, and organs, as well as fibrous tissue repair from injury. We rely on the continuity and communication inherent in soft tissue dynamics to affect structure and function simultaneously — the same medium of communication, change, and flow of the *dan tien*, or triple warmer, exercised in acupuncture. This *tela*, or web, is continuous throughout extrinsic musculature into the fascia profunda — the deep second layer surrounding and investing intrinsic musculature into joints and bones via the periosteum surrounding and investing the matrix of bone.

The third layer (subserous fascia) surrounds, supports, and invests visceral organs. Together, these layers communicate inside to outside, structure to function, flowing from head to foot, binding body and structure as a tensional continuum at the effect of habitual holding, movement patterns, and injury. You probably know someone recognizable at a distance by their posture or the way they move. It is as individual and personal as one’s signature.



Breathing pelvis connected down to Earth and up through the spine.

This plastic, resilient medium conforms to the demands made upon it. Deviations from vertical integrity require splinting and vital energy for support. Structure and function are affected by trauma, compensation, gravity, and time. One option to random entropy is tensional integrity, or tensegrity — a state of equal distribution of weight, compression, and tension in all members or struts of a structure. Integrated structures involve balance of extension and expansion of the framework from a stable center out. A human being is in expansional balance when the force lifting her in the field of gravity is equally distributed throughout the body, as one equal tensional field of force expanding omnidirectionally in space balancing the two polarizing forces of the vertical and the horizontal. All this sounds very linear in description, but it is a circle of relatedness in practice.

The Interrelationship of Layers

The prescription of SI — the Recipe — is a map shaping the intention of the journey by systematically processing structural anatomy from superficial to deep, head to toe, front to back, side to side, and inside to outside. It is a distillation of knowledge, wisdom, and experience that is immediate, direct, and economical. Rolf recognized that a body is organized in concentric layers, that body function can be understood only by realizing the interrelationship of these layers. By addressing layers, the series has a cumulative effect greater than the impact of one session or another. Each session generates a wave of change to the fascial network, affecting all systems of the body simultaneously. In sequence, each session predicts the need for the next, inviting random disorder to surface, unwinding years of habituated compensation that has become painfully normal and all too familiar.

The map leads practitioner and client into a voyage of discovery and the promise of personal evolution. This series is a field for exploration into the nature of being in time, space, and gravity. Structure becomes a metaphor for function, breath a window to resilience moving through the system. The Recipe is a koan, the series an odyssey approaching the whole person, affecting body, mind, psyche, and spirit through structure.

The Recipe is a seven-step process — a sequence of myofascial manipulations perturbing unconscious postural patterns, moving from superficial to deep layers, exposing underlying compensatory holding and tension. Principles of the work are encrypted, woven into the Recipe. Work in the front of the body is in service to the back; back work is in service to the front; work above is in service to the base; and base work serves structure above. As above, so below.

Every session addresses the necessity of bringing the pelvis into a horizontal state by organizing, stabilizing, and



Separation of girdles
decompensating the spine.

mobilizing that most central of segments. By addressing the relationship of pelvis to ground through the base of support (and pelvis as base of support for the spine, cranium, arms, and shoulder girdle), a new gestalt emerges around the line.

Clients coming for the series are ready for change. First, we see how the body is ordered in space. Random bodies move toward disorder by falling away from the center, which begins a cascade of splinting and compensating expressed as chronic flexion or extension. We look for what is right and make space for that to get better. Our intention coheres in a vision of postural integrity, symmetry, and equipoise by evoking, rather than imposing, order. Every body has an implicate order awaiting space for expression. The series is a ritual of centering, like clay on the potter's wheel becoming a ceramic pot. Balanced pottery is a container of space organized around its center. The art in this craft is knowing when less is more.

A Series of Sessions

The first three sessions in the SI series open the superficial fascial web, diminishing surface tension to open space for deeper holding and compression to surface. An organism falling out of balance is reinforced by chronic holding. As a unit, these three sessions initiate deconstruction of unconscious holding patterns by opening and lengthening the anterior, posterior, and lateral compartments from foot to head. The manipulations rehydrate desiccated tissues and layers that become laminated. Vertical structures require spatial definition communicating support through the system. As this sleeve opens, the center receives space to begin awakening. We start opening the anterior thorax, enhancing vital capacity. As the front opens, the back responds, releasing and diffusing around and through the system. Enhanced oxygenation liberates energy while making resilient space to receive changes made during the second, or "base of support," session.



During this second session, balance is enhanced, improving the foundation of the feet over the arches. As they relate to the ground better, they give support to the legs, pelvis, and spine. At the end of two sessions, the anterior and posterior compartments are open, the base enhanced, and the spine begins extending but it needs something more. The third session opens the lateral compartments, tying front to back, top to bottom, supporting major body segments as they relate in space. This session is one of line, dimension, communication, and lift.

These are important foundational sessions as liberation of the sleeve invites the expression of structural/functional options when the system relaxes into a new orientation, an emergent order. Space allows for de-rotation of joints and major segments moving into improved relationships. Motion is more

Organized girdles connecting through open lumbar.



Finding the line, unwinding from the center out, integrating core lift with grounded base.

continuous and fluid as the body begins extending in space. The line is beginning to express itself. An open sleeve makes space for core expression. The arms and shoulder girdle begin hanging, relating to the sides. Weight bearing is moving toward the center of the leg. Compensatory holding in the legs and hips is relaxing its grip on the pelvis and spine. The feet have space to respond to changing pressures from above, transmitting, reorienting as a solid, resilient foundation diminishing straining, allowing the body to feel grounded, connected, and long. The thorax responds to breathing with omnidirectional expansion as the diaphragm embraces and moves to fill increased space. Organs start settling into appropriate spaces as the pelvis begins its journey toward horizontal balance. Subserous fascia enveloping viscera resonates and reverberates the massaging effect of breath through the organism.

Opening the sleeve avails space for core awakening. Different models have differing opinions about what the core is, but for structure we define it as the axial skeleton, diaphragm, and iliopsoas relationship. The center of gravity is moving toward, and relating to, the central vertical axis. The line expresses its presence through shifts in proprioception, ease of movement, increased energy, psychoemotional opening, improved balance, and an intangible feeling of lightness. Ripples of released tension rise through myofascial structure in search of the next place to get stuck. An open sleeve allows that to diffuse. Indescribable things happen as the structure organizes vertically and the wisdom of being and body integrate a new paradigm. The essence of these changes is not so new as to be unsettling; rather, there is something natural, familiar, and inviting in this exploration of how we occupy space. The body always wants to go to a better place, and these sessions open the way to restructuring awareness.

Sessions 4, 5, 6, and 7 are the heart of the Recipe. The superficial sessions created space and resilience in the sleeve to accept and embrace deeper change from the core out. The pre-fourth session body looks longer on the outside and shorter on the inside. The pelvis now needs unwinding and balance. We approach this project through the underpinnings of holding in the base of support. Pelvic imbalance and restriction is reflected in the femurs, down into the feet, and up into the spine. Working the adductor-iliopsoas continuity breathes new support into and through the pelvis into the spine. "Horizontalizing" pelvic structure in its balancing act over the trochanters evokes deep movement up into the lumbar spine, viscera, and proprioception as the lumbar extend and breathe. Retiring extrinsic myofascial patterns allows space for balancing and mobilizing as the hips release restrictive holding on the sacrum, allowing the pelvis to breathe, indicating a resilient, stable organization in the base of support — a prerequisite for spinal extension and poising the cranium at the apex. Balance, ease, and stability are hallmarks of the axial skeleton, organizing around the central



The layers begin to open and breathe with time, space, and gravity; grounded life supports body and being.

vertical axis. The seventh hour is cranium and axial skeleton specific, and the spine is at the height of extension. After that, we have no new anatomy to explore, and the series could end. But Rolf saw that structures would lose integrity in and around the lumbar spine. The body needed global attention to balance and symmetry.

Sessions 8, 9, and 10 require a shift of attention and intention. We are less concerned with parts and segments and more interested in spatial relationships and orientation. Artistry is the essence of this integrative trinity in order to complete liberation, organization, and stability of the axial skeleton from appendicular holding (Rolf-speak for the process of balancing arms and shoulder girdle, and legs and pelvic girdle around the line — balancing sleeve with core, doing with being). Strain from above and below has conspired collapse in the middle. We have to determine which of the girdles is imposing and pulling compensatorily on the lumbar spine. Working from the middle out to the extremities, we put segments where they belong and make them move appropriately. The mobile stability of the foundation moves with greater resilience, connection, coherence, and ease. Arms and shoulders work more freely, relating to the sides anew, organized around the spine, allowing the cranium a new freedom relating to spine and line.

Session 10 is a capstone, a global manipulation organizing and integrating segmented structure in space, balancing the horizontal with the vertical. We occupy space differently. There is fullness to our awareness as the body moves resiliently in expansional unity rather than an aggregation of parts. Once fulfilled, the sense of being centered is quietly powerful in our presence. One feels less fragmented. "Sense-ability" begins extending from inside out. It takes time for feelings to percolate up from the unconscious into conscious awareness. The energy field of the client is fitting into the energy field of the planet ... and beyond. These are physical, metaphysical, and existential considerations we don't fully understand, yet. A new sense of self is emerging. We have choice in opening, relaxing, releasing, healing, or reacting — attempting to control a process deeper than personality.

Three Powerful Allies

After the basic series, reinforcements arrive in the form of time, space, and gravity. These three allies continue curing what has been initiated. Posture through alignment continues to improve for a year or more.

One of the gifts of this series is an expanded sense of acceptable experience, awareness, and relation to what is happening inside as feelings of health and well-being move to vitality. The basic series is a profound excursion integrating and balancing structure with the electromagnetic ocean all around us. Structural integrity overcomes postural insecurity

during a journey from the inside out. We begin to have a glimmer of becoming the center of the cyclone. The series is a profound personal educational experience, orienteering and aligning with nature. We walk toward new opportunities and choices, embracing movement through life.

Therapeutically, this series is a potent force for clarifying the effects of stress and injury, but Rolf was clear in relating that her work is about healthy people getting better, a more human use of human beings, and the idea that integration transcends the palliation of symptoms. She was interested in the physics of consciousness, opening the doors of perception, and the meeting of matter, energy, and medicine. The basic series is a pilgrimage toward centering in the physical manifestation of one's being. It is a commencement exercise and staging platform for entering the here and now, exploring the up/down in the body of one's nature. Being the interface between heaven and earth, one opens into the security of feeling at home in the body entering an open universe.

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