

“The Healing Touch of Rosenwork”

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*Rosenwork penetrates the memory locked into chronic tension,
allowing a release of the barrier between ourselves and others.*

*This work is about transformation, from the person we think we are to the person we really are.
In the end, we can't be anyone else.*

■ Marion Rosen, PT

In 1984, casting about for a new direction in life, I traveled to London to visit Sufi teacher Irina Tweedie. While there I stayed at the home of one of her students, Mona, whose work was a kind of hands-on bodywork/breathing therapy. Exhausted and depleted from three months of traveling on the continent, I thought perhaps a treatment from her would help me recuperate. I can't really say what happened while Mona worked on me. I only know that by the end of the session I was so deeply relaxed and felt so complete in myself that I had no desire to speak for the next hour. I had never experienced bodywork like this before.

When I asked Mona where I could learn to do this work, she replied that I would have to go to Germany, since that was the only place it was taught. “But, you know,” she continued, “there's a woman in Berkeley California, who does bodywork that comes out of the same tradition as my work. Her name is Marion Rosen.” It seemed extraordinary that after several different careers and 25 years of searching for the right work, I would hear about a teacher in my own hometown while traveling in Europe. I determined to seek out this woman when I got back to Berkeley.

When I returned home, I made an appointment with Marion Rosen to be interviewed as a prospective student in her training course. Arriving at her office on a fall afternoon, I was greeted by a tall woman in her 70's with clear blue eyes and the gangly movements of an awkward teenager. Her youthful, welcoming smile belied her age, and her lilting hello, more sung than spoken, betrayed a slight German accent. I told her I wanted to train with her but that I had never experienced the work. She suggested I have some sessions before beginning the three-year training and that I attend an introductory workshop taught by some of her students.

The afternoon workshop was a terrible disappointment, but somehow I resolved to try again, and a few weeks later, I made an appointment for a private treatment with Rosen.

As I lay on the table, Rosen's hands slid over my body like silk. (After 40 years of doing this work, her fingerprints have literally worn away.) Then she focused her attention and her hands on my back, and memories began to surface. I recalled how different and lonely I felt as a child growing up in a small Minnesota town where no one seemed to value or share my intellectual and spiritual interests. When I told Rosen what I was experiencing, she said simply, “And that was the most important part of you, wasn't it?” I burst into tears. My passions had been tolerated as an amusing eccentricity when I was a child, but here my very essence was being acknowledged as my “most important part” by this woman who, until now, had been a stranger. Her words helped me to open to the pain of isolation I had lived with but had never fully allowed myself to feel. The pain separated me from family and friends; now perhaps it could be healed.

As the body relaxes in a Rosenwork session, clients often remember events and feelings as I did. Rosen explains that ordinarily muscles contract and relax as we breathe, move, and express ourselves. But sometimes a muscle contracts and then does not complete the cycle by relaxing again. This muscular holding is often associated with the suppression of feeling and memory.

For example, during childhood we may have experienced an overwhelming trauma or a family situation in which we felt trapped, with no way to escape or even to express our distress. In such situations, we repress the feeling or memory as a way of surviving. Feelings occur in the body, and the way to inhibit them is to tense the musculature. If the muscles remain tight, we experience chronic or habitual tension. The holding has become unconscious; we have forgotten how to let go. Unfortunately, not only are the threatening feelings held down, but all feeling is blocked in a tense muscle, and its physical function is also impaired. Such holding patterns keep us from responding to life appropriately and spontaneously.

“These survival mechanisms have become barriers to the possibility of expressing ourselves fully, of being in the world.” Explains Rosen. “In our work, we bring about the relaxation of the muscles that hold down these experiences. The barrier can be released; the moment the experience becomes conscious, there is no reason to hold it down anymore. It’s just there – and as a grown-up we can usually handle it or look for help.”

In a bodywork session, the Rosen practitioner helps evoke the client’s unconscious experience through a special kind of touch, unique to Rosenwork, and through verbal interaction. The touch used in Rosenwork is gentle but deep – deep not because a lot of pressure is used (although at times strong touch is needed) but because it acknowledges and accesses the emotional level of the person’s experience. It is touch that connects to the pranamayakosha, or energy/breath sheath, and the manomayakosha, or mental/emotional sheath, of the subtle body, as described in yogic literature.

As the practitioner senses responses in the client’s body, her hands acknowledge these subtle shifts. She may also verbally reflect back to the client a feeling or incident he has related when it correlates with what is happening in his body. In this way the client becomes more conscious of his experience. Through awareness and acceptance of his feelings and memories, the client starts to give up the holding. As he integrates these experiences, realizing that “yes, that happened to me. I lived through it, and I’m all right now,” there is no more need to “put them away” in the musculature. He allows the holding to release, without effort or “doing.” In letting go of control, in surrender, comes release.

Marion Rosen, the remarkable woman who developed this subtle and profound method of working with chronic tension in the body, charms everyone she meets with her friendliness, wisdom, attentiveness, and honesty. Born in Nuremberg, Germany, she came of age during the Nazi period. As a young woman she trained with Luzi Heyer, a student of Elsa Gindler. Gindler was the “grandmother” of many body, relaxation and breathing methods based on sensory awareness; perhaps her best-known student was sensory awareness pioneer Charlotte Selver.

Heyer worked in conjunction with her husband, Dr. Gustav Heyer, a colleague and former student of Carl Jung. She and Marion did relaxation work with patients who then saw Dr. Heyer for psychotherapy. The Heyers together achieved such spectacular results that people came from all over Germany to work with them. Here the seeds of combining verbal and body therapies, a hallmark of the Rosen Method, were sown in Marion’s mind.

As World War II approached, the Rosen family left Germany. Marion and her sister went to Sweden to await American visas, and Marion took the opportunity to study Swedish physical therapy, which affirmed and validated what she had learned from Heyer. Finally, she received her visa and, traveling via Russia, landed in California. She settled in Berkeley and worked as a physical therapist with men and women injured in the wartime shipyards. After the war she took a physical therapy course at the Mayo Clinic and, following a period of hospital work, established a private practice.

Working for over 30 years in a basement office in Oakland, California, Rosen gradually became known as someone who could effectively treat psychosomatic cases. She noticed that people who talked about what was happening in their lives at the time of their injury or illness got better faster than those who didn’t. Her work in relative isolation during those years acted like an alchemical process in which her early training mingled with extensive hands-on experience and cooked to a rich, nourishing brew.

This period of working alone ended in the early 1970's, when two circumstances conspired to draw Rosen "out of the basement." A patient who had not made much progress came in one day much improved. She told Rosen that she had just taken a weekend seminar called Mind Dynamics with someone named Werner Erhard. Impressed with the change, Rosen enrolled in Erhard's seminar and later took the third est training. "I became aware of knowing really much more than I had ever let out," she recalls. "I began to say things to my patients, and it seemed to make a great difference. This is how I reawakened in myself an interest in the verbal part of my work and really when it began in earnest."

At about this time a young woman named Sara Webb was casting about for a career direction, and her mother, a client of Rosen's, suggested that she ask Rosen to train her in relaxation work. When Sara approached her, Rosen's initial response was, "I couldn't possibly teach what I do." However, she went home that night and, having just done the est training, considered that maybe she could do more than she thought she could. The next morning she called Sara and took on her first student. Soon Sara began bringing friends to be trained, and in 1980 the first training class began. These early students founded what is now the Rosen Institute in Berkeley, California.

"If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you." This quotation of Jesus from the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas, which hangs on the wall in the waiting room of Marion Rosen's office, is the unofficial motto of the Rosen Institute. It expresses Rosen's conviction that those parts of ourselves that we have "put away" by tensing our muscles work against us, causing limitation and disease, whereas if they can be brought to consciousness, they can become resources in our lives. The rewards for going through this growth process can include improved health, a fuller understanding of ourselves and other people, and an expansion of our worldviews.

Marion Rosen's own healing experience illustrates this process. She had had asthma as a child, but as an adult had been relatively free from it. Then one day on a trip to the mountains, far from any help, she had an asthma attack. Frightened, with no one to turn to but herself, she remembered a process from the est training, and projected herself as an asthmatic child onto an imaginary screen.

"I said to the little girl, 'What's wrong? You don't have to cry, you are with me.' The little girl didn't like that at all. So I said to her, 'What do you want?' She said, 'They won't let me cry.' 'Go ahead and cry,' I said, and with that I started crying. As I cried, I became aware of the hurt and the need to cry, and the asthma went away. It was an incredible thing to have happen, because I was scared to death to be there and not be able to breathe. If I had been somewhere else, I would have gone to the doctor, who would have given me some medication. They could have given me medication again and again, and I would have had asthma every time I felt sad. I don't think I've had an asthma attack since then," says Rosen.

The process of "putting away" has consequences other than poor health and tense muscles, according to Rosen: We have literally built a physical barrier of tension between ourselves and the unconscious. This barrier is a "posture" or false self that shields us not only from threatening aspects of ourselves but also from our authentic selves, from real contact with others, and from our connection to the whole, the transcendent. Rosenwork, while helping to release this barrier of tension, seems also to open people up to spiritual experiences. In trying to understand how this happens, I asked Rosen to speak about the essence of her work.

"The basic principle is relaxation, non-doing, which provides an opening for something," she explains. "The non-doing enables people to contact the unconscious, and from the unconscious they can have an awareness of what is going on with them. You give up your conscious control and let another control take place, the control of the body, of the unconscious, allowing the autonomic nervous system to take over. You don't have to hold anything back, you don't have to hold anything down, so the unconscious can give you input into your life."

Both practitioner and client participate in allowing this "other control to take place." In giving a session, the practitioner drops down into a kind of meditative state, beneath the ego and social persona. Once there, she works intuitively, without an agenda except to help the person become reunited with his authentic self, letting her hands guide her, perhaps accessing and sharing images related to the client's body and life situation. The client, too, often enters an altered state, and the two share a kind of mutual, conscious dream state, centered around the client's body-mind experience in the moment. This experience has a feeling of sanctity and presence that reminds me of Jesus' saying, "When two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them."

"I think it's getting in touch with the unconscious, the soul, the depths of our being," says Rosen. "We are there to help them to reunite with who they are. That's why we say we should not have an agenda, except to be with the person and further his or her connection to the unconscious."

"Something lovely happened to me in Sweden. A person said to me, 'Through your hands I felt that I was touched by the hands of God.' Then a few days later this same woman came to me with tears streaming down her face. 'You know,' she said, 'I worked on somebody and they said that to me, too. Imagine, this can come through my hands too.'"

To facilitate this kind of experience, Marion Rosen teaches trainees to be with the client in stillness, patience and acceptance, while at the same time not knowing, not having an answer. The practitioner attempts just to be present with herself and with the client and to sense the authentic self beneath the holding and barriers. Then when that self comes forth she can acknowledge and support it. Besides learning to recognize the responses in the body that signal contact with the deeper self the work involves developing a high tolerance for the unknown and trusting that the authentic person will appear when it is ready.

Rosenwork training consists of two years of part-time classes and one year of internship. (Intensive trainings are also available to accommodate students from out-of-town.) A Rosen movement program teaches movements based on physical therapy range-of-motion principles that are designed to prevent physical problems. There is much interest in Rosenwork in Europe, especially in Scandinavia, and Marion Rosen spends a great deal of her time there teaching and spreading the work. In April 1989 she traveled to Moscow to teach Rosenwork for the first time in the Soviet Union.

At the end of our talk, I asked Marion Rosen what, in her wildest imagination, she would envision for the work. "I'd be satisfied with it growing slowly," she said, "growing in different places. It could make a great contribution to health by enabling people to find tendencies toward illness and then to reverse those tendencies. Also, being accepted by the medical profession, so people don't have to be sick in order to be treated, but can be taken care of before they get sick. Then, instead of just sick people being treated, a nation of well-being would be created."