

Dennis Hughes: Let's start with a brief description of Hellerwork.

Joseph Heller: Hellerwork developed out of an evolution of Rolfing. I was trained as a rolfer. I knew Ida Rolf, and I ended up adding to her bodywork a couple of things I thought would complement it and make it more comprehensive. Basically, Hellerwork consists of three things merged together: deep tissue body work, which aims to restructure the body and realign it with gravity; movement re-education, which aims to teach people more effective ways of using their bodies so they can re-create the same tensions and rigidities as before; and dialogue, along psychological and emotional lines, that gives the client a chance to look at the physiological component of stress that may be present in their life.

Dennis: You mean dialogue with the Hellerwork practitioner?

Joseph: Yes. Dialogue between the practitioner and the client. The dialogue is not really psychotherapy or anything like that, because we aren't trained psychotherapists. It's more a chance to have the client examine what kind of issues may be held in those parts of the body that we are working on.

Dennis: How did you come to develop Hellerwork out of Rolfing? What are the similarities and differences?

Joseph: Rolfing is very effective, and my clients felt it was very effective, too. But they had trouble keeping the results. Often they would come back six months to a year later and say, "Gosh, I lost it... let's do more." That didn't please me or them. I started looking into what was missing, so to speak, that didn't allow people to keep these results. The first thing that I became aware of is that maybe these tensions and rigidities were created by the way we used our bodies.

Dennis: Meaning we go back into the same patterns or usage?

Joseph: That's right, it's almost guaranteed, because we are creatures of habit. We aren't going to change that; once we learn a certain way of doing things we keep repeating it habitually. So I began to study movements to see if I could facilitate my clients to change their movement habits, in addition to changing the structure. I believe that neither component is enough by itself. Kinetically, you can change movement habits. It's over the long run that we change the structure. My experience is that it takes a very long while.

Dennis: You wouldn't suggest one instead of the other, but both together.

Joseph: Right, we started combining them together. The other thing that happened was that I was interested in the Human Potential Movement, Gestalt

therapy, NLP, and all kinds of modalities like that. I became aware that many, if not most, of the stresses that we are subjected to are actually psychological and emotional in nature other than physical.

The dialogue in a Hellerwork session is arranged along a certain theme. Each session has a theme. These themes came about out of my tendency to talk to my clients and ask them questions like, "What are the major areas of stress in your life?" I noticed that when I worked on certain parts of their body, people tended to talk about certain topics.

Dennis: Certain issues affect certain parts of the body?

Joseph: There are obviously many exceptions to that, but there was enough of a pattern that I began to notice it. It made sense because we use different parts of our bodies for different activities. It follows that we would have different issues stored in different parts. For instance, in the third session of Hellerwork which is in the arms, shoulders and (inaudible) of the body, the theme for that session is reaching out--because to me we express our aggression through our arms. (I mean both aggression in the positive sense of the word as in reaching out to make contact with people, reaching out to give and receive, as well as aggression in the negative sense such as anger hostility and violence.) In that respect we call our arms our weapons,.

In the course of the third session we work out the clients' patterns of aggression. We start first with the positive patterns: how hard or easy it is for them to make contact with people; do they have preferences between giving and receiving; are they the kind of people that go after the things they want or need in life, or do they wait for them to come to them, and things like that. On the negative side are the things that make them angry: where do they feel the anger in their body; how do they express it when they do express it; where do they store it when they don't express it.

Dennis: I have never fully understood the connection between the emotions and the different body parts.

Joseph: The word emotion means outward motion. How we express our feelings is with our bodies. For instance, when a person is angry they tend to want to either throw, hit or push away, which involves the arms and shoulder, or they want to yell, which involves both the mouth and the jaw. When you repress the expression of emotions, you unconsciously tighten the musculature that would be involved in the expression. People who are angry but are trying to suppress it will clench their teeth.

Dennis: So the jaw and neck muscles tighten.

Joseph: Or you can see them make fists and pull their arms tight and things like that. If you do that once or twice nothing much will happen, but if this is a recurrent pattern, if it is something you do again and again, after a while it begins to imprint in your musculature and you start walking around with a tight jaw, or with shoulders pulled back and arms pinned to your side. That comes from repeatedly denying or holding back of the expression of the emotion.

Dennis: I have heard that fear is associated with the belly, tightening up there. So the way your body reacts to different emotions, different body parts are affected and if you do it repeatedly, then there is a pattern there.

Joseph: That's right, and often what happens with bodywork is that people will experience emotions as I release the body part. Sometimes it is specific, and they will remember an incident, but many times they just feel an emotion. Because there was no specific incident, it was just a small accumulation over time.

Dennis: In Hellerwork, you don't work on the whole body every session, but you work through the body in a series of sessions? I think in Rolfing it is ten sessions.

Joseph: In Hellerwork it's eleven sessions. We do work on different areas, but we also work on the whole body throughout the series. It's too much to handle the whole body in one session. We follow a sequence through the body that reorganizes it--first through the superficial layers and then through the deeper core layers, and then integrating the two.

Dennis: Do you work on the superficial muscles first and then go into the core muscles in that same session?

Joseph: The first sessions are for the superficial layers of the body. Session three completes the superficial layer. With session four, we start working to the core of the body. Four, five, six and seven are about the core, and then the remaining sessions are about integrating the core in the sleeve.

Dennis: In looking at the illustrations in your workbook you use the analogy of an apple. So you're saying that the core of the apple, like a person's muscle, is denser?

Joseph: The tension tends to concentrate there, yes. People tend to shorten and compress in the core.

Dennis: There is fascia that surrounds the outer muscle sleeve but also a separate layer of fascia which surrounds the core, is that right?

Joseph: Fascia is actually continuous throughout the body, so it's everywhere. It surrounds muscle, bone, blood vessel, nerves.

Dennis: Would you mind describing fascia for our readers who might not be familiar with that? Most people are aware of bones and muscles but aren't so aware of the fascia.

Joseph: The soft tissues of the body are divided into the muscles which are the "red meat" of the body. The connective tissues are the tissues in the body that are used to connect things. The connective tissues cover a whole range of rigidity to fluidity. The most rigid connective tissues are bone and the next less rigid are cartilage. The next are ligaments (which are straps of connective tissue that tie bone to bone), then comes the tendons, which strap muscle to bone. Then there is this substance which is called fascia, which are thin elastic layers of connective tissue which lock all of the muscles and all the muscle fibers. This actually makes a muscle work, because it's the tube of fascia around the muscle fiber that allows the muscle to contract. You can think of the tube of fascia as being like a little sausage enclosing the muscle fiber. As the fiber contracts, the sausage gets shorter and fatter. Fascia and muscle are intimately interconnected. When we say we work on fascia, it's true, but it's only half of the truth because we are at the same time working on the muscle as well.

Our attention is more in the fascia, because it's the fascia that stores the stress, and it stores the stress in the form of rigidity.

Dennis: When I was rolfed long ago, I remember they talked about the fascia actually being bunched up. It could be smooth if it was relaxed, but it is like a wrinkled sheet when it bunches up. Is this correct?

Joseph: Yes, it can bunch up; it can compress. Fascia can glue to an adjoining sheet of fascia, which then restricts movement much further because fascia is supposed to facilitate muscles sliding over each other when it's lubricated and elastic. When it becomes compressed and it loses some of its lubrication, it actually becomes glue-like. Our forefathers used to make glue by boiling down animal connective tissue. When muscles start gluing to each other we experience that as restriction in movement.

Dennis: Does exercise help lubricate and keep this all fluid?

Joseph: Absolutely, the body is made for movement. Movement is definitely the healthy use of the body. However, movement by itself will not necessarily organize the body. It's not as efficient as having energy coming from the outside added to your system.

Dennis: If you are doing weight lifting or even jogging, that is involved more with the sleeve muscles?

Joseph: That's right.

Dennis: I am very involved in tai chi chuan. That type of exercise works on the internal core muscles, correct?

Joseph: Yes. It works on both sleeve muscles and the core muscles, unlike Western calisthenics exercise programs, which tend to only address the sleeve muscles.

Dennis: You have stated, "Tai chi chuan relies on the refined movement or the intrinsic muscles." Intrinsic muscles means the core muscles?

Joseph: That's correct.

Dennis: What do you mean by refined movement?

Joseph: The intrinsic muscles tend to be smaller ones, and they tend to be the ones with which we control our small movements.

Let me try to explain. Imagine a football player dancing ballet. It's a bit of an incongruous image, right? They are trained to use the big muscles to do powerful, big movements. The ballet dancer is trained to dance but also to do small, intricate, elegant flutters with the arms and things like that, which are done with the intrinsic muscles that the football player can't even begin to do.

Dennis: Interesting. The sleeve muscle is larger than what you call the muscle bundle or core. Inside of that is something called muscle fiber. What is muscle fiber?

Joseph: Muscle fiber is the smallest component of the muscle.

Dennis: There are also toxins building up in the system, and perhaps even calcifications and mineral deposits and so forth. With your work, you are helping to break up and release this as well?

Joseph: In general, we are working to make the tissues more fluid and to increase the circulation of fluids in the body.

Dennis: Physical manipulation is going to help with detoxification. Do you advise people about diet and intake of liquids as a part of what you are doing?

Joseph: I am not an expert on diets so I don't advise people about it. I believe it's important, and they should consult an expert in that field. I do advise people to drink a lot of water to detox with during the process, because that helps flush out all of the toxins that we release in the bodywork.

Dennis: How many Hellerwork practitioners are there now?

Joseph: I have trained myself, and my trainers have trained, by this time over 600 practitioners.

Dennis: Is that worldwide?

Joseph: Worldwide, but most of them are in the United States. I don't know how many of those are still active, because they are not required to belong to any organization.

Dennis: Do you do all the training in Mt. Shasta, where you live?

Joseph: Some trainings are happening in Mt. Shasta, some trainings are happening in Canada, Washington, Los Angeles, New Zealand and in Europe. Even in Japan!

Dennis: How much training does it take to become a Hellerwork practitioner?

Joseph: It's an extensive training program, which usually takes a year to a year and a half. The different formats take different amounts of time. It's a 1250 hour program, and Hellerwork International is approved in the state of California as a state approved school.

Dennis: You do the Hellerwork training in a residential retreat setting. This is different from most trainings. Why do you choose to do it that way?

Joseph: For stress reduction purposes. In my experience, people can really relax a lot more and put their attention on the studying this way.

Dennis: When they are more relaxed they can take it in more?

Joseph: That is absolutely true. Learning as far as I'm concerned is the thing we do most easily and most naturally and should be fun. I am very mad at the school system for having taken the thing we were born to do and making it into a

drudgery, a chore--and grounds for failure. Part of my joy in life, in the training program, is the rekindling of people's lust for learning.

Dennis: When I read your background, I noticed that you had gone to CalTech and had become an engineer, prior to doing bodywork. Do you think that the engineering background helped you at all?

Joseph: Yes, it helped me. I think that engineers and poets make the best rolfers because they understand structures, and poems and are highly intuitive. I feel that my engineering background did help, both in terms of having to be interested in structures and systems and things like that, plus the particular field I was in was aerospace engineering, where we made thorough use of gravity. The concept of aligning the body with gravity made a lot of sense to me right away.

Dennis: The application of mechanics in what you do probably gave you some good insight for the bodywork.

Joseph: That is correct.

Dennis: With so many different kinds of bodywork available now, for what reasons would someone choose Hellerwork instead of other modalities?

Joseph: That's a good question. I believe that there's a great variety of bodywork therapies because different people respond to different things. I don't think that Hellerwork is the thing for everybody. Some people are more responsive to movement work. Some people like energetic work, and so on. That's why there is a variety of modalities.

What I believe Hellerwork has to offer is a conscious approach to changing your body. To me that's very appealing. I have experienced other bodywork, such as the Feldenkries® Method. I couldn't tell at the end of the session that I was different. I didn't have the sense of how I had gotten there. A day or two later I didn't feel like I could reproduce it anymore. That's just my own opinion.

Dennis: It's similar to the different spiritual paths. It's all Spirit, and you are drawn to different teachers based on your personality and so forth.

Joseph: Exactly. I welcome a great variety of bodywork, and I think that there are going to be more because we live in a time of increasing stress. Basically, we are talking about the need for more and more stress reduction.

Dennis: What direction do you see bodywork therapies developing in the future?

Joseph: This is in an area where low-tech may be preferable to high-tech, in the sense that medicine is developing into a very high-tech occupation, and development of tools for looking into the body in various different ways which are very impressive.

Dennis: They have their place.

Joseph: Yes, very much so. But as far as I am concerned, nothing takes the place of human touch. I think that the connection that happens between the practitioner and the client is one of the most important aspects of this work, and facilitates the healing process in many different ways. I think that bodywork is going to become more popular as we go along. Both from the point of view of the greater need for stress reduction, and because I think we are waking up to the fact that it is very cost effective.

Dennis: For preventative health maintenance?

Joseph: For preventative health maintenance, and even for taking care of some problems. The average back pain case in the medical world costs thousands of dollars in treatments. The Hellerwork series is usually effective in getting people out of back pain on the order of hundreds of dollars.

Dennis: Bodywork, meditation and exercise...these traditional things are really the antidote to the stress of modern day living.

Joseph: Yes I think so.

Dennis: I am now 46, and got I rolfed probably when I was 21. How often do people need to do the Hellerwork process?

Joseph: I would say you don't need to do that very often. But I would like you to think of it is an ongoing process in the sense that we live in times of stress. Even if you got rid of the old stress, you accumulate new stress in your body. You mentioned preventative maintenance before. To me that is the most intelligent way to use this kind of work. When it comes to cars, we have become wise enough to realize that preventative maintenance works better than waiting for the breakdown. With our bodies we are not there yet, we keep waiting for the breakdown.

My clients tend to go through the series with me once and then they have follow up sessions once in a while. The time period depends largely on them.

Dennis: A follow up session, would that be like a shorter series or one session?

Joseph: One or two sessions. Sometimes they come with a specific problem, that shoulder is aching, and sometimes they come for preventative maintenance.

Dennis: More of a "tune up" rather than a total realignment.

Joseph: Exactly.

Dennis: What would you say is the ultimate goal of Hellerwork?

Joseph: The ultimate goal of the work is self evident. I would say it is to *live better*, which to me means to tolerate less stress. One of the worst things people can do is to "cope" with stress. As far as I am concerned, that is not the intelligent way to deal with stress. The intelligent way is to get out of it, not put up with it!

Dennis: To avoid taking on more, and get rid of the stress you've got.

Joseph: Right! What happens with people after they go through the Hellerwork series, they become more sensitive. They say, "Gee, I want this!" because they can feel it as the stress stops accumulating. It's a wonderful thing.