

Integrating Fluid Movement into a Structural Integration Series

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Fluid movement is a hallmark of an integrated body. As practitioners liberate fascial restrictions, we create balanced motion through the joints. As joint after joint is released, fluidity naturally emerges. However, even with free joints some clients need a little more education to unlearn their habituated rigid patterns. I was one of those clients. This article summarizes my trials, errors, explorations, and successes as I learned to teach the fluid movement of undulation in conjunction with structural integration.

Stiff Like Me

Undulation, a fluid movement through the spine, is a lesson commonly taught in the sixth session of the Hellerwork series. (See Figure 1 for an illustration from the Hellerwork Client Handbook.) When my practitioner taught it to me after the back-work in the back-of-the-core session, I didn't get it. I was too impatient to work through the rickety, jerky sensations I felt, so I neglected this lesson in favor of the more static sitting and standing exercises, which were easier and provided the relief I sought. By finding my Line I could reduce my neck pain and avert headaches. Finding my center physically also gave me a mental refuge, a place of calm in my hectic world.



Figure 1

A few years later when I decided to become a practitioner, undulation became a daily homework assignment in my training as we studied session six. It started with undulating through the spine as far as the movement would easily go and noticing where the movement was easy and where it was stiff. Among the instructions was: "Allow your back to lead you and follow it wherever it wants to go." On the fifth day of the homework, I had a profound revelation. I realized that the purpose wasn't to move gracefully; the power of this lesson was to be able to sense places inside the body and move them so they weren't stuck anymore. This was even more empowering for me, since I could use the movements to give myself release just where I needed it, even places too deep for my practitioner's elbow or outside my practitioner's awareness. Then as a practitioner myself, I wished for my clients to have this empowering tool, so I made undulation my specialty.

A Developing Specialty

Soon colleagues and clients were referring people with back pain to me for undulation exercises in addition to and sometimes instead of structural integration. I felt a need to honor the prescription and taught undulation on its own. Rather than follow the series, we'd do bodywork that helped clients find their stuck places and learn to move them. I also taught a weekly undulation class at the local yoga studio. This attracted a group of therapeutic students who enjoyed the slow, easy movements. It didn't take long, however, to learn that stability was a prerequisite for the flexibility of undulation. The clients who came to my office with back pain

initially liked undulation and the focused bodywork, but it didn't hold, it didn't have the "aha" effect of the structured recipe. And in the weekly undulation class I taught, I found that students, especially those with sacroiliac joint issues, could easily become unstable if undulation were not combined with grounding.

This wasn't the first time in my career that I had diverted from using the series. And, as I had before, I returned to its wisdom. Still I was anxious to introduce my specialty to clients before the sixth session and experimented with how to do it.

Love-Hate Relationship

When I taught undulation in a client's first session, the reaction usually fell into one of two categories: clients loved it or hated it. Most often, clients froze into an autonomic state of "there's nothing you can do to make me do *that*." A few clients had the opposite response; they started oscillating with the slightest suggestion. But I noticed that their movement usually unknowingly reinforced the pain pattern they sought to resolve. For an example, one client had chronic pain in the area of her right lower ribs, and continuously side-shifted right into that spot.

I originally thought the fault was with my instructions. If I just explained it better, surely clients would get it. It took me a while to realize that clients just weren't ready. Although I didn't know then exactly what the preparatory skills or knowledge were, I know there were steps that would lead to fluid movement. One prerequisite was awareness of the fluid motion of the breath. I know this from my SI training and as a yoga teacher. So regardless of the purpose or prescription of a client's visit, I almost always start with Session One with some intention about improving awareness of or access to breath.

In Emilie Conrad's Continuum work, students can play with breath and transform different breath intentions into profound movements. Most of my clients not only didn't consider that possible for themselves, they thought it was plain old strange. I couldn't convince clients to attend Emilie's workshops and they viewed my enthusiastic Continuum movements with raised eyebrows and politely concealed smirks. They were not going to be able to follow the nuanced path of breath as the only stepping stone to fluid movement, so I looked for different alternatives within and without the framework of the series.

Fluid Movement Prerequisites

The second session, surprisingly, was a good place to introduce undulation. While most of the session is spent balancing the arches, creating ankle hinges, and producing a greater sense of grounding, the back work organically developed into a fluid movement test. Of the handful of back work techniques I use, the most common in the second session is a roll down and roll up. The client sits on a bench, well supported by both feet and sit bones. As he drops his chin to his chest and rolls down into a forward bend vertebra by vertebra, my elbows or knuckles engage the layer of fascia between the longissimis and spinalis with caudal and medial pressure. It is a dance. I try to keep step with my client with my pressure at the vertebra that is moving. Meanwhile my pressure creates awareness—a guide to proprioception—of the segmentation that is available in the spine.

As the client rolls forward, his body weight drops squarely into his feet—grounding that is so obvious even the most body unconscious client (like I was) gets it. "Press down evenly into your feet and reverse the order to roll back up." As he unrolls his spine, I give light pressure at each spinous process for proprioceptive and alignment feedback. One day, just as my client articulated up to seated alignment, I lightly pressed alternately on the left and right sides of his spine to create a passive undulation. The movement flowed through his spine and he brightened. He left the session with a profound sense of grounding and a connection to some level of fluidity in his spine. I had a new technique that has become a banner in my tool belt.

I also had insight into the prerequisites for fluid movement. Connection to the ground was vital. I didn't know if it was a sense of security or the motive power from Earth's energy, but being grounded had to precede fluid movement. Alignment was another requirement. It was only at the end of the roll up when the spine had connection to its Line that there was enough organization to undulate *around*. As a matter of fact, I've come to conclude that large undulating movements in a disorganized body can create injury. Self-protection might be one of the reasons that clients don't move fluidly. Finally, proprioception and fluid movement are linked. When we teach one, we teach the other.

I learned this from Robert Schleip's article, "Scoliosis and Proprioception." In a fascinating review of the research about the causes of scoliosis, he draws the conclusion that scoliosis may partly be due to incorrect proprioception and can be improved by exercises that "facilitate a refinement in proprioception" such as "active micromovements" and "small undulations to even a single rib or vertebra at a time," in addition to other interventions. Before clients could articulate at a vertebral level, they needed to have awareness of each segment. Before they could be aware of the segments, they had to rediscover parts of their bodies that were outside their proprioception. The roll down and up was an important tool in helping clients find their spines.

Overcoming Barriers

As a pre- and post-test in the third session, I commonly have clients stand and side-bend to the right and left to evaluate the different range of motion and sensations between the sides. If I want to make the work easier for me (and why not?), I get them to start loosening things up with movement. "Now alternate between right and left. As you gently sway, notice what places move easily and which are stiff. How can you bring movement to the stiff places?" With less than one minute of movement before we start the table work, the client is inside his body's sliding fascial layers, and he has an excellent frame of reference for the changes he feels at the end of the session. His experience is always a progression from more jerky to more smooth, and his internal experience is more valuable than any instruction I give him.

As a matter of fact, I began to realize that the words I used often inhibited fluid movement. Asking people to move and notice was part of my session six homework. It was different than using images such as "willow in the wind" or adjectives that typically accompany directions for fluid movement such as "wave-like" and "flowing" and especially "smooth." That language creates a picture in the mind that the body tries to duplicate. But the truth is that undulation doesn't feel smooth or wave-like in the beginning. It feels chunky and jerky as the body works through its internal restrictions. I even deleted the word "fluid" from my definition of undulation, changing it to: A movement through multiple joints (especially vertebral joints) that includes waves, bends, and curves. I tried to find more ways to let the client simply experience movement through one joint to the next.

Nuances

Fluid movement may not be smooth; it may be rough like a waterfall that over time wears away jagged edges of rocks and turns them into sleek stones. While flow from joint to joint may include jerkiness, it is not forced. Fluid movement is organic and arises from the inherent capacity of the body, rather than a mental construct dictated by the brain. It requires being able to listen to the body, a willingness to trust the body's wisdom, and a perception of nuanced sensations. These are skills most of us learned to forget long ago.

The inferior and anterior core sessions (fourth and fifth in the Hellerwork series, respectively) are ideal for reestablishing this lost internal knowledge. As we are freeing the pelvis, especially in the fourth session, I prompt my clients to make their movements smaller and slower. "Tilt your pelvis. Yes. Now half that movement. Half again. Half again. Great. Can you go slower?" Smaller and slower movements access more core tissues and awareness and, in my opinion, establish better internal proprioception.

In addition to the work of freeing the pelvis in the fourth session, attention to the pelvic floor and its role with the breath is another excellent opportunity to find an internal wave. I direct my clients to coordinate the movements of their pelvic and thoracic diaphragms by starting each exhale with a slight contraction of the pelvic floor and letting each inhale reach all the way down into the pelvis to soften and expand the pelvic floor. We revisit the wave of breath in the ribcage and expand this flow through the entire torso and perhaps even down into the legs. The nuance of breath flow throughout the body is an internal undulation that surprises and delights many clients. Most wonder if they are imagining it, and I assure them that subtle sensations often feel like imaginations.

Firm and Flexible Foundation

Despite my eagerness to teach undulation, I eventually learned that Joseph Heller had a very good reason for including it in the sixth session. Fluid movement in the spine was a result of a grounded, balanced, and floating sacrum. Remember my clients who had a love or hate reaction to undulation? Those who abhorred fluid movement typically had locked sacra, either due to being generally up-tight or as guarding to protecting a sacrum with a dysfunctional rotation. (I had both.) Clients who undulated all loosey-goosey typically had a hypermobile sacrum, but were lacking adequate stability through grounding and balance. When I mistakenly tried to create mobility on top of a stiff, tilted, or wobbly foundation, my clients didn't experience lasting change.

In Seattle, we have the Rainier Tower (see Figures 2 and 3), a building that was designed to create open space and withstand earthquakes. The narrow base instigated nicknames of "the pencil building" and "the wine glass building." The 29-story building stands on an 11-story pedestal, which is connected to an underground counterbalance. This building sways more in the wind and in earthquakes than others its size. Its movement gives it strength to withstand these forces.



Figures 2 and 3

I like to think of the Rainier Tower's pedestal as a sacrum. In average buildings the pedestal is mired in steel girders and concrete. In average bodies the sacrum is mired in restrictive connective tissue. When the sacrum is given space, when it is cleared from the concrete, when the left side of the wine stem is symmetrical with the right side of the wine stem, then we have a "floating sacrum" and the upper body can move freely without risking damage. Although I could set the stage for fluid movement in earlier sessions, and it was helpful to do so, expecting clients to undulate before they had the necessary foundation was not productive.

I took a workshop on the integration sessions from Liz Stewart last year. As she helped us develop our seeing skills, she showed us a set of diagrams that symbolize the goals of each session and has helped her in her practice. Unfortunately, Liz didn't remember the source of the diagrams, but the one for session 10 caught

my eye since it used a wavy line. I adapted and slightly modified this figure to create a model of fluid movement that I use in my practice. (See Figure 4) It reminds me of an undulating Rainier Tower with a head, a building flexible enough to sway in the breeze and withstand life's heaviest challenges. This symbol of fluid movement is an important goal of the series for me, whether that is a contralateral movements while walking, subtle movement from tail to head when sitting down, or a delicious stretch that gives each joint loving attention.

Emerging Undulations

John Smith in his article from the 2006 Yearbook, "The Oscillatory Properties of the Structural Body," keenly observes that ". . . undulations of different kinds tend to emerge spontaneously at different stages of the Rolfing process" and "It should be emphasized that this integrating movement work is not to impose a different kind of gait pattern on the client, but rather to highlight for the client a pattern that is already emerging."

In the core and integration sessions, movement from the feet, through the pelvis, up the spine, and involving the head (and in the opposite direction as well) is emerging. We cannot predict how it will occur for each client; it is as exciting a discovery for us as it for them when it materializes. However, I think it is important for practitioners to explain, encourage, and facilitate this movement using whatever tools are most relevant to "help our clients to listen more carefully to the inherent rhythmicity of their structure and to discover the minimum input from the muscular system necessary to maintain the movement." (Smith 2006)

And what do we do for the clients for whom fluid movement doesn't spontaneously emerge? We need to get creative, use whatever movement background we bring to our practices and perhaps learn something new, undulate into and out of the knowing, try this and that, and model flexibility to our clients. Whatever it takes. The series isn't complete, in my opinion, until a client has this flow.



Figure 4

Clients often ask me: What makes the change from structural integration last? How can a limited number of sessions be enough? I explain that the more a body is aligned and balanced, the more it will move in ways that support and reinforce balance. As SI practitioners, we teach our clients how to walk, sit, stand, and move in ways that the body is doing the Work on itself. Undulation, a wave pattern moving through the body, is the result of alignment and balance. This is the way that integrated bodies move and it is the wave that creates the internal releases that endure. For me, the Line is a place of calm, the wave is the path to let go.

Bio

Anita studied Hellerwork Structural Integration at the Institute of Structural Medicine with Donna Bajelis as her primary teacher. She graduated 10 years ago and practices in the Cascade foothills in Issaquah, WA, USA. She is the author of *Relieve Stiffness and Feel Young Again with Undulation*. Her website is www.undulationexercise.com and she can be contacted at anita@anitahellerworker.com.