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Rolfing's Renaissance

After an altercation with a snow groomer in January 2005 left me with chronic pain in my lower and middle back, left shoulder, and neck, I couldn't find many answers. X-rays and an MRI revealed nothing. Two shoulder surgeons were baffled. My shoulder was declared 'weak'. I was told to do yoga and physio to strengthen it. I did. The pain became excruciating. In addition to my back and neck pain, the damage to my body caused a work-related issue. I am a runway model and, after the accident, the upper half of my body barely moved when walking - not good news for a runway model!

To try and sort myself out, I started on what ended up as a two year course of

chiropractic treatment. This helped. My back and neck were adjusted once a week and I would feel better. But a week later the pain was back and I'd need to go to the chiro again. I also tried combining this with a weekly massage. The masseuse was great but the muscular pain in my shoulder was sometimes acute. In the end I felt the top layers of the knots in my back were being loosened but not the deeper ones. Finally, in the spring of 2010, I gave up. I did not want to contemplate surgery, but that seemed the only option.

That is until a friend mentioned that she enrolled in a course of Rolfing®. I had never heard of Rolfing, but discovered it was a popular practice in the 1970s when Dr. Ida Rolf founded the The Rolf Institute® of Structural Integration. Rolfing is currently undergoing a renaissance, particularly for people who have tried everything for chronic pain and are still finding they have a persistent problem.

To better understand Rolfing, let's first look at the problems it addresses. "Our bodies are made for dynamic movement," explains my practitioner, Daphne Berwind-Dart of Cambridge Rolfing, "which is why sitting at a desk all day making small, repetitive motions can get us into trouble." Rolfers™ work

primarily on fascia, a malleable connective tissue. The fascia that allows our bodies to change alignment over time for better or worse according to the demands we put on them. Fascia can lock us into patterns of compensation such as tight pecs from too much computer use but it can also free us from those patterns. "Rolfers capitalize on this plasticity, manipulating the regions of fascia that have become short and distorted in order to realign joints and restore the proper length and elasticity of the tissues," states Daphne. "The ultimate goal of Rolfing is to restore order, balance and fluidity." The changes that Rolfing can bring about are also lasting - the average person need only check back in for tune-ups every couple of years.

Beginning my Rolfing program in September of 2010, I met with Daphne and, after discussing my needs with her, we settled on a ten-session course of treatment. The first of the sessions was all about my breath capacity. Rolfers believe that the body is not very open to healing until breathing is freed. Daphne also looked at my pelvis and began to "neutralize" it (Rolfers speak for reducing any tilts, shifts or torques that are contributing to misalignment). The second session assessed how well my feet and legs were supporting my spine, neck and head, and in the third session she worked to establish my side or "lateral line."

The fourth session we worked on my inner legs and thighs and, in the fifth, she balanced the tension in the soft tissues around my organs and core muscles. In the sixth course Daphne addressed my back's deep structural problems, working on the backs of my legs, my pelvis and, of course, my back.

The seventh session involved some intense work on the cranium. The joints in the cranium are the least mobile joints but Rolfers believe they should be able to 'breathe' to let the cerebrospinal fluid flow freely. As Daphne warned me this was a very thorough session which included work in my mouth and nose. "This is the part where clients usually think Rolfing is pretty out there!" she mused. In the eighth session we worked on my pelvis some more and in the ninth again on my shoulders.

The tenth session was the most general. Daphne used the final sessions to reinforce the balance and proper alignment that we

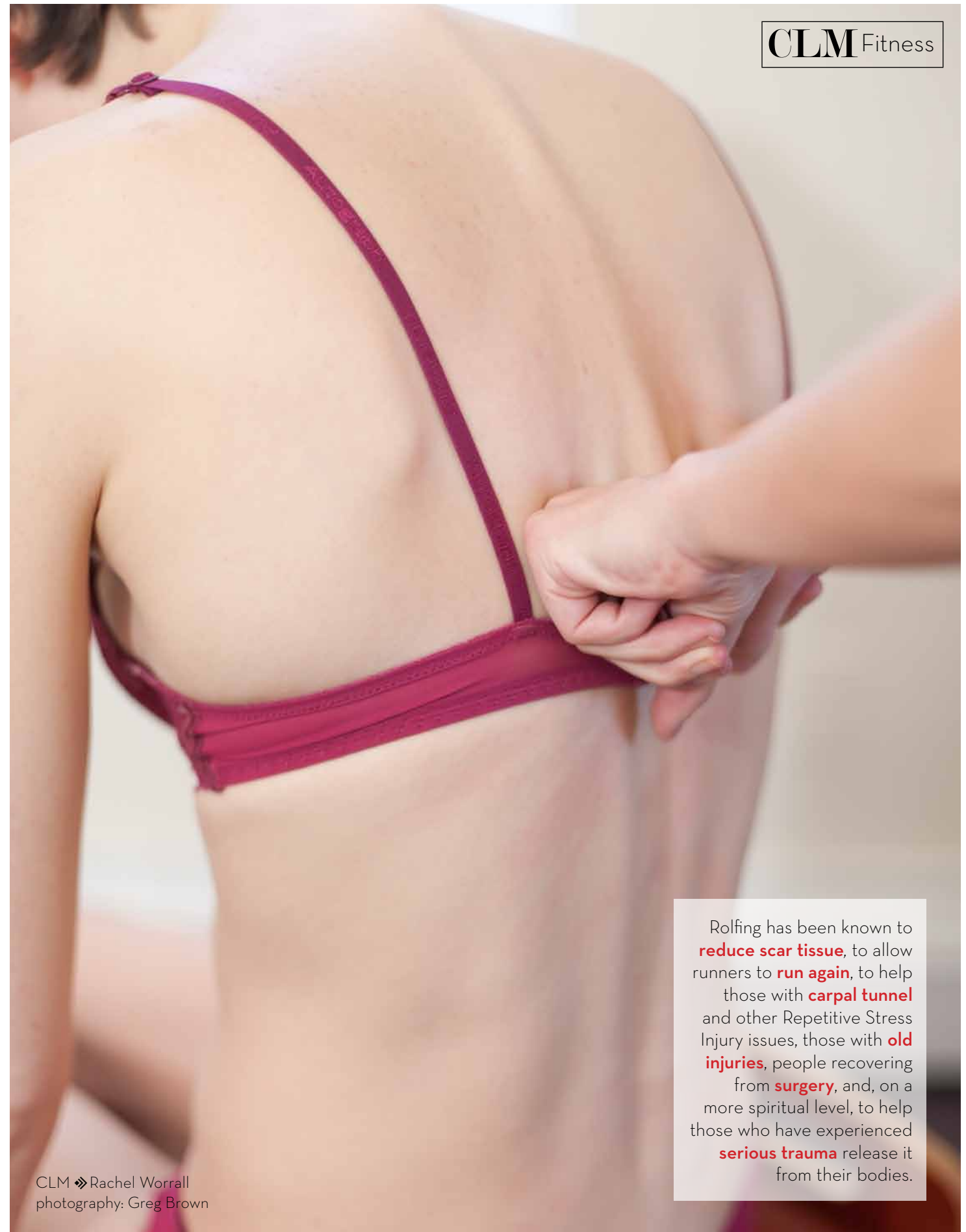
had worked to create in the earlier sessions and to set me up for continued integration. It's important to stress that in each session, as when working on the individual parts, Daphne was looking at increasing adaptability and support throughout my whole body. To this end, each session began and ended with Daphne watching me walk.

People seek out Rolfing for many different reasons. Rolfing has been known to reduce scar tissue, to allow runners to run again, to help those with carpal tunnel and other Repetitive Stress Injury issues, those with old injuries, people recovering from surgery, and, on a more spiritual level, to help those who have experienced serious trauma release it from their bodies. With Daphne, clients follow an individually tailored plan according to their issues.

As for me, I have not had pain in my shoulder, neck, middle or lower back since half way through my Rolfing treatment. Daphne helped me regain the movement I had lost throughout my shoulders and spine. I'm walking more runway now than I ever have, and, apart from those crazy heels, doing it pain-free.

Despite its benefits, Rolfing does come with a stigma of being a painful therapy. I, however, never experienced much pain at all, certainly less pain than in a massage. In the past Rolfing was an aggressive practice. "In the '60s it was a different climate: Primal Scream therapy was popular!" laughs Daphne. "Dr. Rolf was rather intense and she encouraged her students to work pretty aggressively. The whole field has evolved though since then. Practitioners today are more precise and more sensitive to the experience of the client. It's more of a shared experience - we do the work together as opposed to I do it to my clients." That said, Rolfing can be intense. Introducing your body to a new therapy is never easy. Our minds and bodies are wired to hold onto what we know. But most people find any intensity is temporary and the results they get are worth any temporary discomfort.

Rolfing's emphasis on fascia and on the body's relationship to gravity makes it quite different from chiropractic, physio and massage. It was this difference that made the difference for me. After my shoulder healed, after my back muscles strengthened, it was the fascia that needed the work. It compacted after the accident, causing the continuing pain and stiffness in my back. It was the freeing of these deep fascial restrictions that I needed to get my back... back. A pain free existence? I'll dance to that!



CLM ♦ Rachel Worrall
photography: Greg Brown

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