

The Idea

Over the past year or so I have been studying in more detail the work of Judith Aston and Steve Hurley and have come to some interesting realizations.

After experiencing the magic hands of Mr Steve Hurley who some of you will remember from the Hellerwork conference in Vancouver last year, I have learnt more about the untapped energy potential that exists in our structure when Gravity and Ground Reaction Force are able to make their way through aligned body segments. Judith Aston defines ground reaction force (GRF) as the force equal in magnitude and opposite in direction to the force that the body applies to the supporting surface through its weight bearing segments. It can be harnessed in movement to make life easier and more enjoyable. What I would like to share in this short article is a beginning theory about how it can be used to advantage in how we apply the bodywork techniques of Hellerwork.

The Incredible Lightness of Being

Judith Aston talks extensively about the dimensional integrity of the body (and the lack thereof) and Steve Hurley, over the 3 days he taught at the 2001 Hellerwork Conference, spoke at length about how our natural “righting reflexes” were all we needed to experience grace, alignment and fluid movement. The few movement lessons I had the privilege of receiving from Steve made me realize how much I was getting in the road of myself (doing too much), and when I was teaching I could see it in how students (copying the teacher - yikes!) approached the “doing” part of the bodywork in much the same way. I got to thinking about the work of both these movement artisans and found that applying the kind of “listening” that Steve asks us to do when he says to us “now just let go there, yes right there and fall into your next step” ! The lightness that comes from using this idea of letting go and using GRF in movement could easily and obviously be applied to our work as Hellerwork Practitioners. I’m not sure where I heard this quote, maybe it was Steve Hurley, anyway it encapsulates the lesson I learnt and I think its fantastic – “Movement is just a series of letting go” and my experience is that if we can let go in our own bodies when we do our work then the client has an opportunity to “feel” themselves without the “clutter” of our body tension coming down our arms and pushing them around.

Examples & Concepts

Each of our body segments has its own unique geometric center that is attained by virtue of its mass. How each of these segments is organised over the top of the next one will determine the dimensional integrity of each segment. So it’s a self organising self perpetuating arrangement. When we talk about the dimensional integrity we are talking about its depth, width and length. Using this information cast your minds back if you will to the last time you were working on a client that had a particularly stuck piece of fascia – lets say around the trapezius. You were determined to help it soften up and you were getting right into it. The client was saying, “yes yes its right there, oooh that feels great, go harder, yeah get rid of those gristley bits”. Having taken up the challenge you were starting to strain a bit and your shoulders were getting a bit tense, even your face was feeling the strain – (what’s that you say..... not you..... someone else that you know, okay right, of course you know not to strain like that). Anyway, this unknown practitioner, to get a better purchase, gets into a martial arts like stance, legs spread wide apart and setting themselves up to really take the strain, they even drop down a few inches to get closer to the ground. Lets freeze frame this moment and take a look at this in detail. The practitioner’s torso is directly in the middle of the base of support (in between each foot and set up like a triangle). Yes they are certainly balanced if you were going to do a karate move, but not so good for the kind of easy bodywork that I’m suggesting we try. If one was to do bodywork from this position, once you started to push in to the clients tissue, because of the stance, you would be pushing back and down into yourself, and then having to tense through your body to stabilize and in this case particularly in your own trapezius and diaphragm . Once you start tensing/squeezing in an effort to increase your pressure, you start to loose dimensional integrity in the whole body. I find that strongly built practitioners usually can get away with

this for a while, but later on will complain of upper body strain and overuse syndrome 5 or so years into their practice.

Mutual Empowerment

There is great strength in the triangle, however where we perceive the triangle to exist is the key. The triangular stance that exists in our friend in the previous paragraph is great if its just them and no one else involved. The wider your base of support the more stable you feel. What I am suggesting is that the working triangle for bodywork is in a different place than that. When we are performing bodywork you and the client fall or weightshift toward the point of work. This is a dynamic and radical departure from a somewhat passive client who does the odd piece of movement to help out with the release and you do most of the work.

What I am suggesting is that during the bodywork the client is as actively involved with maintaining their dimensional integrity in their structure when they are receiving bodywork as you the practitioner are when you are doing bodywork with your client. Through the educational process they can feel if you are squeezing or squashing them - they let you know because they are loosing their dimensional integrity and consequently their alignment and stability if you are in any way straining as you do the bodywork. All these concepts still pertain even if they are lying on the table, however for best results your client will usually have one or both legs bent when lying on their back. Ideally any backwork is done from the sitting position although this is not a hard and fast rule.

The key to all of this is the ability to notice when parts of either you or the client are under strain, or if either of you are loosing your 3 dimensional expression during bodywork. If you make sure that you are using the power of ground reaction force through your own body as a means of moving and releasing fascia, and that ground reaction force and gravity are coursing through the geometric centers of each segment of your structure, your body is always lengthening as you apply pressure to the tissue. It is experienced by both you and your client as a sinking in and being moved along by the clients (and the practitioners) micro movement, as opposed to a more “doing” kind of technique that finds the practitioner using their muscle power instead of gravity power with the client just lying there and “taking it”. This makes sessions very co-creative and the general feel is likened to a cross between the kind of listening one does in cranial therapy that determines the speed and depth of the strokes used, and Tai Chi. When both the client and the practitioner are “listening” in this way it is a mutually empowering experience. The spiritual practice that I take from this along with my previous comments about getting out of the way and letting the client locate their own release is paralleled by the Hakomi principle of non-violence. If we can just listen to what needs to happen next the body reveals its own wisdom, for both the client and practitioner to share.

I have developed a short class that demonstrates these principles easily using the classic Hellerwork neck and shoulder release. I also heartily recommend the movement classes of Steve Hurley who practices in Seattle USA, and Aston Patterning and all that Judith Aston offers in her trainings, they are a fantastic asset for any Hellerwork Practitioner or Bodyworker to have.