

# Taking an Honest Look at Our History

A Conversation between Marekah Stewart and Tristan Koepke

By Tristan Koepke, Certified Rolfer®, and Marekah Stewart, Certified Advanced Rolfer



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**ABSTRACT** *The following is a transcript of a conversation between Marekah Stewart, Advanced Rolfer and member of Dr. Ida Rolf Institute's® (DIRI) Committee for Diversity and Anti-Racism (DIRI D/A), and Tristan Koepke, Rolfer and Chair of DIRI D/A, from August 8th, 2021. Together, they reflect on the theme of integration, weaving their personal histories, the history of Rolting® Structural Integration (SI), and ongoing work regarding diversity, equity, and anti-racism within SI and broader culture.*

**Tristan Koepke:** Thanks so much for coming together. First, I'm so grateful to learn from and with you, and to serve on the Dr. Ida Rolf Institute's® (DIRI) Committee for Diversity and Anti-Racism (DIRI D/A) with you. There are so many things to discuss today, but I thought we could start simply by considering integration, and then discuss integration in relation to our histories as well as work within the Rolting® community.

**Marekah Stewart:** Tristan, thank you as well, for the opportunity to learn from you and to serve on DIRI D/A with you. This is my first experience serving on a committee of this nature and your leadership, sensitivity, intelligence, and patience have been a tremendous help to me. I also appreciate and admire the

personal work you have done in becoming an ally – thank you.

I'd love to hear from you in regard to integration. What comes to mind?

**TK:** There are at least two distinct definitions that come to mind. In regard to Rolting Structural Integration (SI), I think of integration as bringing together parts in coordination and harmonious relationship, with respect to separation and difference within the tissues. We invoke movement that is resilient, informed by history and even trauma, but is directed toward resiliency, potential, and possibility. There's a focus on forward motion. Integration regarding Rolting SI is progressive. And perhaps because of my dance background, integration is focused on movement.

And then there is social or racial integration: bringing people with different embodied racial histories together in pursuit of equal access of education and opportunity.

I wonder what we can learn when we apply Rolfing knowledge to a broader cultural sphere. One of the most beautiful things to me about Rolfing SI is that we can work hands-on in very particular ways, but the knowledge we gain through that approach is so applicable beyond physical work on the table. For example, I'm often thinking about parallels between our Rolfing work with clients in the context of the Ten Series alongside larger structures that shift our culture and context.

Since the Rolfing community is currently looking at creating more inclusivity within the field, what can integration teach us about diversifying our communities and training programs? Is cultural integration a good goal in today's societal context?

What comes to mind when you think of integration?

**MS:** I think you have given a well-thought-out definition of integration in both the areas of Rolfing SI and racial integration. To what you have said, I would also add there is history, or memory (body memory/ancestral memory) within these various parts. Integration is achieved by creating space for balance, which in turn facilitates movement.

I think cultural integration is a wonderful goal, but it's difficult to attain. Cultural integration is an equal blending of cultures. It means a blending, without losing the characteristics of what makes each unique. This is what true integration looks like, and what one would hope to accomplish both in Rolfing SI, and in society.

I can speak directly from my perspective as a Black woman, and for me, this conversation ties directly into the concept of intersectionality. The specific parts of a person-environment, culture, and experiences intersect within the whole person; the specific parts of a community-inclusion/exclusion intersect within the whole community. We can focus on how systems either restrict or free the whole. Addressing the health of the whole system means looking at all the parts that are dysfunctional and bringing them to a place of function.

**TK:** For some, it may be difficult to draw parallels between Rolfing work and these large societal issues. It can seem too lofty. But metaphors have always helped me,

and I see the first seven sessions within a Ten Series as, sort of, like identity politics. Understanding and defining differences, and power dynamics within the body as a means to address cohesion and equity.

**MS:** I like your metaphor of seeing the first seven sessions as understanding, defining differences and power dynamics, as a way to address cohesion and equity. I also think those first seven sessions, and especially sessions four to seven, are the most difficult layers to address because of the depth we (client and practitioner) hope to access in freeing the underpinnings. The degree of freedom accessed on the deeper layers, will impact the level of integration in sessions eight, nine, and ten. And we must remember society works the same way. If we don't address the deeply-rooted structural racism and exclusion in our society, cohesion and equity will not happen.

**TK:** Like we are giving our community one big Ten Series! Equity work is differentiation in order to gain clarity, function, and harmony. I'm not saying doing a Ten Series is doing equity work, simply that there is systems-thinking that can be applied across these inquiries. Along this line, has Rolfing work helped you prepare for our work with diversity and anti-racism?

**MS:** I don't know that Rolfing SI has directly helped prepare me, in the ways it might have helped others. I think life as a Black woman, and more specifically the first Black female Rolfer for so many years, helped prepare me in terms of working with people from diverse backgrounds. I grew up in a predominantly White community. Life taught me how to function within the majority community, and to recognize microaggressions because I was experiencing them directly. Being a Rolfer however, helped me develop more sensitivity, empathy, and acceptance, as well as opportunities to recognize my own biases.

The work with the DIRI D/A, as well as the keynote conversation we collaborated on for the 2021 IASI Symposium, rekindled memories of the many times throughout my life I have had to code switch, or swallow microaggressions, as a way to be accepted by the majority community. I now feel more empowered as a Black woman to stir up some "good trouble," as John Lewis said.

**TK:** Your history and your intersecting identity has profoundly affected how you approach all things in your life.

**MS:** That's very true. My intersecting identity has shaped who I am, and how I live my life. Despite the inequalities of being a Person of Color, and parts of society's fear of inclusion, my hope and expectations remain solid that positive change is inevitable.

**TK:** I always admire your honesty, openness, and pragmatic optimism in our work together. Our histories are very different. I'm a White person raised in Central Wisconsin on stolen Indigenous land. I have Native American family members, but we all lived in an almost exclusively White community. I'm still in a learning process, probably a lifelong process, of understanding my blind spots regarding race and privilege that surrounds me. I also grew up a queer person in a sports-dominated town experiencing a lot of gender-based bullying, so my lens to seeing and understanding difference often relies on a nuanced understanding of gender and sexuality.

**MS:** Our backgrounds are both similar and different. You have Indigenous family members. We know how our Native people have been treated since the beginning of this country. Also being gay can present as "other," and invite mistreatment.

My ancestors came to this country as enslaved people from Africa. To this day, we're still living with the underpinnings of slavery. Whether gay or Black, we can work together to create change. We all have blind spots, whether it's about race, gender, sexual identity, appearance, intellect, and more. In a willingness to dialogue and interact with others different from us, we learn to uncover these blind spots.

**TK:** Speaking of working together to create the change, I want to discuss more the work we're doing with the DIRI D/A. After so many years working as a Rolfer, you've seen our community shift, evolve, and even proliferate. Why now? Why are these conversations finally entering the Rolfing community?

**MS:** Well, Rolfing SI was created by a White German-American woman. At that time, intentionally or not, the focus was on White people. I think the DIRI D/A is a reflection of current society. It's hard to turn one's head when you see the atrocities within our society regarding the BIPOC [Black, Indigenous, People of Color] communities. People/organizations either take notice or ignore what's in front of them. I think DIRI has taken notice.

**TK:** Yes, our community as a whole has begun to take notice, and take a more

honest look at our histories. I've even been hearing the Human Potential Movement, which has a history deeply intertwined with ours, being talked about lately as the *White* Human Potential Movement. Same could be said about Rolfling SI, if at least by chance. Primarily White people were in the room, working on the betterment of other White people. Even if the goal was a more universal scope, without the inclusion of cultural differences, there were limits to how applicable the theories that developed could be.

**MS:** Dr. Rolf had a Eurocentric model of health and wellness in mind. A lack of racial diversity was simply not of concern in those early days.

**TK:** It seems to me that it was never a malicious intent to exclude non-White people from the field per se, but more an outcome. Which doesn't excuse it, but does explain why our community is relatively homogenous.

**MS:** As I mentioned before, racial diversity just wasn't considered when Rolf developed the work. More people are waking up to the social and racial injustices that proliferate within our communities, and our work with DIRI is now a part of that. The ability to integrate the differences and create balance applies to Rolfling SI, and social equity.

**TK:** It's egregious that the murders of Black and Brown people, particularly the murder of George Floyd, were a catalyst for people and organizations to really open our eyes.

**MS:** The work of Black Lives Matter, and activists within the BIPOC community and some White communities created the momentum for change. When you see a Black man murdered before your very eyes, or learn of a Black woman murdered in her bed, it's hard not to react. Yes, these catastrophic things have to happen before our eyes are open. It's tragic, and yet it continues. Just as tragic is, once the news media leaves, people forget or don't want to remember the bad things that have happened, and continue to happen. So, life goes on as usual.

Now there is a call to create more inclusivity within our Rolfling community, and it has to start with our members. It means Rolflers going into their own communities, and communities of color, and finding more ways to introduce Rolfling SI – what the work is and its benefits. Also, supporting clients of color who are potential candidates, and who express an interest, in becoming Rolflers is important.

**TK:** It starts with individuals coming together. The parts working together as a whole. Differentiation and integration.

**MS:** That's right. What do you think gets in the way of that goal?

**TK:** To be honest, I often encounter a self-righteousness within our community. I'm not sure if Rolfling SI attracts a certain sort of person, or if the pursuit of "building a better human" itself encourages self-righteousness. It's of course not universal across our entire field, but I often find that some of our colleagues have a hard time adapting. If they've found a system, even a way of practicing the Ten Series, that has worked for them, it must work for everybody. But if adaptability is one of our primary goals with our clients, then I hope we can encourage ourselves to truly take it on too. To live adaptively in our intellectualism, our empathy, our politics.

**MS:** I think a Higher Source gave Rolf the gift of what we know as Rolfling SI. The way the Ten Series comes together is nothing short of miraculous. So many SI schools have come and gone, but DIRI now exists stronger than ever. That being said, I believe when we get in the way of letting the body/being guide us during a session, and think we know how it *should* be, it can become an ego trip on the part of the practitioner. Perhaps there is some unconscious fear on the part of the practitioner to let go of that preconceived idea of *should*. Or, maybe the *should* is a reflection of oneself. Magic happens when we let go, and follow the flow of energy between the practitioner and client.

**TK:** I can't help but mention, especially within the context of the United States, the

history of cultural integration is connected to the concept of assimilation. Integration has often demanded that People of Color and other racialized people are expected to assimilate into the dominant, or 'right', or White, way of being. I think as Rolflers, the pursuit of integration can sometimes slip into the pursuit of the 'right' way to be, and we are asking our clients to set aside parts of themselves that are culturally-specific, that give connection to their communities. What may appear like integration to us actually promotes what W. E. B. Dubois famously called double consciousness: seeing yourself as you, but also through the eyes of the oppressor (Myers 2020). Or more contemporarily, inadvertently asking our clients to 'code switch'.

**MS:** I, too, see similarities between cultural assimilation and the 'ideal' body being based on a Eurocentric model. Our society expects the minority to totally become absorbed into the majority as a way of being accepted. Trying to maintain one's uniqueness often results in code switching – learning to live in two worlds. Adjusting one's speech, appearance, behavior, and expressions that provide comfort to the majority in exchange for fair treatment are examples of code switching. So, these are awarenesses Rolflers might consider, both in terms of self-exploration, and in working with BIPOC clients.

**TK:** So when DIRI, or individual Rolflers, are looking to broaden their practices to include more difference and diversity, we have to broaden what the integration process can look like. We have to let go of any standards we have, any platonic anatomical references that don't embrace difference. We have to ask ourselves, continuously, "What am I accidentally in pursuit of? What embodiment cues are my standard, or what leading questions do I use commonly, or what expectations of change do I hold for my client to be looking a certain way? Am I asking the client to let go of a part of themselves simply because it doesn't fit my personal lens of health and wellness?"

**MS:** I think as we ask ourselves these questions, and at the same time stay

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connected to the client in terms of their expectations, some of the answers to those questions become clearer. We have to engage with our clients, and not just in the hands-on work. Just like we ‘see’ with our hands, we also have to ‘listen’ to the nonverbal messages that surface – feelings and emotions that have perhaps been held on those deeper levels. If we can hold a safe space for the client, and get *our* agenda out of the way, there won’t be an expectation of change looking a certain way. I believe we have to trust, to the best of our being, that good change is happening within the context of the work, no matter the ethnicity of the client.

For many years being the only Black female Rolfer, and possibly the only Black Rolfer at some point over the course of those years, I felt very isolated. The work itself was my passion, but there wasn’t a community for me, and I didn’t feel any connection to the organization, partially because of the lack of diversity. If there was diversity, there wasn’t a way to find it. BIPOC people were not in the classroom as students, on the faculty, or part of the administration.

**TK:** Do you think that isolation affected how you were working?

**MS:** Well, it probably did. I’m not exactly sure what I missed out on, because I didn’t have a sense of belonging within the organization. I just placed my entire focus on doing the work. I followed the foundation and principles of the work, along with inspirational guidance. I also continued to receive, and trade, Roling sessions with practitioners who were more directly connected to the Roling community. This was also a way to continue to learn and see how others were working.

**TK:** And the community missed out on a chance to know and learn from you!

**MS:** My focus was just on the work, and I loved it. It’s interesting how something can become part of your identity, and I think Roling SI became a part of who I am. It was always something that I looked forward to doing every single workday. It brought me such satisfaction and joy. The satisfaction was in seeing someone walk out feeling better than when they walked in, as well as seeing the positive changes happening in their lives.

**TK:** Within our work with the DIRI D/A, what are some changes you are hoping to see, or special projects you are invested in?

**MS:** There was no support for people like me when I became a Rolfer, so I want to find out how BIPOC Rolfers can support each other, as well as be supported by our membership. Creating an affinity group might be one idea. Being able to share, and discuss situations that directly impact who we are as Rolfers of Color, and the recruitment of other People of Color, needs to be supported by our organization.

If our work is to integrate bodies through the hands-on work, we have to bring that same expertise into the community by being more visible. It means not only media marketing, but also members being willing to do demos, give talks, etc. and really engage people and organizations within underserved communities. In addition to what’s already in place within DIRI to help prospective students, I would also like to see the establishment of an endowed scholarship. This would be supported by the Roling community, and others who might be interested. It would provide ongoing financial support for deserving students.

**TK:** Yeah, there’s a lot of long-term growth that is starting to percolate. If we return to thinking of the Ten Series metaphorically, where do you think the community is? How far along are we?

**MS:** Metaphorically, I think the Roling community has begun taking baby steps. We are not truly walking yet. It’s great that we have begun to see the faces of a few People of Color in our marketing etc. but that doesn’t truly represent where we are as yet, within the organization.

As it relates to the Ten Series, I believe we’re at the superficial level – sessions one, two, and three. We have begun to open the envelope of the ‘body’, and we’re discovering what’s there. We’re exploring the areas of ‘stickiness’, with a focus on where release and change can begin. Real change takes time, and continues well after the ten sessions end. I foresee real change coming into our Roling community in terms of inclusivity within our student body, administration, membership, faculty, and Board.

**TK:** And how could we offer a new definition of integration?

**MS:** Gosh Tristan, I think we have been defining and redefining integration throughout this entire conversation. I don’t know what more I can add. I will say, it has been a joy, and a great privilege to have shared this time with you. Thank you for inviting me to join you in this discussion.

**TK:** Thank you so much. I’m already looking forward to our next conversation.

*Before becoming a Rolfer, Marekah Stewart was a nurse and had a dynamic career in many medical settings including serving with VISTA (Volunteers in Service of America). Stewart has been at the frontlines of health care for decades in service of facilitating positive change for racialized communities. A friend mentioned to her that Emmett Hutchins could help her with her chronic body discomfort and she had many sessions with Hutchins. As she began to feel less discomfort, she resonated with Roling SI’s model of treating the whole person. Eventually, Stewart completed her Roling certification in 1983. She completed her Advanced Training in 1986. Stewart has now retired from her Roling practice after thirty-seven years of clients, teaching throughout the world, and she is currently a part of DIRI’s Diversity and Anti-racism Committee among other inspiring projects.*

*Tristan Koepke is a dancer, educator, and Rolfer based in Minneapolis, Minnesota. He has been a Rolfer since 2016, and now serves as Chair of DIRI’s Committee for Diversity and Anti-Racism. He is currently the Associate Director of the Young Dancers Workshop at the Bates Dance Festival, is pursuing a Master’s in Fine Arts in Dance at the University of Maryland, College Park, and is a co-instigator of Liberation Somatics. He is also the Diversity and Inclusion Editor of this Journal.*

## References

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