Radio Praha
Český rozhlas

Rolfing "reorganises" rather than fixes body, says Swiss-based therapist Aleš Urbanczik

21-09-2015 15:28 | Ian Willoughby

Aleš Urbanczik is a practitioner and teacher of Rolfing, an alternative form of physiotherapy that also goes by the name Structural Integration. The one-time actor discovered the treatment in Switzerland, where he has lived for most of his life. But we spoke on one of Urbanczik's monthly visits to his hometown of Prague, where he has been running Rolfing courses for over two years.

Aleš Urbanczik, photo: archive of Aleš Urbanczik

"My family actually comes from a little town near Ostrava called Příbor, I think the hometown of Sigmund Freud. But I was born in Prague."

And your parents left in 1968?

"They actually left in 1963, to live East Germany, because my father was an expert in tuberculosis and he got a better position in East Germany, and we actually lived there until 1968.

"In 1968 as Czech citizens you were allowed to travel. So my family decided to spend the holidays in England for three weeks. My mother worked there. She was a pediatrician and she worked there for three weeks in a hospital, replacing another doctor, just to finance the whole thing.

"We were supposed to fly back to Prague on August 21, 1968. And of course we turned on the radio in the morning and my family decided within hours to stay in the United Kingdom."

My next question was going to be, Why did they move to Switzerland? It was because they were German speakers, I guess.

"They spoke German, but it was more because my mother got a job offer there. Then we moved to Basel."

I've often got the impression that Switzerland is a relatively hard country to get citizenship in, that they're not so welcoming to foreigners – but I guess if your parents were doctors, it must have been easier?

"Well, twenty-five percent of the population of Switzerland are not native Swiss at this moment in time. That's quite a high percentage – I think one of the highest in Europe.

"And Czech citizens in 1968, 1969 were I think very welcome all over Europe, really. Especially because the people that left and emigrated in 1968 were usually lawyers, dentists, medical professionals.

"It was not that we had Swiss citizenship from the beginning. You have to live in Switzerland for 10 years and you have to live in the same place to apply for the citizenship, which we then did and we got."

You yourself studied maths but eventually dropped out and became an actor?

Photo: archive of Aleš Urbanczik

"Yes, that's right. It was a tough decision because my parents left Czechoslovakia not because of themselves.

"Of course they didn't like the political system. But they got by. They had good jobs. Within the hierarchy they were pretty high, well paid and all that.

"My parents left because of their children. They wanted their children to have better lives, to have a better future. But they didn't take into account that children sometimes decide themselves what they want to do.

"For my parents it was clear that I would at least have to become a university professor. Which for me was not necessarily a thing I wanted to do.

"But the pressure from home was so big that I decided to start studying at 18 and spent four years at the university studying math. Until I was internally strong enough to decide I really don't want to this.

"So I quit and did the thing that at that time I liked best: I applied to the acting school, the academy in Zurich, and they accepted me."

You were a theatre actor?

"Yes, on stage."

Tell us, how did you discover Rolfing?

"I had had a bad injury to my knee playing football, and they had extracted a meniscus in my knee. Years later my knee still hurt. For an actor on stage this was terrible, because my knee hurt all the time.

"The medical professionals couldn't help me any more. They wanted to do more surgery, but with the expectation that they couldn't solve the problem.

"Somebody decided I should see a Rolfer. I had never heard of it but I said, I might as well try. And he resolved the knee problem within five yours, within five sessions or something like that.

"I never would have thought something like this was possible. Just by pure manipulation."

Describe this manipulation. What exactly was he doing that solved your problem in five hours?

"To be able to explain it, I have to go a little further back. You have to imagine how the body is built, how it's set up.

Aleš Urbanczik, photo: archive of Aleš Urbanczik

"You have a lot of bones within you. They more or less stay the same, unless you break one. But your arm bone looks more or less the same as it did a year ago and as it will look in another year.

"But around those bones you've got a three-dimensional web-work of mainly connective tissue. And the organisation of that web-work basically defines the joints and the bones and their positions and their movements relative to each other.

"That can change dramatically. For instance, if you have somebody that plays the violin professionally then he will have a certain amount of rotation in one arm one way and in the other arm the other way. This will then twist his spine in a certain way…

"What a Rolfer does is basically to reorganise that, so that all that web-work is closer to where it's supposed to be, thus allowing the joints to become closer to where they're supposed to be and to take up a more appropriate function again."

And gravity is also involved?

"Gravity is involved in the sense that if you're not in a certain amount of alignment, what will happen is that your head will get pushed in space forward. Your head can never go too far back – it will always compensate by going forward.

"Your head weighs about seven kilos. Gravity takes over and there is a set of compensations that start, throughout the whole body and all the way into the feet. To balance that anterior weight of seven kilos, hanging in the middle of nowhere – basically so that it doesn't fall to the ground.

"Then a vicious circle starts. Muscles start tightening up. Other structures start to compensate. This is what a Rolfer does – he basically reorganises the whole body so that that head, ultimately, can come further back.

"Then gravity feels like it's supporting you, not tearing you down. That's what usually is the feeling after the basic series of 10 Rolfing sessions."

Are most people simply holding themselves wrong, when they're walking or standing or sitting?

"Holding is a difficult word, because it implies that you would be able to hold yourself differently, if you only tightened other muscles…"

Many people for example have bad posture. You can just see it – they don't stand straight.

"Exactly. But they can't correct it themselves, because the effort is too big, and the amount of attention that would be needed is just too great.

Aleš Urbanczik, photo: archive of Aleš Urbanczik

"So if you don't work with a strategy where you reorganise the connective tissue – and then start having them constantly change that – you're not going to have success."

I had never heard of Rolfing until I read an interview with you. It sounded so interesting and I was wondering – why isn't it better known?

"I think one of the reasons is that the initial approach, the idea that Rolfing has, is not so easy to get across.

"Because our main aim is to organise something, and not to fix something. Usually somebody comes because they hurt somewhere – they have back pain, they have elbow pain or whatever.

"The less I concentrate on their pain, the more I concentrate on reorganising the structure, the better the result is going to be in the end.

"Now this idea that you have to work on your feet to solve a problem in the elbow on the other side is difficult to get across at first.

"The second reason is that the territory we work in, this connective tissue, is fascia. And until about five or six years ago fascia was regarded as mere filling material with no function other than like you put bubble-wrap in a package, so that things don't collide with each other.

"A Rolfer in Germany named Robert Schleip did a doctoral thesis on this about 10 years ago. He actually built a lab where he put fascial tissue… he

did this in his own kitchen at home, this was his project, like a real pioneer.

"He proved that fascia does not only contract and relax independently of muscles, that there is an innervation within the fascia that had not been known about in the medical community.

"But he also proved that it contracts as a reaction to stress hormones. Of course that's a radical new view in the medical community. So far psychological factors for illnesses and things like that have been kind of neglected and left to alternative therapies and esoterics and stuff.

"But somebody could really prove that tissue basically shrinks as a result of stress. This was radical.

"So due to Robert Schleip's work in the last five or six years this has become much more commonly discussed – at least in Western Europe, in Germany. The Czech Republic is slowly catching on there."

Did you introduce Rolfing to the Czech Republic?

"I'm not quite sure, but I'm probably the first person that started working here. And I am certainly by far the most experienced Rolfer that can actually speak Czech reasonably well [laughs]."

Do you have to in some sense prove that what you're doing isn't dangerous? Do you need any kind of certification or something like that?

"We have founded an organisation here, the Czech Organisation for Structural Integration – Structural Integration is the original word for Rolfing.

"And we actually train people. At the moment the situation is that [practitioners] need a massage diploma. They basically have their business license through massage therapy or physiotherapy but what they do is Rolfing.

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"In other countries it's different. In Switzerland, for instance, it's becoming a profession. It'll take some time."