



Through Their Own Hands

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I can write this today because I came into my body, into life, again. I 're-membered.' After years of nightmares of being physically dismembered, I brought my body back together by touching something fundamental that I'll never forget: I remembered what it was to be in my body and in the world, to truly touch and be touched. I understood that personal and cultural wounding are intimately related. I experienced sensuality as what it truly is – an awakening of the senses – and sexuality as an expression of a powerful healing force. I no longer confused these concepts, or feared and negated them, or relegated them to narrow social constructs. I saw and felt my body both as a vehicle for, and an expression of, this creative, transformative energy. It's empowering to touch that – to feel the world through and in our form. A large part of this awareness for me was my training in and personal experience of California massage, and my practice today continually serves to remind me that to touch another, we have to first respect and honor ourselves. Whether we practice, teach or receive it, California massage is very much about touching an 'individual' experience of the body. And, although it has evoked many stories in many bodies, the actual history of this unique form of bodywork has never been told.

– Sonia Osorio

The Lineage of California Massage

by Sonia Osorio

"California massage was developed with the belief that every person is whole and deserving of love, that pain expresses boundaries to be approached with respect, and that the body is a safe, sacred and pleasurable place to be," says Rebekah Crown, who studied the technique first-hand in the 1970s with its founders Margaret Elke and Carol Truman. "As we learn to receive nurturing touch, we find a way to heal the experiences of pain, violence, neglect and lack of love that we all hold in our bodies, in our cellular memories," explains Crown, who has been practicing and teaching bodywork and body awareness for more than 20 years.

Although neither Elke nor Truman wrote any books on massage and never self-named their technique like Ida Rolf or Joseph Heller did from that era, they did something just as powerful – they brought people back to the "sensuality" and pleasure of the body in a respectful, nurturing, sacred and, therefore, healing way. They taught touch as what our bodies inherently know it should be: nurturing and pleasurable, regardless of the traumas we may have lived through or what societal messages we may receive. They offered people a viable, and vital, option – we can learn through pleasure, not just pain or illness.

California massage has its roots in ancient healing traditions and its

basis in the human potential movement of the '60s, a movement whose influence can be traced back to the early days at Esalen Institute in Big Sur, where massage moved into the realm of touch therapy, sensory awareness and personal exploration. But to say California massage is simply a technique is somewhat limiting. It's truly a personal journey back into the body. We learn to love the body again and to listen to its messages, which allows us to rediscover ourselves, to remember and reweave our experiences into healing forces – forces for change – both in our bodies and in the world.

Embodying Fearlessness

Margaret Elke passed away three years ago. Her lineage, however, lives on in Truman (her former teaching partner), in her first-generation students (among them Connie Buck and Crown, who studied directly with Elke and Truman and eventually taught together), and in their own students and those who have received this form of bodywork. It is these people's words, their lives and their touch that remind us this is a living story – both personal and transpersonal – and one which continues evolving.

Who were these women that transmitted this legacy of healing touch? "These were fearless women," says Buck. "They didn't believe anything the body was capable of experiencing was to be



feared. It was definitely to be respected, but not feared; and it was really worth going for if you wanted to feel alive again. Both Elke and Truman had hands from Heaven. It was unbelievable the way they could make contact and communicate through their hands what they knew.”

At the California Massage Institute, which the two women founded in San Francisco in 1970, Truman taught breathing awareness and anatomy. In addition to her strong Jungian background, Truman was originally a medical and agricultural researcher. She was influenced deeply by the work of Charlotte

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Selvers, one of the pioneers of sensory awareness through breath, and Magda Proskauer, a Jungian analyst who incorporated breathing awareness into her practice. Truman herself explored and taught how breath changes consciousness, enabling one to move from deep relaxation to a state of heightened body awareness.

Elke, who had a more sensual approach, was convinced of the importance of re-awakening the sensory system of the body at a very

deep level, and that, if one could create an opportunity for people to truly experience their bodies – to know what it is to be alive – then they could learn and practice from a place of genuine connection and understanding because they had felt that vitality within themselves. Elke’s hands – languorous, fluid, incredibly strong, yet capable of the most delicate touch – spoke this non-verbal message.

During the time she taught the basic California massage training, Elke also led couples’ workshops on what she termed “sensual massage,” where she would teach people to inform one another about what was pleasurable. The actual term, “California massage,” however,

came out of Elke’s work in Europe, specifically France, where she taught and worked for nearly 10 years after closing down the San Francisco school in the late ’80s. It was in France where the technique was dubbed “massage Californian,” since Elke came from the state.

What emanated from these women’s combined experience comprised an original 10-week training program: the basic massage technique, anatomy, breath work, and an attitude of respect and love for the sensuality of the body.

Beyond the Basics

Although California massage incorporates an in-depth knowledge of anatomy, body dynamics, alignment



and T'ai Chi moves, what distinguishes it from other work is the quality of touch. This requires embodying the basic principles of self-love and self-respect before being able to transmit them through one's hands to the body of another. In this sense, California massage is beyond technique and, in fact, often takes on the unique qualities of the therapist, enabling them to communicate their own embodiment, self-acceptance and non-judgment through touch and presence.

"That quality of making contact with the body is not a medical 'fix-it' model. It's a contact that touches something very primitive and innate," says Buck, a Ph.D., who practiced and taught the technique for 20 years. "Margaret and Carol both had very different skills, but they taught people how to do something I don't experience from those who aren't trained in this way. They taught us how to be fearless in making contact with a person's body,

and with all the emotional and cultural shadows we keep in our own bodies."

That means not simply touching a body bared, but our true selves bared, with all the joy, hurt, rage, sadness and ecstasy possible as human beings. California massage teaches it's through our hands, our bodies and our very skin that we can access this potential to become fully embodied.

"The skin is the largest sense organ, and it comes from the same fetal cells as the brain and nervous system," explains Buck. "It's the embodiment of all other sensory systems. And, it's capable of learning and remembering. So, when we touch someone without judgment and with awareness, something very deep and essential is contacted. This is beyond body image and beyond the overlay of culture on the body. It gives a person the opportunity to respond from a very deep and archaic

layer of awareness. So, it's healing in the sense that it's so 'other' than what culture offers."

This place of deep awareness, of "knowingness," has never been truly lost to us, although it may have been forgotten. Elke and Truman remembered that place. And when we're touched by one who has remembered, one who knows how to find it again through the body – it may be the opening for which we've all been waiting.

"Many people don't know what it is to be fully alive, and they don't even know they don't know – I didn't," says Buck. "One time Margaret massaged me when I was going through a lot of deep, personal work and I felt an [emotional] armoring about a quarter-inch beneath my skin, a kind of chamois that dampened sensation, not letting the world in and not letting myself out. I grieved about that for a long time, but then I really began my journey, which still continues, in uncovering what sometimes prevents me from experiencing full aliveness."

To experience being brought into the body again, to feel all that we are capable of feeling (both the pleasure and the pain) as vibrant, sensual beings is an initiation, one that involves having a deep commitment to oneself and to those we are intimate with – and to whatever is evoked in the process.

"Not everyone can open to this kind of work because you have to touch fear and go into and beyond that fear," explains Buck. "But when people do go there, it's as deep as any shamanic experience. I call it courage, dealing with what it is that keeps us so terrified. One way to access that is through the body."

Crown views this moment of embodiment as a critical time, when we can either anesthetize ourselves to the experience or deepen our capacity to feel. "Through our bodies we feel both the joy of being alive, and the pain and toxicity of our physical and emotional world," she says. "We all hold thoughts and feelings that are



Awakening the Body

More than just philosophical differences, California massage has some specific concepts which separate it from more traditional massage.

Completion

The completion of strokes is paramount to the full expression of this work. It's important to always work from the origins to the insertions of muscles, always working the whole body.

Wholeness

Never is just a piece of the body worked on. In fact, a whole area of the body will be undraped at one time (i.e., the entire left side) to ensure that sense of wholeness. Instead of looking at a client as having a "sore neck," you would see the neck extending down to the feet and out through the fingertips; the tension in the neck would be held by the breath and thought patterns.

Awareness of the Body's Language

Part of this work is relearning the deep, instinctual and intuitive language of the body, and being sensitive to the quality of touch. More than philosophy, this encompasses the experience of what is felt.

Awareness of Breath

Breath work and guided relaxation are used throughout the work.

Support

This encompasses knowledge of the body. For example, knowing how the breath works or how to effectively hold a limb at the joint when lifting it are ways in which the therapist offers support, but also paying attention to the details of the body and transmitting a sense of caring and listening through your own detailed motions.

California massage, recognized and codified by the Quebec Massage Federation, can be seen as a foundation technique that forms the base of any touch therapy. From this foundation, other techniques can be incorporated to complement these essential principles.

painful. As we come into the body and open to its capacity to feel, all sensations are awakened. Often, the only way we contact this sensitivity is through sickness. But nurturing touch can show us that learning through joy and pleasure is also possible."

In the Body and of the World

Buck's experience of California massage was a turning point in her life. "I was living in New Mexico at the time and visiting San Francisco when I received my first massage

from Carol. I was an intellect and an athlete, and thought I knew about being in my body. After that massage, I realized I knew absolutely nothing. I also realized this work was important and that I was there to save my life. If I had not found this place, something in me would have dried up and I probably wouldn't be alive today. So, after that experience, I dropped everything and moved to California for a four-year training. I didn't do it to have a profession; I did it to get touched in this way. It developed into a profession later."

Elke and Truman taught students living anatomy so they could understand what they were touching – muscles, bones, nerves, viscera, as well as emotions and history – thereby becoming more sensitive to how to touch and actually feeling who they were touching. Buck recalls the classroom setting: "They taught touch in a very discriminating way, in a fashion that wouldn't send the body into alert, so it could relax, open and release. I was taught by being immersed in it. I learned from the inside out what wholeness



and completion really felt like. Sure, you can learn strokes and moves, but the absolute exquisiteness of what these women taught was that it was backed by a respect for the body and rooted in a very deep training in anatomy.”

For Buck, this immersion allowed her to truly embody the lessons and principles being taught: “You really can’t practice or teach something that you haven’t experienced. People who do bodywork who don’t experience their own bodies are, at the very least, missing out on what this world is about and, at the very most, doing harm to others. If you don’t know what it is to be touched in a way that allows openness and honors contraction and defenses, you can’t feel safe when somebody is touching you, and you don’t know how to make somebody else feel safe.”

With her background in dance and ritual healing workshops, Crown incorporates this viewpoint in her own way, teaching that boundaries are to be respected and that creating a safe and sacred space

is essential to the practice. She emphasizes the experience should flow, on and with the breath, through the body – which she calls a sacred vessel.

“That’s what Margaret communicated through her hands,” says Crown. “I see every body as beautiful, and capable of experiencing beauty and pleasure. Massage is an invitation to someone to come into their body. There’s enough pain, hatred and violence in the world. We try to communicate through touch that the massage session, and the body itself, is a place where something entirely different is allowed to take place,” says Crown.

“It’s not just about a technique, it’s about opening to an entire universe,” comments Buck. “That’s how big it is inside the skin and in the field around the skin – around the body. It can be very terrifying to people for that reason. They’re on the edge of something huge, which evokes fears of annihilation. I happen to find that world absolutely thrilling, even though I was scared at the beginning to even be naked. Believe me, I had to confront my

terror. Back then, my body was the most frightening place for me to go in my life because the work had started to awaken its language.”

Buck discovered her body had both terrifying and exciting things to tell her, and it was essential she listen to these messages. “If I had not been directed by those teachers to examine my own wounding and see it as part of the gold there for me to discover, I would have risked transmitting my attitude (which I consider a culturally-instilled hatred of the body that communicates an attitude of subtle violence) to another person. What this type of massage taught me is to not be violent – to myself or others – because everything and everyone is connected.” Today, Buck writes and lectures on how primitive states of mind impact adult perception, and how our personal and cultural “shadows” can distort our view of the world and of ourselves.

Continuing a Legacy

After training with Elke and Truman at the California





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Massage Institute, Crown and Buck returned to Santa Fe, N.M., and eventually taught workshops together before teaching and running a massage school – Dr. Jay Scherer’s Academy of Natural Healing, which continues training therapists today.

In New Mexico, this second-generation of California massage therapists gained an even deeper appreciation for their work. “I realized how amazingly courageous Margaret and Carol had been in their approach. And I also realized that what Rebekah and I had created in New Mexico was something that didn’t exist in a state where healing and the curandera tradition was so important – no one had ever addressed the fear of embodiment of

the flesh, and gone into and beyond that.”

Crown and Buck, in the spirit of Elke and Truman, went in fearlessly, infusing the places where they taught with a respect for the body, and continued the tradition of mindful and compassionate touch. In the 1970s, however, it was considered evocative and even provocative to call the work “sensual massage,” as it was called in California, so Buck and Crown renamed the technique “nurturing massage,” but taught it sensually.

Repatterning to Reclaim

To teach the body new ways of being in the world, one has to first re-awaken the body and allow it to be present for whatever sensations

and emotions run through it. Then, when we’re conscious of our bodies, the thoughts and habitual reactions that perpetuate self-defeating patterns can be changed.

“We can think our way into falsehoods about ourselves, but the body is incapable of lying,” states Buck. “It can be taught through a positive experience of touch to be in the here-and-now, which is where change can occur.”

Once we’re in our body and in the present moment, Buck explains, there’s a “therapeutic window” where relearning or repatterning can occur. This is the midpoint between two sensory poles: if someone is desensitized (numbed out) or over-stimulated (hypervigilant), no new learning can take place. It is in this middle ground, holding the tension between those two states, that the body can open to new learning on a neurophysiological level.

Evidently, the body has to be given an experience of something else, which is where California massage comes in. Over time, this new message about pleasurable touch and self-acceptance becomes part of a new body-brainwave pattern and, therefore, of a new way of feeling, and being in and seeing the world.



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As it becomes more integrated through regular bodywork, this new learning can become a natural part of someone's life, offering a more vital option, and enabling the attitudes and beliefs that keep the body in a place of fear, pain or tension, to fall away. Once embodied, this attitude of self-respect and self-love can be taken out into the world.

"The practice of this massage is about integration, which then becomes healing," explains Crown. "It's about allowing yourself and those you touch to become whole. There's nothing to 'fix.' What's important is to be fully present. It is not, however, simple to do this. It's a practice that involves knowledge, as well as attention. When you're fully awake to the person you're touching and to yourself in the moment, doors to healing are opened and what you transmit will be beyond words."

It's this notion of respecting, honoring and trusting the body and its process that's so integral to California massage. Each training and each practice thus becomes an individual creation, where one's

presence communicates their experience of what this work is, of how it has profoundly changed them and of how it holds this living potential for another.

Evidently, no technique or massage therapist can do all this for someone. People have to accept that responsibility for themselves and be willing to experience such an opening. What the technique and those who practice it do offer is a powerful method to encourage and support an experience of self-awareness, and an opportunity to express who we truly are in our bodies and in this lifetime. When we choose to take up the offer, then our true life's work begins. If we have the courage, we can rediscover the immensity of who we are and what we are capable of in the world – and we can know and love our body as the place where life's sacred creative energy can flow. **M&B**

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