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MARION ROSEN AT 97: FINDING A NEW LIFE LATER IN LIFE

Mara Lynn Keller and Sara Webb

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Internationally-renowned somatics pioneer Marion Rosen founded her own work in the healing arts at age 56. Still working at 97, she is a model for aging gracefully, productively, and powerfully. She was a physical therapist practicing in Oakland for 30 years before beginning to teach Rosen bodywork and movement locally and internationally. She has maintained a Rosen bodywork practice for the past 42 years.

Marion's work has two forms, the bodywork and the movement. *Rosen Method Bodywork* offers a gentle yet firm, non-intrusive kind of touch that is contactful, intuitive, and invites release of muscular tensions that originate in holding patterns in the person's subconscious. When a person feels their tension is being contacted with curiosity and awareness, this can lead to a release of memories and feelings that have remained unexpressed. This in turn leads to a new freedom in our bodies and spirits. *Rosen Method Movement* classes serve to deepen the breathing, lubricate the joints, and lengthen and strengthen the muscles. Moving to different kinds of music in a circle with others brings a special kind of enjoyment. (see Keller 1999)

A refugee from Nazi Germany during the late 1930's, Marion sees Rosenwork as a practice that can contribute to a more peaceful world through touch, by first serving to lessen conflict within an individual, allowing room for feelings of greater self-acceptance and peaceableness. This in turn can have positive ripple effects into the larger world. Also, the more a person lives out of their sense of freedom rather than from fear, the more creative, satisfied, and happy they can feel. Marion's belief in the healing power of touch has been absorbed by younger generations who have carried her message as Rosen Method Bodywork and Movement to 15 countries— including Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Finland, Russia, Germany, France, Italy, Majorca, Canada, Mexico, and Australia; as well as across the United States.

Marion's life demonstrates how it is possible to find a new vocation after age 55 which calls forth all your abilities and passion and allows you to contribute to the wellness of your community. Marion had thought her life was pretty much over at age 55, because her physical therapy practice in Oakland was declining as the doctors who had referred to her were retiring. Then Sara Webb came to her, at the recommendation of her mother, and asked Marion to teach her to do what she did. Marion did not know if she could, but she decided she would try.

Sara became Marion's first student, and she is now the Executive Director of the Rosen Method: Berkeley Center, and a senior teacher who works very closely with Marion. Marion and Sara, in cooperation with others, created a woman-owned business that has become internationally renowned. Now, some 40 years after they started Rosen Method Bodywork, Marion's work continues to expand around the world.

After age 55, Marion began to travel and see the world. And she discovered that it is possible to fall in love at 68 and enjoy a romantic relationship well into one's 90s. Although Marion uses a walker to get about now, and no longer flies to Sweden to teach every year, she has continued her regular bodywork practice at her home and continues a lot of teaching.

Rosen practitioners Sara Webb and Mara Lynn Keller also came to a significantly expanded role in life after age 55. In the last eight years, as Marion has begun to do less, Sara has taken on more responsibilities for putting Rosenwork into the world, doing more teaching and public speaking, in addition to her private practice with clients. At the same time, Sara is caring for her mother at home, who has Alzheimer's disease.

At age 55, Mara moved from part-time teaching at San Francisco State University where she taught Philosophy, Women's Studies, and Global Peace Studies (a program she co-founded and coordinated), to the California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco, where she became a fulltime professor of Philosophy, Religion, and Women's Spirituality. She served ten years as director of the Women's Spirituality MA and PhD program at CIIS, and now, at age 67, she continues her full-time teaching there. She continues to write scholarly articles, books, and poetry. Mara has been offering Rosen classes together with Sara at CIIS for the past decade. This past year, Mara's husband had a heart attack and by-pass surgery, so she also has added new responsibilities of care-giving.

Marion Rosen's Keys for Tapping into Our Aliveness

Sara and Mara wanted to explore with Marion the meaning of aging in our personal and social lives. Mara was feeling there was not enough space for talking about the aging process, with both its challenges and benefits. There seemed to be an assumption that older people should pretend they were remaining youthful and their aging had no problems; and that aging was considered an inappropriate topic for conversation, was too boring, or something to keep hidden. And yet, the aging process is an increasing concern for so many of us. Marion, Mara, and Sara decided to teach a class on Women and Aging. Synchronistically, the very next day, the opportunity arrived to offer a presentation at the Poetics of Aging conference in San Francisco.

For the classes on Women and Aging, which were held at Marion's home in north Berkeley, California, we asked the women who came to this circle to share their experiences of aging and their stories about how we can take good care of ourselves as we age. How do we feel about declining health and capacities? How can we meet the

needs of ourselves and others with more awareness? How can we address our anxieties and fears? How can we contribute to our communities? What does the approach of death, for ourselves and our loved ones, mean to us?

These classes were well attended, and everyone had a lot to say that was interesting and valuable. We discovered people wanted the opportunity to share more deeply what aging meant to them -- feelings about our aging bodies and problems with illness; the physical, emotional and spiritual adjustments to caretaking for a parent or spouse; dealing with health insurance and financial planning; dating; poetry; and much more.

Marion especially enjoyed people sharing their positive experiences with aging. At the same time, Marion honestly acknowledges that aging "is limiting in a way, and there are many things you no longer can do with your body like you used to do. And yet you can feel very happy and very fulfilled. There is also freedom in that. I say no to things I don't want to do." She smiles, "I can always say, 'I am too old!'".

At the Poetics of Aging conference, we wanted to focus our presentation toward doctors, nurses, body workers, therapists, counselors, as well as family members, and individuals in transition, who looking for more satisfying possibilities as they age. We invited them to consider Marion Rosen's life and work for the possibilities that can open for a person living well into one's 90s. Here we had a new set of questions. How do we re-vision our usefulness throughout the seasons of our lives? Who and/or what decides on how we use our vitality? What ideas determine the roles which we inhabit as we age? How do we become the author of our lives in the context of community?

Many were curious as to what Marion had learned from her experience of living a long, healthy, and productive life. She has several recommendations for others in their older years. "First, live in a very beautiful place. And if you can, live at home. Ask for help when you need it. This was hard for me to do, learning to ask for help, having to ask for help. I no longer can drive, and so I need to depend on others, for example, to go to a Rosen movement class. It is better not to live alone. It is important to be able to talk with someone every day. Second, continue working as long as possible. I am still able to work and I love what I do. Work is very important to me, and I feel so good when I work with a client."

Other recommendations from Marion are that we "take care not just to talk to others, but also to listen carefully. Others will appreciate this. Do keep moving, at a movement class if possible, or just by taking a walk every day. This will help a lot to maintain your health. Eat a healthy diet. Do things for other people -- because the more you do for others, the better you feel! And remember to touch others, and to allow yourself to be touched."

Marion lives by these simple and wise commitments. She shares her home in Berkeley with her daughter Tina, and Marion feels very fortunate that Tina, along with others, is able to care for her now. In fact, Marion has many people who care deeply about her and who, when needed, will help care for her. She appreciates that she has many younger friends.

In giving Rosen bodywork sessions, Marion listens very closely to each client, with curiosity, wanting to see the person more clearly, to get to know who they really are. She is pleased and proud that she has been able to continue working, seeing clients usually four mornings a week (now at her home, rather than her downtown office). And she continues to teach Rosen workshops, mainly in order to support other Rosen practitioners in their communities, and in order to continue to spread the Rosen work to others. It is work she continues to believe in.

For many years, Marion taught movement classes to her friends and clients, sometimes four or five times a week, simple movements to music, based on her knowledge of physical therapy. She continues to attend Rosen movement classes, as her schedule permits. She keeps to a healthy diet, and keeps the extra pounds off. She participates in fund-raising events for several religious organizations in the San Francisco Bay Area, including the Buddhist center at Spirit Rock in Marin County, and the Mata Amritanandamayi (MA) Center in northern California, both of which teach loving-kindness as central to their spiritual practices.

Sara believes the secret to Marion's longevity can be found in the Rosen work she has been doing. Marion has been touching people with her special kind of attentiveness for many decades. She often says that in the session, both the client and the practitioner are receiving the benefits. Sara points out that Marion has had many daily doses of oxytocin, a hormone which provides pleasure and satisfaction and is released when we touch or are touched in a positive way.

The Benefits of Rosen Touch, Peaceful Touch, Healthy Touch

In the classes on Women and Aging and at the Poetics of Aging conference, Marion, Sara, and Mara invited everyone to participate in a simple hands-on-shoulders practice. Half of the people stand behind the other half of the audience and connect through touching the shoulders; after a while, they trade places. We guide people through the process of learning Rosen Touch, first asking the standing person to allow themselves to relax and breathe more deeply, then to let their hands rest lightly on the shoulders of the person in front of them. We ask them to touch with a sense of curiosity about this person, making full contact with their palms, and also to explore with the fingers, touching into the muscles of the shoulders, meeting whatever is there with an equal amount of pressure, not too much, not too little. We invite them to remember that our hands are connected to our hearts, and our hearts are connected to our whole body, and to our whole selves. One hand remains relatively still (the non-doing hand) while the other hand presses into the muscles (the active hand). What do their shoulders feel like? What is the temperature? the shape? the softness or firmness or tightness of the muscles? Where is the breathing in the body? Does it rise to meet the touch, or not? Do we feel any responses or changes beneath our hands? What is it like for this person in this body? How is the whole life of the other person somehow present in them, in their body, in contact with our hands? We do not try to fix a person, or manipulate the tissues, but rather to make intuitive contact.

We invite the person sitting down and receiving the touch to experience the touch from inside, to feel what each part of the body feels like to them, what sensations, feelings, or memories might be arising? After ten or fifteen minutes, both the person giving the touch and the person receiving the touch seem to have come into a deeper relationship within herself or himself, and with the other person. We ask people to share a word or two of what the experience was like for them. "Being held." "Relaxing." "Safe." "Comforting." "Peaceful." "Energizing." "Lovely." "Kind." "Restful."

While there have been no studies to date focused specifically on Rosen Bodywork and elders, the studies about benefits of touch for adults are relevant to older adults. There are benefits for those leading stressful lives, those with disease, for couples, for those working with or visiting children, and for those who may be touch-deprived. Touch deprivation often increases with aging. Unfortunately, this is a matter for people of all ages in modern cultures, even the very young. There can be benefits for the person who is giving touch to others, and even to oneself.

In one study of the affects of Rosen Method Bodywork on adult clients, conducted in Sweden fifty-three Rosen Method Bodywork clients were interviewed. Their ages ranged from 27-67 years, with an average age of 46. The average number of Rosen sessions experienced was 29 (with a range from 1 to 140 sessions). According to Hoffren-Larsson and colleagues (Hoffren-Larsson, Gustafsson, and Falkenberg, 2009), clients reported improved psychological health: increased happiness, harmony, well-being, and self-confidence; along with reductions in depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts, and stress. They became more aware of the interconnections of mind and body, particularly in the awareness of how body tensions and emotions were linked to their daily life experiences and to prior physical symptoms. They experienced support for personal growth with the Rosen sessions, gaining a new awareness of previously repressed problems and memories; and they found a new ability to move beyond them. In tandem with this, they found themselves able to create *self-initiated life changes that involved a refocusing of their priorities*, along with making self-affirming choices. Regarding physical health, clients reported more relaxed breathing and improved digestive function, as well as reduction in pain, tension, headaches, and back aches.

Another study focused on the effects of Rosen Bodywork with couples (Holt-Lundstad, Birmingham, and Light, 2008). The results are relevant to couples of varying ages, including seniors. Twenty married couples (randomly assigned to this group) were trained to use Rosen Method Bodywork touch with one another, using a soft, receptive touch, what is often referred to in Rosen as a "listening" hand. Another fourteen couples, randomly assigned to a control group, were asked to keep a journal about their experiences of physical affection and moods. At the end of four weeks, it was found that the couples who had used Rosen Method Bodywork touch with one another, in comparison to the other couples, had higher levels of oxytocin and lower levels of stress hormones. The men who had been in the Rosen Method Bodywork group had significantly lower blood pressure.

These results were similar to those of another study with adult couples. The study by K. C. Light, K. M. Grewen, and J. A. Amico (2004) discovered that "affectionate, non-erotic

touch in married couples activates the parasympathetic (relaxation) nervous system, lowers blood pressure and heart rate, induces the secretion of the hormone oxytocin, and reduces the blood concentrations of stress hormones” (Light et al., 2004; cited in Fogel February/March 2011: 6).

These encouraging results are due in part to the effects of oxytocin, the hormone produced in the pineal gland which generally accompanies the actions of positive touch, hugging, caressing, love-making, birth-giving, and nursing. It is often referred to as the *bonding hormone*, *love hormone*, or *pleasure hormone* because it aids in the formation of pleasure bonds between mothers and babies, parents and children, spouses, and friends. Oxytocin is released in both the client and practitioner of Rosen bodywork, and in other forms of massage. We recommend that elderly people find some way to bring more touch into their lives.

In her book *The Oxytocin Factor: Tapping the Hormone of Calm, Love, and Healing*, Kerstin Uvnäs Moberg writes that:

When you were born, oxytocin helped expel you from your mother’s womb and then made it possible for her to nurse you. As a small child, you enjoyed your mother’s and father’s loving touch because it released oxytocin in your body. As an adult, you experience the effects of oxytocin when you enjoy good food, or a massage, or an intimate interlude with your romantic partner. Oxytocin is active in all these situations. (Moberg 2003: 65)

Moberg’s book also explores numerous scientific studies with animals. Oxytocin injections have been observed to correlate with changes such as the

rapid development of maternal behavior; stimulated and facilitated mating; more social contact between individuals; less anxiety, increased boldness and curiosity...; a calming ... effect...; a diminished sensation of pain...; and facilitated learning, even in individuals with learning difficulties. (73)

Psychologist Alan Fogel has discovered an additional basis for the success of Rosen bodywork in supporting clients to find greater well-being in their lives. This comes from what he names *present-moment body sense*, or *embodied awareness*; it is what we also can speak of as *embodied spirituality*. This is a special attunement of the mind and spirit to what is present in the body on the level of sensation and experience, and to how these connect to the fuller experience of our own life, our whole self.

Fogel explains that the effectiveness of Rosen bodywork is due in large part to the way Rosen Touch invites the client into a state of physical and emotional self-awareness. It is this simple act of embodied awareness that allows the body-mind to mobilize its own powers of self-healing. He explains:

Present-moment sense is like a booster shot for the nervous system. When we become aware of feelings, including pain, it means that the self-regulatory

network of the brain ... can be activated as a single unit of neural integration. This integrated network is exceptionally powerful because it can find the most optimal form of functioning across neuromuscular, digestive, hormonal, cardiovascular, and immune systems leading to a reduction of pain and ultimately a return to healthy functioning. (Fogel, 2011)

The results of all these studies are exciting and encouraging. Whether we are professional healthcare providers, or caring for family members, the presence of regular positive touch in our lives can provide tremendous rewards.

In addition to inducing more physical aspects of wellness, Rosen bodywork and movement may evoke spiritual feelings of wellbeing. Since the beginning of Mara's participation in Rosen Bodywork, she realized that the most effective part of the work comes when the client moves into a state of reverie and is closely connected to an inner awareness of the self. This special time, when the client and body worker go deeply, to a place beyond words, is held with connection and silence. This altered state has been explained in various ways. The *hypnogogic state*, the stage of consciousness right next to the sleep state, is when the brain produces theta waves, which are connected with self-healing. For Mara this place of reverie and deep connection to self brings a feeling of quiet awe. Marion refers to it sometimes as a feeling of grace, and as a reverence for life. "The healing occurs when the body and spirit come together in a state of surrender, opening, and trust. It is a state of grace for both practitioners and patients. This may sound strange or even untrue, but this is the reason many people have a feeling of awe about this process." (Rosen 2003: 32; see also Keller 1993: 30;)

Care for Others, Self-Care, and Community

When caring for others, simple hands-on techniques support relaxation, inviting more spaciousness inside. When tension is contacted with gentle touch, release leads to new ease in our bodies and spirits, and we become more capable of being creative and living harmoniously with ourselves and others.

Often elders spend significant time caring for young children, either their grandchildren, or working or volunteering at a near-by daycare center or school. Studies have shown that positive, *healthy touch* can be very beneficial for children, boosting self-esteem, increasing social competence and cooperation, and reducing aggression and feelings of hostility, anxiety, or depression (Honig 2005; Carlson and Nelson 2006; La Plante 2007).

A *Peaceful Touch* movement, begun in Sweden, is also growing in the United State, and seniors may want to participate in this important work. It was begun by Hans Axelson, the founder of the Axelson Institute in Stockholm, Sweden. Through his

institute, over 10,000 teachers and other school personnel have been trained in the use of peaceful touch, which was been instituted in schools by the Swedish government (www.axelsons.com/peaceful-touch.php). Axelson is also a long-time associate of Marion Rosen, and a major leader in the international Rosen community. People who want to learn more about this work, and training opportunities, can contact the Peaceful Touch organization (<http://www.peacefultouch.net>). There is also an informative and delightful video available on youtube: www.youtube.com/watch?v=e81TJejOkcg.

Sara thinks it is worthwhile to explore the meaning of *relational care* as a complement to, or alternative to *custodial care*. She realized she could provide kinder care for her mother at her home. Rosen touch has been beneficial for her mother, who still responds to touch, and even now, can enter moments of lucid awareness and connection, even though she has an advanced state of Alzheimer's. Sara feels very grateful she can have her mother with her during these years at the end of her mother's life.

Mara proposes that positive touch can also be used for self-care. At the Poetics of Aging conference, when asked how Marion's colleagues were expanding on the work, Mara spoke about the way she has learned to practice Rosen with herself. Marion, however, is firm in her view that Rosen work takes two, the practitioner who is the witness and helps to hold the person's muscular tension in a way that invites them to feel safe, and the person who allows the release of feelings that were put away when they arose, because it was not safe at the time to express them.

Mara feels she can apply Rosen touch with herself, partly because of a Vipassana Buddhist meditation practice learned at a desert retreat in California with the Buddhist teacher Ruth Denison. Denison helped her learn how to focus mindful awareness to contact each part of the body with careful and full attention, observing whatever feelings might arise, and at the same time allowing the reflective consciousness to be a compassionate witness. She notes: "It is this same kind of dual awareness that allows me to give myself something of a Rosen session, to relieve the tense muscles of my shoulders, fore-arms, and hands after too much computer work, or the muscles along the middle spine, or around the diaphragm and heart. With this kind of conscious touch, I allow myself the time (for example, in a relaxing hot bath) to let suppressed emotions float to the surface and clear out from my body, mind, and spirit. And I also agree with Marion, that there is something very special about Rosen bodywork, when we are able to feel safe enough to share our deep, hidden-away feelings with another person, who offers acceptance, without judgment."

Another way Sara and Mara have been taking the work further is in their teaching of Rosen Method at the California Institute of Integral Studies, which has brought us a growing appreciation of the power of circle work that can emerge when using Rosen Method. Sara especially trusts in the "collective wisdom" of the group, and

she is adept at holding the space open for the deeper feelings of others to emerge, in response to one another. Both this growing focus on Rosen circle work and its role in building community, and on the possibility of using Rosen for self-care, are contributions Sara and Mara are bringing to the Rosen work.

Conclusion

One of Marion's guiding lights has been the quotation from the Gnostic Gospel of Saint Thomas: "What you bring forth, will save you. What you do not bring forth will destroy you." Through the creation of the Rosen bodywork and movement, Marion has provided a new interpretation of this saying, one that is physical as well as spiritual.

Rosen work embodies what have been considered by some to be the more "feminine" relational qualities of contact, connection, receptivity, and non-intrusive intuitive touch. This very personal emotional work addresses matters of gender, race, class, age, sexuality, etc. as they arise from the experience of the client. Beginning with Marion's 80th birthday party in 1994, a Diversity Scholarship was created to fund students of color to study to become Rosen bodywork practitioners and movement teachers.

The larger goal of Rosen work is to allow an individual to find greater harmony within, and to become engaged in the creation of a more peaceful and diverse world. Rosen work invites us to show up as our true selves, as much as we can. And this truth-sharing will have a positive impact on the world. Marion's experience is that

when fear and uncertainty go away, ... a new space inside opens up for loving acceptance of oneself and others.... People make a spiritual connection they become physically well and another dimension opens up in their lives. Often people who are estranged from their partners can reconnect with them and find another dimension in their relationship.... Some patients ... feel good and their life is working. Others have a longing for something more; they can feel they can make a contribution or find more fulfillment in life. (Rosen 2003: 68-69)

Marion, Sara, and Mara are grateful for the opportunity to reflect together on the elder years of our lives, and we want to invite others to consider how to find a new life later in life. What are new ways to re-envision the possibilities of our lives, and the new roles we can discover and stretch into as we age? How can we care for ourselves as we age? How we can retain vigor and passion in our elder years? How do we learn to listen to our 'wise inner Elder'? As we open up potentials within ourselves, we draw to us new possibilities for living in the larger world. This work can serve as a touchstone for contacting the fuller potential that is stored inside each of us.

Mara Lynn Keller (BA in Religious Studies; PhD in Philosophy, Yale University, 1971). is a professor at the California Institute of Integral Studies, where she served as the Director of the Women's Spirituality MA and PhD program from for ten years. She has been a Rosen bodywork practitioner since 1986. mkeller@ciis.edu. http://www.ciis.edu/Academics/Graduate_Programs/Womens_Spirituality_/Faculty.html

Sara Webb was Marion's first student and has been practicing Rosen work since 1971. She has been the Executive Director of the Rosen Method Center in Berkeley since it was founded in 1983, and she is a senior training teacher. <http://www.rosenmethod.com/berkschool.html>

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