

Hellerwork & Pregnancy. By Roger Golten

Hellerwork is a therapy system founded by Joseph Heller (1940-) that evolved directly from the work of Dr. Ida P. Rolf (1896-1979). Hellerwork is a synthesis of classic structural integration and somatic education (soma=body) which attempts a mind/body/spirit integration using the potent tools of myo-fascial bodywork (myo=muscles), movement and awareness education, and a conversation to relate thinking, feeling, attitudes, emotions and beliefs to the person's experience of being in their body. The major results reported by clients of Hellerwork include an effortless improvement in posture, a tremendous increase in body awareness and improved breathing, standing, sitting and walking.

Pregnancy is itself a powerful and natural opportunity for the development of body awareness, bringing consciousness into the body through the big changes that take place on the emotional, physical and existential levels. Sometimes problems such as various kinds of backache and shoulder or neck tension arise during pregnancy which lead women to seek assistance. Other times there is a general desire to get into as good shape as possible prior to the birth. Hellerwork can provide focussed attention on optimising well-being for such an important and demanding event in one's life. Hellerwork seeks to empower clients to become the "expert" on their own body, so that they are able to take responsibility and get more of what they want out of life, to be the cause of their lives rather than a helpless victim of the circumstances. During pregnancy this is particularly appropriate, with the tendency for the medicalisation of childbirth, leading to increased interventions which interrupt this natural process.

As the baby grows and increases in weight, there is an inevitable exaggeration in any postural imbalances in the mother's physical structure. Hellerwork client's posture in the early stages of pregnancy (3-5 months) has sometimes improved so much that they appear not to be "showing" quite so much, decreasing potential discomfort. Hellerwork can be an intense experience in terms of experiencing one's own chronic and formerly unconscious tensions, and learning to let go and trust in a powerful process can assist in the preparation for childbirth. Specific case histories illustrate the range of applications that arise with the kind of attention that is given during Hellerwork.

Ruth Backway introduces herself:

"I have two memories of working with pregnant clients that may be of interest to you. Before telling you these, you may want a little background, since we haven't met.

I am a Physical Therapist and have been a Hellerwork prac for 15 years. Because of this, I get medically oriented referrals. I also have a practice inside a medical clinic.

One case was a woman in her 30's who had a long history of back problems. This was her third pregnancy. The one she had two years previously was very troubled with low back pain and she was put to bed for a week at a time due to the pain. Structurally, she had an increased lumbar lordosis and carried her chest in a position so it was backward bent over her pelvis. She also had her Right pelvis tipped anteriorly and almost no movement in her Right SI joint. She wanted to do the Hellerwork so she didn't have such a bad time of it this time around. We worked on her during the second trimester. When doing the psoas work, I worked in the middle and high on the muscle, not disturbing the lower abdomen on the deep layers. I also used a PNF technique to help right the pelvis and get the SI joint moving. The Hellerwork took care of the other postural stresses on her back, and she had a routine and comfortable pregnancy.

The other case I recall was the wife of my Chiropractor. I work out of his clinic. She was 40 and pregnant for the fourth time, but it had been 14 years since her last pregnancy. She came in one day with a very pained look on her face. She was in her final 2 weeks. She complained she couldn't get comfortable--had strong back pain and couldn't stand up or sit down. The pain was centered in her SI joints and across the sacrum. On testing, the Left pelvis was tipped back and the Left SI was stuck. I used Soft Tissue mobilization to her Piriformis muscles and then the PNF technique I mentioned previously to right her pelvis and the pain went away. The point here being that in the end stages of pregnancy, when things start to get lax, it is easy for the pelvis to slip a bit and this can cause a great deal of pain. Practitioners need to watch for this, and finding a practitioner who has experience in fixing this type of problem can be very

useful."

Tom Merrill, Hellerwork Practitioner in California reports:

"Pam was one of my two "models" for the Hellerwork Training I attended in 1989-90. This was a year long, non-residential program that involved weekly evening classes and one three day weekend class each month. Thus, the bodywork series for the models spanned over a period of 10 months.

Pam was approximately 5 1/2 months pregnant when she received Session One. Thus, session four landed just a couple weeks before the little one was due. Session five was delayed a week and done at my mentor's home.

Performing the inner thigh session just before the birth and then the belly session right after was a perfect fit. All went well and as best as I can recall, uneventful throughout the course of the series. A few years later, Pam called up and scheduled a few more sessions as she was carrying again."

and finally, Lonny Fox, Hellerwork Practitioner and Trainer in Canada:

"I first met my client, I'll call her Susan, when I was still working with The Victoria Pain Clinic. She was there on one of the clinic's ten day programs recovering from a motor vehicle accident. At the end of her stay she was improving and was referred to me on a out patient basis. We saw each other for about eight months, as I was supporting her through her return to work, when she came in one day and asked if I would also support her through her second pregnancy.

I was both worried and overjoyed at the prospect of working through this pregnancy with her. I knew it was going to be challenging as she was still experiencing both low back and neck pain from her accident.

All went well for most of the pregnancy. She was a very motivated client doing her stretches and watching her posture and movement. She also loved the bodywork and was managing to keep up with her job and look after her two year old daughter. I was also enjoying working with two people; the one who gave me the verbal feedback and the one who would kick my hand from the inside when she didn't appreciate a stroke. Throughout Susan managed to be very bright and cheerful, happy about the upcoming birth. That is until very close to what was supposed to be her delivery date.

That Wednesday when Susan came in she was very upset and started to cry almost as soon as she sat down. She told me that her first child had been a cesarean section and she had been hoping in her heart for vaginal birth this time. She had just been to her gynecologist and he had told her that because the baby wasn't "dropping" into the pelvic bowl he was afraid that she would probably have to have another C-section.

We talked about it for a while and then had a closer look at what was happening. There was such a tight band in the abdomen between the scar tissue from the previous C-section and the pubic symphysis that the baby couldn't get through. Couple that with the worry and fear Susan was feeling and the whole pelvic bowl, like Susan, was literally "held in suspense" waiting to see what would happen.

We knew we only had one or two sessions until they were going to induce labor so I started with some very detailed work around the old C-section scar and the pubic bone. Interestingly enough I didn't get anywhere near the internal complaints that I was used to when I worked the abdominal area. It was as if the baby knew what we were doing. Four days later when Susan came back the baby was "dropping" but would pop right back up to her old spot in the abdomen. It was as though her pelvic floor was acting like a trampoline bouncing the baby right back up so we went on to do two things. We spent an hour and a half releasing the pelvic floor as completely as possible trying to clear every old knot and holding from the adductors and the pelvic floor area.

At the same time we were doing this I knew that Susan loved the old Disney

shows and in trying to think of the birth process I remember the time lapse photography of chrysanthemums opening. I asked her if she had seen those shots and she said she had. I then checked to see if she thought that was what might happen to the cervix as it dilated for the baby to come through. She loved the idea saying that she really couldn't imagine the process until that moment.

I got a call the next day to say her baby had "dropped" and was in the correct place. Shortly after that her water broke and she gave birth.

One of the most touching moments of my career came when she called to thank me and let me know that not only had she had a vaginal birth but that as far as she was concerned the cervix did open like a flower to welcome the baby through."

As you can see, a trained Hellerwork Practitioner can provide valuable support at any stage of pregnancy, before, during and after the happy event. At the heart of Hellerwork is respect for the client, the Hellerwork Practitioner meeting the client appropriately at the mid-point between what they have to offer in terms of their skills and compassion, and what the client is ready or able to receive. Each pregnancy is an unique process, bringing with it its own challenges and circumstances, problems and opportunities. Like a roller-coaster ride, you can't get off half way through, but you can learn to surrender to the process and enjoy the ride! Hellerwork can be considered a valuable adjunctive treatment which pregnant women may consider to further their self-empowerment and their ability to manage their own pregnancies.

Roger Golten
Hellerwork Practitioner
Email: rgolten@dial.pipex.com
Website: www.golten.net
For a list of Hellerwork Practitioners, visit www.hellerwork.co.uk

Further information: "The Owners Guide to the Body" by Roger Golten. Thorsons/Harper Collins. 1999.