



## Reshaping the Body in Collaboration

by Renee Podunovich • photos by Heather Martinez

In the waiting area of Anita L. Smith's office, the previous client calmly gathers her things. She turns toward me, takes a deep breath and says, "I feel like a brand new person." This reassures me. I am at the beginning of a healing journey, excited, but also aware of fear and anxiety. I too want to be a new person, but I know there is a path to travel, and I'm unsure what it entails. I'm pretty sure it includes trusting, letting go, expanding and opening — all desirable, yet part of me wants to remain this familiar self and cling to a sense of control, even when everything in my life directs me toward transformation. I am reminded of the words by Anaïs Nin: "And the day came when the risk to remain tight in a bud was more painful than the risk it took to blossom." Going into the unknown requires vulnerability. Going into it with another person requires collaboration.

Smith is a licensed massage therapist and certified advanced SOMA practitioner. For 30 years, she has studied and practiced SOMA Neuromuscular Integration™, a form of structural integration in the Rolfing tradition, with the inclusion of Craniosacral therapy. I am comfortable with her immediately, and aware of being in the presence of someone who has mastered her art over years of dedication, discipline and practice. She is a healing artist, and her medium is the bodymind — connective tissue, tendons, myofascia, muscles and nervous system. Like a sculptor and matter, Anita and I will collaborate in reshaping my body. "In the bodywork, I feel somewhat like Michelangelo, in that I can see and feel the essence of the being that is the potential and possibility of the individual seeking to emerge through the form, the body, the soma," says Smith.

In her early career, Smith taught high school physical education and believes her work incorporates this in a different form. As she stands me in front of a full-length mirror, I feel as though I am seeing my body for the first time. Kindly, and without judgment, Smith educates me about the physical self from which I am so often disconnected. Together we notice my ankles at this angle: one hip rotated forward and one falling

backward; one shoulder an inch lower than the other; and some encouraging things such as good muscle tone, a neutral gait and a clean diet reflected in healthy tissue.

SOMA founder Bill Williams, Ph.D., believed bodywork should incorporate the client as a member of the healing team, rather than as the submissive owner of a body to be manipulated. He believed that being re-educated and involved with the body leads to the experience of greater joy of movement and ease of being. The session is one of discovery and expansion. I notice the places that hurt most when touched are the places that most need to be touched. During the challenging moments, Smith coaches me to meet the touch with my breath and awareness, without any narrative from the mind about the sensations in the body. I learn how my body has been affected by my experiences; this tenderness is from wearing

heels, this one from too much computer work, this one from too much grief and loss. My body is shaped by my life experiences, both physical and emotional. It is held in certain ways because my mind developed fears, limits and barriers around those experiences. I meet the touch much the same way I react to the world — sometimes with fear, sometimes with ease, sometimes having to call on a deep, inner strength to meet it at all.

At the end of the session, I stand in front of the mirror again. The lightness, ease and sense of increased energy I feel are reflected in my posture. My shoulders are visibly more even, the pelvis not so tilted. Most noticeably, I feel taller, and later, when driving home, I have to adjust the rear-view mirror. I am given homework assignments and a "journey book" to track my experience through journaling and dreams. I feel a growing resolve to no longer limit myself in my mind or constrict my emotions in the old patterns reflected in my body. The tag line on the SOMA brochure Smith gives me is "The Physics of Consciousness," which seems to sum up my personal experience. I am glad to have the support and guidance of another person. This collaboration has been a success, and I leave in gratitude. 🌿

