

AN INTERVIEW WITH JUDITH ASTON

BY JULIE HAMMOND



I was very excited and a little bit nervous to interview Judith Aston. I have been told many great stories about Judith and even though I have had the pleasure of meeting her before I was quietly in awe of this very successful lady who is an important piece of the beginnings of Structural Integration. The interview went far too quickly and to be honest I could have listened to Judith talk for hours. She is a very intelligent, witty lady with a very infectious, playful laugh that I feel has probably got her in and out of trouble throughout her successful career.

Julie: This E mag is very much about experience and how your work changes over the years with refinement, maturity and a wealth of experience. So I would like to look at your life's journey and what led you to where you are now. Starting with your childhood. I read an article that said as a child you were a great mimic. Can you tell me about this?

Judith: Yes, for some reason, it was easy for me to duplicate other people's movement patterns, so when I did not remember someone's name, my mother and others would know who I was talking about. As a child I was always wanting to fix toys or problem solve things. For example, if a watch didn't work, I would take it apart and put it back together. It would work. Probably only because it was dirty and when I put it back together I cleaned it. Not because I felt I was a genius for fixing things but I was intrigued.

Someone who does a lot of work with Gil Hedley asked me "How did you discover the grain?"

I think it started probably as a child because I always wanted to do things faster, easier or better and if it could be all three, I really liked that the best.

PATTERNS

My mother would make apple pies and she would ask me to peel the apples. I would look and there would be an enormous bowl of apples and I would start peeling the apples and then something would happen and I would put it down and then go back and start again. However, something had happened and it was easier. The knife hadn't changed but evidently I started with the stem side of the apple instead of the other side of the apple. Only years later when I started teaching people about the grain of the tissue did I realise what I had been doing. The apple has a grain, everything has a grain. So I have been actually reading grains for a very long time. I have a curiosity about things that many people would probably let pass. If something gets my attention, I have to back up to try to figure out why it happened.

I don't know if you have flown with Southwest Airlines but they don't assign seats in the States. Everybody wants to get there early to get in line. You get to the airport and you see the line from the desk to the entrance to the airplane and it goes perpendicular to the flow of traffic at the airport. Why do people not go parallel to the traffic? Maybe it's because they are not paying attention.

Sometimes I would become the traffic director and say, "you know if you would just line up this way then I, being number 50, wouldn't be standing in the way of people walking down the terminal to get to their gate."

Julie: Did this get you into a lot of trouble?

Judith: Rather than get me into trouble, it has gotten me involved. Someone would ask me to do something I would ask, "Is it okay to possibly do this differently? Sometimes they would say "No just do what you have been asked..." like with former bosses.

But immediately, I was involved in trying to figure out an easier or faster way to do it. That seemed to be my curiosity and mission.

Julie: I read about your love of maths and patterns, what was it that got your interest?

Judith: I found very early on I had a skill and aptitude for maths and perceiving patterns. I think probably all of us do but my skill was highly tuned to patterns of voice, body motion or stillness and repetitions, maybe more so because I was sensitive to getting in trouble. I knew from three rooms away when my mother called if she was pleased or not. I think most kids know these voice patterns. For some people, it is a movement pattern, they cross their arms and they look at you with their head down and you know, even without them saying anything, that there is some concern. I became more and more aware of people's patterns and their differences.

I would say observing people's patterns, the maths and my desire to want to fix things have been my tendencies in life and still are.

Julie: I would imagine these were amazing skills to take into your movement education and body reading practice.

Julie: In the mere 17 years I have been in Bodywork, my treatments and hands have changed and it is not a lot of years in comparison to your work. What do you feel has changed for you? What have you learnt over the years?

Judith: Oh Lots, I have learnt so much..... I have also learnt how much I do not know; this is a great thing.

One of my college friends gave me an aptitude test for a study she was doing. She showed me a glass of water and said, "is that glass half full or half empty?" I said, "it depends, did you just hand me the glass or are you still pouring?" She just threw their hands up and said "could you just answer the question?" So I said "no it depends, the answer depends. If you are still pouring it will be half full. If I have drunk some then it is moving towards empty." This is how I make myself crazy because there are so many possibilities. Everything I have created has come from working with people and their questions. A client might say, "no-one can seem to figure out my discomfort or problem and I have had so much work." I suggest "Bend your knee and describe it." They say "that hurts when I bend my knee". Then I observe and neutralise their pattern by supporting them up in a certain way and say "bend your knee again".

They say, "it doesn't hurt." I reply "I believe it has something to do with the rest of your body and not as much in your knee, even though the original injury was at your knee".

An experience like that makes me want to teach people how to unweight a body to figure out where the consequence is coming from. These intriguing questions go on and on and on for me because I have by now worked with tens of thousands of people. This September will be my 54th year of teaching. (I think wow, I am seriously in awe)

Julie: You graduated from college (Masters in Fine Arts, Dance) in 1965. You developed your own programme for dancers and actors, can you tell me about this? Did you always have a clear vision of where you wanted to go?

Judith: No, not at all. As an undergraduate student at UCLA, I started teaching at a college in 1963. I was hired by a college to create movement programs for their theatre department, music department, physical education department and creative dance department. I remember saying "oh sure of course I can do that" and they said "good because that is why we are hiring you". I had to create a program for all athletes coming through to get their degree - that meant the football team, swimming team, water polo, you name it. I had to find common denominators to work with all these different athletes to help them improve their body movement skills. That was my first class you know and I had to teach them social dance, **she chuckles here....**

(Judith has the most amazing naughty laugh that can't be reflected in words but is obviously a hugely important piece of her character)



I WAS THE MOVEMENT LADY

Judith: The social dance instruction was pretty interesting and so was the modern dance. I frightened them by telling them they would have to wear tights. At that time men didn't usually wear tights, only in Robin Hood. Because I am a problem solver and the person who interviewed me appreciated this, he hired me. I stayed there nine years but in my sixth year there I had a terrible car accident. A car going fifty plus miles per hour rear-ended me. I had stopped - we didn't have seat belts in those earlier years. My body was whiplashed up from the seat, thrown back into an arch over the driver's seat and then thrown back into the steering wheel. When I came up again I saw my car was headed towards an 18-wheeler so I turned the wheel and went over a kerb and then another kerb into a parking lot. I was temporarily paralysed and I couldn't stand up straight; I couldn't get the last fifteen degrees of straight for a very long time. At the time, I also had a couple of other part time jobs and I became a movement lady for an Esalen type centre in California. I worked with great people - I was the "movement lady" for Fritz Perls and Alan Watts and all these great people.

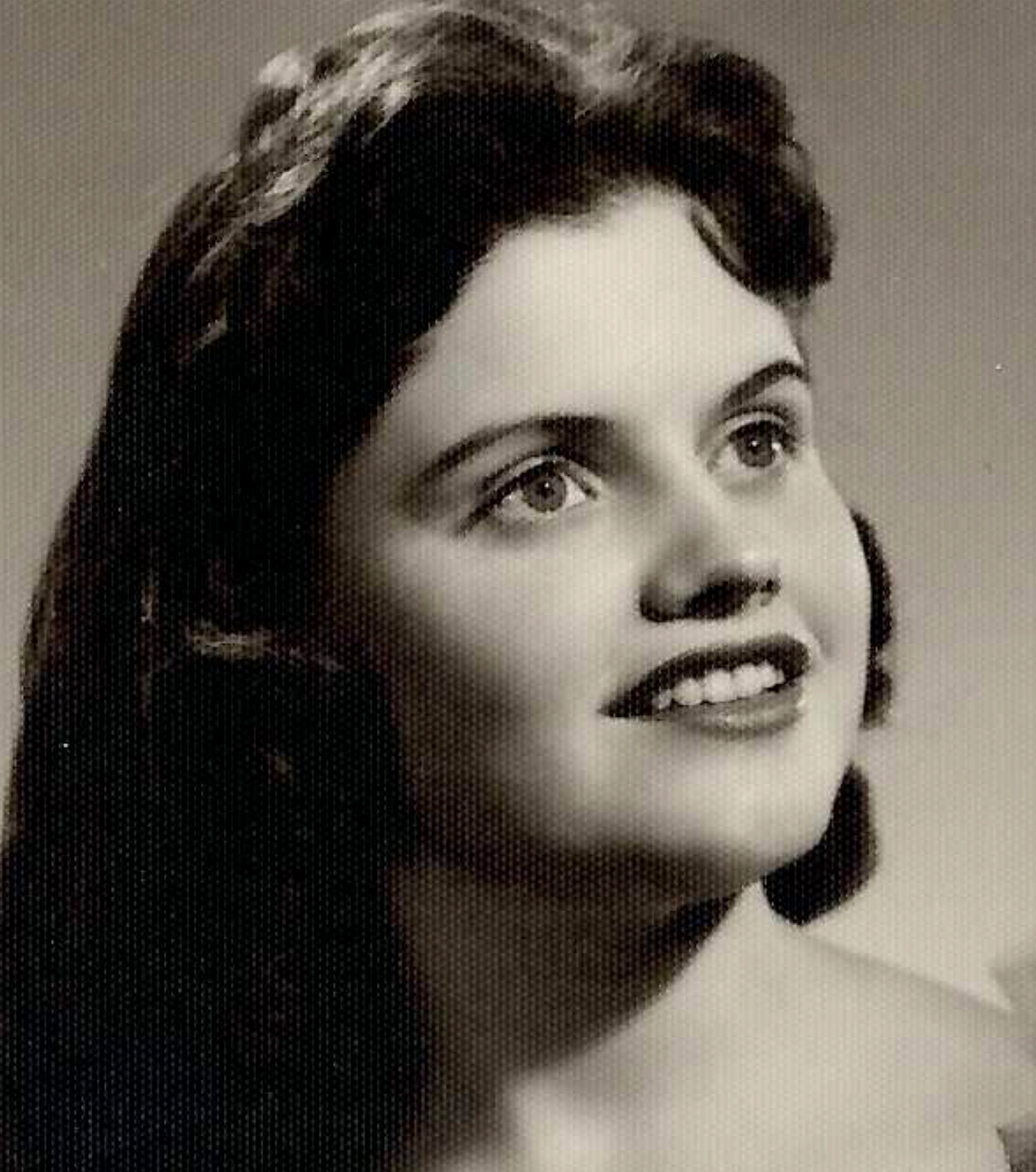
Julie: Can you tell me about the incidents that led you to meet Ida Rolf? Where was this? Do you remember your first session with her?

Judith: I co-lead groups with a psychiatrist named Dr Thomas Munson and he asked me to create a movement program for the people who took his weekend workshops. He saw me unable to straighten up and knew that I had been trying everything and asked how I was. I said, "you should be able to tell me, I have had scans and nothing is showing up and they are saying it's all in my head." He said, "no it's not in your head, I have heard of a woman they call the white witch Dr Ida Rolf, she is coming to Big Sur California in the spring and you should go see her."

I left there and started calling people at Esalen because I had taught at Esalen and they advised good luck because she is all booked. So I said "ok, I'm coming anyway."

This is the story many people have heard because I camped on her doorstep. She would open the door to let someone in or out and she would say "you're not still here are you?" I would say "oh yes I am waiting until you get a cancellation." So on the second day she opened the door and said, "I have an opening at 2pm tomorrow, be here."





Create

She must have done some homework on me wondering who the strange lady was on her doorstep. At that time, I was in my mid-twenties and I went into the session knowing nothing about it. She started working on me and I was surprised how this older woman (70s) used her knuckles and elbows to change tissue and it hurt. However, when she stopped, it didn't hurt, so I tested my movement because I knew my body and it had improved. I would say "Wow that's great how did you do that" and she would dig in some more and I would test it again, each time being able to straighten up more. I knew she had done some homework because somewhere in this session she said, "I understand you create movement programmes for different groups." I told her that's what I do and she said, "do you think you could create a movement programme for me, for Roling" and I said "sure", like I have said for many others.

She then went on to say she would have to train me and I asked why she would have to train me. She said "So you would know what to create." "Usually I just go and observe people, I ask questions and I create, then we go through the preliminary and we refine it" was my reply. She said very adamantly, "No, that won't work, I need to train you. Of course you will never make it in this field because you are too small but I still have to train you and the training starts mid-June". I said "Oh no Ida I am sorry, I finally get to go to Europe then, I have my plan to travel all over Europe" and she said "No, the class starts mid-June and you will have to change your plans". I started to say no again and she said "I said change it" and she said it strongly. In a tiny voice, I said, "okay".

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I SAW BODIES AS *shape and space.*

I did leave her house and remember leaping to my friends' house across the lawn to tell them that Dr. Rolf had performed a miracle on me and that she had asked me to develop a programme for her.

I cancelled my trip and because I was late to book accommodations, everything was booked. I moved 16 times in the six week training. I could stay with people one or two nights and then had to move on to another friend's house or the motel. I was a basket case by the time I finished. I loved auditing and seeing so many body patterns and also realized I had something to contribute. It was great to sit in on Dr. Rolf's training where I was again intrigued by the potential to change patterns and influence movement.

One of the movement programmes I had developed was called Stage Movement for Actors. I had to create the ability for these students to see bodies because they were 18 to 22 years old and if they had to portray someone 45 they made it look like they were 95. To them, being that old meant they were really old. They didn't understand how they walked. I had to teach them first of all about their own body and then how to use body patterns to change themselves into their character.

That experience helped me in Big Sur with Ida's class. I would be in the back of the room with other auditors and Ida would ask the group what they could see about the person standing in front of the class. Someone would whisper to ask me what I saw. I would say well the pelvis is higher on the left. They would go and tell Ida and she would say "well of course you're right but it's the psoas that is short on the right".

I didn't see muscles but Ida did, if you have ever heard stories, she would say "it's the upper part of the psoas just under your middle finger on the right." She was unbelievable. I did not see bodies through anatomy, I saw bodies as shape and space. People started hanging out with me at the back. I don't know if Ida was okay with that in the beginning but then she said "maybe you could teach a class for our students".

I did sometimes wonder if she wanted me there or not or did she just need a Girl Friday? I ran all her errands, I picked up her cleaning, I took all her messages and called people for her. So I thought maybe that was all she needed but then she started asking me about my opinion on movement.

That was the beginning of my connecting with Dr Rolf, how I found her and how I loved her forever, I still do and it was great. Studying Structural Integration with Dr. Rolf introduced me to bodywork. The field and its effects gave me numerous opportunities to apply many of my skills and interests and develop from there.



EXPERIMENTING



Julie: You were asked by Ida to develop her movement programme, how did you feel at the time? Did you realise the importance of this at the time?

Judith: Not at all. She turned me down on the last day of class. She waited until everybody had left and walked me out to my car which I thought was strange. She said "I have decided not to take you" and I said "sorry, what, surely I have misunderstood." She said "I have decided I am not going to train you after all." I asked her why and she said "you are too small, you just can't make it."

So I asked "why are you telling me now?" and she replied "I have just decided."

"You didn't know this a few days ago or maybe a few weeks ago, you couldn't have let me know?" She said, "no I have just decided now."

I told her she was wrong and hopped in my Firebird 400 and zipped down from Big Sur to Los Angeles, gunning it all the way and immediately enrolled into massage school.

Because I had been teaching at the college for five years, they wanted to make me a teacher at the massage school. This was working for me because I asked "would I be able to sign off on people I train who want to go into Roling?" They said, "yes we will authorise you" and I thought to myself "awesome I will become a teacher", (as she chuckles). I got my massage qualification and I gained ten pounds and I heard Ida was coming to Los Angeles for something. I wrote to Ida and asked to meet with her. I found out the cost for the full training which was February 1969 in Los Angeles. I went into my little savings, wrote a cheque and walked in to meet her.

Have you ever seen the Rolf walk? It's the waist line back, feet close together, pelvis tucked under slightly, elbows out, knee goes forward, top of the head up, chin in. I had the cheque in this hand and I walked like that and I said, "I have gained ten pounds." I walked by her and paused with the cheque and she took it and said "Alright, alright, alright". So I said "Ok then, am I accepted for the training?" She said, "yes you are". I did the training in February 1969 and I did the auditing in June 68.

Julie: Tell me about the auditing process?

Judith: Do you not have auditing?

(Dr. Rolf created the 6 week auditing class so that students could begin to train their sight and knowledge of the series before doing their practical training.)

Julie: No, we go straight into the training. They all have manual backgrounds although we have taken a couple of movement students, who I call our "wild cards." They have been really good - great hands with no preconceived ideas.

Judith: I think that's what I would probably have been called back then, her "wild card". Because she really didn't want to take me.

"The important piece isn't that someone is a movement therapist it is who they are besides being a movement therapist."

Dr. Rolf had asked Dorothy Nolte to supervise my practitioner training sessions with women and children who practiced in another room so Dr. Rolf could supervise the "bigger folks" in the main room. On the last day of the class, she said, "Dorothy Nolte has a movement program: maybe you could study with her."

So I did a lesson with Dorothy. It was lovely: body sensory work on the floor. I immediately called Dr. Rolf in New Jersey and said, "It's not at all what I had planned for our movement education. Do you want me to go ahead or not?" Dr. Rolf then gave me the go ahead to create my program.

Dr. Rolf gave a few exercises she liked in training classes. I included some of these. For example: toes up, feet up. I saw the need to create skill sets for practitioners, helping them assess, problem solve, and eventually teach, helping them with ways to communicate with each individual client. All these skill sets were needed so I kept creating. Because Ida did all my ten sessions, then she did advanced work, she didn't always use the recipe. I commented on that. I said "Ida, you are making everybody do the recipe only". She said, "I want everybody to do the recipe for five years."

I started experimenting and you are going to laugh at me Julie but I taught a class in England and said to this group "maybe you could start with the upper extremities instead of the lower in this sequence" and they were shocked. They were yelling heresy!!

I insisted with one practitioner because I could see his client could use the upper first and it totally threw him off. I felt bad because he was confused. So I started creating all new classes for these skill sets for people and that's how that grew.

Julie: What I like about the KMI /ATSI training is that in Part 3 the students are starting to find their own style and adapting it to suit their own style. But I do feel that you should follow a recipe for a long time until you understand it well enough to be able to mix it up. It's like baking a cake and making sure you follow the recipe until you understand how all the ingredients work together. You can't miss something out or add in something else.

Judith: Exactly, you know Ida had this worked out. The woman was brilliant. Also, from a marketing business point of view, people would travel to make sure they could get all their sessions and not be left unfinished. Once you have learnt from it then yes that's the time to start adapting it.

WONDERFUL SURPRISE

Julie: What made you decide to move away from Ida and the training?

Judith: I didn't decide, it just came to a natural end. I was doing a lot of presentations and I did one for a national psychology convention where someone in attendance listened to my presentation and wrote an article. I was Dr. Rolf's first faculty person, I worked on the movement and I started training people in 1971. I trained Rolfers between 1971 and 1977 in body mechanics and postural assessment. I think I worked with two hundred Rolfers as well as many people from movement practices. Then one day, a wonderful surprise - what happened was, things were expanding beautifully and Ida had asked me to work on her. I was extremely honored because of my care and admiration for her. I worked on her in Big Sur, New Jersey, Florida whenever we could meet. I assisted in several classes so I could be available.

Naturally, I incorporated the ideas that were coming to me in the work I did on Ida. I figured if she was not liking them she would have let me know, yet she hadn't said anything. At the same time that I started teaching and traveling around the country. Emmett Hutchins and Peter Melchior became faculty followed by Michael Salvesson and Jan Sultan and several others. I was the head of the movement education division because I had created it and I was on the board of directors. I got wind of a board meeting and I said "Oh I didn't know there was a board meeting." The person looked frozen and I deferred, saying, "that's ok, I can't go anyways". I didn't have a clue that the meeting was about me. I got called in to another board meeting about an article saying that Judith Aston, an originating genius had created soft Rolfing.

I got called in and they asked me to explain the article. I had to say "I'm sorry I don't know what you're talking about". I knew nothing about the article. They insisted I should remember being interviewed. I had never been interviewed.

Dr Rolf knew I worked on the diagonal pathways rather than perpendicular. The truth is I had never used the term soft Rolfing, but I did teach about vectors, body mechanics, and how to save the hands – all of which would make the work easier and more efficient. But people felt I had been disloyal to Dr. Rolf.

I need to digress slightly to give you one of the pieces that lead into all of this. In 1976 I organized a trip for 16 Rolfers to go on a 13-day trip down the Colorado River. Once we got past the first couple of days and we realised we were stuck with each other for that many days we made it work well. At the end of the first night trying to sleep on a tiny pad I went to the leader of the group and said "do they have any helicopters that can fly in here and take me away" he said "no, you're stuck here. "Oh no, I couldn't sleep last night I was so uncomfortable" and he said "well princess you are going to have to deal with it." So that night I thought, what can I do? I took my clothes out of my duffel bag and stuffed them in all the unsupported areas to support my body in neutral and I slept like a baby. I started putting this same idea of support into my sessions and I realised that I was more accurate with my strokes and I was more accurate in my sessions. I started introducing it into all my sessions and into my classes.

The teachers decided Ida should see this so during an advanced training, someone said "Ida, Judith has something to show you." I said, "I'm not sure if this is appropriate right now" **(with a little hint of humour in her voice)**. I told her the story and explained the pillow propping and I could see by her Triple Taurus expression that I was in trouble. "Why are you pampering the client, you don't need to pamper the client." She said, "it doesn't hurt when you get to that layer because you are not at the right layer. If it doesn't hurt, you are not getting it"

Afterward, I wondered how could I have missed that message. I had been teaching so many students how to work deeply without causing unnecessary pain for themselves or client. "Perhaps she felt on the spot and reacted. I did not have time to explain what I thought was the value of supporting the person and their pattern."

The stress went on for a while and I realised it wasn't going to work. I had more than enough material to teach if people wanted the information. Once I changed the alignment model of the details of good posture, a new paradigm emerged and things happened so fast I couldn't keep up.

So, I didn't plan on leaving: it just happened.

Julie: Is this when you developed Aston patterning or was it something else before then.

Judith: Originally, in 1970, I called it Rolf Aston Structural Patterning. In 1972, I started describing the movement work as Neuro-Kinetics. By 1976, I had uncovered a different biomechanical paradigm, so I called it Aston Patterning.

I kept describing new forms of the work. In 1977, I created a bodywork form called Arthro-Kinetics. In 1979, Myo-Kinetics. 1980, Ideo-Kinetics. As I added more and more forms, for massage, fitness, ergonomics, seniors, etc., I put all forms under one name: Aston Kinetics.

Julie: Where did your work go from there? Did you have a clear plan of how it was going to progress?

Judith: It progressed quickly. It wasn't long before I started to design ergonomic products. By 1983 I had created 300 product designs. I had 5 patents. It just came fast and furiously.

Julie: I was lucky enough to take a workshop in Australia with you and your husband (Brian Linderoth) taught alongside you. How did you two meet?

Judith: I used to teach 5-day intensives where people were welcome to come to receive bodywork, movement group classes, share several meals together, it was a community experience. Brian came to one of those, he came as a massage therapist, fitness trainer, he was a swimmer and coached swimming. He taught a few classes at Boulder School of Massage and he came to one of these intensives and decided he wanted to train, lucky me....



“BALANCE IS THE MOMENT TO MOMENT NEGOTIATION OF ASYMMETRICAL DIFFERENCES.”

So he trained and after that we became friends, then good friends, then a year and a half later we got married. We have taught together since mid-1984.

Julie: In Australia, Structural Integration has had a new lease of life through KMI, and the training is going from strength to strength. How is Structural Integration looked at in the USA? How do you feel it has changed? What would you like to see happen for the next generation of Structural Integration practitioners?

Judith: One of the dilemmas with Structural Integration is that the trainings vary widely depending on the teacher, and with so much variation, it can be challenging for one organization to guide its progression. Because of what Tom Myers has organized and by building a system with a specific focus that is anchored to and fits with Anatomy Trains, there is more consistency. I would suggest that this is key to its momentum and ability to attract a whole new generation of SI practitioners.

I would also like to congratulate you Julie as I know the job you have taken on is significant. Running my own company, I empathise with you knowing how much this encompasses.

I am so glad you and Lou Benson are working together. Through Lou, you were interested in doing this interview.

Julie: Structural Integration has a new lease of life and a lot of newer practitioners maybe don't understand the history. So for me I feel it is important to acknowledge where the work comes from and who it comes from. It's also about connecting the Structural Integration community.

Judith: In this day and age being able to easily communicate with each other around the world, makes it easier to be able to be cooperative with others and play well together, which brings a certain balance. My definition of balance is “the moment to moment negotiation of asymmetrical differences.”

“Balance is the moment to moment negotiation of asymmetrical differences.”

Julie: One more question: One piece of advice you would give to your younger self?

Judith: Be PATIENT., I am so fast and, when I was dancing at UCLA, when anything needed fast movement I got the part. My brain is fast, my wit is fast and my thinking and problem solving is fast. While I appreciate the positive aspects that come from this skill, my impatience would trip me up physiologically and spiritually. I am similar to my Firebird car that I drove from Big Sur. I had all the elements - fire, flying, speed.

Julie: Obviously your fire and determination is what led your amazing career so I wouldn't change a thing. It's what has driven you and I think you did it perfectly.

Judith: Oh, about perfection: I might say to a student, “I tell you why I want to give you this feedback - it appears as though you are trying to perform for me and other faculty and not make a mistake. Your cautiousness is interrupting you. So here's the deal: if you make a mistake you get to learn at least two things. You get to learn what not to do and you get input from your teacher on how to do it differently. Let go of the stress of perfection and make grandiose mistakes.” This is another example of one of our main concepts: “learning by contrast”.

“ So here’s the deal: if you make a mistake you get to learn at least two things. You get to learn what not to do and you get input from your teacher on how to do it differently. Let go of the stress of perfection and make grandiose mistakes.”

Judith: Moshe Feldenkrais taught a class in 1972. He was teaching in one room in Big Sur and Ida Rolf was teaching in another and I was going back and forth. One day he was feeling frustrated. I said, “I’m sorry, I need to go back over to Ida’s class” He said “yes, yes Structural Integration, if she can call it Structural Integration I am going to call this work Functional Integration” and that’s where it came from. Talk about being at a moment where something gets created, that was fun.

Judith: Julie, thank you for your interest. You are a fun interviewer!



BIOGRAPHY:

Judith Aston is widely recognized as a pioneer in the art and science of kinetics for her discovery of the Aston® Paradigm and consequent development of the many forms of movement training, bodyworks, fitness programs and ergonomics of Aston® Kinetics.

She created and developed Aston Kinetics as an educational system of movement and bodywork that aims to treat a person’s physical body as something that is unique to them. Rather than to enforce physical symmetry, Aston Kinetics seeks to recognize the asymmetries that are natural to a person’s body. Aston Kinetics is a holistic approach and works to ensure that the whole body is in sync with itself.

Early in her career, from 1963 to 1972, Judith taught movement, physical education and dance for performing artists and athletes at Long Beach Community College. In 1968, at the request of Dr. Ida Rolf, she developed the movement education program for Rolfing SI and taught this program until 1977.

In 1999, Judith was honored by the Association of Humanistic Psychology for her work as a somatic pioneer, 2006 National Office of Aging - Best Practices in Health Promotion Award, 2008 AMTA President’s Award for Distinguished Service, and was inducted into the Massage Therapy Hall of Fame at the World Massage Festival in 2011. She was also included in a documentary by Emilie Conrad for the Moving Legends: Individuals who have created somatic systems beginning as dancers. She is particularly proud of her charter membership in the Nevada Inventor’s Association.

Judith divides her time between presenting and teaching bodywork, fitness, performance, and movement workshops. She leads many Aston Kinetics training and certification courses, as well as speaking at professional conferences. She devotes a portion of her time to work on her ergonomic product designs and re-envisioning how products can work optimally for the body in various environments. Judith lives with her husband Brian Linderth in Lake Tahoe, Nevada, the headquarters for Aston Kinetics, and part time in Hawaii.

Judith is tentatively scheduled to teach at the summer school in Maine in 2018.

**For more information on Judith go to:
<http://www.astonkinetics.com>**