

IN MEMORIAM
“Conductor of the Bodymind”

Laura Hope Steckler



Ilana Rubinfeld
1934 – 2022

Ilana Rubinfeld has passed away, leaving behind a major bodymind legacy. She has been variously referred to as “the Grande Dame of the body-oriented therapy movement,” “the Godmother of talk-and-touch therapies,” and “the genius of touch” (Rubinfeld, 2000).

Originally an orchestra conductor, the rigors of conducting led to chronic back and shoulder pain that, after the medical profession offered little or no help, was eased by use of the Alexander Technique. She was so impressed that she trained as an Alexander teacher.

She subsequently trained with Moshe Feldenkrais in the Feldenkrais Method® of somatic education. Completing the cocktail of methods that eventually became the Rubinfeld Synergy Method® (RSM), she trained with Gestalt therapy founders Fritz and Laura Perls at Esalen in the 1960s. She began to weave these three methods into her own cloth. Her synthesis of bodywork and psychotherapy has been described as “conducting the bodymind.”

Her method eventually came to be called The Rubenfeld Synergy Method® after demonstrating her work to Buckminster Fuller, who said that she was not just doing a combination of Alexander Technique, Feldenkrais®, and Gestalt therapy, but that she was “synergizing.” Indeed, as Gestalt psychology tells us: “The whole is greater than the sum of its parts.”

To this day it is rare, if not impossible, to find anyone who has so seamlessly and elegantly synthesized bodywork and verbal psychotherapeutic exchange. She would refer to each session as a “piece,” i.e., a work of art. And, indeed, the work was artful, musical, and beautiful. Each session captured universal themes that emerged from the client’s bodymind.

Early Life & Roots of RSM

Born in Tel Aviv, Israel, Ilana Rubenfeld came to the United States at the tender age of five. Her family escaped in 1939, before their hometown was bombed. Music was her first love; her book *The Healing Hand* (2000) begins with the sentence “Music saved me.”



***Leading a Rubenfeld Synergy session is like conducting Haydn’s “Creation.”
It is a journey of great depth.***

***We enter the chaos before creation, hear the birth of the universe,
rejoice in the theme of variations of life,
and discover and integrate the harmonious soul voice that is within each of us.***

—Ilana Rubenfeld (2000)

Rubenfeld was a highly successful musician. She studied at the Manhattan School of Music, and then studied conducting at the Juilliard School of Music, where she received her B.S. degree in 1960, as well as the Frank Damrosch Award for Outstanding Conducting. At that time, female conductors were a rare breed! Rubenfeld approached the professional trainings in Rubenfeld Synergy® with the rigor and meticulousness of a dedicated musician.

Like so many healers, her journey began with her own wounding; a spasm in her back led her first to seek relief in the Alexander Technique in the early 1970s. As the Alexander work supported her to open in her body, she noticed strong and powerful emotions emerging. Her Alexander technique teacher was not equipped to help her process these emotions, and so she sought verbal psychotherapy.



She found, however, that verbal work did not facilitate the depth of emotional experience as did her work with touch. She began to feel that these two arenas should be integrated, and then had an insight that she, herself, would need to do this. This journey of integration led to her work with Moshe Feldenkrais and Fritz and Laura Perls. Upon witnessing her emerging synthesis, Fritz Perls told her he felt this was the future of Gestalt therapy.

Like Perls, Rubinfeld was also influenced by the “sensory awareness” practices of Charlotte Selver, a student of Elsa Gindler who took Gindler’s work to the USA after the most of her writings had been burned by the Nazis (Johnson, 1995). When asked why she had her stu-

dents lie on the floor so much during trainings, Rubinfeld loved to quote Selver: “Something’s gonna change, and it wouldn’t be the floor!”

Rubinfeld also spent time in Brazil, where she studied with traditional healers. She incorporated some of these techniques into RSM, including ‘brushing off’ energy from clients (and practitioners) that was released during sessions. She also began a subtle somatic mirroring of the movement of energy she felt in her hands. Although she never described the work in this way, it had some similarity to craniosacral therapy (see for example Sills, 2011).

As her method developed, she began to see clients, and became quite busy as demand for the work grew. She witnessed rapid transformation and healing that she felt would otherwise take years using verbal psychotherapy alone.

She offered well-attended workshops in her method at Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California, the Omega Institute in Rhinebeck, New York, the Hollyhock Retreat Center on Cortes Island in British Columbia, and the Rowe Conference Center in the Berkshire Mountain foothills in Massachusetts.

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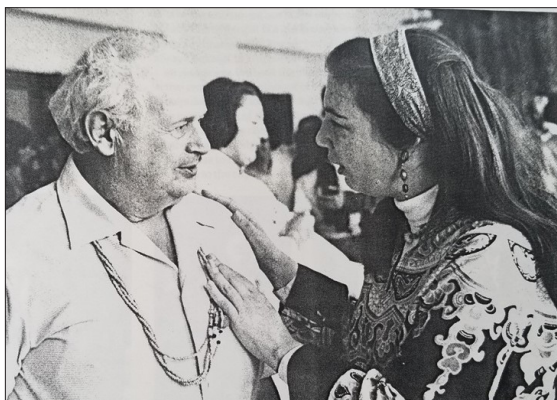


The Method

Rubinfeld used a “listening touch,” somewhat different from what she had learned as an Alexander teacher. Alexander used a directional intent in his method of touch. Hers was a very light touch that facilitated sensing in the hands the movement (or lack thereof) of energy in the body. She called it a “butterfly touch,” which might reflect the influence of Eva Reich (Overly, 1994/2004). The energetic response she felt in her hands would direct her verbal enquiry, and vice versa. At times, if she felt a stagnation in response to what the client said, she would say: “Your body doesn’t believe you!”

Rubinfeld always felt that the body and mind were integrally connected. She believed that the word “bodymind” should be used to reflect this. To honor that, this term is used throughout this article. She further held that in using a listening touch, we are contacting the whole person, facilitating the emergence of stories held in the body that needed to be heard and witnessed, and the energy they held that needed to be released. Not unlike Reich, she further believed that blocking emotions in various ways led to disharmony in the bodymind. Unlike Reich, however, she felt that armoring could be melted in a gentle manner.

She believed that string theory’s multidimensional model of inner space provided a good model for bodymind dynamics, and that there was a musicality and sound oscillation to emotions throughout the entire body (Rubinfeld, 2016). Thus, she described her work in musical rather than anatomical terms. During trainings, she often made musical sounds to describe what she felt in her hands during a session.



Ilana with Moshe Feldenkrais (left) and Buckminster Fuller (right)

At the time that her work developed, the Cartesian body/mind split was still prevalent. The use of touch in psychotherapy was virtually unheard of, although Gerda Boyenson was beginning to develop psychotherapeutic touch work around the same time in Europe (Young, 2022). Well before the publication of the seminal *Descartes’ Error* (Damasio, 2006), Rubinfeld instinctively sense what we somatic psychotherapists now know: the body and mind are integrally connected, and including the body in psychotherapy is crucial for more complete therapeutic change. Candace Pert, author of *Molecules of Emotion* (1997), had a session with Rubinfeld and subsequently told her that her research and Rubinfeld’s work were based on the same principle: “the body has emotions.”

Mindfulness and compassion-focused work, which include interoception and the use of imagery and breath, have been well-researched as effective interventions for psycho-

logical well-being, (Khoury et al., 2013; Kirby et al., 2017), but did not exist at the time Rubinfeld was developing her work. A number of interventions used in these approaches are similar to those used by Rubinfeld, such as visualizing a substance or color coming into the body, or sensing difficult emotions in the body with curiosity rather than judgment or preference. The Gestalt-based intervention “If your... (belly, arm, foot, shoulder)... could speak, what would it say?” is one such example of a mindfulness approach. She was truly a trailblazer.

Touch, as used in RSM, seems to facilitate interoception, which has now been shown to be associated with greater affect regulation, and is implicated in greater psychological well-being (Khalsa et al., 2018; Price et al., 2018).

In addition, it has been found that touch can lead to increased vagal activity (Field, 2008) and increased parasympathetic activity in the autonomic nervous system. Touch can lower blood pressure, slow down the heartbeat, and reduce cortisol, and triggers the release of oxytocin (Field, 2014). None of this confirmatory research existed at the time Rubinfeld developed her work.

Rubinfeld also felt that many somatic experiences could be metaphors for a client’s psychological functioning. Her work has been described as hypnotherapeutic; indeed, she would tell trainees that their client was in a trance state, and that they too, were in a trance state when working in this way. Her work has been compared to that of the pioneering hypnotherapist Milton Erickson (Rubinfeld, 2000). After witnessing her work, an Eriksonian colleague told Rubinfeld that the safe container created by her use of gentle touch and humor naturally facilitated a trance state.

According to Erickson & Rossi, analogy, metaphor, and even jokes can be understood as potent medicine for the unconscious mind by activating “association patterns and response tendencies that suddenly summate,” leading to new perspectives and responses (Erickson & Rossi, 1976/2021). Thus, insights gained in RSM sessions were embedded in the unconscious bodymind, perhaps accounting for some of the rapid transformations experienced by her clients.

She also emphasized the healing power of humor, which may also have functioned as described by Erickson & Rossi. She was not always able to articulate how she did this, as it came to her so intuitively. It is my belief that she had an uncanny ability to combine deep compassion with the awareness of the many paradoxes of being human that led to this humor, which was what made it so successful. She emphasized that deep laughter can be just as cathartic and healing as crying or expressing rage.

Training Others

People told her she could not train others to do what she did; it was felt that the success of the work was unique to her character and her particular abilities. She did, however, come to train many others, beginning in 1977. There are now over 800 certified practitioners across the globe. Her trainees came from a wide variety of backgrounds, and include psychotherapists, bodyworkers, social workers, musicians, and educators.

In classical Gestalt fashion, each and every trainee had an individual session with Rubinfeld in front of the whole group. Rubinfeld wrote (1992) that the table replaced the “hot seat.” These sessions would be preceded by didactic material, poetry, music, or jokes. She recorded everything she did, and then meticulously watched and critiqued what she saw. She left 400 hours of instructional training videos to The Ilana Rubinfeld Foundation.

She had a strong belief in the healing power of music, so music and dance were an integral part of the training experience. She often played music before sessions began,

and after trainees had sessions with her. This created an atmosphere suited to whatever was focused on that day. Trainings took place in her West Village brownstone basement, where there was a beautiful grand piano with a sign that said, “Don’t even think about touching this!”

Rubinfeld likened the synthesis of touch, movement, and therapeutic dialogue to conducting, as one had to simultaneously attend to multiple elements. She often gave trainees brief lessons in conducting. She “scored” RSM sessions according to the somatic intervention, client response, and her observations and reflections (Rubinfeld, 1992).

She emphasized self-care in her trainings, often reminding trainees to be really clear about their boundaries, to sense themselves, and not get enmeshed with their clients.

Witnessing her working with others was a rather magical experience. The work usually took place with the client fully clothed, lying on a massage table. There was something about that combination of compassionate humor with the universal themes that emerged from each session that was fascinating to watch. There was a performative element to the work. Rubinfeld managed to balance staying with her client, her own body, and connected to her audience simultaneously. She made it look easy! There were often

tears and abundant laughter in the witnessing audience.



In 1998, Rubinfeld held a year-long group/workshop leadership training together with the late longstanding RSM practitioner and theatre director Bernie Coyne. Evolving from this training, a new program, RSM for Life, has now been developed.

In 2000, she published her long-awaited book, *The Listening Hand: Self-Healing Through the Rubinfeld Synergy Method of Talk and Touch*. In 2015, she published a chapter on the history, theory, and practice of

hands-on somatic-emotional release work in *The Handbook of Body Psychotherapy and Somatic Psychology* (Rubinfeld & Griggers, 2015).

Last Words

Rubinfeld was once described as an urban shaman. She was earthy, feisty, funny, fiercely intelligent, and fabulously well-read. When she turned 60, she would get a big grin on her face and say, “Still juicy at 60!”

She was fierce in her dedication and commitment to her work. This at times could lead to conflict and disharmony amongst those she worked with. However, many practitioners remember her with gratitude for the work they did with her personally and professionally. One psychotherapist said working with RSM is like “doing therapy in color.” Suzanne Forman (1998), a massage therapist, describes feeling that her work became three-dimensional after training with Rubinfeld.

In 1994, Rubinfeld was given the Pathfinder Award by the Association of Humanistic Psychology for her outstanding contributions to Humanistic Psychology. In 2002, she received a Lifetime Achievement Award from the United States Association for Body Psychotherapy.

Rubenfeld moved to Ashland, Oregon in 2000, and reconnected with music, her first love. She passed away peacefully in December 2022 after an extended period of ill health. She was 88 years old.

*A simple and quiet end
To an extraordinary life,
One breath, and no more.
A hummingbird (yes, really)
Zipped back and forth
Above her brightly colored
Shroud
To a nearby tree
As her body was wheeled
Away.*

Brian Kerns
Executive Assistant



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For more information about The Rubenfeld Synergy® Method,
see <https://usabp.org/Rubenfeld-Synergy-Method-Training> and <https://www.rubenfeldsynergy.com/>

Donations may be made in Ilana Rubenfeld’s name to The Ilana Rubenfeld Foundation (TIRF) www.rubenfeldfoundation.org

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