

**Why I Work on the Side: A Quiet Evolution in Bodywork**  
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*I feel like I have been holding on to a big secret since 1987. I hope that you will be able to feel my ardor and enthusiasm in this article. It is rare that I have had the opportunity in my life to develop something new and find out that it really works well; so well in fact that I think it may change the way bodywork is viewed and practiced. Others have been uncovering the same secret in their own work. Sssh! The secret is that side-lying is easier for the practitioner, more comfortable for the client, and incredibly effective!*

In 1987 I had my first introduction to side-lying in a Trager® class taught by Betty Fuller who was Milton Trager's first official protégé. Like most of you, when I was introduced to side-lying I was told that it was to be used with special needs clients, like pregnant women or for people with extreme back problems and so on. I remember the feeling of receiving work on the side for the first time... it felt so good! I was new to *Trager* and studying and practicing diligently. But I realized during that class that I'd never felt as good after a session!

In the world of *Trager*, as in the bodywork field in general, side-lying was considered one of a series of stop-gap approaches to be used when necessary. Milton Trager rarely worked persons on the side and he never taught moves for side-lying. Betty's class lasted two days and she covered other ways of working clients as well. The side-lying work was considered second-rate compared to prone and supine. Unless one specialized in pregnancy massage or with other special needs clients, there was really no reason to use side-lying.

I suspect that most persons who teach side-lying rarely use it and so the classes are limited in scope and repertoire. Talking with my bodywork colleagues over the years I've found that most do not use side-lying because they consider it less effective. Hence they do not spend enough time practicing it to build confidence. Most of the practitioners I've met who use side-lying regularly have had similar experiences to mine. They felt something different on the side that provoked their interest and they've had very good results with their clients.

One week after the class I received a call from a friend, Penny, a fellow Orcas Islander, whose back was spasming so badly that she had to crawl on all fours to get around. As I drove to her home I wondered if I'd really be able to help her. Her husband and I both had to carefully support her to get her up on to my table. Something very unique happened during that session that has colored the way I have done bodywork ever since. She had done quite a bit of inner work on herself. Thus she was able to feel into any part of her body and give me accurate feedback on what sensations she was experiencing.

I started with the moves I'd been taught by Betty Fuller. Some of those moves were helpful but, thanks to the accuracy of Penny's feedback, we quickly found that we needed to adapt and create new moves together. The session went on for about 1½ hours. It was primarily a Trager session with lots of improvisation. At the end of the session, although still feeling pain, she was able to walk without help. Over the next seven weeks I saw her two to three times a week. During that time I was able to hone my skills, trying out a variety of approaches and checking out the results. Those sessions were also memorable because she was my first insurance client. So I had to chart the sessions, a challenge in itself especially since many of the moves were experimental. Since that time Penny has never had a return of the debilitation she had experienced.

Because of the success I was having with Penny, I started experimenting at the spa at Rosario Resort with the same moves whenever a client reported back problems or difficulties lying prone. The successes multiplied and I got a reputation at the resort as someone who could fix backs and frozen shoulders. After a few months I flashed on the idea that I should try using side-lying in all of my sessions. This would give me even more feedback about the efficacy of the work and lots of opportunities to try out new moves. Most of my clients reported, as was true with me, that they actually enjoyed the side work even more than prone or supine. Since then I have been using side-lying in almost every session.

I also experimented with different types of bolstering. What I discovered was that there were great advantages to the way the bolstering complimented the intention of the moves. The bolsters were not just supporting the body in different positions but were becoming platforms to work off of and spacers that would allow the loading and unloading

of joints and connective tissue. Because *Trager* involves rhythmical movement of the client's body the bolstering could be customized to allow more or less movement.

Because I was working at a resort and typically seeing clients for only a few sessions, I could explore different techniques and find out what offered the best results. Also because of the formative sessions with my friend Penny, I developed a method with which I could draw the client into each body part that was being worked and eliciting feedback that would accurately report sensations. I am grateful for the opportunities the resort offered me to be creative and I bless those clients who helped me to learn.

Over the years, having given thousands of sessions, I realize that side-lying offers so many advantages that it could arguably be used in every session, not only in *Trager* but also in every school of bodywork. Here are some of the advantages that I found:

- Most clients, when properly bolstered, are more comfortable and less resistant when lying on their sides.
- Clients who have been abused usually feel much safer, less vulnerable in the semi-fetal position that side-lying offers.
- Gravity can be used to great advantage because of the way it loads the joints and muscle tissue, hips, shoulders, abdomen.
- The therapist benefits from all the positioning advantages and thus doesn't have to work so hard.
- There is comparatively little body surface in contact with the table so one can introduce movement with very little effort. Like a pendulum the further away a body part is from the table the easier it is to keep in motion.
- The shoulder girdle and hip that is not on the table can be decompressed and tension in the joint released non-reflexively with the help of gravity.
- Small amounts of motion can be transmitted through the joints with very little effort and very pleasurable effect to the client.
- The body in a side-lying position is similar to a piano keyboard with various body parts readily accessible at the same time.
- The body in the sagittal plane is asymmetrical from back to front so you can take advantage of the different way the body moves. For instance, the pelvis and shoulder uppermost move independently of the torso. When any one is put into motion a gentle and freeing torque is created along the spine.
- There is a three-dimensional effect to the work that is unique and the tensegrity structure of the body as a whole can be felt and articulated more easily.
- It is easier to feel relationships between different body parts.
- Certain body parts, like the ribs, trochanter, IT band and scapula can be compressed, lifted and moved directly, independent of the underlying structure.

I believe that it is time for us to change our view of side-lying as a tool in our profession. I know that I'm not alone in that view. Positioning clients on the side is nothing new, however the distinct advantages of this work have lain dormant over the years, unknown except to a few. There is an elegance and beauty to this work that needs to be revealed. I hope that I have sparked your interest.

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