

From Intensive Care to Center Stage

A Rolfer™/Rolf Movement® Practitioner Helps a Singer Recover from Polytrauma

By Bárbara Brevá, as shared with Bibiana Badenes, PT, Certified Advanced Rolfer®, Rolf Movement Practitioner



*Bárbara Brevá and
Bibiana Badenes*

ABSTRACT *A singer shares how her work with Rolfer and Rolf Movement Practitioner Bibiana Badenes helped her recover from significant polytrauma caused by a motor vehicle accident. The rehabilitative work, even when different than traditional Rolfing® Structural Integration, was based in the Rolfing Principles of Intervention.*

Introduction by Bibiana Badenes

Through working with Bárbara Brevá I learned that the body has its own rhythms and that there is a natural process for healing. But it is touch, being present, and integrating the parts – that is our mastery as Rolfers.

I'm going to let Bárbara tell this story, as it is the story of how her great strength, presence, and understanding led not only to healing, but to her finding her true self.

Bárbara's Story

On December 10, 2018, I was with my parents in the car when we went off the road. I remember it perfectly. I was in the back seat, half reclined. We made a few turns until the car overturned and left the road. It was a good vehicle: all the airbags inflated, and that (and a little bit of luck) saved our lives. The immediate help we received – cars that stopped, firefighters, ambulances, police, and emergency doctors – contributed to our survival as well.

I was conscious, I knew everything, but I couldn't move. Impossible! The feeling was strange. As if the signal from my brain ordering "move" didn't reach my arm, my shoulder, much less my sides. When I arrived at the hospital, I had a CT scan. The diagnosis was scary: fifteen or sixteen broken bones, the liver and lung affected, pneumothorax (the presence of air or gas in the cavity between the lungs and the chest wall, causing collapse of the lung), and a major internal hemorrhage that put my life in danger. My pelvis had been broken in several places; I had at least six broken ribs and other cracked ribs; the humerus, clavicle, and a lumbar vertebra all were broken. No wonder I couldn't move!

Immediately they punctured into my thoracic cavity to withdraw fluid so that the air that was between the lung and the pleura released, thus relieving the pneumothorax. They plastered my arm and shoulder, plugged in a few catheters, and put me in a box in the ICU – full of cables, monitors everywhere, an oxygen respirator, a morphine syringe – very tired



Figure 1: In the hospital immediately after the accident.

but with a lot of faith. I also watched them transfuse me, one bag of blood after another. When I saw them coming and going I thought, “This must be serious!” – but not so much as to lose consciousness or good humor.

The next day, or two days later, Bibiana Badenes came to see me at the intensive care unit during visiting hours. [I had previously received Rolfing Structural Integration (SI) sessions from her.] She looked at me and said with a smile, “You’ll get out of this one, but you’re going to get tired of seeing me!” Later, Bibiana told me that she felt she should be there when she heard in town about our accident, that she was walking down the street and she kept hearing something that Dr. Ida Rolf had said, about only a Rolfer can reorganize a body and give it back its potential and its integration.

Bibiana had told me that I would be fine, but maybe I would get tired of seeing her. And so it was. I left intensive care. And yes, I saw her! But I didn’t get tired of seeing her. On the contrary, it was a precious and very enriching experience to see her tenacity and desire to help me move forward and improve in spite of all the adverse circumstances.

After fifteen days, it was Christmas. Bibiana came to see me with a bag full of “toys” – little balls of different sizes, springs for the hand, rubber bands. I had just had an operation on my arm and had a surgical fixation of my lumbar vertebra, and I barely had any strength. I still couldn’t move – only my neck and my left arm and hand responded, which was my salvation during those days. Little by little, my legs began to move, just to bend them was an achievement! And

to raise the pelvis minimally to be able to introduce a wedge was a great effort. I felt like a dejected explorer lost in the middle of the jungle without being able to move, but I was surrounded by so much affection everywhere that it became very bearable. The days passed and my back was still ‘attached’ to the bed, but with a good dose of painkillers and patience, everything was slowly taking shape.

Bibiana kept coming and told me what to do (e.g., working small gestures, relaxation, visualizations, mobilizations) so that I would not lose contact with my body. She told me that she was giving information to my nervous system to not be afraid, to start repairing, and for the myofascial tissues to heal in an orderly way.

Almost a month later, I was told it was time to go home. I complained, “I can’t even get up yet!” But they helped me sit in a wheelchair (the pelvic fracture barely allowed me to put my feet down), and then we went home!

therapy that she was doing every day recreated my full rib expansion and the continuity of my breath.

Bibiana insisted that although she did not apply the work of the Rolfing method, she followed the principles of it [Editor’s note: the Principles of Intervention]. She spoke of the holistic concept, adaptability, support, and palintonicity. She told me that through me she could understand better than ever these principles. I did not understand much, but I felt full of confidence in this work and in my body too.

We worked on getting up without forcing. She had me put my feet on the wall and imagine an artificial floor; she placed pillows and different textures under my feet to activate the receptors of the plantar sole. Sensing the feet and directing the force towards the wall was a first step before I was able to sit down. As soon as I could sit alone in the wheelchair, and from there go alone to the bathroom pushing myself with my feet and hands, I

[To paraphrase Ida Rolf:] Only a Rolfer can reorganize a body and give it back its potential and its integration.

Bibiana, who had come to see me at least a couple of times a week at the hospital, continued to do so at home. And we started to work! Not only me, but also my family, who were almost as battered but fortunately all safe. Their perseverance meant that soon I was able to begin to sit up almost alone (helped by the hospital bed which lifted my back) and to sit in the wheelchair. Bibiana taught me to turn, to crawl, to work the support from any part of the body.

She insisted that I should start singing, and we worked on my ribs. She started by putting her hands around my rib cage. I could feel the places where they were broken as she whispered, “Stay present; move my hands from inside out; do not push.” All my ribs seemed to understand the message, “Use your breath, send your breath where I am touching and working with you at this present moment.” She also tied a soft ball around my chest to increase interoception and proprioception and to expand the movement of the rib cage. She did not force and all the manual

was happy. “I am free!,” I thought, “I can go to the bathroom by myself now!”

It was hard for me to move, though. It seemed that I had no strength in the abdomen. We worked the abdomen with weights, progressively increasing the weight. As Bibiana worked my tissues, she told me that the lines of force were almost integrated and that I was not going to limp. It was almost an obsession for her – how to reconnect everything, how to give information to my nervous system, to my muscles, joints; but she didn’t force me in any way. The right arm began to respond, where there had been almost no movement. We began to work the lines of force, the projection in space, although I could not yet do much force and my nerves hurt a lot, or so I thought. With her techniques, a mixture of Rolfing SI, traditional physiotherapy, osteopathy, and a lot of experience and a clinical eye, Bibiana was able to remove the nerve pain in my arm – hallelujah!

Soon I dared to sit in the shower on a small stool. (Bibiana almost pushed me

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into the shower.) I opened the tap and what a sensation! It's amazing how the little things of every day become a blessing when you haven't been able to do them for a long time; it was like I had lost those basic pleasures. But when I turned on the faucet, I felt like the water was running through me; passing the sponge over my skin, washing my hair . . . and best of all, I wasn't afraid. I wasn't afraid that something would hurt me, that I would look bad. I was just letting my body recover and slowly return to its normal state.

Every day we were working: move feet and hands, get up a little better, turn around in bed (this cost me a lot!), raise the limited arm, expand my movements. We never forced; there was hardly any pain. We worked with the sensation, and Bibiana repeated, "What does your body want to do?" She looked at me and said, "You will be fine sooner than you think." And she was right! In less time than expected, I was traveling around the house in a wheelchair like a fallow deer, helping myself with my hands and feet and overcoming all kinds of obstacles: closed doors, corners, furniture in the middle of nowhere.

And then I dared to go out into the street with the chair! Bibiana took me out and taught me to go down the ramp alone. Two months had passed since the accident, and I went to the bar on the corner to have some wine with my friends. What a sensation!

Meanwhile, people's support through social media and visits had been constant. I couldn't complain. What friends I have! They didn't leave me alone for a moment. Neither did my parents, who were recovering little by little. My mother was recovering from the scare, because physically she was better off. Bibiana worked on her because she was starting to develop Sudeck Syndrome in the hand that she injured. She responded quickly and that disappeared after a few

sessions. Then we gave her a job – she had to take care of her daughter and her husband! My father was recovering his mobility, his consciousness (he was more sedated than me), his prodigious mind, his usual vitality, and his sense of humor. Bibiana did a lot of work with all three of us. She went from treating just me to treating all of us. She came to see us two or three times a week and spent some time with each of us, doing the most appropriate exercises or therapies.

At the beginning of the third month, one day she told me, "I believe that in no time you will be able to get up and start walking." I didn't believe it – getting up? I was told not to expect to walk until almost summer. But it was the month of March and, indeed, I started getting up! As a transition, Bibiana told me that we were both going to a pool; and she brought me crutches to start walking. The water work was connecting and re-establishing communication in my body, as if the parts were talking to each other and signaling each other again, first clumsily, then better and better. She

took me in her arms; she moved me in the warm water. My nervous system was ready; I was ready. Then, I walked through the pool. No limping, full range of motion.

My feet had become like those of a baby. All the calluses had fallen off and it seemed like I had been given new feet. The calluses never came back because of the new way of walking: following Bibiana's advice, I started walking again as if I had never done it before. New technique! With new support, my footfall improved a lot. Now the exercises became more vigorous. Besides balls with the foot, we played to catch balls with the arms, more movements, a lot of crawling, and, little by little, I was doing exercise as I could, even if it was half a squat. I also went to the hospital three times a week for magnetotherapy, which contributed to the consolidation of the bones. Meanwhile, the X-rays were giving good news.

The doctors were amazed at my recovery.

People came to visit me from City Hall and asked me to sing at a very important event in the city where I live: the Galania (homage to the fiesta queen at the town's main festival). I had not lost my voice, nor bellows, nor respiratory capacity! I only needed a little more support as a result of not exercising it. Then I really understood that fear influences singers more than physical limitations. I had not lost voice, nor performance, nor movements. Bibiana impressed on me, "Where does your voice come from?"

I went onto the stage through the big door, and I knew that nothing was going to stop me. Hardly anyone knew that I was already walking, so it was a surprise to see me climb with my own feet onto the stage, microphone in hand, and sing to the 'queen' and everyone present as if nothing had happened. It was an exciting moment for me, but it was a bit difficult, too, to stand up with all the weight of my dress, so I supported my torso with



Figure 2: Bárbara working with a ball five weeks after the accident.



Figure 3: Bárbara enjoying the sun in her wheelchair two months after the accident.

my hand. But it was a very dignified performance and a test passed.

From then on, the improvement was exponential. So much so, that in the month of April, for Easter, I dared to travel by car again. I was not afraid. I did not even think about being careful while driving. It hardly hurt me at all. I just had to be careful not to spend a long time walking or have too many hours in the car.

On May 11, five months after the accident, I went out to do a rock and roll concert, a tribute to the Beatles. I was wearing 'heart-attack heels', and I moved as if nothing had happened. And there was Bibiana, explaining all my fractures while people stared with open mouths. There was the rehabilitation team from the hospital and a lot of friends who came to spend the afternoon with us. It was the clearest sign of a return to normal, and all without the slightest pain! I was dancing and bending my torso backwards, Bibiana had to say to me: "Woman, a little less."

How was it possible? To begin with, Bibiana's work gave confidence to

me and to my nervous and muscular systems that everything was connected, that I was going to heal correctly, and that it was simply a matter of giving the body the time it needed to heal. Trust and living each stage of the process without suffering, allowing my body to slowly do what it could as it recovered, made me not nervous. And so, with joy and hope, everything changes, and what could have been something painful became an enriching experience both physically and mentally.

I am not the same after this accident. My joy has grown wonderfully and so has my understanding of life. I no longer try to control anything, beyond not allowing my mind to become excessively disturbed. This can be accomplished. How? Just as with bones: leaving it still, not twisting with disturbing thoughts, so that it alone recovers its path and stops identifying with fear.

Before this event, I was medicated for anxiety disorders. My life was sometimes hell, a very dark tunnel, a mental prison from which I didn't know how to get out. Now I live my life in freedom. Bibiana has helped me emotionally. I have been able to identify that, as well as broken bones and muscles, the mind should be allowed to rest for a prudent period of time. The body should be allowed to recover, without requiring or forcing it to do things that it is not ready to do. With the mind, we should do the same.

My body has not recorded negative emotions regarding the accident; but quite the contrary, body, mind, and nervous system have been reconnected in a wonderful way. Even my neuronal and hormonal systems work better! I have understood that happiness is the key to success and that it is based on a process and not on a moment. It is not arrived at thanks to achievements, nor are you given things from outside yourself, but it is found by identifying with the being that we are in our essence.

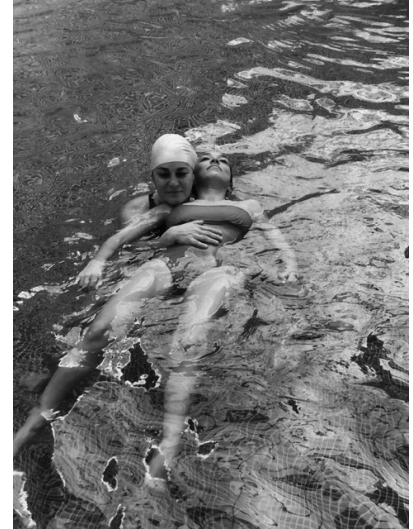


Figure 4: Working in the pool three months after the accident.

Life does not give us joy; we are the ones who bring joy to life!

As a singer I have improved on two essential themes. First, I have lost my fear. I was not a person who suffered from stage fright, but I often questioned the quality of the performances, the possibilities for improvement, constantly seeing defects. Now I sing with enjoyment and without thinking that the performance could be better. I simply see what my voice allows me to do that day, and I play with it; and I don't over-punish myself if I see a note fall.

On the other hand, the reconnection of the muscular system has greatly improved my support system and the connection to the vocal cords. So much so that now I am able to hit some notes that I didn't even dream of before, or sounds that I had a hard time accessing because I felt a body block that prevented me from accessing them. It has been a fantastic discovery to put technique at the service of emotion. All this has been greatly helped by my new way of walking, breathing, even swallowing.

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With the body relearning I have done with Bibiana and the reconnection of the whole system, I am changed.

I have learned that rehabilitation does not have to be hard or boring, but it can be a fun experience of self-discovery with daily improvement as long as one has confidence in the therapist. Without that confidence, probably progress is much slower. Feeling one is in the hands of someone who knows what she is doing makes you relax and, by not being in a hurry, one progresses much faster.

This is also fundamental: understand that recovery is a process and don't expect the body to be 'healed' by the second day, or ask for things that it can't yet do. The concept of integration that I didn't understand before, I understand now more than ever. I am patient and treat my body with affection. Learn to love and to listen to the body and to find the best way to solve its ailments.

In fact, with this treatment, not only have the traumas of the accident been solved, but I have been able, among other things, to walk again in flat shoes, something that had been impossible for me; to walk upright without collapsing my back but without having rigidity either; to allow the pelvic floor to extend and involve itself totally in the 'support' when singing; to allow the jaw to relax and find a relaxed position to sing and speak. In short, to let go of rigidity, eliminate vices, and find natural positions.

At eight months Bibiana told me that we had finished, that we had come to closure. I had a jazz concert; she saw me on stage and told me, "You are able to bring this work we have done into your daily life. This is true integration."

Bibiana Badenes is an influential somatic educator from Benicassim, Spain, where she oversees an innovative body-mind rehabilitation program for rheumatoid

arthritis patients and stress and burn-out clients; directs the BodyWisdom series of conferences; and is the head of Kinesis, a somatic therapy clinic. She has completed training in NLP, mindfulness, Experiential Anatomy and EFC Somatic Coaching, and leadership and coaching from Columbia University in New York City. She is part of the board of directors of the International Somatic Movement Education and Therapy Association (ISMETA). She trained as both a physical therapist and as a Certified Advanced Rolfer and Rolf Movement Practitioner.

Bárbara Brevia is a singer and also involved in business management, communication, and journalism. She has a degree in law and business from the Universidad Pontificia Comillas (ICADE) in Madrid and a degree in Journalism from the University of Madrid. Her website is www.barbarabreva.com



Figure 5: Singing in concert five months after the accident.