

## Hands On Healing ~ Crazy Wisdom Interviews Seven Up-and-Coming Massage Therapists and Aspiring Healers under the Age of 40

### Questions for Kelly Kempter

*Kelly Kempter, 38, was raised in Ann Arbor, and she has years of gymnastics and dance in her background. Trained in massage at Irene's Myomassology Institute, she's also been integrating Thai Massage into her practice. She and her two business partners run Kaizen Healing Arts. Her daughter, Jahri, is 12 years old.*

**Where were you raised, Kelly?**

I was born and raised in Ann Arbor. Growing up as a hippie child on the Old West Side, I had a loosely structured childhood. At 18, I moved to New York City for college and lived there for six years, and then returned to Ann Arbor to raise a family. I think growing up in Ann Arbor has given me an innate openness and appreciation for all things liberal, esoteric, natural, and organic without feeling a need to actively seek these things for myself.

**Looking back, have you been a naturally kinesthetic person since childhood?**

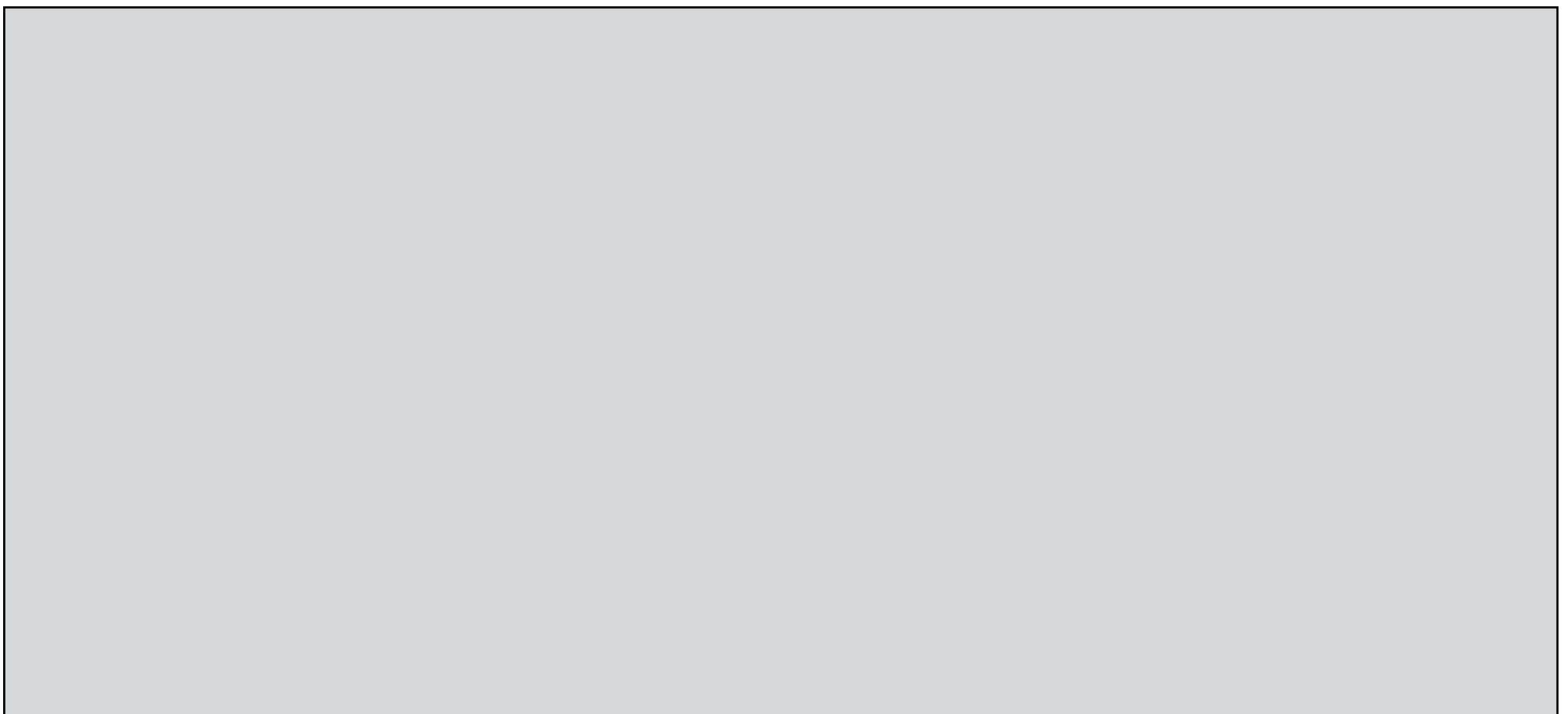
Very much so. I was an extremely active child, constantly moving and experiencing life through my body. I remember whirling, dancing, and flipping through grocery store aisles and parks alike. For the record, you can still occasionally spot me repeating such antics. Although my parents encouraged physical activity, I was so attracted to movement, that it was unnecessary.

As a shy youngster, I was often aware of physically pulling in when I was uncomfortable by hunching my upper back and drawing my shoulders forward and up. I now realize that this is a natural response to stress, but what's notable is my keen awareness that it was happening, even at an early age. I can remember many times wondering what I should do with my arms when I stood still. I think there was some discomfort in standing still that perhaps influenced my strong desire to move all the time.

I have always had a knack for observing and imitating the physical habits of others. This innate ability greatly contributes to my practice as a massage therapist. As a child, imitating the stance and movement habits of others was a constant pastime of mine. I didn't understand, until recent years, what a gift it is to be fully present in one's body, and that for many people, connecting with their body is a great challenge.

**What sports did you like and play when you were a girl?**

Although I spent most waking hours moving my body in some kind of physical play, including running, biking, swimming, hiking, skiing, skating, and dancing, I chose to devote myself fully to one, and only one, pursuit: gymnastics.



Where ever I found myself, I did gymnastics. For me gymnastics extended far beyond the gym into every moment of my life. If I could create a new gymnastics apparatus with objects at the scene, I would begin making up tricks and routines. If not, I was upside down or otherwise exploring gravity in creative ways. I invented several other "sports" in those years: picnic-table-nastics, brick-nastics, trampoline-nastics, water-nastics, you get the idea. I spent most of every summer devoted to choreographing and practicing routines on a variety of homemade gymnastics events.

**What did your 12 years in gymnastics as a young person contribute to you?**

My years as a gymnast instilled in me a multitude of skills, ethics, aches, and pains, from discipline to an uneven pelvis. Devotion to gymnastics gave me a flexible, healthy, and strong body, great balance, a good work ethic, a sense of camaraderie, several sprained ankles, a love of swinging my body through space, an introduction to dance, a separated shoulder, an ability to incorporate both verbal and demonstrated instructions into my own body, a multitude of ripped calluses on my palms, precision, a personal understanding of gravity, a comfort in being upside down, bravery, a drive to create, and a sense of pride.

**And you were a dancer, as well?**

I still am a dancer, and feel that I will always be in some regard. Graduating from high school marked the end of my years as a gymnast. After moving to New York City to attend college, with no structured outlet for all of my physical energy, I began to realize how much I missed moving my body. In an attempt to remedy the situation I began to take modern dance classes at several studios in the city and also at Hunter College. I quickly fell in love with dance and soon thereafter fell in love with the small, family-like dance department at Hunter. The Hunter dance program is unique in that it is non-exclusive, and aspires foremost to foster creativity in the students. I dedicated myself to dancing,



of dance in my everyday life, whether it is watching the movement of another, tuning into my own body in a moment of stillness, or dancing in my kitchen while I cook dinner, I am dancing. Dance is and will always be a part of me.

thus setting in motion a formula for a long term chronic problem which plagued me for many years to come. Eventually, Dorothy Vislocky saw my struggles and began to work with me for free. My sessions with Dorothy consisted of both hands-on work on my fascia, as well as posture and movement retraining. She helped me to understand my body on a new and deeper level. I remember leaving a challenging session with her and feeling like I had to relearn the simple act of walking. I broke down in tears and frustration as I was crossing Central Park because I realized that for so many years I had been moving in a way that was detrimental to my health. I focused on strengthening the muscles that were weak, stretching muscles that were too short, and bringing my awareness to the present moment to analyze and correct my posture and movements.

I also remember during that time, beginning to experiment with giving and receiving bodywork with another dancer in the program. Because our classes were so hands-on; and we were encouraged to study using tactile and kinesthetic methods, this was a natural part of the learning process for us. By this time I was already sold on receiving massage, but this was the first time I remember enjoying *giving* massage.

**And at what point did you decide to become a massage therapist, and why?**

When my daughter, Jahri, was born, I dedicated myself wholly to mothering. As a single mother from the time of her infancy, parenting

was a full time venture with enormous responsibilities, and I had no energy left for other endeavors, such as pursuing my own passions. As she grew, I had many thoughts and ideas of vocations that I could pursue and eventually I decided to create a database where I would list and research different career paths. My database contained several general career tracks of interest, including the healing arts, dance related vocations, various facets of teaching, several bodywork methods, childbirth related occupations, and social work. I then listed more specific options and began to research what would be involved in pursuing each of them. My specific list contained dance therapy, social work, physical therapy, life coaching, massage therapy, acupuncture, Rolfing, and more. I set a deadline for myself, by which time I would need to decide upon a career path. As the deadline approached I realized that I would need to just make a decision to pursue *something*, and that it would need to be something doable. It would need to be a path that would fit into my life, fit my budget, match my interests and strengths, and not compromise my ability to mother Jahri. Pursuing massage therapy increasingly seemed to be a great place to start and I was thrilled to finally get started.

I find that my clients are some of the most interesting, driven, strong, lovely people I know and it's a pleasure getting to know each of them on so many levels.

**Where were you trained? And how do you feel about your training?**

I received my training at Irene's Myomassology Institute (IMI), in Southfield. I was attracted to the school because I saw that it was compatible with my beliefs about the mind-body-spirit connection as it relates to health and all of life. I believe that true and lasting health is achieved through the balance of all of the body's systems and that the way that this is attained is specific to each individual. IMI is committed to exposing the student to a variety of modalities; from Polarity, Yoga, and Reiki to Trigger Point Therapy, Myofascial Release, Shiatsu and Thai

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choreographing, attending performances, rehearsing, teaching, studying, and immersing myself in all things related to dance.

After college, upon moving back to Ann Arbor, I joined Jesse Richard's dance and musical theater company, Hundredth Monkey, where I further expanded my repertory and skills. I enjoyed and still cherish the close knit relationships I formed as a member of Hundredth Monkey. I was a company member for five years and have subsequently rehearsed and performed sporadically with other local choreographers, most notably Suzanne Willets-Brooks and People Dancing. My last performance was this past June, and I'm not sure how I will incorporate dance into my life in the coming months and years. As long as I am regularly moving my body and connecting with movement in a meaningful, creative, conscious, and healthy way, I feel a sense of fulfillment in my relationship to dance. If I take the time to focus on the daily expression

**You mentioned to me that it was in dance that you took your first anatomy and physiology classes, and that you loved them. Tell us more.**

The Anatomy and Kinesiology course was a requirement for all dance majors at Hunter. Most students dreaded the class but I found myself excited to begin to understand on an intellectual level what I think I had understood on a visceral level all of my life; how the body works and moves. My teacher, Dorothy Vislocky, was the founder of the Hunter College Dance Department, which was created with minimal funds and against all odds. She was a demanding teacher, yet she took the time to help us to understand and integrate what we were learning. Dorothy also taught the Improvisation class where I was first introduced to meditation. In addition, she was a talented body worker who had a deep understanding of the myofascial system. She was an inspiration to me in countless ways and I consider her to be my most influential teacher and mentor.

In Anatomy and Kinesiology, Dorothy taught us about the physical structures of the body, focusing on the bones, joints, muscles and related soft tissue. From there, we went on to learn to assess details regarding the complexities of human movement. I was captivated and fascinated by the miracle of life and all that comes together inside of us to give us form and move us through space.

**And how did you get introduced to massage and bodywork?**

I received my first massage from another dance teacher at Hunter College, David Capps, who is also a talented massage therapist. I attended a short introductory workshop on massage taught by David. The main reason I wanted to attend was to receive massage. It turned out that I learned an important lesson in that class. I still remember how surprised I was when my partner expressed that she sensed when I was massaging her from a physically uncomfortable position and that the quality of my touch was diminished. This information ended up being something that guides my everyday practice and will surely add to the longevity of my massage career.

Around that time, I fell on my tailbone which resulted in sudden and severe sciatica. I had always pushed through my pain, and this was no different. I continued all my activities, without giving my body time off to heal,



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## Questions for Kelly Kempter (*continued*)



acupuncture, in creating Kaizen Healing Arts. Our warm and healing space is located in the Kerrytown area, above the People's Food Coop. Kaizen Healing Arts aspires to bring vibrant health and wellness to our community through a variety of healing modalities.

### **Are you enjoying your practice, and how is it going?**

I love working with and through my body in this way. I often look forward to giving massage. It's a wonderful way for me to center myself and be fully present in the moment. People are always appreciative of my work and that feels rewarding to me. I find that my clients are some of the most interesting, driven, strong, lovely people I know and it's a pleasure getting to know each of them on so many levels. Since I split my schedule between massage and my research job at U of M, I feel quite blessed by the balanced life I lead.

goes away during the session. I've often wondered why this would be the case. I think it has to do with focusing on another, being present in the moment, and an exchange of energy that balances both people involved.

### **Do you find that you absorb the energy, including the negative energy, sometimes, of your clients, from working in such a hands-on way with them?**

Not at all; it's interesting because they warned us about that in massage school and you hear all kinds of stories about therapists absorbing negativity and pain from their clients. For example, other therapists have reported that after working on someone with an injured shoulder, the therapist's shoulder began to hurt. I've heard this type of story repeatedly, but I've never experienced it myself. I wonder if it's because I don't really believe in negative energy coming from a person physically, and I just don't give it that kind of power. In addition, I enter each session with a little prayer which sets the tone; and I end each session with a deep sense of gratitude for the session, the person, and the energy that we have shared.

### **What is really important to you, as a massage therapist, in terms of boundary issues?**

I aim to be respectful, professional and warm in every interaction. I like to be in communication with my clients and to solicit feedback from them so that I can tailor the session and future sessions to their needs. I try to tune into the person in front of me and get a sense of their comfort level and preferences regarding massage. Each person is unique and what may be uncomfortable for one person may not bother another.

Even if I'm working with my own mother, I treat the session as I would for any other client; by keeping

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Message. This multi-disciplinary approach is not only invaluable in helping clients to heal, but allows students to focus on particular areas of interest. In researching schools I was inspired when I read about the founder of IMI, Irene Gauthier. I was touched to learn that she too had been a single mother, and had successfully raised four children while simultaneously pursuing her passions for learning, healing, and teaching. The fact that Irene, at age 86, is still teaching and treating clients, bears witness to her dedication. IMI has a part-time program which demonstrates a willingness to help all people attain their dreams. I saw this as a perfect fit with my life as a single working mother. For me, the engraving at the entrance sealed the deal; "The essence of our being is love."

I had some amazing, inspiring, and dedicated teachers, such as Randy Fillion who introduced me to Thai massage, and Kit Bruce, who was my weekly hands-on instructor. With plenty of hours working in the student clinic, I felt well prepared to work on the public. The curriculum was broad, giving me a great knowledge base. However, I often felt that the program was not demanding enough. I remedied this by challenging myself in a variety of ways. For example, I created a set of study cards with detailed sketches of individual muscles. In essence, attending massage school was just the beginning of my training. I continue to learn and grow with each massage I give.

### **And how long have you been working as a massage therapist? Tell us a bit about your practice, what it's called, who your partners are.**

I began school in 2003, and since I opted for the two-year program, and because of the way the program is structured, I was about 75% done with the program after the first year. At that point I began charging a minimal amount (the same as one paid for a massage at the student clinic), which marked the beginning of my massage practice. At the time I had an office in my home. In 2005 I joined with Alyssa Schreiber, also a massage therapist, and Sara Alrawi, a naturopathic physician specializing in

### **In your own mind, what is the difference between a massage therapist, a bodyworker, and a healer? Are you a healer, and if so, what does that mean? If not, do you aspire to be one?**

In my mind, a massage therapist and a bodyworker differ in that a massage therapist is focused on treating soft tissues, such as muscles, ligaments, fascia, and tendons, while a bodyworker has a broader range of training and is aiming to affect other bodily and energetic systems. I've mostly thought of this in the terms defined by the National Certification Board for Therapeutic Massage and Bodywork, which has two separate exams, one for massage therapy and one for massage therapy and bodywork. The latter requires an additional basic knowledge of Eastern philosophies and other somatic techniques. I chose to become nationally certified in therapeutic massage and bodywork (NCTMB), rather than only in massage therapy (NCTM).

In my mind, a healer is defined in looser, more esoteric terms. I think of a healer as a wise practitioner with many years of experience; one who consciously or unconsciously calls on a higher power to bring health to their patients. I believe that all of us in the healing arts have moments when healing happens, and thus in that moment, we act as healers. Perhaps we are healers-in-training or aspiring healers. However, for a true and seasoned healer, these moments become the norm rather than the exception. I consider myself to be an aspiring healer. If I am blessed, after many years of dedicated learning, growing, and practicing, perhaps one day I will be viewed as a healer.

### **You told me that often you feel better after you have given a massage. Please talk about that.**

I often feel rejuvenated after giving a massage or two or even five. There have been plenty of times when I have felt better after giving a massage than I did before it began. For example, if I have a headache before a session, it usually

appointments, beginning and ending on time, honoring her process, style, and needs, not engaging in unnecessary conversation, and helping her to feel comfortable with the draping, amount of pressure, temperature etc. I find that it's easy to let boundaries get fuzzy when working with a family member or a close friend. However, I consciously guard against this by directing my full attention to my client before, during, and after each session because ultimately my practice is a service to others. Another important aspect of boundaries is the state of my own mental and emotional health. I believe part of my job is to explore and know myself by reflecting upon and analyzing my own thoughts and actions.

### **You told me that you enter each of your sessions with a little prayer. Please tell us about that.**

It's a simple but profound prayer that I came up with some years ago: "Heal me, heal him/her."

### **You went to Thailand earlier this year to study Thai massage. Tell us about that. And how much of your practice, now, is Thai massage?**

I studied Thai Massage in Northern Thailand at ITM (Institute of Thai Massage) under Chongkol Setthakorn, a respected master. My adventure to Thailand was a profound period of leaps-of-faith, growth, exploration, and newness.



I am deeply fascinated by Thai massage, both as a giver and as a receiver. Traditional Thai massage is often described as “lazy man’s yoga” because the practitioner moves the receiver’s body into a variety of yoga poses throughout the session. The session is performed on a floor mat and through the client’s clothes. The technique utilizes deep compression, point pressure and stretching performed in a gentle rhythmic movement style to balance the energy in the sen lines. These lines are similar to those in the Chinese meridian system but also incorporate aspects of Ayurvedic medical theory. The treatment, which typically lasts ninety minutes or more, creates an effective cleansing of the body that continues for days.

After returning from Thailand I made it easy for clients to try Thai massage at a reduced price. Many people tried it and won’t go back to the table; others found that they like to alternate between Thai and table massage. Currently, Thai massage constitutes about half of my practice. The only part I don’t enjoy is taking down and setting up my massage table. Maybe someday I will have a separate room dedicated to Thai massage.

**You mentioned to me that you would be interested in learning more about Roling at some point in the future? Why?**

In short, I have a lot of respect for Roling and the work of Ida Rolf. Also known as Structural Integration, Roling addresses the balance of the body in relation to gravity, which reminds me of many of the lessons I’ve learned or been introduced to as a dancer. I am attracted to the Roling focus on manipulating the myofascial system as well. A lot of my work on the table is directed toward releasing the myofascia and I find it to be extremely effective in realigning the body and absolving pain. Delving more deeply into understanding the subtleties of the myofascial system is an exciting prospect for me. Roling is said to be capable of initiating profound changes in the body. I imagine the Rolfer’s hands to be finely tuned and able to

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discern slight differences in tissue. I think I have developed palpation skills but I like the idea of honing them further.

**Are there other complementary modalities you would also like to integrate into your practice, in the future?**

I do keep and carry a running list of modalities that I am interested in pursuing. In addition to deepening my knowledge of the methods that I already either practice or have a basic knowledge of, such as Thai Massage, Shiatsu, and Myofascial release, I would like to explore other techniques such as Kinesis Myofascial Integration (a descendant of Roling), Hot Stone Massage, Tuina (finger acupuncture), Trager Work, and Ashiatsu Massage (also called barefoot massage).

**How interested are you, or not, in the more esoteric kinds of healing work, such as Reiki?**

I am acutely aware of feeling a variety of energy patterns when I perform my hands-on work. This fascinates me and I am drawn to learning more. I have received my Reiki attunement and I do practice Reiki at times. I have no doubts about the effects our energy system has on our health. To me all work can be energetic in nature. However, in general, I haven’t been completely satisfied with any of the explanations or theories I’ve been exposed to regarding how and why this is so. The researcher in me, the part of me that wants clear, concise, provable explanations thinks that we don’t yet have the technology to answer the many questions energy work provokes. At this time in my life I don’t feel compelled to formally explore energy work through continuing education. I still feel there is so much to learn about the structure and mechanical function of the body. I imagine that as I grow

as a body worker, energy work will become increasingly important to me as a powerful healing modality.

**I see that you’ve been leading a workshop on Couples Massage, with Alyssa Schreiber. How is that going, and what is interesting about that work?**

We offered one class in the fall and are about to offer another. We are hoping to refine and develop our class and offer it at regular intervals. We also talk about the possibilities of offering other classes. We believe everyone is born knowing touch as the primary channel of communication and connection with the world, yet people

Even if I’ve worked with someone for a long time, I am still discovering things about him or her and about me in every session. One thing I do which keeps me engaged is to select a weekly theme for my massages.

have forgotten how vital touch is to our sense of wellbeing. It takes only a little willingness, time, and awareness to bring the power of touch back into our relationships through shared massage. We are excited about the class and have put a lot of work into creating a workbook and developing a class that makes sense for non-therapists. We feel that partner massage is a wonderful way to create and maintain a profound connection with people in one’s life.

**Do you have a family?**

I live with my daughter, Jahri, who just turned 12. Her presence in my life has profoundly affected me in countless ways. She is an intense ball of energy and a daily inspiration to me. My mom and my sister also both live in Ann Arbor and they are an important part of family life for both Jahri and me. The four of us lived together in my mom’s house (along with a variety of renters) for Jahri’s first eight years and we still have regular family dinners and take vacations together.

I recently became engaged to an amazingly solid, caring, and dedicated man, who has three bright, creative, thoughtful and all together enjoyable children. We plan to get married next summer and subsequently merge our households, so I know there will never be a dull moment in the road ahead.

**What do you like least about your work? And what is hardest about your work?**

The most challenging part of my work is the business aspect, particularly in the area of advertising. I think that I’m actually reasonably good at it and driven to do it, but I don’t enjoy it. There are so many details to keep track of, so many to-do lists, so many ways to reach people, and the work never ends. I sometimes wonder whether my client load would change at all if I didn’t do any outreach. Word of mouth is definitely my biggest advertising boon. However, I do think having a professional, well designed business card, brochure, and website is important. I am grateful to

have my partners, Alyssa and Sara, because these tasks are easier and more enjoyable to approach as a team.

**What do you love most about your work as a massage therapist and bodyworker?**

I am lucky to have landed here and to be on this journey. Being a bodyworker fits me well and feels like home. I think massage is one of the most profound and therapeutic healing methods. I love giving massage and I love receiving it. Often, when I am grounded in the present moment, focused on the space between my body and the recipient’s body, I experience a deep sense of connection with all life. I feel exceedingly blessed.

**Anything you wish to add?**

Through bodywork, I’ve discovered a whole world to delve into. Some therapists may feel bored and stuck in a routine, but I find the entire experience interesting. Even if I’ve worked with someone for a long time, I am still discovering things about them and about me in every session. One thing I do which keeps me engaged is to select a weekly theme for my massages. During my first session each Monday, I silently petition for a focus and this becomes my central motif for the week. Weekly themes I have used in the past range from a focus on a specific technique, the breath, my body being relaxed, or flow, to giving massage with a sense of gratitude, or an aim for my client to attain better posture, or an awareness of the music, or with my eyes closed. I investigate this theme in a variety of ways while giving massages for the week. This is a simple and fun way for me to explore the many layers of bodywork.

**Thanks, Kelly.**

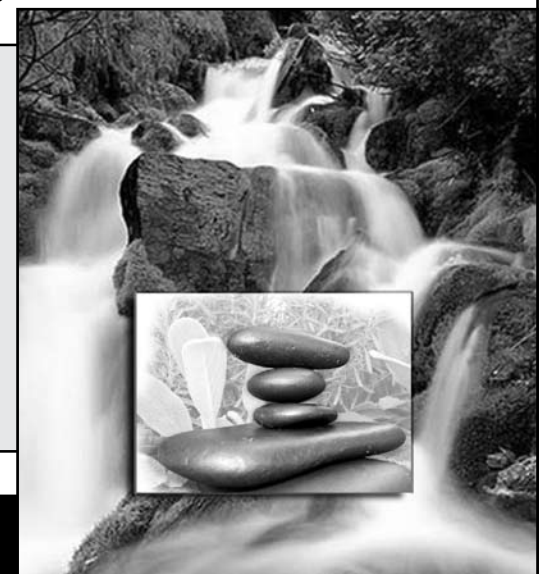
Thank you, Bill. It’s been a great experience to reflect on these thought-provoking questions.

###

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