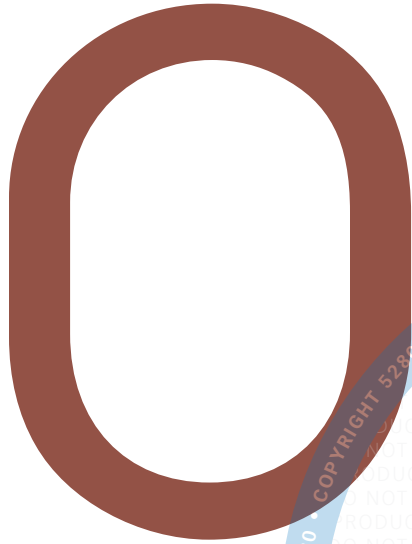


# THE HEALING TOUCH

AT DENVER'S APOTHECARY TINCTURA, OLD-WORLD HEALING TECHNIQUES COME FACE TO FACE WITH MODERN MEDICINE

BY AMANDA M. FAISON



Once a month, 15-year-old, Littleton resident Jill McKay is bedridden for days with searing menstrual cramps and violent waves of nausea. Heavy-duty prescription meds and alternative treatments such as acupuncture have failed to ease her suffering. Options exhausted, McKay's pediatrician sent her to Shelley Torgove, a local herbalist and massage therapist who owns Apothecary Tinctura. After just one massage session with Torgove and a regular regimen of herbs and self-care massage, McKay's pain during her next period was reduced by a remarkable 50 percent.

Behind apothecary jars filled to the brim with dried herbs and teas and the bookshelves lined with volumes on natural healing and herbal remedies, Torgove's Sixth Avenue shop has two treatment rooms where she, and two other women, practice the ancient healing art of the Mayan uterine massage.

As bizarre as it may first sound, the abdominal massage is a centuries-old remedy for women's health issues throughout much of the world. The massage can spare women from hysterectomies, cysts, and painful periods while also preparing their body for pregnancy. Practiced in places as close as Mexico and as far away as Africa and Cambodia, the teachings are as old as the cultures in which they're practiced – and the results, healthier women, are hard to dismiss.



## A MAJOR ADJUSTMENT

The principle behind the noninvasive, external massage is righting the position of a tilted or out-of-place uterus through gentle kneading and manipulation. According to Mayan healers, a retroflexed (backwards) or antilexed (forward leaning) uterus can be at the heart of women's health issues. And, about 75 percent of women have wandering wombs.

When off-center, blood flow is constricted, reducing the regular influx of fresh blood and nutrients to pelvic tissues – not to mention the ovaries, bladder, and bowel. The result is a build up of older, damaged tissues which can result in everything from crippling cramps and cysts to endometriosis and a difficulty getting pregnant. “A hard fall on your tailbone as a child could do it,” Torgove explains. “The uterus is held by ligaments, those can be stretched so the uterus can be off-center, tilted, or actually leaning backwards.” The massage works to restore the uterus to its correct position while also increasing blood flow, easing cramps, headaches, even indigestion. Unlike most massage techniques where the abdomen is all but ignored, the Mayan massage focuses exclusively on the abdomen.

While often dismissed as “normal” by the medical community, a tipped uterus is anything but, according to Torgove. “A tipped uterus is not OK – it's common but not normal,” she says incredulously. “It wouldn't be considered normal if any other major organ was flipped or tipped.” In other cultures it's a given that an out-of-place uterus is the source of problems. Cindy Aspromonte, a registered nurse and certified holistic nurse practitioner who has studied holistic medicine since 1985, says, “When you talk to indigenous cultures – they all have the same response, they say ‘Of course, this [massage] is the only way you treat it.’ Uterine massage is really common around the world. It's something that's been in practice but we're just learning it (or relearning it – the Native Americans used this).” Aspromonte also administers uterine massage at Torgove's Apothecary Tinctura.

Torgove, who speaks Spanish and lives in the Baker neighborhood, first learned of the technique by working with Latino



**NATURAL WONDERS** From the top down: Denver native Shelley Torgove is doing her best to change the face of women's health care; Mayan healers Hortence Robinson and Beatrice Weight; Ix Chel, Rosita Arvigo's farm in Belize, is home base for Torgove's trips; When performing the self-care massage, place your hands together to form a little rake.

women with reproductive and fertility problems. “I kept hearing these stories about when they [my patients] would go home to Mexico and visit these traditional healers for abdominal massage,” says Torgove. “I decided I had to find out more about these massages.”

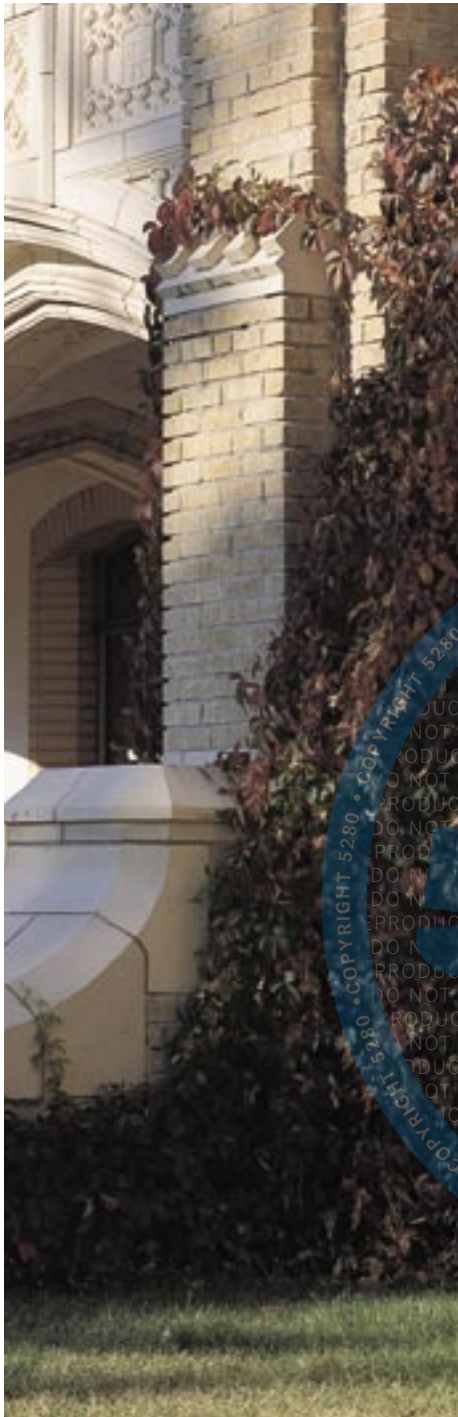
A 1999 trip to Belize's rainforest and much searching eventually led her to Rosita Arvigo, an American woman who has lived in Belize for 30 years – 20 of which have been spent as an apprentice to midwife Hortence Robinson and village healer Beatrice Weight, both of whom specialize in uterine massage.

## HEAL THYSELF

For the last five years, Torgove has traveled to Belize to train in Mayan uterine massage – and each time she has brought along a group of 15 like-minded women, many of whom are area doctors, midwives, nurse practitioners, and massage therapists. The idea is to expose as many women in the medical field as possible to uterine massage – with the hope of making it more mainstream. Their home base in Belize is Rosita Arvigo's farm. Named Ix Chel after the Mayan goddess of healing who looks after women, the farm is located on the border of Guatemala and Belize about 30 minutes outside of San Ignacio. In February, Torgove will lead her sixth trip to Belize.

Taught by Arvigo, Robinson, and Weight, the women learn, among other things, the age-old massage technique and its history. The version of the massage taught is the “self-care” form that is used in conjunction with the professional massage (only those who go on and become certified “to touch” can give the massage professionally). The self-care variety – a firm “scooping” of the lower abdomen up toward the belly button with your fingers cupped like a little rake – is gentle and takes only a few minutes. Empowering her clients to “heal thyself,” Torgove teaches her clients the self-care technique after the second treatment. Clients are instructed to do their self-care every day, except when menstruating.





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The professional version performed by Torgove and others is lengthier and more intense. The hour-long massage (\$85) is generally painless. The first step is identifying the position of the uterus and from there, the practitioner coaxes the organ back to its correct position through scooping and kneading motions. But while correcting the uterus' position is the cornerstone of Mayan massage, the idea of the tipped organ causing a host of maladies is largely dismissed in the American medical community.

Ask just about any ObGyn or fertility specialist about the potential problems associated with a retroflexed or antiflexed uterus and they're generally unconcerned. "In pictures you see the uterus standing straight up," explains Dr. Sam Alexander, an infertility specialist at Rose Medical Center and one of 5280's Top Doctors. "But typically it leans toward the front and sometimes toward back. It's kind of like being left handed, it's a normal variant...there's no difference in pregnancy, pain, or pregnancy loss." Dr. William Schoolcraft, another esteemed fertility doctor (and another perennial Top Doctor) at Swedish Medical Center, similarly dismisses the condition. "It's not a problem...neither condition is associated with infertility or any problems."

The handful of practitioners who feel otherwise recognize the importance of the position of a women's uterus to her overall health. And they are the ones bridging the gap between conventional medicine and old-world medicine. "It's hard to go up against the medical establishment but there are enough women docs out there doing this work [10 to 15] that we're slowly changing and making a difference," says Torgove. "Denver is at the forefront of this, we're teaching women to help themselves."

One such "bridge" is Aspromonte, who in addition to working with Torgove, works in the mainstream medical field under Dr. Pete Vargas, a primary ObGyn at Rose.

Schooled in both allopathic (modern) and traditional medicines, Aspromonte has a unique understanding of both perspectives – and she utilizes the best of both in her practice. And through the years, she has come to realize the potential problems associated with a tipped uterus. "When I went to nurse practitioner school, I was taught a tilted uterus was normal – or a variation of normal. But since I've learned uterine massage, I pay attention to where the uterus is in the pelvis," she explains. "When it's too far to the right, left, back,

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or front, those women anecdotally have more symptoms of pelvic pain, PMS, etc. There's a connection, even if it's not scientifically proven."

The transformation in her patients' health is proof enough for Aspromonte. "When I've taught my patients self-care – which really helps reposition it [the uterus] more to the center – those women's symptoms have improved. It's made an impression on me," she says.

Aspromonte is in the unique position of externally treating someone with massage and then being able to see the results inter-

nally with a pelvic exam and ultrasounds. And since incorporating the massage, she's begun to keep case studies. "Now I pay attention to where the uterus is and document it on the chart," she says. "I corroborate in my mind where I think it is and I'm just about 100 percent accurate."

Aspromonte's integration of the Mayan uterine massage and other holistic practices into a conventional doctor's office has also made a lasting impression on Dr. Vargas and has opened him to holistic methods. "I'm a doctor and I approach things from a scientific and medical perspective," he says.

"I think it's difficult to distinguish who has a problem because of that [a tipped uterus] or because of something else. But there are some things we do that are without good scientific basis – we do things because we think there's a good reason to believe it will help. We like to believe that we're offering some benefit to these women."

As for a medical explanation for the results seen by patients who undergo Mayan uterine massage, both Dr. Alexander and Dr. Schoolcraft liken the effects to acupuncture. "Meditation, massage, yoga – all of these decrease stress-related hormones and increase blood flow," says Schoolcraft. "There's probably a mechanism that's helpful, it's not voodoo."

But in terms of actually changing the position of the uterus, Alexander is skeptical. "To my knowledge, there's no manipulation that can change the position of the uterus. Even with a surgical procedure...over time it goes right back to where it was. And just manipulating digitally certainly doesn't do anything."

So, how do you explain that to Aspromonte who has visible proof that the uterus can be moved?

Recently, a new patient came in for an annual exam and Aspromonte commented that her uterus was centered (something relatively uncommon) and the woman responded "Well, it should be, I've been working on it for years. I've had surgeries and my massage therapist is working with me on uterine massage and I've been doing my self-care."

The massage's health benefits are very real for the women it has helped. High school student Jill McKay is just one example. For the teenager who usually experiences 16 hours of crippling cramps and nausea, "It was a miracle...I was very skeptical but I was totally surprised," she says. "I didn't throw up and the cramps only went on for 10 hours."

Natalie Gentry, is another success story.

Owner of the Renewal Center on Cook Street, Gentry is a massage therapist working toward becoming certified in professional uterine massage. She is convinced that her tipped uterus was the cause of an ovarian cyst that painfully ruptured. "This condition really can cause physical problems – decreased blood flow can cause cysts and reproductive problems." Today, after seeing Torgove since February and a strict regimen of self-care massage, Gentry's uterus is straight, healthy, and cyst free – and she and her husband are in the process of trying to get pregnant.



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## LOOKING AT THE BIG PICTURE

The gift Torgove is imparting on her clients is an individualized, whole-body approach to the body. Torgove spends an average of 90 minutes talking to her clients before ever laying a healing hand on them. “Shelley is so thorough,” says Barbara McKay, Jill’s mother. “She spent about an hour-and-a-half talking with us the first time. She wanted to hear all the specifics rather than saying ‘I know what’s wrong with you’ after five minutes.”

Rather than fix the problem – be it cramps or the inability to get pregnant – with short-term solutions, Torgove looks at the whole picture. “Women are missing the whole first step: What’s going on with their body? They need to know that before taking medical steps,” says Torgove, who after three months of treatment with no tangible results, refers her clients to infertility specialists and ObGyns – which wins her points with the medical community. Dr. Vargas praises Torgove’s work, “Shelley is excellent. She knows what she’s doing but she also knows her limitations. If a woman has serious problems and Shelley’s methods aren’t working and she knows it’s something more serious, she refers out.”

Given modern medicine’s bent on instant gratification, it’s understandable that the holistic perspective is oft overlooked even by patients. But as doctors regularly turn to prescriptions to cure what ails, women such as Wheat Ridge High School teacher Sarah Brunke are becoming disillusioned.

Brunke, 32, turned to Torgove for help getting pregnant after she became frustrated by her infertility doctor’s impersonal, regimented treatment. “It seems to me that the medical industry deals with extremes and treating symptoms: ‘You have a cold? Take this.’ ‘You can’t walk, here, take this.’ They’re not treating the problem, they’re treating the symptom of the problem,” Brunke says.

Brunke, who’s father is an otolaryngologist (ear, nose, and throat doctor), is quick to state that she hasn’t shunned modern medicine altogether. As far as she’s concerned, there’s room for both in her life. As a result, she’s learning about why she might be having difficulty getting pregnant. “From Shelley I am learning about my body...Clomed [infertility drug] probably would have worked but I’d rather figure out what’s going on.” Which is exactly what Torgove is hoping for when clients such as Brunke enter her clinic. “There are no failures, you’ll leave healthier,” says Torgove. “The goal is to learn about the body and its cycles and to normalize them. The goal isn’t to get pregnant.”

Natalie Gentry speaks to the rigidity of modern medicine. “I don’t think the medical community values alternative medicine as much as it could,” she says. “It’s kind of appalling that I learned about uterine massage from an herb shop rather than my gynecologist.”

Perhaps the boon of the uterine massage in the Denver market is a sign of things to come. Torgove is seeking the best of both worlds: An old world, holistic approach to women’s health backed, when necessary, by new world technology. Aspromonte is successfully blending the two perspectives to the success of her

patients. There’s room for both and as Torgove sees it a revolution of ideas is “just around the corner. We need people to realize the value of step by step and see the bigger picture and the importance of all the pieces.” ▲

For more information on the Mayan uterine massage, contact Shelley Torgove. Or stop into Apothecary Tinctura, located at 2900 E. Sixth Ave., 303-399-1175.

**Amanda M. Faison** is managing editor at 5280. She’s interested in the traditional and nontraditional ways of ensuring good health.

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