

# Learning From and Collaborating With Stanley Keleman Recollections From the Early Days

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## Abstract

In this article, the author shares some of her experiences with Stanley Keleman and with learning and practicing Formative work. She begins by describing her first meeting with Stanley. Next, she describes two early workshops: The one in which Stanley first presented fundamental insights into the Formative Process, and the one in which he introduced the How Exercise. She goes on to describe two of the Family Body programs that Stanley and she later conducted. Finally, she describes a few of her own observations and impressions concerning Stanley's use of himself.

## Keywords

Somatic Psychotherapy – Formative Psychology – Stanley Keleman  
Personal Growth Groups – Family Body Work

I have known Stanley Keleman for 34 years. At the time I met him, I was disillusioned with psychoanalysis, and I was seeking an alternative approach and guidance in how to strengthen and grow myself. I attended my first Keleman workshop at the urging of friends. Shortly after I attended that workshop, I became part of a circle around Stanley that included professional students and people from many walks of life, eager to learn about his vision of the life of the body. Ever since then, I have been closely associated with Stanley's continuously evolving body of work, as a student, as a teacher and as a collaborator in forming the Family Body approach.

When I began to write this article, I dug up my old notebooks and journals. As I read them over, I was once again reminded of the special magic of the early workshops, so I decided to make those workshops the focus of this article. My notes refreshed my memories considerably and have enabled me to reconstruct and portray exactly when the Formative process became central to Stanley's understanding of the life of the body and how he first presented his thinking about it; his introduction and use of Formative journal work; his introduction of the five-step process of Formative work, the How Exercise.

Of course, learning from a great teacher involves learning much that is less tangible than the content of concepts and the rules of techniques. Stanley has always conducted experiential groups, and I have often been present during his one-to-one work with group participants. In this context, I have learned a great deal by observing the enormous range and skill of his applications of Formative principles and the How methodology to help participants elicit and form new possibilities for themselves. Stanley's charged interactions with provocative group members have also taught me a lot. To convey something of this dimension of my learning experiences, I offer a few observations and impressions about Stanley's use of himself.

## First Encounter

It was in 1972, shortly after I moved to San Francisco from Chicago, that I first heard about Stanley Keleman's body-oriented work. At that time I was exploring some of the new approaches in personal growth work that were proliferating as part of the Human Potential movement. Several people whose opinions I valued urged me to go to a Keleman workshop; they could not praise him enough. I stayed up all night one night reading *Sexuality, Self & Survival* (Keleman, 1971), and attended my first Keleman workshop that summer.

Limited to 16 participants, the workshop took place over 2 days in a comfortable house in the Berkeley hills. We sat on pillows surrounding a mattress, listening to Stanley's interchanges with group members who sought his help with various personal issues. The member would be asked to stand and walk around a bit while Stanley studied his or her structure. Then the member would be asked to engage in some kind of physical movement, often while lying on the mattress. The connections between the person's presenting issue and what he or she had been asked to do were not always clear to me. My background as a clinical social worker and family therapist, and as a former psychoanalytic patient, offered only limited guidance as I struggled to understand what was going on. I did recognize that something powerful was happening. I was experiencing a high level of visceral excitement and a wide range of emotional responses as I listened and observed. I sensed that other group members were having a similar experience, and at some point I realized that each person's physicalizing of his or her situation was setting the stage for, and evoking the expression of, the next person's issue. My own work in this workshop remains vivid—partly because it was my first experience with Stanley and partly because I was in a personal crisis at the time. Starting my life over again in California was proving to be more daunting than I had anticipated, and my coping resources were wearing thin. Also, I felt intimidated by the seeming sophistication of the other participants in the group. So at the same time that I was experiencing an increasingly urgent need to reach out for help, I was unable to summon up my speaking voice—I literally could not open my mouth and ask to work. Finally, to my surprise and relief, Stanley recognized my silent distress and invited me to explore my state with him. My intensely constricted throat quickly became the focus of the work.

Looking back now, after 34 years, I understand much better than I did then what happened next, and the nature of Stanley's interventions. First, he instructed me to externalize and enact my self-strangulation by strangling a towel; then he had me gradually do that less. This freed up my voice, but I still needed further help in how to use myself bodily to form a personal expression of asking for help. Growing up in a family where self-reliance and not-needing were highly valued, I had learned all too well how to stifle myself. However, I hardly knew how to use myself to express a need (although, paradoxically, I was able to serve as an advocate for others). In this first powerful experience in my personal somatic education, Stanley began to teach me two things: How to influence what I did know how to do (an extreme form of self-inhibition), and how to form a bodily expression of what I did not know how to do.

In retrospect, I recognize that Stanley was already applying a number of Formative principles in this work with me. First, the principle of always beginning with the person's existing pattern of self-use, and having the person embody that pattern more intensely, so that an enhanced template is formed, which can then be influenced by the deliberate exercise of voluntary effort. Second, the principle that recognizes that when an ingrained pattern of self-use is modified, the body does not know what to do next; another behavior must be deliberately formed and practiced. And third, the principle that recognizes that relief, and the beginning of real transformation, come when a person, with another person's help, begins to do something for himself or herself.

### Milestones in the Development of Formative Psychology

*Is there one thing in the known universe that is not subject to the law of evolution?*

— Jack London, *Martin Eden*

After this first experience of working with Stanley, I wanted more. I attended another two-day workshop and began having private sessions. However, I was a practicing psychotherapist and, before long, I decided to study with Stanley, in the hope of bringing bodily perspectives into my professional practice. From Fall 1972 through Spring 1973, I attended a series of one-day professional tutorials. Here I found myself part of a loose circle of interesting people, all devoted to learning from Stanley. I think we all recognized that he possessed great wisdom about the life of the body, and wisdom about how to help ourselves and for others to connect with themselves bodily and emotionally. I also recognized that, at the ground floor, in myself was a deep hunger to feel more alive, a hunger to expand my ability to behave more as an actor than as a reactor in my own life.

In reviewing my notes from these early programs, I see that Stanley was already talking about the Formative process of all animate life, and that he saw this Formative process as the basic structuring force of human life. For example, in my notes from the tutorial on May 19, 1973, I wrote: "What a person is forming (the tending toward) is one of the deepest ongoing events in his life. The Formative process can be facilitated or inhibited but cannot be stopped." And again: "Think of yourself as a process, rather than as a body or a mind."

In subsequent programs, it became abundantly clear that Darwinian evolutionary theory influenced Stanley's thinking about the life of the body. The evolutionary principle that shapes change over time is the basis for Stanley's assertion that our bodies change shape over time, and that the shape of the body can be influenced by voluntary effort. By the early 1970s, Stanley's work already focused on encouraging what can be, rather than on restoring what was damaged or lost.

Because Stanley was an early member of Alexander Lowen's Institute for Bioenergetic Analysis, and was one of its senior trainers until 1970, he continued to be considered a bioenergetic therapist long past the time when the term was appropriate to describe his work. In fact, many other significant influences contributed to Stanley's anatomic-emotional approach. To begin with, there was his early chiropractic training, which gave him an extensive education in human anatomy. This was followed by his private practice as a chiropractor in New York, where he saw many patients from the Broadway theater world and was able to learn a great deal about how people used their bodies in singing, dancing and acting. Nina Bull, a lay researcher who directed a Research Project for the Study of Motor Attitudes at the Psychiatric Institute in New York City, and who is best known for her Attitude Theory of Emotion, was a mentor and a personal friend. Stanley often credits her with giving him a creative and profound understanding of the social implications of neurology. Karlfried Graf von Dürckheim, founder of the Center for Initiation and Religious Studies, was also a mentor who gave Stanley a deeper understanding of the value of subjective experience. A later, but also very important, influence was Joseph Campbell. Over a 10-year period, he and Stanley did personal growth workshops together and charted new territory in the relationship between anatomy and mythology.

I would say that by the early 1970s, Stanley's vision of the life of the body, and his techniques of somatic work, had progressed to a level of distinction such that his body of work stood on its own. However, it was a body of work without a name of its own; it was known simply as somatic-emotional work, I believe until the early 1990s, when it was christened Formative Psychology.

Following are descriptions of two early ground-breaking programs in the history of the Formative approach.

#### *"The Body as the Living Expression of the Formative Principle," October 8-12, 1973*

This 5-day residential program was held at the Westerbeke Ranch, in Sonoma, California. Here for the first time Stanley made the Formative process the central focus of the group. He spoke of our living in a continuous field and being always in the continuum of our lives. He said that being in the Now does not exclude the past or the future. We did an exercise that consisted of taking a memory and stretching it out to its past and future. Our focus during the week was to establish, in both narrative and embodied form, where we were in our lives at present, so that we could learn what we were tending toward and could participate in our own formativeness.

This was also the first workshop in which participants were asked to keep a journal. This enabled them to do a great deal of work on their own, to take the lead in helping themselves, and to generate a larger frame of reference for themselves. In our journals, we addressed fundamental questions about our lives. These questions were always connected to how we used ourselves bodily and emotionally and were designed to further the process of developing an embodied ego. Our Formative journal work was also the springboard for working one-to-one with Stanley in group sessions.

We were directed to pay great attention to our subjective experiences of excitement—how our excitement peaked and flattened, and how our excitatory processes were fundamental to the way in which we left one world and created another.

Here are some of the evocative, Formative questions that we worked with:

- Where do you perceive yourself to be at this stage of your existence, in both your inner and outer worlds?
- What are important stepping-stones—events that led to this place in your life?
- What is your relationship to your body?
- What is the image you have of yourself that you polish? What do you suppress and repress of yourself in the service of that image? Can you identify how you enact these processes physically?
- What do you experience yourself as tending toward?

In the closing session of the workshop, we each dealt with the question: what have I formed of myself this week, and what am I tending toward?

*“The Life of the Body,” July 1-19, 1974*

This 3-week program, the first of Stanley’s annual Summer Institutes, was held at the University of California, Berkeley and was attended by about 45 participants. A number of other body-oriented therapists besides Stanley conducted sessions, and I was one of the people recruited to serve as a small-group facilitator. These small groups met regularly; in them, participants could express and deal with their confusion regarding the conceptual material and the exercises. They could also share their bodily experiences during the group exercises, and receive acknowledgement and support from other small-group members.

Our conceptual frame of reference in this program was the Formative process, which Stanley now described as having three phases: Endings, Middle Ground and New Form. Each week of the program, and its attendant exercises, emphasized a different phase. We began with the question, “What is Ending for you?” Our focus was on learning how we responded bodily to both large and small endings and turning points in our lives, and on how we could voluntarily influence our process. For example, we worked with how we ended being merged with our parents on the way to forming a private, unshared part of ourselves.

In the second week of the program, the focus was on experiences in Middle Ground, the place of less form that we find ourselves in when something has ended or is ending, whether we choose to end it or not. We called this “being in the soup.” We learned how we functioned when we were in a relatively unformed state, with the globalness, the increase in excitation, and the expansiveness of this state, which for many people may be quite threatening. Our question here was, How do you handle yourself in the Sea of Creation?

In the final week of the program, we focused on self-gathering, helping ourselves to make more form and experimenting with new forms of self-expression. We explored stances of being the fool and being the knower; we learned how to “sing our own song.

It was in this program that Stanley first introduced the How Exercise, or Five-Step Process, the ritual that translates Stanley’s understanding of the Formative process into a series of steps that people can use to voluntarily influence how they function. The How Exercise remains the core methodology of Formative work. It is much easier now for Stanley and others who do Formative work, myself included, to guide novices through the exercise. But when we first tried to do this exercise at the 1974 Summer Institute, it was amazingly difficult to get what Stanley was after. The experience was something like grappling with a Zen koan. This may have been because people were generally attuned to focusing on what they experienced (for example, “I’m a tense person”) rather than on the how of their experience (“How do you make the tension?”).

In this introduction to the How Exercise, Stanley had a standard response to people who volunteered to talk about their process in the group. He would interrupt these people to ask how they were doing whatever they were talking about. The interchange might begin something like this:

*Woman Participant: I’m a very insecure person...My mother was very hard on me, and my father was basically absent. I do grounding exercises to help myself.*

*Stanley: How do you make the insecurity?*

*Participant: (long pause)...Very anxiously.*

*Stanley: How do you make the anxiety?*

*Participant: (long pause)...It just comes whenever I’m with a person in authority,*

*Stanley: Is the insecurity here now?*

*Participant: Yes!*

*Stanley: Can you experience how you’re lifting and bracing your chest and holding your breath as you talk to me?*

*Participant: Oh!*

*Stanley: How do you lift your chest?*

*Participant: (appears to be thinking)*

*Stanley: You’ll never be able to figure it out. You need to do the movement.*

*Participant: (intensifies bracing her chest) Oh, I can feel that I’m stiffening my upper body.*

*Another example:*

*Participant: I'm too much of a good boy.*

*Stanley: How do you make your good boy?*

*Participant: (long pause)...By inhibiting myself.*

*Stanley: How do you inhibit yourself?*

*Participant: (long pause)...By not breathing deeply?*

*Stanley: How do you do that?*

*Participant: (long pause)...By raising my shoulders and tightening my belly.*

It seemed as if the How questions could go on indefinitely. Eventually, it became clear that one could not answer the questions by consulting one's ideas about oneself. The answers could come only from the direct experience of one's process. It became apparent that the value of doing the How Exercise lay in the broadening and deepening of one's experience and one's behavior, not in finding answers. The person who was going on the journey with Stanley was entering ever more deeply into the somatic-emotional organization of a fundamental aspect of his or her way of being in the world. In so doing, the person was learning experientially how to participate in his or her own Formative process.

Throughout this 3-week program, we deepened our connections to ourselves bodily, becoming more intimate with our patterns in the different phases of the Formative process. We also did self-drawings—pictures of our bodily somatic-emotional attitudes, which we called somagrams—and Formative journal work. I found my experiences in this group enormously enriching, both personally and in the way they developed my ability to bring bodily perspectives into my own clinical work.

### The Family Body

From early on, Stanley was deeply interested in family process, in working with the ways in which family dynamics and experiences influence how people form and use themselves. In 1974, he invited me to co-lead a professional group where he could apply his biological vision to family work. The idea was that I would offer psychosocial perspectives to complement his observations and insights. In 1975, we co-led an experiential personal growth group. By this time, I was experienced in working with the How Exercise, and I was ready to join Stanley in working somatically with people who were exploring family roles.

*"The Family Body," January 29-March 5, 1974*

The program consisted of six 4-hour sessions, held once a week over a 6-week period. The workshop announcement read: "This workshop is for exploring how our physical selves are formed by family roles. We will look at two family bodies in the group to explore their dynamics from this perspective." Actually, we were fortunate to have three families agree to participate in live sessions in front of the group. At the end of each session, the family would leave, and the group would discuss what had transpired and what we could learn from these family bodies. Stanley focused on the character structure of individual family members, suggesting linkages between, for example, a mother's collapsed chest and her inability to support her own assertions when she dealt with her recalcitrant husband. He was opening a window into a whole new level of understanding, and relating to, family process for me and the other therapists in the group. I had to expand my understanding of families as psychosocial systems and reconcile it with this new approach—looking at families and individual family members as bodies. It was a challenge that I willingly took on.

*"Individuality and Community," March 15-June 14, 1975*

This experiential group met once a week over a 3-month period, beginning and ending with an all-day session. Stanley began by asking participants to make two somagrams—a large drawing of their family of origin and a self-drawing. Then he asked them to do journal work, addressing the following questions:

What role did you play in your family of origin and what role do you generally play in a family situation or group now? What did you want to be, but could not be, in your family? For example, did you want to be angry, or sexual, or assertive? What did you want supported by your family that was not supported? Who in your family did you feel blocked by? Or is there a situation in your family that blocks you?

At this point, participants worked on their own, making their somagrams and writing in their journals. They were also asked to physically mimic their somatic stance in various family scenarios—for example, when faced with a disappointed parent. This was the beginning process of making connections between their family images and stories and the physicality of family life and family roles. Next, we asked the participants to organize themselves into subgroups consisting of five or more members each. These subgroups would remain their "families" throughout the program. Within each family, members chose their own roles, but they also negotiated with each other about certain roles—if a member wanted someone to play her older sister, for example, and no one had chosen this role. Then these simulated families began to role-play various scenarios. Stanley and I visited each family, simply observing at first, and eventually intervening.

It quickly became apparent to us that these constructed family roles, and the role-playing interactions, created an intense interpersonal environment, which we later dubbed a co-bodying field. Within this environment, each person's character structure and

characterological issues revealed themselves. We used a variety of strategies to help people connect bodily with the way they functioned in their roles, and to influence how they functioned. One strategy was to stop the role playing abruptly and have participants freeze-frame their stances, using the How steps first to intensify and then to de-intensify their shapes. So, for example, a man playing an intimidating father might begin to experience how he both stiffened and inflated himself, and how he could deflate and soften this shape, enabling him to relate differently to the man playing his rebellious son. Many group members found it easy to make connections between the shapes they assumed in their simulated family and how they functioned in the real relationships in their lives.

Another powerful strategy was to have participants talk to their families about the way they experienced the role they had assumed, and then exaggerate the physical organization of the role. The other members of the family would then imitate the person's stance, generating a kind of somatic hall of mirrors. When the stances were taken down, a rich nonjudgmental sharing of experiences ensued. A third strategy was to have family members give each member nonjudgmental feedback about their somatic experience of that member's stance. For example, "I notice that I become agitated and pull back when you reach out to me." Of course, this feedback is equally useful to the person offering it.

After everyone had participated in the family role playing, much direct characterological work could be done. For example, group members could identify the role that they habitually played in family conflicts—provoker, initiator, avoider and so on; then work could be done on how they organized themselves bodily in these roles. We also called their attention to other aspects of their experiences in their family roles. These included how they participated in rejection interactions, and how they managed themselves when desperate about certain impulses that they were determined to control around others. We asked each person to identify the feeling that he or she must generate in order to feel contact, exploring how the person used him or herself to evoke this feeling.

In the many years since we co-led these two programs, Stanley and I have continued to do Family Body work—together and separately, in group settings and in clinical practice. We have published articles on the Family Body (Schmidt [Adler], 1979; Schmidt [Adler], 1981; Keleman & Adler, 2001). Currently we are preparing a comprehensive anthology of lectures and articles on the Family Body.

Co-leading with Stanley was always tremendously challenging for me, and it was not necessarily easy for him. Energetically, we were not well matched, and of course, he was the conceptual visionary and a sophisticated somatic practitioner, while I, for a long time, was a beginning student. But it has been a Formative partnership, and the creative rewards have always outweighed the difficulties.

### Stanley's Use of Himself

Stanley has a dominating presence and has always been very charismatic. He was only 40 years old when I met him, but he seemed older, probably because he bore himself with authority, like someone with a great deal of life experience. It is still common for people to be at least somewhat intimidated by the range and depth of Stanley's knowledge of anatomy and physiology, as well as by his deep understanding of all aspects of the life of the body. High-spirited, exciting, alive, unpredictable, a distinct authority figure, as well as someone capable of great empathy and tenderness, Stanley has always been a natural magnet for intense transference projections, both positive and negative.

On the Human Potential workshop circuits of the 1970s and 1980s, Stanley had a reputation as a "force to be reckoned with." Sometimes, this seemed to attract people who were looking for a strong person to pick fights with. He did not put up with participants who acted out in his groups, and he could be quite intimidating when seriously challenged, evoking the Brooklyn street fighter of his youth. He did not want the ethos of emotional catharsis and dramatic "breakthroughs" so prevalent in personal growth groups to permeate his workshops and would set firm limits on anyone who seemed to be moving in this direction. Sometimes, in the early workshops, he allowed himself to respond emotionally to camouflaged provokers and other people wearing the various guises of negativity. New students are often surprised by his confrontations with direct and indirect hostility. Personally, I have always found it refreshing and illuminating to experience a group leader willing to show many sides of himself, and I consider Stanley a model of emotional expressiveness. He has also always been a model of someone who works on himself and uses his own work to grow himself.

Of course, the vast majority of Stanley's interactions with participants in his groups have been free of conflict, and these interactions too have taught me a great deal. His capacity to be present with another human being is remarkable; his somatic intuition awe inspiring. I have never forgotten my own experience of meeting Stanley and feeling that I was really being seen by another person for perhaps the first time in my life.

As a family friend, I have experienced directly Stanley's strong commitment to family and family participation. He and Gail were married for more than 30 years and raised two daughters together. When Gail died, Stanley became a model for someone going through the grieving process, and the ensuing processes of reorganizing family and other important connections.

Over the years, Stanley has shown me and others how we can live the stages of our lives, from the Alpha shape to the mature and Second Adult into the late Adult. He has shared a great deal in his writing and teaching, and by how he lives his life, influencing and forming his own process.

### Concluding Remarks

In concluding this memoir, I want to share a recent dream and the story of my work with it.

I dream that I am with my ex-husband. We stand close together, and I experience a strong physical relationship between us and a warm, intimate feeling. I'm a little edgy, though, because I know it's time for us to separate—he has a plane to catch and I need to be somewhere else. But he clings to me in a very insistent way and won't let go, until finally I wrench away and push him back.

Now I am on the upper floor of a hotel, trying to catch an elevator to go down to the ground floor. The elevator stops several times, but the doors close before I can get on. I become more and more frustrated. Another woman arrives on the scene. She finds a back door into the elevator. In the blink of an eye, she opens it and gets on, slamming the door shut in my face. Now I'm really angry, but I also feel helpless.

I wake up.

A few hours later, feeling frustrated with the task I am doing, I remember the dream and decide to work with it. I assume the stance of my angry, frustrated, helpless self and hold my intensification of the stance for a long time. I feel as if I'm back in the dream, continuously being shut out of the elevator. Gradually, I work with softening the pose. As I disorganize my posture, pulsing waves of excitement fill me. I use myself to make a shape of containing this liquidity and as I do, inside myself, I hear Stanley's voice saying, "you are a wave." I recognize that the place I was shut out of was myself, and now I am in myself. I taste the experience of my own pulsating being and recognize that I am no longer angry or helpless, and I know that I will be able to deal with the task at hand. Once again, I am filled with wonder and gratitude to my great teacher, who has led me to the gift of my own aliveness and Formative capacities, and has helped me to share this gift with many others.

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