Forming an Embodied Life: 
The Difference between Being Bodied and Forming an Embodied Life

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Abstract

The human’s ability to make transitions in its age shapes, socially and personally, produces distress, anxiety, and doubt about how to behave. One response is to become overly reliant on inherited responses. An alternative response is to use voluntary muscular influence and the formative dynamic to manage and resolve cortical emotional organismic dilemmas. The body is an organized environment, a structure of excitatory vitality and experiential knowledge, and a source of the personal and collective wisdom of knowing. Voluntary muscular effort extends this power, making it possible to participate in how we give body to experience and make memories.

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The bodied life is a life of morphogenesis, a process of continual change of somatic shapes. But being aware of and experiencing our soma and the morphogenesis in a bodied life does not constitute what I call an embodied life.

The body’s forming process is at the heart of animate existence. The body changes its shape involuntarily by following an inherited program of development and adaptation. It also changes its anatomical shape by the application of voluntary effort such as learning to walk and talk, read and write. The ability for voluntary effort requires the cooperation of muscle and cortex. The cortex makes and remembers neural maps of muscular activity. The involuntary muscular system in relationship with the cortex allows the development of voluntary muscular effort. Voluntary muscular effort permits the organism to differentiate its inherited behavior. This voluntary effort of differentiation is a gradation of muscle effort and tonus which changes the intent and outcome of inherited acts. The ability to influence muscular tonus and change an inherited pattern of action is the single most important evolutionary step that has changed hominid behavior into human behavior.
The ability to alter programmed behavior is the basis of developing voluntary self management and of creating alternate behaviors to those which are inherited; this ability of cortex and muscle to create novel behavior, experiences that have not existed before, is the difference between having a bodied life and forming a personal embodied life. Voluntary morphogenesis is how the organism learns to influence its inherited behavior and form repeatable memory structures of how it influences, recalls, and forms new expressions. Voluntary morphogenesis uses voluntary muscular effort and creates a personal life field that also has personal meaning and social value and is what I mean by an embodied life.

Living the embodied process depends upon the organism’s use of voluntary effort to generate experience and to form memories of the body’s relationship with itself. This remembering is an anatomic process which is experienced as “I can do this; I can organize a personal behavior different from my inherited reflex response.” Voluntary muscular effort facilitates excitatory patterns and is able to give them body by making new expressions so the organism does not fall into old reflex patterns of response and can organize a personal somatic reality and influence how to be specifically bodily present as needed. This is a continuing education associated with the desire to form an autobiographical formative identity.

Being embodied is a formative process. It is imperative for the organism to develop voluntary motor acts to facilitate forming a personal somatic excitatory life field that rebody its involuntary and voluntary somatic experiences into behaviors that are not programmed. This asks that, over time, each person endeavor to develop fine motor skills for differentiating reflex motor patterns into new behavioral expressions and relationships that generate and develop the soma’s life field and a motoric excitatory emotional cognitive aliveness. Voluntary effort is not mental will power; it is a muscular neural effort that brings about anatomic morphogenesis that bestows experiential awareness of past and present excitatory events and possibilities that can be made part of a personal embodied behavior. Living an embodied life takes voluntary muscular effort which influences inherited somatic behavioral shapes, like reaching, approaching, and withdrawing, which generate motoric sensations, feelings, and cognitive feedback. Voluntary muscular effort mobilizes old muscular memory structures and organizes new acts. Forming helps the organism transcend its inherited life which makes the organism an agent of its own embodied destiny of a personal life.

The forming process has four organizing phases: the motile, mercurial, short-lived phase; the porous, malleable shapes where frail stability appears; the firmer, semi-rigid, reliable, repeatable shapes; and the least changeable, dense, compressed shapes. These involuntary somatic shapes are part of a developmental continuum that can be influenced and differentiated by voluntary effort to organize a semi-rigid, malleable, and focused structure, a pulsatory excitatory muscular synaptic life field of aliveness. By making a commitment to use voluntary muscular effort to give body to our experiences we participate in personalizing the continual morphogenesis of animate existence.

The human situation
Living in the age of the cortex

By the formative dynamic, I mean the ability of the organism to recognize its experienced motoric gestalts and develop new motor connections and a synaptic world
of created human feelings, thoughts, and memories that becomes part of its personal field of experience. This personal somatic world, called “I”, develops by its rules of organizing actions, is a generator of experience, thought, feeling, and images, and is the narrative of our identity over a lifetime.

As differentiating somatic shapes have come more and more under the influence of the cortex and voluntary muscular effort, the human’s ability to influence its transitions at all ages has created a personal behavioral excitatory life field that is not genetically programmed. The evolutionary upgrade we are living is not how the brain controls the body but how it has brought a voluntary dialogue between muscle, brainstem and the cortex into existence.

The cortex’s ability to respond, image, and reorganize its acting time and the intensity of its excitement toward an intended target and make new connections and memories that can be recalled and edited through the use of voluntary muscular and cortical interaction, transcends the capacity of the brainstem and limbic system. The body, learning to relate to itself and to remember i.e. make anatomic structures with duration, is responsible for creating a human sphere of existing at work, in love and in sexual relationships.

How the organism uses voluntary effort to influence its somatic emotional cognitive transitions throughout every stage of human existence has brought great change to the human condition. We can influence how we behave, feel and relate to ourselves and others. We can disassemble and reassemble the muscular patterns of acting, and learn to influence instinctual or habitual patterns such as fight-flight, confusion, avoidance, helplessness, defeat, or despair. With voluntary muscular cortical effort not only can we reorganize the over-intense structure of fear or anger in many intimate situations, but we can also bring differentiation to the soma’s innate, involuntary pulses of excitement. Using voluntary muscular and cortical effort to influence behavior gives us a personal experience of satisfaction and vitality as we age. Voluntarily embodying our efforts and experience is a continual education that keeps forming new relations and memories throughout the cycle of our bodied existence.

Many people seek help because they can’t manage the experience of themselves in certain life situations. They are either in a somatic shape of helplessness or resignation, or the hyper-alertness of startle and are experiencing a loss of direction or the inability to satisfactorily organize work, a love life, and personal meaning. They may present themselves in a pattern of somatic rigidity accompanied by feelings of isolation, or their somatic structure may be compressed, dense, or hunkered down in despair. Their gestures and expressions are exaggerated, muted, or rotated as if they want to turn away and avoid contact, but are stuck in having to face forward. Inherited patterns of frustration include stiffening, twisting away, and compressing, or becoming porous, diffuse, and seeking to merge. They are accompanied by limited ranges of action and the sensations, images, feelings, and thoughts associated with a restricted or fearful world within themselves. The body’s cortex and its connective tissue vitality have been muted, as has the formative process of rehearsing, dreaming, and imaging possibilities to enact. The experience is an overall loss of optimism and cheerfulness.

When people in such a somatic state make their postural emotional attitudes, expressions, and gestures more vivid through the use of measured voluntary muscular effort, their cortex immediately engages in making a muscular model and a neural map of the act. If the intensified muscular emotional attitude is disassembled in measured
steps to prevent rapid disorganizing and loss of boundaries, the cortex develops its ability for voluntary muscular management. Voluntary motor acts stimulate the cortex to engage in editing the inherited reflex organization and permit different somatic shapes to appear; for example, to be less dense or less rigid, or more rigid and less porous. The repeated practice of voluntary acts influences the established behavioral, emotional, and cognitive organizations and presents modified behavior to practice in real life situations. In this way the organism empowers itself and grows a new identity rooted in the mantra “I can do this.” The formative practice grows a library of new experiences that makes a personal life. This is the formative dynamic that creates the formative life over time.

**Forming an embodied existence**

Formative Psychology® is a pragmatic approach to daily life. It educates a person about how to use voluntary muscular effort to influence emotional structures, cortical beliefs, and psychological beliefs in order to continually form their adult self in a changing world. Few people realize the significance of the statement “Anatomy is destiny.” Most of us do not realize that our emotional, sexual, and cognitive patterns of behavior depend on the innate pattern of acting which provides the reference for our experiences of behaving. Most of us are not able to grasp the reality that the body acts before it feels or thinks. Being able to inhibit, plan, or carry out an action does not deny that it is built on an innate pattern of response. The impulse to attack, to retreat, or to dispose of comes into play without thought or feeling. Once in play it is almost impossible to inhibit without considerable practice. In fact, there is little or no emotional accompaniment of an action until a certain level of muscular intensity has been reached. Only then will feelings and thoughts of revenge or images of triumph appear. When the innate reflex is enacted with voluntary muscular effort, its muscular pattern can be differentiated or made more semi-porous or less intense. This in turn makes the voluntary influence more rewarding. Voluntary formative effort has its own psychology, its own organizing dynamic and time, for the development of being personally embodied in daily life, which creates a personal somatic emotional cognitive reality.

Formative Psychology’s® practice is an experiential approach for managing and differentiating emotionally complex situations in relationships and life transitions. It is of urgent importance to practice voluntary muscular effort in order to more effectively govern one’s responses and accumulate motoric memories and their associations throughout the cycle of existence that organizes one’s adult life field. People engaged in working with voluntary muscular cortical effort to mobilize patterns of behavior, to go forward with determination, or to mobilize a pattern of withdrawal, for example, can voluntarily mobilize muscular effort to make a muscular model which also organizes a neural map. The model can be voluntarily disassembled with deliberate cortical effort by altering one’s anatomy and widening the field of possibilities for voluntary action. This differentiated muscular cortical pattern becomes a new reference for behaving differently. Thus, making a muscular model of an emotional expression teaches the person to use themselves bodily to acquire an experiential knowledge of how to alter the way they act, feel, and think and how to use themselves differently and not be overwhelmed or confused in situations.
Voluntary muscular effort which mimics or intensifies a muscular pattern allows the cortex to help disassemble excessive tension. This adds to the chain of remembered voluntary acts. For example, if squeezing our body is a protective holding pattern, from our voluntary effort we can learn how much we over squeeze and how to make layers of holding that do not inflict harm on or overwhelm ourselves. Voluntary muscular effort helps us learn a personal style of organizing and disorganizing an anatomic emotional cognitive behavior pattern, which helps the organism have a relationship with itself in which it can respond to its creativity and form a personal embodied existence. To use voluntary muscular effort with oneself is to touch one’s self, make connections within one’s self and develop contact with and knowledge of one’s bodily self. While learning to develop voluntary muscular effort over time is the key to influencing our instinctual and habituated behavior, voluntary muscular effort consists of much more than inhibiting or differentiating an action or emotion; voluntary muscular effort also develops degrees of behavioral time frames and layers of somatic shapes which become a thick labyrinth of connections between rich memory structures that function as a fountain of felt satisfactions and wisdom.

**Conclusion: E-mails with a client**

Dear Stanley,
The bodying exercise is giving me new experiences of a world within me that I feel is a bigger and deeper world than I usually have. When I can assert measured muscular force at the surface of my body, a deep layered nonverbal ocean appears in me that is bigger than me. I realize more and more how voluntary effort makes me alive and other ways to be more personally bodily present in the world as a personalized me that has embodied my experiences. My efforts to give body to my experiences gives me a connection of me and a remembered me. The work with myself forms a field of lively peace and confidence from being able to help myself make a personal me in me even in tiny steps. Living an embodied life takes work, Stanley, but it’s better than being victim to storms of emotions and excitement that wash me away.

Many thanks.

Dear A,
We start where we are, and develop, creating our somatic future. Human nature is always organizing its future; this has been a personal truth since we stood upright and began to have a horizon. Sometimes it takes a lifetime to prepare ourselves to be ready to develop or form some aspect of our somatic nature which we live, or continually dream about without knowing it. The body keeps forming and differentiating its basic inherited gifts which the cortex and muscular effort munch on. Each person needs a voluntary practice that fosters muscular cortical interaction to create and give their style of existing body, form. The body is a formative agent, an artist that can, with voluntary muscular effort, grow a personal second adult, which also is a formative agent. We can all be artists growing a personal second adult, even at 75, slowly shifting into forming new acts and perceptions that form a new world. Working with VME forms an inner somatic garden which can meet the adaptation challenges of existing in every age our body lives. That is what it means to live an embodied life grounded in our voluntary efforts.
In the course of living a life we all have the opportunity to form it. However, few of us know how to participate in giving shape to our tissues and the organism’s pulsatory organizing waves within us that connect us to the vast ocean of life both in and around us, without losing our personal formed identity. VME is a powerful tool for getting to know the mystery of our excitement, the ebb and flow that helps us live in the waves of our earth’s biospheres as well as in the waves of society and family. Voluntary muscular cortical effort connects the organism to its own pulsatory patterns that form its multi-layered life and is the royal road to a kinder, embodied life.

BIOGRAPHY

Stanley Keleman PhDHC is the director of the Center for Energetic Studies in Berkeley California, where he teaches the Formative Approach to human development. Awarded a PhD in Human Letters from Saybrook Graduate School in 2007, he is also the founder and developer of Formative Psychology, the director of research at the Center of Form and Development in Zurich, Switzerland, and a visiting lecturer at the Spectrum School of Humanistic Psychology in London, England. He has authored the pioneering books Emotional Anatomy, Embodying Experience, Your Body Speaks its Mind, Insults to Form, Living Your Dying, and Myth and the Body, in addition to numerous clinical books.

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