

# Spring 2017 Interview

## With Stanley Keleman for AAP Journal Voices

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*The following is excerpted from the Spring 2017 issue of the American Academy of Psychotherapists journal Voices. The interviewer is Ron Hook, a faculty member at the Institute for Individual and Group Psychotherapy in Southfield, Michigan.*

**Hook:** I understand that you practiced as a DC in 1950's NYC. How did you get to Formative Psychology?

**Keleman:** It was developed over years. In my early career, training for my doctorate in chiropractic, I met original, creative people who were the founders of early chiropractic. Many of them even served jail time because their teachings went against mainstream medicine.

**Hook:** My goodness.

**Keleman:** These characters were free-thinking people with enormous courage and tremendous insight. They broke up into different schools, but they had a common basis for structural analysis that had to do with distress or dis-ease as a disturbance of the whole geometry of the body. I had a teacher who saw that emotions were triggered by chiropractic adjustments; this was an early recognition that feeling and emotion are influenced by changes in body states. For me, it brought together psychology and the body into the whole notion of the healing arts.

In neurology class, I was taught about Hans Selye's general adaptive syndrome, which is: The body's response to stressors is in stages of inflammation. Selye was another remarkable man with tremendous vision based upon his clinical observations. He also said that all diseases have the same beginning which is the inflammatory response. These were seminal notions that led me in my research of the body and its ability for reorganizing, which is a formative as well as a healing process.

I knew Gestalt people very well, especially Laura Perls. She led groups in which I worked with people who had psychiatric diagnoses. I watched their movement patterns and saw where their coordination, their gestures and action patterns broke down in the intensity of the stress process. This helped me understand that somatic distress, like the inflammatory process, was in fact changes in anatomy.

Nina Bull, a Who's Who in Science, was another one of those champions who fell into my life. She understood the nature of the somatic, muscular-cortical connection. She wanted to know the biology of Freud's unconscious. And her conclusion was it's a muscular attitude of a readiness to act. Readiness to act is brainstem activity for reflex actions like startle, fight or flee, etc., accompanied by emotion and feeling responses.

I opened a practice in Manhattan and had the opportunity to work with some famous Broadway singers and dancers. I learned a lot about how to intervene and help people deal with their patterns of overuse, which is a major stressor in that business. I was now on the path of researching the relationship of the body's structural changes and its internal dialogues and responses.

I became very interested in the relationship of the body and psychology. I always felt something was incomplete with the Reichian way of freeing the emotions through catharsis. The missing piece is illustrated in this story: Several years ago I gave a talk to a group of London osteopaths on the "Pulsatory Nature of the Human Organism." At the end several people identified a common dilemma: Why is it that our clients come to see us, and after a treatment they report feeling much better, only to come back at the next session bringing their original condition? Why don't they stay better?

I told them that all behavior is fundamentally a process of biological organization and that people mostly do not understand how the body's biological reorganization takes place or how it is sustained. To support healing, which is actually a reorganization, not a return to an original state of health, you have to teach people how to be agents of their own healing, of their own reorganization. As a practitioner you can do something for them by modifying a body state and showing them new movement possibilities but how they learn to use themselves physically to support and sustain their reorganization is the critical factor.

If a person doesn't support the changes by practicing, physically, then change is not stabilized and it is not lasting. In Reich's model, catharsis broke down structure, and a person was left at the mercy of instinctual forces. Nothing was taught about voluntary reorganizing.

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**Hook:** That's very interesting.

**Keleman:** It's a matter of understanding the dynamics of the biological process of how body shape changes form which, anatomically speaking, is how body tissue shapes gain stable structure and how these structures change to less stable forms or disappear. A posture, an attitude, is a malleable process of body shaping; it is not simply a mental state. A mood does not exist a priori, it's a biological movement pattern that produces a mood.

Understanding this, I went back to Selye. He tells you what happens when there's an insult to the body. What happens is an inflammatory response, and the healing response is the body reorganizing itself. And that's the basis of my understanding the formative process of voluntary self-organization and self-healing. Voluntary reorganization happens with cortical support because the cortex is where the voluntary centers are.

You have to understand that the cortex is the highest organ of voluntary self regulation, second to none. One of the sole purposes of the cortex is to modify reflex responses and habitually excessive behaviors. The cortex gives you a chance to learn to act appropriately by learning to differentiate the inherited reflex attitude through voluntarily reorganizing. We call this self-regulation or self-management. Voluntary self-influence means learning to reorganize ourselves somatically, and this is the ground floor of formative psychology.

**Hook:** How do you teach voluntary influence?

**Keleman:** First to be understood is the fact that the human organism is a pulsatory process that has an innate pattern of anatomical, structural development. Generally speaking we are all programmed to grow into the same stages of living. This is involuntary--it just seems to happen. The ability to voluntarily build on this innate process, that is to create behaviors and situations that are not programmed, is a learned function.

At some point I began thinking that the human organism has now gone from learning to influence its environment by creating new conditions for living, to entering a new phase, a new focus which is learning to create its own inner environment. Having an inner life, having a personal life, is something voluntarily created. It's when we learn to differentiate our inherited adult in order to have personal expression within our body's given constitutional parameters.

The organism's basic aim is to develop itself to extend the life process. Replication is a means to do that, but not the only means. This is a big shift in how you think about survival. It means there is a basic urge to develop ourselves in ways that are not programmed, and then intentionally remember experience and transmit it. So, that's the epigenetic application of Formative Psychology.

**Hook:** So, it's a reorienting of one's self on a physical level.

**Keleman:** Reorienting and reorganizing. Look at it this way: A man or a woman who doesn't make new memories, which are fundamentally a tissue relationship between muscular events and excitatory responses, is forced to live old ones. Memories are stabilized tissue structures; they are a reference library for what has been learned. Memory is essential for repeating a behavior, and memory structures can be edited by practicing new behaviors that form changes in tissue structure. Practice stabilizes structure and supports a durable change in behavior.

**Hook:** Which requires voluntary muscular effort.

**Keleman:** Yes. There are inherited instinctual behaviors, and then there are voluntary organized and learned behaviors. Athletes know this, skilled craftsmen know this, professional walkers know this, and surgeons know this. They develop specific muscular skills that are cortical skills as well, which are behaviors that were not inherited but can be transmitted epigenetically.

**Hook:** I have a couple of quotes from your website material. I'd like to see what you have to say about them. One is, "Language begins to separate us from grounded experience. Unfortunately, we engage in identifying something rather than engage in being that something."

**Keleman:** A friend described it like this: Some people were talking about understanding the phenomenology of an event, and they kept walking around this chair and describing it but never sitting in it. I try to help people sit in their experience and describe what they are experiencing. Anxiety is one of those events. It's kind of a globalized dread that we are trying to pin down with descriptive language. But people mostly don't adjust their language to include the actual physical experience.

A client might say, "I am full of dread. I feel like I'm going to explode. I'm burning up. I feel like I'm (whatever)." And I say, "OK, you feel pressure and heat? Can you show me without categorizing, the posture of 'about to explode,' then from your experience tell me what you are doing, what is it like, where do you feel it? What does it do to you? How do you regulate it. by tightening, or squeezing?"

Questions like these bring a person inside the experience of themselves. I might then say, "Let's think about this formatively: What is the body trying to do? Is this how you hold yourself together? Is it a signal to maintain your form?" I aim to use their experience of themselves and to find new experiences and new descriptive words that change their orientation.

Change in body shape changes orientation. If you use words to describe things as they were, you'll never think your way out of a process. You've got to bring fresh

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experience and fresh language, because language is not based on the meaning of words when you first learned them, it's based on your current somatic experience and creating a language for it.

**Hook:** So, if you don't change the language somehow, you only repeat.

**Keleman:** Right. Changing behavior begins with the ability to reenact a pattern of behavior, first by recreating its body shape, then editing it by differentiating the action, then adjusting the language from this experience. That's formative psychology.

**Hook:** You also say, "Action precedes emotion and is its creator; it is not the result of emotion." I've understood that people react to danger first in the body and then they realize that they experience fear. But, the other feelings?

**Keleman:** We now have discovered that the limbic system is a supplier of qualitative excitation that we cognitively categorize as certain feeling states. Depending upon your school of thought, there are between five and nine states: dread, fear, awe, etc. You realize that in an emergency, the organism's behavior can be supercharged. The emergency is not only a signal from the outside, it's a signal from the inside acted on by the body before the cortex can respond. The neural response system of recognizing a threat or a challenge is quicker than the interpretive feeling system. A neural impulse travels at 390 feet per second. The instinctual body responds so quickly that the sense of the feeling is the after-result.

When someone comes to me and says "I feel tight," my first response is, "Show me bodily the shape of tight. Hold it long enough so you recognize its components physically." Then I ask, "Can you increase the muscular tension? Don't change the shape by making it bigger or smaller, just increase the pressure, make it voluntarily tighter." I watch as they make it tighter and I focus the response to come from their experience by asking, "What kind of feelings emerge when you change shapes by changing the pressure gradient?"

**Client:** "When I pressure myself more I feel rage, I feel disgust, I feel murderous." I continue to focus responses and language coming from their experience: "And what happens if you change the intensity? Can you decrease the intensity you have voluntarily organized? Can you do it by making slow discrete frames?" Repeating this process, a person learns to make voluntary subtle shape changes.

In the beginning most people let go muscularly in one big jump into what they call "relaxed," which is actually a dismissal of voluntary management. The important part is learning the step-by-step slow increase and decrease of pressure gradients. This gives time for the body to learn new possibilities within a pattern of action, and makes time for feeling awareness to accumulate.

**Client:** "Well, I begin to feel vulnerable, I don't want to be softer, I like the power state of being compressed. When I feel uncompressed, I feel anxious because I don't have power."

So you see how it happens that feedback comes as feeling or emotion from an action the body is making. Nina Bull said it beautifully in her book *The Attitude Theory of Emotion* (1951): When a person is preparing to cry, they feel sad. When they are crying, they don't feel sad. I extended that to include the muscular attitude of readiness to respond. When a person feels rage, he's getting ready to hit you. When he's hitting you, he doesn't know what he's feeling, he's just hitting you.

As a teacher or therapist, you want to get at the sequential action pattern because in the neural-muscular preparation of readiness to respond there are intents, meanings, feelings a person doesn't even know about. You can see it! When I watched other people do Reichian bodywork, you could see the body respond. You could see attitudes taking place right in front of you, and you could see the difference between what their bodies were doing and what they were saying. Action, meaning and feeling were not connected.

At some point I began to see that psychotherapy really should be an educational process. In many cases it isn't a matter of pathology, which does indeed exist, but for many people problem-solving is an educational process that has been neglected. For example, the way forward isn't the denial of sexuality, it's learning and forming how you handle the sexuality. That wasn't taught. Change is not a matter of eliminating or suppressing a behavior, it's about managing it to form new options, new choices that have personal meaning.

A teacher tells you, "Pay attention," but she doesn't tell you how. She leaves it to you to figure it out, but that doesn't mean the way you figure it out is very effective. It's likely to be biologically cost-ineffective. So, I see the formative work I do not as correction, but as learning how to be in the world based upon your experiences, not my idea or anyone else's idea of what you should be.

**Hook:** So changing yourself somatically is a process of education, like a learned physical skill?

**Keleman:** As a generalization, all body shapes, tissue states, exist in a dynamic pulsatory continuum of movement patterns. The pulsatory continuum is a back and forth between more form and less form, between established stable behavior and less established behavior seeking more form. I identify four overlapping stages which I call motile-porous-rigid-dense.

First is the motile state, in which things are very agitated with lots of excitement, moving and changing at a fast pace. Embryologically, you see this when you watch how

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much motility is happening when the first cell division forms the blastula, which is a ball with a hollow space, rapidly making more and more differentiated cells and layers of inside and outside. It's changing so fast that it's difficult to keep up with.

Motile activity when seeking a more stable state moves into porosity, where tissue movement is slower and more cohesive but still very malleable. This state doesn't have enough firmness or stability of structure to have much duration. So porosity can seek more stability by organizing rigidity. The rigid state is where gradients of firmness, stability, repeatability are acquired. And then there's the dense state, the habituated state, where form is long lasting, where stable memory and entrenched habit reside.

The voluntary influence of behavior is the pulsatory tiding along this continuum. This back and forth, from density to porosity, is where new shapes and behavioral possibilities are developed. So, learning the process of behavior change means learning how you voluntarily move back and forth along the continuum from dense, or firm to porous and malleable.

When you practice altering your behavioral stages you are learning new ways of acting and feeling. There are steps to doing this. It's not a matter of making yourself rigid, on and off, a lot or a little. No, firmness has different stages between a little and a lot. With practice you learn to differentiate stiffness into smaller bits, and you can manage the smaller bits. That's what reorganizing is. Small movements, slow gradients create big effects.

**Hook:** That makes sense.

**Keleman:** So, teaching this to a client we might begin by asking, "How do you organize being angry?" Client: "I knew what I said would make that person angry and I'd have power over them." "How did you do that?" Client: "Well, I held my chin back, pulled my eyes down, and I gave them my mother's look." "OK, can you increase your focused rigid pattern and hold it so you give yourself time to recognize the muscular pattern, then slowly decrease the pressure in small steps? What is it like to shift your sense of power to something that's softer?" Client: "I don't know about being softer. How can I be softer?" "Well, let's find out. Show me how you regulate softness by introducing less muscular pressure, in small degrees. Then add small increases in pressure. Hold each step a bit to recognize the new state. Holding a shape establishes stability, which is how memory is formed. Can you experience some pulsing between your more rigid and less rigid states? That's the porous malleable state where new form is born. Now, your homework is practicing degrees of softness. In the next session, I want you to tell me how you used the exercise."

At the next meeting I'll ask, "And what did you learn from your degrees of softness?" Client: "Well, I only did it three

times." "That's OK. Tell me about the three times if that's what you could bear. So let's see how you can learn from small things." And that opens the dialogue toward changing behavioral form.

**Hook:** I took a look into your book, *Maturity, Solitude, Intimacy* [2014].

**Keleman:** Oh, that little blue book of essays about developing a personal life as we age.

**Hook:** Yes. We are aging. You described it in the book as people becoming afraid of powerlessness and loss. Your alternative sounded delicious to me. I'd like you to describe it, if you don't mind. By the way, it looks like it has worked out very well for you.

**Keleman:** Obviously, I'm involved in getting older. I'm living it-86. And, a lot of my students are living it. We've come to a biological state where we've extended the life span but what has been neglected is knowing the pleasure of self contact that comes from living close to your pulsatory life force. There is a deliciousness to it. So, I want to break this apart to examine it.

I do know from experience that giving people a tool for self-influence and self-management relieves helplessness and institutes optimism. We have entered a time where there are enough people living past 80, and escalating, that something new is crying out to be identified as a distinct stage of living. So, thinking formatively we can ask, what is seeking to be formed here? What can older people learn about themselves when it is no longer appropriate to live out the needs and desires of a younger person?

As the body accumulates years, what are the strengths of our changed anatomy? How can we recognize and use these strengths? We might ask, how do I recognize the change of body mass and relate to it? The question becomes, how do you relate to your experience rather than viewing it through the lens of loss? One way is to notice the attitudes you bring to aging, notice how you move yourself. Pay attention to how you are engaging voluntarily in daily activities, for example, styles of walking or how much excitation you need or want, or the function of time. What is changing about your speed of recall or focused attention? What understanding do you get from new ways you use yourself? Notice what is changing in your societal role when your body's physicality is not the same. It's a different way of being in the world, it represents a different level of presence, of contact with yourself and others.

One thing I've recognized is that I'm entering an age of increased intimacy. It's not primarily an intimacy with another person, it's an intimacy with oneself that is then shared with another person. For me this is a personal subjective somatic intimacy. Being slower is the key. It

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can be a pulsatory wave between yourself and yourself where a wave of quietness is gentle pulsatory tiding, or a porous vulnerability slowly inhabits your whole body. I pay attention to the changing patterns of contact that give me satisfaction and meaning. Sharing with others the whole vista of what your world is like at this stage of life is a sharing of an evolutionary epigenesis. This is what the blue book is about.

**Hook:** How do you educate people about this new somatic world?

**Keleman:** You have to start with the body we have, to bring that online and learn how to use it both with ourselves and with others. Learn about your own pulsation, about degrees of rigidity and porosity, learn how to manage levels of stimulation and excitement. How do softer pulsations inform your life? One possibility might be to explore how the alpha stage of life is voluntarily developed into a life stage of inclusive tenderness. Living well into older age is a stage of life that can be under-formed. For me the formative approach opens a whole new dimension to savor and enjoy.

**Hook:** Chuck Kelly told me as he was aging that his defenses seemed to drop, and he was in better contact with what he would call the life force in himself, and around him.

**Keleman:** That would be a good description of it. But I would not use the word “defenses.” I would say one reason we change is because we lose body mass at a rate of 1–2% a year starting between 45 and 50, and people do not really take that into account. No matter how much you lift weights and get hypertrophied, you are still losing muscular mass, smooth muscle as well as striated muscle.

Yes, age brings distinctly different body shapes. I describe this as a changing pulsatory tide of the lessening of rigidity and the arising of porosity. So, to stay with the formative perspective, I would say, yes, you’re losing some of the biological structures by which you were able to manage how you are in the world. But, as body mass changes, your world is asking for another kind of participation. It’s not simply that aging is happening to you, you are participating in it and to a meaningful degree you can form it! My old friends Al Lowen, Ola Raknes and Joe Campbell all found ways to use themselves in their later years and continue to participate in a meaningful life. I admire and respect that.

**Hook:** That’s so important.

**Keleman:** I think that’s what I want to say in a nutshell. I’m interested in what the future of being older is for myself. I’m doing a book about aging now, and the opening line is, “Every human being dies two deaths: the death of the inherited body and the death of the body

that you voluntarily make as an identity in the world. The anguish is not about the inherited body dying, it’s about the loss of what has been personally created.”

**Hook:** Beautiful.

**Keleman:** You made me feel very comfortable, Ron, thank you.

**Hook:** Well, thank you. It has been great to meet you and to hear your wisdom.

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