

# Interview with Eleanor Criswell

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*On Dec. 8, 2012, Stanley Keleman discussed the embodied life with Eleanor Criswell, core faculty member of Meridian University. The conversation was a part of the university's second annual Mystery of Embodiment summit. In the following text, Keleman elaborates on the interview and the principles of Formative Psychology.*

**Stanley Keleman (SK):** Several years ago I gave a talk at the osteopathic conference and this familiar question came up: Why is it when we work with people somatically they feel better for a while but then the work doesn't hold or it doesn't hold together long enough and later they are back in the same place?

The fact that you make an anatomical intervention with somebody doesn't necessarily mean they know how to support the organization of the change. That the body can be plastic enough or malleable enough to be influenced doesn't mean there is some mechanism by which the body automatically knows how to stabilize and embody novel change.

The question we should ask is what does it take for the body to make a memory of a new behavior and then be able to repeat that behavior in different situations? The central question becomes how to establish tissue memory so the unstable anatomical changes are supported by voluntary effort.

Making a new tissue memory of an anatomical pattern is a function of the action of voluntary effort to support the anatomical change. And then this new memory is stabilized by repeated effort. If learning how to voluntarily support change is not introduced to the clients, they feel only that nature has the power that may heal them and help them, but nature will only do as best as it can. Learning how to influence oneself through voluntary effort is self empowerment.

Formative Psychology is the basic principle, I should say the formative process is the basic principle of how the organism forms itself from the moment of conception. The way the body plan is enacted is always behavioral action. These actions follow a formative process of organizing and disorganizing and reforming that is taking place through all of one's life including the aging phases.

We see the formative process in the development of behavior. A piece of behavior goes through stages I have identified as motile, porous, rigid and dense. These stages are action patterns and developmental sequences of how anatomical organization, on the tissue level, changes shape and creates stability for itself over time.

If the inherited formative principle is expressed in everybody's life as a dynamic morphological organization, then how we influence and support those changes helps us create a personal life. A personal life, means the organism is capable of modifying its inheritance by generating novel anatomical experience it can support; this includes muscular experience, emotional experience, and cognitive experience that can be repeated and acted on.

When individual behavior is the interaction between what is given and what is voluntarily shaped, it represents the personal human dimension. It is this dimension all of us are involved in by supporting behavior that we think satisfies being a human being over evolutionary time. I think that every person who is somatically interested should understand the body is a very powerful organizing force; an organizing force that can be applied personally for one's self and clinically with clients or students by understanding how we use ourselves to form a behavior or influence a behavior.

**Eleanor Criswell (EC):** When you are with a client, are you aware of the formative principles as you are working with them?

**SK:** There are two things: I think of the organism as always being in its life situation. What behavior is being organizing for the short term and long term. Then how is the organism dealing with what I call constitutional dilemmas—meaning different kinds of inherited structure and phases of development at different stages of life. A person may be underdeveloped in the legs, like the immaturity of a child, and more developed in the upper body to function in the adult world and so there is a dilemma about how to organize behavior.

It is the same thing in language: How does a person begin to imitate the muscular, anatomical actions to

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make certain sounds and be able to repeat them, not just the muscular development but to encode sounds and meanings that make a language? This takes place over a lifetime and it takes place not only in child time but also in adult time and in aging time. How we learn to influence our efforts – how we want to speak, how we want to inflect, how we want to make gestures, how we want to position ourselves in a situation -- makes us one of the most adaptable animals on the face of the earth. It also makes it possible to transmit what is not programmed.

I ask myself: How, physically, is this person telling me about their dilemma? Is the difficulty they can't make up their mind. Are they confused or physically diminishing themselves. Do they feel worthless or depressed or unable to manage their impulses. I'm looking for the behavioral organization they cannot form and differentiate, and how much they are relying on programmed behavior and not able to influence it. What is it that needs to change, such as an impulsive behavior; and how bodily do they not know how to do this? How could I help them, say in a postural attitude of squeezing themselves and holding themselves under control, and how can they learn to manage their action/shape and create an alternative. How can they disassemble a postural attitude as a way of learning their own organizing process over time and then apply that process to how they try to manage and differentiate their behavior. How can they learn to reorganize their impulsiveness or anger and begin to lay down a different experiential history.

**EC:** So there are several things I am hearing in what you are saying. There is a big psychological dimension to your work plus an educational dimension.

**SK:** Basically what I think is that the human condition for the most part has a kind of ignorance about how behavior is organized. The relationship of involuntary and voluntary behavior is forgotten. People forget the steps of childhood -- how they learned, how they learned to use themselves muscularly and then made a shift into the cognitive dimension, which is a higher order of organizing that is built on the lower and they forgot the lower, so now they don't know how to organize a different behavior. They get themselves in all kinds of difficulties because they don't have the tools to manage and differentiate expression. The powerful potential of voluntary effort, of intentional self-influence, is that it is the royal road to a personal life.

So basically for many people in our population there is a kind of under education about what it means to have the ability within themselves to manage and differentiate and grow behavior. The formative approach is different than the pathological model. I don't deny pathology. It is another dimension.

I think that every person when you explore their behavior in terms of innate genetic behavior or in terms of social programming -- when you explore how they shrink, how they hold themselves in control, how they have learned to manage themselves -- you find behaviors that are habituated into action/feeling patterns that people do not know how to influence. A somatic formative approach teaches a person to recognize the stages of how a muscular emotional behavior comes into being and acquires symbolic and psychological meaning.

Once a person begins to get to the primary mechanism of self organization: Oh, I pull myself together like this, oh, I squeeze myself like this. So if this is the pressure I do, now I can learn to undo it, do it less, not make it so intense. With this kind of experiential understanding a person begins to generate a subjectivity. And from an experiential subjectivity they can ask themselves what kind of experience do I have? What do I feel about this? How do I manage not to overwhelm myself? So when I make these action shapes I can be less angry and not over dampen my experience. Now I have a way to learn how to manage my behavioral expressions in different situations.

Behavioral expressions are muscular and muscular organization produces experiences that are emotional and cognitive, and they are all linked in what I call a brainstem-thalamic-cortical connection. When a person finds themselves growing their cortex they are no longer simply dominated by their brainstem activity. They are establishing a memory feedback of the satisfaction of self management and a library of new possibilities. This is an evolutionary process.

Formative work begins with listening to a person telling you a dilemma and gathering information about their individual style from watching how they tell you, watching how they move, how they emote, how they use their hands, their shoulders, their face. Many times a person does not know what they are doing, how they are doing an action, how they are physically languaging.

You can watch a person be physical about thinking by how they hold themselves. They may be stiff and turn their neck to one side or rotate. You direct the focus by asking: What are you doing and how are you doing it? If necessary you can show them what they doing. Once a person experiences how they do something they can learn to do it more intensely by adding more muscular pressure, then to do it less by taking away some muscular pressure.

Then, if you are not in a hurry, you see if they can further differentiate the action by doing it in slow micro-movements -- not slow motion, but a slower way of doing it with more and less intensity. So now the person is making muscular-cortical connections back and forth in which the cortex becomes informed about the level of tension and expression.

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Because all tensions are behavioral actions, cortical suggestions for different muscular actions can be invoked to influence the amount of tension. This process of voluntary effort develops a whole pattern of experiential narration, an imagistic and action feedback that brings to the fore different qualities of feeling. The person may not even know the large range of possibilities and feelings they have. Beginning to learn in a formative way is not releasing something or looking for the big insight, but is learning by your actions over time.

Learning is a series of anatomical events in the connective tissue and in neural-synaptic interactions. Voluntary effort creates and influences cortical memory of muscular actions and of novel cortical neural connections. Multidimensional, layered anatomical maps are made of both the action of the effort as well as the experience of the effort. Voluntary muscular cortical effort is enmeshed with other memories that are similar to it in action patterns and in symbolic content and each can be edited. This is a wonderful understanding of a human life, of what an embodied life is about.

**EC:** What you are working with and talking about is right at the crux of the mystery of embodiment, right where it comes together.

**SK:** We are all born with an inherited body that, depending upon your scale of time, goes back millions or billions of years. This inherited body, our genetic program, is basically about how to make proteins and how to make a body structure. This is life's formative process that for each of us begins at conception.

Becoming familiar with the body's formative process is a gift of embodied existence. Bodied existence brings about a very powerful relationship to the ground of animate life, but it doesn't say anything about the evolutionary process of how a personal dimension of living takes place. By that I mean how self influence of inherited behavior happens, not because of adaptation to society, but how neural and muscular and emotional novelty is created in solving a dilemma. And how a new behavioral invention can be repeated through the development of voluntary effort. As humans we have the ability to develop a cortex that is able to make novel personal responses and organize body shapes and actions that alter an inherited intent, which is the ability to go beyond what nature programs. In other words, voluntary muscular cortical effort is about making a body shape or action pattern that is able to influence itself. You have this in the dialogue between the inherited body and its own creation, its personalized cortical functioning.

This dialogue makes possible to evolve a personal way of being in the world, a way of using oneself that can then be shared and taught to others like singing or dancing or someone who teaches you writing, things like that.

In a similar way we can learn how to build a personal identity. We can learn the forming process of our own development and evolution. We can learn how to communicate with other people, how to develop intimacy over time. We can regulate how we organize being solitary and being social and communicative. These are behaviors with many gradations that have to be learned.

**EC:** It seems to me that this is a very, very important message that needs to be known throughout the world. What is it like for you to carry this message and be trying to communicate it as broadly as you possibly can?

**SK:** First of all, it is about how I try to live my life and things I have had to deal with in my life. I have developed for myself the tools to help myself somewhat and that to me is a great pleasure, especially as one gets older and your body has gone from what I call an alpha adult to a mature body which has less muscular structure and a changed muscular cognitive relationship that prefers living in slower time.

So, I explore how to voluntarily help myself adapt and create a new body shape with expression, feeling and emotion consonant with this stage of my life. So on that side, the kind of joy or happiness that I have is for myself and those people who are interested.

I've written 5 or 6 books, 7 books, maybe 10. I have a website. I've lectured all over, but I enjoy sharing as I am sharing with you. How shall I put it... the human being likes to share experiences. A person likes to tell you how they have managed something, how they have created an active truth for themselves that they can live out. So, when I put that message out there, in a way, I am just sharing my experience and saying "Hey, here is something. Take what you need."

I am still involved in my life. I am finishing a two part paper on the importance of understanding solitude as a way of developing an internal anatomical subjective motoric organization. Voluntary organizing somatic solitude is not a retreat or withdrawal pattern but a boundary-making pattern that develops and deepens somatic subjectivity. It is related to developing a kind of personal intimacy of the cortex with its own thalamus and brainstem and the body's surface with its own interior. The soma becoming familiar with itself, with its own organizing processes, speaks in its own gestures and postures. These self organized subjective experiences also set the stage for how we come close with others and make separateness from others; how we handle excitement, when to extend it, when to contain it. I think these are lessons in self management that every person has the tools for, if they choose to develop them.

**EC:** It seems that you are able to manage your theoretical understandings and your personal understandings at the same time -- not an easy thing for human beings to do.

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**SK:** I think something not said by experienced somatic workers is that they have created a way of doing their work that is based in an internal anatomical behavioral organization. How a person both conceptualizes and experiences their work, how they use it with themselves and with others has created a distinct anatomical organization of self reference, of feeling and acting which they have formed over time and often they don't recognize there is no language for it. For me it is worthwhile to make a language for it.

I have tried in my work and in my books to make a language of anatomical experience. Without borrowing from physics or other disciplines I try to understand and articulate an experiential language that has formed the human dimension. How do you articulate that? For some people by writing linear text, some people by poetry and some, like Jackson Pollack, create the tradition of painting without touching the canvas. He made a transition by allowing the gesture to create something that will find a form on its way to a surface. However the effort and the gesture are voluntarily influenced. And then I have my method of voluntary muscular cortical effort.

**EC:** I remember that you have been or perhaps still are quite a sculptor.

**SK:** I am still doing that. I moved from doing big metal sculptures into making videos. Using moving images I have just finished converting my book *Emotional Anatomy* into a semi-animated project. I use images and stories of the human organism's formative process and how through voluntary effort different human expressions appear on the stage. Many people do not understand the formative process nor do they recognize how an expression is created until it is shown back to them and then they learn to experience it. So my sculpting has taken on that form.

**EC:** You also write poetry and other forms of artistic expression.

**SK:** Yes, I am just finishing up something now. A little booklet *The Soma's Song* is poetic prose describing the human organism as a motile matrix that has currents of form in it. How the body's own pulsatory form, like the heart beat, like the vascular system's expansion and contraction, or like the neural system's floods of excitatory impulses, is actually a tree of life, a living structure that is growing its own individual branches as it meets its own growth needs. That is what the poem is about. But that is enough talking about myself. The most important message I would like to leave...

**EC:** Well I think that part of the message here is that you as a developing soma have included in your sense of self and your being in the world all sorts of forms of expression.

**SK:** Yes. I have tried to personalize my life as an evolutionary process learned over time. By that I mean not as a narcissistic endeavor, but as developing voluntary muscular effort that becomes voluntary cortical muscular effort. It is a skill to learn about yourself. Dancers partly have it, painters have it, musicians have it. You are building your life structure that feels, thinks, moves and expresses itself in its own form with its own kind of subjective reality that is developed over time.

What develops inside one person is capable of being transmitted and recognized by others; it stimulates mirror neurons to produce the motor actions that give another the feeling of their own possibility to form their own interior life. That is my view of an embodied life and it opens the door to the most sacred feelings the human being can experience in terms of what is awesome, what is the real potential of a human life. Especially to recognize that we are co-creators of existence.

**EC:** You are heading toward something... What you are describing here, a human being who is becoming more cortical and becoming more aware and so forth. It is in a way, moving more in the direction of being a co-creator, an evolutionary.

**SK:** Well, the answer is: The dominance of the cortex is about 40,000 years old. It is dated at least as a starting point in the caves of Lascaux where we begin to see images replicated on walls that are the depiction of an inner life and the recognition the creation of that an individual artist.

This kind of subjective imagistic creativity has exploded into engineering and technology. It has exploded into literature and art. The cortex has created a human dimension of behavior and experience that is still growing, but it is not that the cortex dominates. If you think about the formative process being a process in nature that permeates our galaxy. And as a process of forms organizing within forms that develop over time, then you see the relationship of the body and its cortex.

The body continues to form itself through the interaction of muscle and cortex; it is an agent of what I call voluntary morphogenesis. The voluntary influencing of our body shapes will take you through life's transitions as an agent of your own transition. Now that to me is a lovely concept and a lovely image to bring into the public world and into the private world of those people you are close to, your children and grandchildren, your friends. This is where the individuation of one's self is really an organization of a shared intimacy of growing something deeper and deeper about our lives. Growing it because we don't just inherit it.

**EC:** We will open this up to questions now. Thank you so much.

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**Question:** How do you work with someone who feels in chronic day to day stress? What can you recommend for people?

**SK:** I wrote two books about this. *Insults to Form* and *Emotional Anatomy* speak to it. A simple answer is the stress pattern is a continuum of different body shapes. It is not one thing. It goes from alert investigation, to fight or flight which are shapes of fleeing toward or fleeing away, to confusion, oscillating back and forth, to helplessness and lastly to resignation. These are all somatic shapes which are motor behaviors.

Helplessness is when you can't escape, there is no alternative, you enter into defeat with feelings of shrinking, sinking down into yourself to a lower order of existence where you don't care to be engaged in the world. Defeat leads to resignation.

Resignation is not the organism quieting and subduing itself, but actually beginning to shut down. Each of these stages are a distinct shape that has to be mobilized and then disassembled bit by bit, slowly over time so that the bundle of behaviors we call stress can be differentiated and a person can learn and develop behaviors of mastering their own responses, as well as understanding responses of the world.

You can show a person how to influence these shapes. First by recognizing their posture, shoulders raised around their ears, or a turning away stance. Then by differentiating the shapes within the general pattern they can learn to influence these shapes. Using voluntary effort they can assemble and then disassemble habitual response patterns. Paying attention to the experiences coming from small voluntary changes they can, through repetition, support those changes. Then a person no longer feels trapped by their own responses.

Learning to change one's shape instills the power of self influence which is a reliever of stress immediately, because stress situations in which you feel trapped are the deadly ones.

**Question:** What was the moment or moments that set you on the path of your life's work?

**SK:** Oh my goodness, wonderful people with whom I've had interactions. Certain mentors like Nina Bull, who saw in me what I didn't see in myself, or Karlfried Graf Durkheim who also helped me understand something about myself... just these wonderful dialogues and conversations, and then spending time alone. One of the great times in my life was my 31 days at sea from Bremerhaven to California. Thirty one days on a freighter, sitting in the prow of the boat moving in and out of the ocean reading Spengler's book. (*The Decline of The West*) From that experience I understood life as a pulsatory reality in which you are moving in and

out of the greater ocean of life and like a porpoise that swims from the depth and spends a few seconds in the atmosphere of another world and plunges down -- this I recognized, was my life. So that was a great moment.

And certainly when I was present at the birth of my two children. Wow. I can't tell you to witness the pulsatory thrust of how someone comes into the world and the two different ways that both my girls entered the world. Standing at the bedside of both my father and mother dying moved me to understand how one is impacted by life's comings and goings. These engendered deep experiences of what a personal life is and how you embody it. Personal experiences like that.

Let alone sometimes with clients. Working physically sometimes people say things so profound you don't know where it comes from. Let me put it this way: There are a lot of little epiphanies and big epiphanies in a life and if you can let that happen to you and then form its expression, experience will begin to inform you about what human existence is, especially yours.

**Question:** What is the role of community in the formative approach to human development?

**SK:** Many years ago I said that the nature and function of individuality was to serve the community and if the individual gets out of control, the community reigns them in. The individual is the leading edge of the human organism probing its world so there is a dynamic relationship between the individual and the community and the community and its individuals. The human organism is like a board of directors with a changing chairman, no permanent chairman but a chairman that is capable of grasping the situations at hand.

This image begins to describe how community shares experience, amplifies and puts it to the test of practical use. Individuals who know how to give shape to experience and who can transmit that information back to the group are forming a community that generates communal behavior in an individual way. I think that life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness as seen in nature but practiced in the civilized state, as written in the Declaration of Independence, says as clear as anything in the world about the relationship of society and the individual.

**Question:** How do you work with a client who is afraid of exploring their anger?

**SK:** Explore their resistance to it. Ask them to show you how they resist or avoid anger. Show the muscular pattern of how they shy away, turn away, shrink away, step away. Then you explore small changes in the muscular intensity of the behavior pattern. When a person understands experientially that they can have some influence by managing little pieces of behavior in a way that does not overwhelm them, they

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will be much more willing to come to terms with how they could deal with the larger issues.

The process is always working toward managing oneself through small steps of influencing behavior. Behavior they are afraid will dominate them. So you can start from the resistance part, but not as something bad, but as a coping behavior by which they attempt to manage themselves and keep themselves in society. I think using voluntary muscular effort for understanding attitudes of anger is an enormous help if you know how to use it.

**Question:** Just want to say how deeply honored and humbled I am by your wisdom and I am so ready to get your books. Where else do you teach or share your videos. Can you say some resources for our listeners?

**SK:** My website: [centerpress.com](http://centerpress.com). All my books are for sale there as well as lots of other information. Everything is listed there.

**CL:** In the course of our interview you have allowed us to see quite a bit of the expression of the formative principle in all of existence. We have it in evolution, we have it through the universe, we have it in our personal lives, we have it in your life and you have communicated it very clearly. Do you have a concluding comment for us?

**SK:** I would say this: The greatest gift that we have is being bodied. It is the gift of the planet, of the universe to us. How we shape this gift becomes our personal destiny and our personal life. The gift of embodiment and its gift of voluntary muscular cortical effort is the capacity to differentiate and evolve ourselves as human beings capable of having some say in life's inherited program. The recognition of this gift bestows one feeling, and that feeling is rejoice being alive as best as you can. This is the nature of my work. Know who you are and how you can use yourself and love your life.

**CL:** That is a wonderful message and deeply inspiring to me and to all who are listening.

**SK:** Thank you all and good luck to everyone.