

## June 2009: Stanley Keleman

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Stanley Keleman is the founder of *Formative Psychology*, an approach that views life as an organizing and formative process. Stanley Keleman is based in Berkeley, CA, where he directs the Center for Energetic Studies.

The Spring 2007 issue of *The USA Body Psychotherapy Journal* was devoted to Stanley Keleman's work and its practical applications in psychotherapy, medicine, neurobiology, acupuncture, organizational development, literature, poetry, and personal growth. It includes an article by Stanley Keleman about *Dreams & the Body*.

The following is a transcript of the original audio, which is part of the *Somatic Perspectives* series ([www.SomaticPerspectives.com](http://www.SomaticPerspectives.com)). Please note that this conversation was meant to be a spontaneous exchange, not an edited piece. For better or worse, the transcript retains the unedited quality of the conversation.

*Serge Prengel: Hello I'm with Stanley Keleman. Hi, Stanley.*

Stanley Keleman: Good Morning!

*S P: So we're going to talk about dreams. Do you want to maybe start with talking a little bit about how you see the function of dreams?*

S K: You know, when you work physically, when you begin to introduce a physical somatic contact with people, you notice that when they do exercises, energetic exercises, physical exercises, somatic emotional exercises that people dream, they tell you, "Oh I had this dream last night after we worked." So I began to notice over time that there was a relationship between how people would try to engage themselves to help themselves grow or solve a problem physically and how dreams generally follow this. And, wow, I saw this relationship of how the body is activated and motivates dreams to come to the surface and that relationship told me that the body dreams about its own dilemmas. The body dreams about how it is engaging itself around something novel for itself meaning the somatic exercises.

*S P: Yeah. So already in the way you are describing this it is very different from the way say a psychoanalyst would talk. You say the body dreams about its own dilemmas and so there's a very, very strong emphasis on the body in what you're talking about.*

S K: Totally. And so I then saw that dreams played a role in how the organism itself was trying to deal with its own productions. How should I change myself? What is the situation that I find myself in, in the dreams? So I saw that if I began to look at the dream as the body talking to itself about its own dilemma or challenge, it opened the door to tell me what the connection was between let's say mental activity, daily life activity and the activity of the body below the threshold of the daily awake life. Before that everybody is looking for an interpretation of a dream, but nobody was looking for a rehearsal taking place about how the body might want to move itself forward or challenge how it is doing something physically. For an example, somebody would tell me, "I had a dream, after you worked with me lying on the bed and asking me to tighten my pelvis and slowly disorganize or soften the tension of my

pelvis, and I had a good experience with that. I felt some warmth in my pelvis or I felt some anxiety in my pelvis, and then I dreamed that I was standing by a door. I couldn't open the door because I felt unstable and unsure of whether I could walk through the door." And then I said to the person, "Well, stand up and let's take the figure from the dream, the one where you're standing by the door. Now show me how you are standing physically, mimic that."

*S P: Okay , so I just want to slow down a little bit to see that what's happening is what you're describing. We're no longer talking about interpretation as something that's a language as if from the outside or something that has to do with just thoughts and cognitions but you're really directly into the language of the body. You've given this client a body experience and then he's had a dream that's related to it and now you're asking him to body the dream?*

S K: To give body to the dream, yes, so he then mimics what he's done in the dream. I'm standing this way. I'm making a muscular model of this. But the importance of that statement is that he is using his cortical effort to replicate an inherited or reflex activity or an involuntary activity. He has established a connection between the cortical apparatus and the brain stem and the limbic system.

*S P: Right.*

S K: So while doing that, he's involving the whole organism in trying to have an experience of mobilizing a way to open the door which was a signal to him in the dream about being shaky and how the shakiness was experienced as inhibiting him and making him unsure. The more he mimics it and uses voluntary muscular effort, the more he is able to make adjustments or additions and have other experiences opening the door or being in front of people or taking a step in his life.

*S P: Right, so what's happening is he is first mimicking the dream, but as he mimics the dream there's a cortical effort, a consciousness effort and then there is a movement that he's not normally accessing.*

S K: Now you used the word consciousness there for a minute, and I would prefer to think about it as a voluntary effort.

*S P: Voluntary effort.*

S K: It is the motor tracts of the cortex organizing a muscular effort. It isn't the effect of the mimicking, it is the voluntarily trying to use muscles to organize a particular movement or a particular expression, it is the voluntary effort which signals the big difference between the person being passive to his own productions, dreams and so forth and how voluntary effort engages a relationship between the higher brain centers and the lower brain centers. The voluntary effort becomes a self forming effort. The ability to influence yourself is really a big statement about how we can view the human being as a self-influencing creature that is able to differentiate or reorganize its inherited behaviors, like the reflex of reaching out or the reflex of retreating.

*S P: So we're no longer just talking about tropism or reflexive behaviors, but the thing that distinguishes the human being is the ability to create that voluntary action.*

S K: Right, we can call that creating, developing voluntary influence through one's inherited patterns of action. It tells you that you are personalizing to be in the world. This is not will power, this is a voluntary effort that takes practice and has steps. It has a procedure of using muscular and cortical effort in making a muscular model of the dream figure. All of a sudden the person realizes what is at stake is how he can intentionally influence his reflex actions and find a way to influence and create experiences of how to be in the world with other people and how to be in the world with oneself.

*S P: Right, so the dream itself is a moment of involuntary behavior and the work on the dream is an opportunity to introduce the voluntary dimension.*

S K: Exactly right, it's first of all recognizing the habitual pattern of behavior, then recognizing that you can influence it. Influencing means to increase or decrease the muscular intensity of your response. Influencing means differentiating a muscular pattern so that it has more fine motor control or less fine motor control; it means you can influence its duration and intensity. This is very important in our work. Say if somebody has a startle reflex of high intensity that mobilizes the upper body almost into a spasm of immobility, you could now step by step differentiate the stiffness of the startle pattern and bring the muscular patterns of investigation and curiosity which are part of the startle pattern into the field of action in a voluntary way, softening but not dismissing the startle pattern.

*S P: Right, the startle pattern isn't voluntary, but then you transform it by bringing it to the voluntary arena?*

S K: Correct. So it tells you that the human being has the great possibility of using its own inherited library of behavior as a way of voluntarily regulating its functions interpersonally and intra-personally. So all of a sudden we can see the human as an acting, feeling, thinking, imaging organism that is always in the process of differentiating its action, its way of experiencing and its way of thinking that comes from its action and editing it by voluntary effort that allows another kind of experience and action to take place.

*S P: So actually, Stanley what would be great would be to take another dream and see it, you know, my fantasy is that by describing the dream first and then what you do, it would be something similar to what people would experience if they were*

*watching a video and you were describing what happens in the video. So could we talk about a dream you've worked on with a client, what you do, and describe what happens.*

S K: A man dreams about following his wife on a city street. He has just lost his wife. I say to him as he tells me this dream, "Tell me how, physically, you are following your wife," and so he describes how he is sort of leaning forward and trying to move quickly up the hill and feeling that he's got to catch up.

*S P: So at this moment, he's describing it as opposed to mimicking it?*

S K: Yes, he's beginning to tell me how he's doing it, and then I say to him, "Show me physically, make a physical act out of it, let's take a moment in the dream figure's action moving up the hill getting ready to take a step." So he shows me how he stiffens his fingers and his neck and his head is leaning forward and how his upper body is in front of him, the legs are behind and how his legs feel on the ground. I then say to him, "Oh so this looks more like you're lunging forward" and he agrees, "Yes, it does look like I'm trying to throw myself." And then I say, "Increase the intensity of your action." This is making a freeze frame of an action of moving forward to catch up; he increases the muscular tension voluntarily, stiffens his legs, pulls up his shoulders stiffening up and then he begins to feel a sense of urgency.

*S P: So what has happened here is first you have given him some feedback in the sense of describing how you saw his action and if it resonates with him he says, yes, this is actually it, the lunging and then you are asking him to modulate the intensity.*

S K: First I say to him, "Take the dream figure of walking and just tell me about it." He describes what he's doing to me. Then I say to him, "Use voluntary effort to imitate it." So now you lift the dream figure from

cortical plane into a muscular plane by voluntary action. He then experiences how he is doing it, and I just say, "Oh, it looks more like lunging than like walking, and then he says, "Oh, yeah, that's right it feels like that to me." But he could have easily said, "This is not walking, this is like I'm throwing myself." So then he has the experience of what he's doing or trying to do or what he is rehearsing to do, and he's connecting his action with his mental activity. If I ask him to increase the voluntary muscular effort so it has more intensity, he stiffens himself more, and all of a sudden he has a different feeling. He feels urgent; ...a kind of urgency emerges from the mimicking of the action, and that urgency was not in the dream. That urgency now is in this muscular pattern and he recognizes, wow, I do feel urgent to catch up, but I'm also frightened.

*S P: Right, and he's experiencing this right here and now in the moment.*

S K: And then I say to him, "If you use less effort, but don't relax, just use less muscular effort with the figure, what happens?" And then he uses less muscular effort, and he says, "Oh, you know that urgency is gone!" And then I say, "Do more effort, so the urgency comes back." And then he begins to realize, hey wait a minute, I can manage how much urgency is in me; I can now diminish the urgency and ask myself why am I so urgent! And I say to him, "Urgency is part of life, but if the urgency is not differentiated or managed, it's running you, and you can decide how much urgency is in trying to catch up." And then he says, "You know what, I'm not in any big rush to catch up with my wife who is dead."

*S P: (laughs) Yeah, so what you've done there is made him aware of the urgency and also made him aware that urgency is something that he can self-regulate, he can modulate.*

S K: I would make one small correction, Serge. He became aware of his own urgency. I didn't tell him the urgency.

*S P: No, you created an experience for him where he could be...he could become aware of it.*

S K: He was creating his own urgency by how he was using himself, and that he could diminish his own urgency by voluntary muscular effort, which actually is voluntary muscular cortical effort. And in this way, he recognizes that the dream figure was rehearsal to interfere with his urgency of catching up with somebody who is now debodied.

*S P: Yes.*

S K: And then that leads to more work physically about how urgency has been part of his life, how he can manage his urgency to become something other than lunging at something.

*S P: So I want to go back on something there. In conventional therapy terms he's had insight, but the difference is that in this case, the insight is not something that just happens but what created this insight is the practical experience of regulating his behavior of urgency. So at the same time he has insight, he also knows how to apply it.*

S K: Yes, that is what happened. He generated how he is in a situation and how he has to reorganize that situation. Or what he realizes here, not only is he correcting himself so that he has a more harmonious relationship with himself or his departed wife, he also realizes that he could actually influence the way he's in the world and have a formative approach rather than always trying to correct himself to be not like that. So what we have here is that insight is action; how voluntarily mimicking behavior in a particular way creates a whole other view of what being human is. The human organism is dreaming about how it is in the world and how it could be in the world by

making adjustments and differentiations to the physical characters in the dream, which are its own productions, and how to embody that. So you then could say that a dream is part of the body's way of influencing its own behavior as it forms its existence. It forms its existence by re-embodying its own rehearsal of how to be in the world.

*S P: So we're not using the dream as something extraneous, because the dream is already very much this process.*

S K: That's exactly it. The dream is part of the process of the body rehearsing and reorganizing how it is in the world. You can say that the process of working with the dream that I just outlined for you is the organization of memory, because as he mimics what has taken place involuntarily, he is forming a motor memory of his experience of differentiating his behavior, and in making a motor memory of his own way of forming or correcting himself, he adds to the library of his lived experiences and creates a way of remembering how he has influenced himself.

*S P: Yes, so that's very consistent with understanding of the brain as an organ of regulation and learning, and the whole human activity is being involved in these processes.*

S K: That's it. This redefines the human being for us and casts a bigger light on the work of formative psychology and those people who are engaged in being somatic therapists. Now we are really talking about more than the life of the body as a sensory pleasure mechanism. We are talking about the life of the body as forming its personal existence during its life cycle. Being a person means being able to organize yourself anatomically, that one is acting from how they have shaped themselves rather than being shaped. I'm writing about this in my book on dreams, which will be out next year.

*S P: Great! Do you want to talk a little bit more about the sense of a wave, you know, that is very much part of your concept?*

S K: The wave of self-existence?

*S P: Uh huh.*

S K: Well, I refer to a dream as being motile anatomy. If you look at the body, you see that there are different layers of cellular activity, some of which I call very motile. In the womb, the creation of the body is very rapid, there are so many body forms in the first weeks of life ...you see their motile shapes. As the mass of the embryo becomes more and bigger in size and even after it's born, the behavior of the physical structure is not as quick and motile. It becomes more porous, it doesn't hold its form very strongly. And then as it grows, its form gets firmer and less changeable, and that's a rigid form. So then these changing forms become part of the ongoing organization of the adult, the emerging adult, and then you have even more stability, habituating behavior--reaching out, walking, learning to talk--that becomes automatic and is a different kind of anatomical event. So you see that these four stages are part of a wave; they climb the scale of anatomical form from motility to porosity to intensity and stable form, and then start a next wave of changing shapes like going from adolescent to adult, from a child to adolescent, going from fully-formed adult to maturing or older adult; and then the whole wave of shapes repeat going through these four cycles. You see the same thing in a dream ... if you don't slow the motility by telling yourself the dream, you forget it. The dream is very quick, it moves very quickly through you, and people recognize that if they repeat it or if they wake up and remember that dream and they tell it to themselves, that's a mechanism of inhibiting the motile mercurial event of a dream and is a way to give it more stability. And if you increase the amount of muscular rigidity by making a muscular model of it, you give the dream even more duration. And then as you alter the amount of intensity and the

voluntary muscular activity, you have differentiation and you add definition and duration to the dream. And to keep practicing using the method--doing it more, doing it less --it becomes habituated, it becomes a memory, a repeatable behavior. That would be now the wave of the body which is stable in creating a very motile responsiveness that is given form overtime, like a peaking of a wave and then taking back the dream and re-embodying it. So that you see that the dream is part of the body's wave of changing how it is in the world, and that it has these four stages, which are like a wave...that it has a series of body shapes that are connected over time. So that's what I mean by wave and how it is a developmental situation. So when this man is mimicking the lunging and experiences the urgency, he is moving up and down the scale of being in the action that is taking place. The action of lunging acquires more form and duration, and then it requires differentiation and then integration into being in the world, not to act urgently or to act with less urgency. And that's a wave of going from the inside of the body to the social world and back to the body itself. It rises back and forth, and the dream then is part of this process.

*S P: Yeah, very much so.*

S K: I think that it opens the door for all of us who are engaged in dealing with the life of the body and is an avenue for helping a

person solve problems and be in the world in a particularly personal way...a very powerful method of self-regulation, voluntary regulation, and voluntary forming. It tells you that you are not only correcting something in helping somebody acquire more sense of themselves, you are telling them that the dream and the way you use voluntary muscular effort brings the whole other layer of how you experience and manage being in the world. And I think this is a whole new dimension that all those brave people who have taken a somatic attitude should at least take a look at, because it enlarges the scope and vision of what it means to live and embody.

*S P: Yeah, very much of an integrative process.*

S K: I would say,...I think the way I look at the dream through the eyes of formative psychology opens another edge for us to bring into the world a way of defining the human being as the master of its own life.

*S P: Yeah. So the experience of working with the dream as you described it is actually an experience of transforming something that feels foreign or a little bit, you know, difficult to deal with into something that is an experience of actually becoming the master of your own life...*

S K: Absolutely.

*This is part of USABP's "Somatic Perspectives" series, edited by Serge Prengel. Transcribed by Shawn Lee. Transcript minimally edited for clarity by Marilyn Haller.*

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