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The *Somatic Perspectives* podcast explores somatic psychology, relational therapies, mindfulness and trauma therapies. It is edited by Serge Prengel, LMHC, who is in private practice in New York City.

The following is a transcript of the original audio. Please note that this conversation was meant to be a spontaneous exchange. For better or worse, the transcript retains the unedited quality of the conversation.

Serge Prengel: Hi Ruella.

Ruella Frank: Hi.

Serge: So Ruella, your practice is developmental somatic psychotherapy, we're going to talk a little bit about that.

Ruella: Yeah, that's an approach to psychotherapy that I developed – and have been developing for many years now – and it's an understanding of human development from a kinesthetic and a relational perspective within a Gestalt's therapy frame. That's my background as a Gestalt Psychotherapist.

Serge: Mm hmm, mm hmm. So, developmental and kinesthetic at the same time?

Ruella: Yes, I've looked at how infants and parents communicate, body to body in the first year of life, the language – the nonverbal language – they develop as a relational foundation to our adult communication.

Serge: Mm hmm, mm hmm. Yeah, so what happens, what did you notice in the first year of life in that communication?

Ruella: Well, the only way that a baby communicates is through vocalizing and through body movement, so that becomes the way they make their needs known to the other person, they signal and are responded to, and they respond to the other's signals, and the style in which they communicate – parent and child – begins to develop the body of the child, the gate, the gesture patterns, the breathing patterns – all the movement patterns of the infant in the first year. The way they connect with themselves, which is through movement and the other person, becomes a style

of what we say “Gestalt Therapy Contacting” the way we’re in touch with ourselves and the environment.

Serge: Mm hmm.

Ruella: So if you look at every different person, you’ll see every different way of moving and gesturing, which reflects their early history.

Serge: Yeah, so you go back to the early history to see where these styles were shaped.

Ruella: Yes.

Serge: And to notice, at that moment, when there’s less interference – less of other things, do you notice --.

Ruella: --that it’s unadulterated, yeah.

Serge: Unadulterated, yes.

Ruella: To notice how the body takes shape, the parent is influenced also, but not to the same degree as the baby.

Serge: Mm hmm, mm hmm.

Ruella: So, if we’re looking in a therapy session, at a person’s gesture, and breathing pattern, and gate, posture – we’re looking at the kinesthetic history that is part and constituting this present moment.

Serge: Yeah, yeah. So, as you go back to the origin, do you notice some patterns and styles that then are going to grow into adult patterns?

Ruella: Well, I have – the centerpiece of my work is six fundamental movements, and I was originally inspired by Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen, as well as other somatic educators and development theorists, like Esther Thelen. Bonnie had four patterns: yield, push, reach, and pull. That was what I studied with her, part of a larger developmental system. I expanded those patterns: yield, push, reach, grasp, pull, and release, because I thought they better explained how experience lives in any moment, in any given interaction all of these six patterns interweave and support our contacting experience.

Serge: Mm hmm, mm hmm. So can we maybe take one pattern to have an idea of what you mean by that?

Ruella: Well, let’s look at how it emerges in a session with a client.

Serge: Okay.

Ruella: So, I was sitting with a client, she was talking about her son, and looking directly at me, and all of a sudden, something happened. She sat back, grasped onto her hands, pulled her eyes away from me, and looked down. So she's grasping her hands quite intently.

Serge: Mm hmm.

Ruella: Now this is a relational kinesthetic perspective, so I have to wonder, I might say to her "Oh, you just looked away from me. What happened?" But then I would be focusing on her as object, rather than, I begin to wonder what happened with me, and her, at this moment, that all of a sudden she looked away and started to grasp onto her hands.

Serge: Okay, but still I want you to stop a little bit to go slower, because that's a difference from some other somatic approaches, where the idea is to ask the client, so here, what's happening is you notice something in the client, and it's a symptom of something happening in the relationship as a whole.

Ruella: In this situation, we are living.

Serge: Yeah.

Ruella: Yeah. How am I part of that grasped hand pattern? How am I part of her looking down? So I might say to her, rather than look at the lack, which is "Oh, you just pulled your eyes away from me," which is what I learned when I first started doing therapy, which has a shaming quality. I'm not looking at the lack so much as I'm looking at what this person is doing with me, and what the function of it is. So I may get interested in, and say to her, "Yeah, you just are looking at your hands now very intently, and they seem to be tightly grasped. That interests me, does that interest you?" To see if she would be interested in her pattern, then I might take her into what happened just before, and wonder what – how I had contributed to that. And in fact as we begin to unpack this moment, what we realize together was, as she was telling me about her son, I took a deep breath, and she interpreted that as feeling that I was critical of her, and she pulled back and grasped on her hands. So I could have looked originally at "Oh, grasping onto her hands, maybe she's anxious." But really, I was feeling tight in my chest, as she was. So we were both anxious together, part of this relational feel, and my holding my breath tight was in her grasped hands. So now when we unpack it, we see what happens between us, there's history, of course there for her, as well as for me. But the history we focus on for her is, when she starts to reach out and become more vulnerable, she becomes very sensitive to when the other person will check out. When she's too much for the other person and they have to leave.

Serge: Yeah, yeah.

Ruella: So here, history is living in this moment between us. But, in terms of the psychological function of the pattern, just phenomenologically grasping the baby, grasp onto something, they're putting – they're grasping in their hands what they have reached for. Is at the end of their reach, it is the inevitable end of their reach, and then in their hand, they can move it around and sense what it is they have. So, I can imagine that she was reaching towards me for health, comfort, whatever, when I wasn't there to grasp onto her, she grasped onto herself. And this is something that she does in situations, even before she has checked out if the other person is there, she's already prepared

not to be responded to the way she needs to, and grasp onto herself. So, whatever's living between us in this exchange is how she's living, you know, in her world.

Serge: Right, right right. And so in this moment, what's happening is you notice the pattern, the grasping pattern, but you're not analyzing it, you're not saying "Oh it reminds me of this pattern of hers." But simply it's a call to attention, to something has happened between us in that situation, and let's try and see what it is that happened a little moment before, that this might be a response to.

Ruella: Exactly. Now, I could also play with that pattern, I didn't do this in that particular session, but I might have her exaggerate how she holds onto herself, what that feels like for her, and then if she could slowly, and incrementally, release the pattern. What would happen, as she released her grasp, probably it would become a very slow and incremental reach towards me. And if she really sensed the palm of her hand, as she opened and released herself, and stretched – reached towards me, she might notice her vulnerability and her anxiety, and then grasp again. So now, we're (...) as Laura Pearls, who was my teacher, the boundary here, of making something different, taking the grasp into the reach that comes before it, seeing what that was like for her. Could she stay extended in her reaching, and how would she feel me meet her? If she would feel that I was there with her, as she reached out to me, then she would take me in, and grasp – metaphorically – onto me, rather than on herself.

Serge: Right, right. So that's really changing the pattern.

Ruella: It's changing the pattern, it's changing the narrative. If we changed the pattern, we'd have sufficient support from which a new narrative can emerge.

Serge: Mm hmm, and so the way you explore that is at the level of the movement itself, by unclasping the hand gently, and just noticing that unclasping the hand gently is going to give a reach, and then paying attention to the emotion that she feels at that moment.

Ruella: Exactly, and the history that emerges – it's an enduring, relational theme – it's a kinesthetic, enduring, relational theme.

Serge: Right, right. So, in other words, then you can say that the view of the mind that you have in a session, for mind, is that something that has learned some patterns that are being repeated and that you pay attention to them and open them up.

Ruella: Yes, and it's interesting that you say it's the mind, because there is a thinking in movement, a bodily logic, an implicit. So, even to say body-mind – it's so difficult to talk about this – but even to say body-mind creates that split, but it is that kinesthetic and bodily logic, so she could be opening her hands, and there's a story that's unfolding that may not even have words to it. I like that part too, that we don't always have to find the words for what's happening, because I know when I was first trained, before I met Laura, as a Gestalt Therapist, I went to an institute which was very good, Gestalt Associates for Psychotherapy, and at the same time I realized that we were asking the client a lot. We were saying, "So where do you feel that, how do you feel that?" Rather than just to let them sense themselves, and not make words of it so quickly, and not even make meaning so quickly.

Serge: Yeah, so to let the movement unfold, as opposed to already start to explain what might be happening.

Ruella: When you start explaining, you're losing all the possibilities that could be. You're losing, if you start to put it into words, you already formulate or categorize something, you've lost all the possible ways this moment can go, which is exciting, also scary. For, especially beginning therapists, the students I teach, they want to make something right away, rather than wait and see what's happening and be part of the happening, because you never know what will happen. That's exciting, but it can also be scary.

Serge: So we talked about that example of that movement, would it make sense to talk about some other movement, or where would we go from here?

Ruella: Well, there are six fundamental movements. I teach them linearly, but they aren't linear. They're foreground and background, so even in that grasping movement where she was holding on so tight, I would say that yielding, which in my mind is our giving in to, with, the other, giving with, and taking from the other. There is no – the yielding is less available as she's grasping tightly onto herself.

Serge: Mm hmm, so it's more of – it's not an either-or, but it's more of a continuum, and it's closer or farther from a certain pole.

Ruella: They are on a continuum, I see them as facets of a diamond. So, let's say you're looking at one facet, oh that's yielding that's in the foreground, or maybe the other facet we looked at, that was grasping, that was in the foreground. But I might say to her, "Can you feel how tightly your hands are grasping? And don't ungrasp them, but what happens if you soften into it, and let yourself really sense one hand in the other? How you're holding onto one hand, with the other," then we're inviting her to bring to the foreground that experience of yield.

Serge: Okay, so it's not that one experience exists and the others don't, but a question of gently changing where the focus is, changing what is in the foreground.

Ruella: Exactly, changing our attention, because they all operate at the same time, or I might say to her, as she's grasping so tightly, "Can you feel your feet on the floor?" She may or may not. What would happen if you noticed that the floor is there for you? So I'm enhancing an inherent yield push. On the floor, I'm bringing that into foreground, maybe something would shift with her hands, or maybe she would feel "No, I don't feel the floor," and she'd grasp more tightly. I'm not saying that one is better than the other, but just to tease out what exactly is happening in this particular situation.

Serge: Yeah, yeah.

Ruella: If, for example, she's grasping onto her hands and we say, "Well, can you feel the floor?" "Not really." What do you imagine the floor would be saying to you: "I'm not going to be here for you." Oh, grasp onto your hands because your world really isn't stable, and sufficient, for you to really push into, and against.

Serge: Right, right right. So there's a sense that whatever is in the foreground, then in a way it's a choice – I don't mean in a conscious choice of the person, but a reaction to the way they perceive the environment.

Ruella: It's a preferred pattern that they've created, which is a support – a resistance. So Laura Pearls would brilliantly say "The resistance was an assistance for something in the past." Only when you really see the function of what that assistance is, what it's doing now, then the history becomes clarified.

Serge: Right, right. And so, there's something about paying attention to these patterns on a kinesthetic level that bypasses all of the justifications, or the things that we wouldn't notice, because we're just so accustomed to the words --.

Ruella: -- The story of. We all grab onto our stories, it's who we think we are. When we go into the kinesthetic experience, then we're living in a very different way who we are. Then, when you try on a new movement pattern, or become aware of the pattern that you're doing – let's say the grasping hands, all of a sudden you become responsible, and then other choice opens up. And these stories, which have been so much a part of our life, change in a moment, just like the brain changes, you know that the brain is so plastic, these movement patterns are plastic, and we're making a relational change. I'm changing in relation to you, I didn't have an insight – we don't do talk therapy – but it's not an insight about what happened to my father, and me, that's changing this pattern, it's "I'm changing this pattern that was forged in earlier relationships, and changing this now in relationship with you."

Serge: Mm hmm, yeah it happens in the present moment, so you just notice it here and now.

Ruella: Yeah, and because we're working with movement, someone – a person remembers that. It's a kind of, very brilliant experiment, meaning that it's illuminating. I will remember that I grasped onto my hands, and then I reached towards you, it's not something offered that easily. It's striking.

Serge: Yeah, and it's not abstract.

Ruella: It's not abstract. It lives now in part of our kinesthetic history, so every time I grasp onto my hands, I'm having some awareness of my history, as I'm living it kinesthetically in this moment.

Serge: Mm hmm, yeah. So, for instance, the moment where you might suggest to a client to slowly unclench the hand, is actually a moment of gently shifting away from the old pattern.

Ruella: Yes, I would say it's breaking up the enduring relational theme, because that's part of the pattern. It's not merely a physical pattern, it's a historic, embodied experience. It's an old relational pattern that we've grasped onto because it still works, until it doesn't.

Serge: Yeah, yeah. So, as the therapist in this relational approach, what happens to you when you notice, say for instance, this clenching? You mentioned curiosity, but how else do you track what's happening, or your part in it?

Ruella: That's a good question. Because how I'm tracking is not just for what I'm seeing, or what I'm feeling. What am I feeling when she's clenching? Am I feeling a clench? Where is it in my body?

Besides being curious about how might I be part of the clench, it's "how am I living it also?" And I might even – often I do, I try on their pattern, which is entering into their world, so in the feeling of what's happening between us, I am already feeling the implied next step. Where I'll go. This is something that's a little difficult to teach, but that students learn overtime, which is again, rather than making the happening that staying with what's happening almost demands you to go to the next step. Just like if I reach my hand to you – this is metaphoric but actual – if I reach my hand to you and I'm really with you, and in my excitement of being with you, I can begin to feel my fingers curl into that next step of grasping.

Serge: So in other words, you put yourself fully into the situation, and then as you are fully in the situation, it can't help but move by the logic of the situation.

Ruella: Yes, that's (...), and we love him. And he taught me so much about – I just really have been thinking about the last six months, about how in every next movement pattern, fundamental pattern to emerge, how it already lives in the prior pattern. And is that demand, that implied demand, for the next. So reading Gendlin years ago, I remembered and went back and refreshed my memory on what he'd written about the implied next step. He talks about it as felt sense, I talk about it as kinesthetic resonance. Because even though he didn't mean it was just me feeling this, when you say kinesthetic resonance, there is something to resonate with and against.

Serge: Yeah, it doesn't happen in a vacuum, it happens in the whole situation.

Ruella: Yeah. And I think more people are coming to understand that – more psychotherapists are coming to understand that we are in fact a part of a two-person field.

Serge: So maybe let's talk a little bit – certainly the example you gave earlier was a beautiful explanation of that, but maybe, do you have another case, another situation to describe where we could also see that?

Ruella: Well, let me think for a minute. How about the client that I'm working with, who her spine is always shortened, you would say rounded but I'm using a more phenomenological shortened, and she's narrowed in her chest, and her feet are pulled in towards herself. So, the soles of her feet aren't on the floor, they're pulled towards herself. And all of a sudden a session, she puts her feet on the floor, quite suddenly, and lengthens her spine. So I would say, for some reason she found a push. Something happened between us, and she just found a push. So, I want to make her aware of "ah, something just happened!" And so that, if she all of a sudden realized, "oh, I don't have to take his abuse," I'm making that part up, "I don't have to let him speak to me that way." In the knowing of this at the same time, she shifted her whole bodily experience, instead of the push being less available as it generally is, there it is! In the session, and I might say, "Can you feel how your feet are on the ground? What does that feel like now?" And I might even ask her to stand up, "Can you now stand up, feel your feet on the ground, sense what you just did, your lengthened spine, and look at this person, imagine seeing this person." Now she might reduce herself again, let's say it was her boss or a friend. Let's say this is a woman who reduced herself in the presence of this other person, and in the session found a way not to. If we actually made it more clear, could she continue to find her push, lengthen her spine, and be there with the person, and feel herself meeting the person rather than shrinking from the person. Now if she couldn't – I might, I've been a practitioner at Iyengar Yoga for twenty-two or twenty-three years, we work with props. I work with props in the therapy session. So I might take a block from my Iyengar Yoga, and ask her to put it between her

thighs. This would be a client I'm comfortable with, to ask her to do this. So whatever you're doing with a client is based on your understanding of them, that you experience them in the moment. We all know this, but it's good to say so you're not inviting anybody to put a block between their thighs. But this client, I might ask you to put a block between your thighs, automatically it's going to heighten her push. So that now she has some support to look at this person, and she might practice being there – she'll remember this sensation, standing on two legs and looking at the person, and her ability to sustain that push of hers, where she can meet the other.

Serge: So in the example you mention, it started with the person finding that push, and not being aware of it, but you seeing it, and you encouraging her to consciously reproduce it. And then, if needed, just a little help so that she can find the body position where she can experience that.

Ruella: Yes, I'm taking her to the next step that she already went to, and then couldn't stay at the boundary. Because when we have a new behavior, we, as Laura Pearls would say, we wobble, we're excited but we're also anxious, so we can push ourselves back from the boundary. So this helped her, this block let's say, helped her really meet the other, with some support.

Serge: But the part in it is you didn't create it with the blocks they do that, but you found it in her, and then helped her develop it.

Ruella: Yeah, I don't want to make her do something she's not doing as if there's an idealized way to be. Let her find the new step, or we together find the new step, and see how that lives in this next moment. And it was only when she understood the function of her shrinking, or her reducing herself – which we had explored many sessions before – and then this new other support of pushing her legs down and lengthening her spine, that she already knew the function of shrinking. We didn't have to go into that, now she needs to know, and experience the function of finding her push, so she could then inevitably – that leads to a push, leads to a reach of her spine and her head.

Serge: Right, and that can be more effectively done if she has explored the old pattern, and knows it more and understands it better.

Ruella: Yeah. Now the next piece is, she's standing in front of someone who's not there, her imagination. So then I have to stand in front of her, so what's it like when you and I are meeting at this new place together. Then she might feel herself want to shrink, or shrink, maybe she can't really meet me where I am because she likes to keep me as idealized, and how could she meet me, actually we'd be on the same level. So all kinds of interesting things.

Serge: But then again you already had the moment in the session where she already did it, and in front of you, so she already could get there, then it's a question of making it more accessible, more conscious.

Ruella: You know, there is no set rule, the rule is just to follow the client. If someone is in shrinking pattern with no feet, all the time, and they know they're shrinking but they just don't have enough support, even between us to shift that pattern by themselves, I might do something like, "well can you feel me with you?" Let's say, "may I put my hands on your feet? How do you feel my hands on your feet? Can you feel your feet now?" Or I might even have them, if I'm feeling comfortable with them, lie on the floor with their feet off the ground, and flexed, so their knees are toward their head. I might put my hands under their feet, and invite them to push into my hands. So, although

they could not find the floor under them, they have a different relationship with me, I may have become a more stable and consistent person in their life, so can they push against me, and then I would give them some push back.

Serge: Right, but so even in that sense, the context of that touching is a relational one, it's not just ugh pushing, but it's pushing against me, or there's a relationship.

Ruella: Can you feel me with you? Can you push against me? Can I feel the force of you? Can you impress me as I impress you? Someone in that particular configuration might not think that they can make much of an impact on someone else, or might be afraid to, perhaps. That could be one thing. So, many, multiple things come out.

Serge: So, maybe as we are coming toward the end, is there something you might want to say?

Ruella: Well, I wanted to say how I felt understood by you. That I felt you were really following me – I say this genuinely, Serge – so well, and really voicing what I was saying in a very clear way, so I appreciate that.

Serge: Thanks, Ruella.

Ruella: And I do want to thank, because I always thank, my influences Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen, Laura Pearls, Esther Thelen, Richard Kitzler, the whole Boston Change Group, Alan Fogel, Eugene Gendlin, I mean I could go on. I stand on the shoulders of many giants to have created this approach, and I don't think we can thank our grandparents enough.

Serge: Yeah, thanks.

Ruella: Yeah, thank you.

 *This conversation was transcribed by Michael Thomas.*

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