Body Therapy and the Embodied Life With Stanley Keleman, Ph.D.

Dr. David Van Nuys, Ph.D., aka "Dr. Dave," interviews Stanley Keleman, PhD. (Honorary) on Shrink Rap Radio, August 10, 2012

Introduction:

My guest today is long time body work pioneer Dr. Stanley Keleman and we'll be discussing his work on formative psychology and the embodied life. Stanley Keleman is the director of the Center for Energetic Studies in Berkeley California, where he teaches the Formative Approach to human development. He received an honorary Ph.D. from Saybrook University for his contributions to the field of body psychotherapy and humanistic psychology. He is also the founder and developer of Formative Psychology, the director of research at the Center of Form and Development in Zurich, Switzerland, and a visiting lecturer at the Spectrum School of Humanistic Psychology in London, England. He has authored the pioneering books Emotional Anatomy, Embodying Experience, Your Body Speaks its Mind, Patterns of Distress, Living Your Dying, and Myth and the Body, in addition to numerous clinical books. Currently, he is writing a book on dreams and the body.

Stanley Keleman has been practicing and developing somatic therapy for over thirty-five years and is a pioneer in his study of the body and its connection to the sexual, emotional, psychological, and imaginative aspects of human experience. Through his writings and practice, he has developed a methodology and conceptual framework for the life of the body.

Stanley Keleman has been the director of the Center for Energetic Studies in Berkeley, California since 1971, where he maintains a private and group practice and an active schedule of national and international professional programs. He is the honorary president and director for research at the Zurich School for Form and Movement, and the Institute for Formative Psychology in Solingen, Germany, where he also teaches.

He is the recipient of lifetime achievement awards from the European Body Psychotherapy Association and the American Body Psychotherapy Association.

Stanley Keleman's website is http://www.centerpress.com

Dr. Dave: Stanley Keleman, welcome to Shrink Rap Radio.

Keleman: Thank you, I'm glad to be here.

Dr. Dave: Well it's great to have you on this show. Of course I've known about your work for years – particularly in the seventies, I had lots of students who were taking your workshops and working with you and they were very excited about your work, and I was seeing your name at various conferences and so on. Back then there was a kind of neo-Reichian revolution calling attention to the body and the approach came to be called bioenergetics, and on the east coast the go-to guy was Alexander Lowen and on the west coast it was Stanley Keleman.

Keleman: That's true.

Dr. Dave: OK—you're not going to deny it (laughing).

Keleman: No, Al Lowen was a good friend of mine, he was an original teacher of mine. We were friends 'til he died. We had regular telephone contact. I grew out of what he had to say, or I grew my own way—but we were friends for as long as he lived and I still consider him a friend.

Dr. Dave: Yes, well, that's great. I found a lot of information about you that I didn't know on your website http://www.centerpress.com. For example, I discovered that your interest in the body started very early, first in athletics and then with your training as a chiropractor.

Keleman: Yes, that's true.

Dr. Dave: And did you ever practice chiropractic?

Keleman: I had a very thriving practice from about 1955 to approximately 1964. I had developed a very specialized technique for the reduction of stress and I had a very big-time show business practice, and opera singers—it actually started with opera singers.

Dr. Dave: Oh, interesting, fascinating.

Keleman: The guy who interacted with me and actually did teach me something, Dr. Bill Herman, William Herman, was a medical doctor who won the first Caruso Scholarship for Singing—and he understood singing and he understood the tensions in the body as interfering with the singing pattern. And so he would send clients

to me and I would work with him back and forth, and we had a warm interaction over years, which was very fruitful in understanding singing, and speaking, and the problems of stress that were related to it.

Dr. Dave: Well, that's fascinating, I can see how that helped to lay the groundwork for the places that you went. Clearly you had a wide-ranging intelligence as your subsequent career indicates. You weren't content to just stick with chiropractic but went on to seek out many additional trainings, for example, you went on to study bio-energetics with Alexander Lowen—you already mentioned that—and then you went on to study at the Alfred Adler Institute. How did that experience change your world view?

Keleman: Well, Adler dealt first of all with the social aspects of human interaction, so that was an important concept for me, but more importantly, Adler wrote a very famous book in which he talked about organ inferiority, and by that he meant an organ that wasn't working well —like your liver or some other organ—and which then dominated your behaviour, and how you thought about the world, and that that became the basis for inferiority feelings. So the notion of organ inferiority led to the notion of psychological inferiority.Then there is the organism's will to power, which was a much more dynamic concept than the drive only for sexuality. I spent almost 200 hours at the Adler school, so that was fruitful to me.

Within the same time, with Bill Herman and Al and the Adler Institute—Nina Bull, who was a fellow in Who's Who in Science and was a teacher in understanding attitude psychology, which really was the driving force that transformed the chiropractic education into a somatic education—so there I was. Nina gave me a very powerful neurological background; she wrote several books: The Attitude Theory of Emotion and The Body and Its Mind, in which she showed that neural and the muscular interactions are basically connected to patterns of behavior; the body's muscular-neural patterns of organization are directly related to the emotional organization of the person and how they are involved in behavior.

Dr. Dave: Well, that sounds like a really important milestone in the development of thinking about the body and psychology. Do you remember about what year it was that her book, The Body and Its Mind, came out?

Keleman: Let's see, that could have been about 1960 or 1961.

Dr. Dave: Okay, that's pretty early.

Keleman: When I met Nina the book hadn't been out for long. I have it on my desk right now (laughing); I could take a look at it.

Dr. Dave: No, that's okay (laughing). Still not content to rest on your laurels, your inquisitive mind took you to Europe, where you studied Daseinsanalyse in Zurich with Dr Dori Gutscher in the school of Medard Boss. I had not heard of her, but certainly I've heard of Medard Boss and Daseinsanalyse. How did that experience impact your thinking about the body?

Keleman: Well, my trip to Europe was very interesting because I became deeply interested in: What is the nature of somatic freedom, what is the nature of the life of the body in terms of being an organism that is trying to make its own way in the world and at the same time is very influenced by the Darwinian idea to live an evolutionary destiny. And so, I thought that somewhere the nature of soul was missing—at least what I thought was soul from American psychology as it was taught on those days. It wasn't in the Adlerian School, it wasn't in the school of analysis of the Freudian people, it wasn't in Al's school. Around the same time Daseinsanalyse was very interesting to me in the way Medard Boss put forward how you are in the world as a part of the existential movement.

So I went to Europe, where I met with Karlfried von Durckheim in Germany and Dory Gutscher and the Dasein Analytics School. I became familiar with Boss himself and we talked about an existential view of how the body is in the world (which is a Heideggerian point of view). So, I began to translate all that physically—how is the body in the world, how is the person as a body finding his way in the world, what are the essential ingredients for the organism forming its adult in the world.

And I found that Karlfried, who was a psychologist himself and a PhD. in philosophy, and Dori Gutscher, who was a medical doctor and a psychiatrist, both provided a very powerful existential point of view. It was in Europe that I met James Hillman and we had some very nice discussions and we continued some form of friendship back in the states when he left the Zurich Institute. But what I was looking for wasn't in the Jungian world either. So then I realised that I had to begin to understand what an embodied life is.

Dr. Dave: Yes, and speaking of the existential viewpoint, that kind of became the basis for humanistic psychology. You returned to the United States from Europe in 1967; you moved to California; you interned at the Esalen Institute in group dynamics, where you were exposed to Humanistic Psychology, which was the leading edge of psychology at that time. There's an atmosphere of cultural revolution, you write, and you establish your own form of working bodily. Your interaction with many leaders of the humanistic movement, for example, Carl Rogers, Fritz Perls, Virginia Satir, Alan Watts, and others, provided a forum for your ideas. And then you meet Joseph Campbell—who I'm a big fan of—and began a fifteen-year association teaching an annual program in

which the two of you developed connections between myth and the body. And these workshops evolved into annual programs taught by you in Berkeley and in Solingen Germany that connect dreams, body, and the Formative process.

So I didn't know any of that! What a rich and fascinating background.

Keleman: Well, for me it was, let me put it this way: I was not only forming a way of working, I was forming my own life (laughing). I was my own experiment in this, and also developing a work which led me more and more to understand that really the heart of human misery in a general package was that there was an ignorance about how to meet the demands of a society for learning and educating and dealing with behaviors that the organism could not do, or that it didn't know how to do it, or forgot how it did it in childhood episodes. And I began to see—these dilemmas were related to the mythology approach of Joe. I began to think about what mythology was, and about the existential point of view, about how a person tries to be in the world, how society puts the whole thing on a sort of innate intelligence that you just learn to do this as if you didn't participate, that maturity happened by osmosis. This just completely misunderstood the nature of learning, the nature of practice, the nature of how you use your body—always trying to correct something rather than form something.

Dr. Dave: Yes, well, this really begins to lead us into your current work, and it also, knowing all of this about your background, helps me to understand better the papers that you've written, which struck me as very philosophical and even metaphysical in their tone. So now I understand better how it is that you've come to move to a level of abstraction even while talking about something as concrete as the body.

So tell us about your work today, and what you call Formative Psychology ®. You make a distinction between a "bodied life" and an "embodied life" and that sounds kind of subtle. What are you getting at there?

Keleman: Well, let me back up a little bit and come back, can I?

Dr. Dave: Okay, yeah.

Keleman: The conversations and the workshops with Joe Campbell were extremely illuminating. Joe understood that the life of the body was at the heart of mythology but he didn't quite know how to translate it. So in the telling of the myth, which Joe was the master of—setting of certain symbols as images that he showed on the screen—I translated all those things into biological events. For instance, we did a gigantic program on the nature of mythology showing all the symbols that were related to embryology, that they were really talking about an embryological process. Like the snake and the many-petalled crown was actually the spinal cord and the pons in relationship with the thalamus and the cortex—and I made that biological translation.

So once I understood biological events as the background for the experience of how we articulate being in the world, I understood that the body is feeding itself back about its own experiences. Most people, including Al Lowen, were trying to help people understand that we have a body, and psychology (including Humanistic Psychology) was in fact trying to connect people back to their body and to learning how their body influenced being in the world. I began to realize that this was a very important first step, but having a body doesn't mean that you form your body. To be bodied means that your life is formed by the body's innate processes that we all inherit, and by adapting to social demands. Personal embodiment is when the cortex acts as a voluntary differentiating agent.

At that time nobody was talking about how behaviors are developed and practiced— how you practice a behaviour like speaking, like writing, like learning to pay attention, like how not to hit your sister or brother, that you practice this. I began to see that what you practice, how you walk, how you write, how you try to teach yourself to speak, how you monitor your muscular reactions about being with your parents, was the foundation of self-knowledge and forming a personal life. Forming a personal life begins with those acts that you intentionally practice, or those events that you try to incorporate into how you act that give you a degree of self-management which is the foundation of a personal life; and that is different than the behaviors you inherit. It is the body that you shape. How you are shaping your own behavior is the embodied life, which is different than the bodied life. They are connected but the difference is how the organism uses itself to re-form what is inherited, and that is the process of evolution of personal embodiment. Understanding this became a work of helping people learn to form their life by learning to disorganise old behavior and reorganise new behavior that is much more applicable to being alive in a meaningful way, that is to having satisfying relationships with oneself and with others.

So there's a talk that I gave at a meeting of osteopaths way back—I gave a talk on the life of the body and what it means to be embodied, and a question kept coming up from the osteopaths: Could you tell us, why is it that when patients come to see us they leave the office, they feel good, and then they come back and they say, well, they felt good for three days, then something happened, now I feel not so good anymore. What happened?

Dr. Dave: Yes.

Keleman: They asked me what happened. I said, you forget that any intervention requires that the person reinforce that intervention, and not be passive to something that happens and simply to carry on as if he doesn't have to do anything. So you are sort of saying, the body will heal itself and you don't have to do anything.

Dr. Dave: I think we all have this wish for the magic silver bullet, where all we have to do is take a pill, or go see a body worker or a therapist and they'll fix it for us. But you put a lot of emphasis on volition.

Keleman: I think it's a word that I've changed to "voluntary effort."

Dr. Dave: Okay.

Keleman: I use voluntary muscular effort, because I wanted to get away from the notion of an act of will, which is associated with mental effort. The development of voluntary muscular effort is how you learn to walk, hold yourself steady. The organism is, the child is practicing that—you see them practicing holding steady; they are correcting themselves, and then you realise they are efforting, and efforting is in fact a voluntary act which involves connected muscular tissue and cortical tissue. How we learn to walk, how we learn to steady ourselves, how we learn to walk like our fathers or walk like our mothers, is a voluntary act which makes a connection between the cortex (especially the frontal lobes) and muscular effort.

Cortical differentiation of behavior is making that link between efforting and experiencing, creating new neural maps or images, and then new ways of thinking and feeling, they are all linked. If you do something to a client—putting your hands on them, getting the tissue to relax, or whatever you do, or even having an insight to a conversation—how is that embodied? What does the person do to support the organismic state that turns insight or feeling into action and into sustainable behavior?

How a person forms their behavior becomes, I think, the central issue of evolution, and the central issue that every person has in their life. How do they make a transition from adolescent to adulthood, from being a full-grown adult to being an older adult? You have to practice behavior. Practicing behavior means making an effort that you can repeat and master, and as you repeat and make masterful use of it you create cortical stimulation and cortical dialogue. You link that action to words and narrative, and then you have a body that you've made inside the body you've inherited, and you begin to have a sense of having power in the world.

Dr. Dave: You know I think about a practice like tai chi, which I practiced for several years, and it's very slow, repetitive movements over time. How might something like tai chi relate to what you're saying, because it sounds like it might embody at least part of what you're talking about?

Keleman: I'm not a master of understanding tai chi except in the most generalised way, but as far as I've understood—at least from the way I work—if you make a fist and open the fist you see that it's sort of a habitual. act You just do it because it's a closing reflex, but opening the hand takes more effort than closing the hand. So you see that there's more effort in extending the fingers than in closing the hand. Then you realise that there's a process going on in which you are actually sequencing an action, and altering the sequence of an action. In doing that you have to do small steps, incremental steps to allow different muscular sequencing to happen. Now you have a differentiated action of closing the fist that you can do slower, and slower, and slower until you realize that you have in closing the fist a voluntarily organized response. It's not simply closing the fist, it's a voluntary act taking place in stages that is altering the joint surfaces, altering how the body balances itself, and also signals learning a different order of sequencing.

It's not producing a smooth muscle action like in tai chi, but a series of very differentiated small acts, like playing the piano or stroking the violin. How you are using the fingers, it takes voluntary effort to learn that. To learn that kind of muscular control which allows a very specific action, with very specific intent, this is voluntary muscular effort and it requires the act of attending, the act of differentiating a muscular action, the action of muscle and emotional feedback, and then the repetition until the act has established a library, a memory bank, of multiple actions that you can use in the same way that you would use verbal language. Forming yourself is what the human enterprise is about, and I think that's an unusual way of thinking about how to practice a behavior.

Take a person who is very anxious, he or she tells you "I am always anxious", you would ask them to show you their body shape of anxiety. Anxiety is part of the startle reaction, which means the organism stops, freezes, and hands and fingers extend. Startle is a preparation to investigate, or run, or attack; you see the hands open in preparation, the neck stiffens in attention, the eyes dialate, the breath is held.

You ask the person, can you with voluntary effort make this pattern of anxiety, the startle pattern, more intense? They may squeeze themselves more, make themselves stiffer, and then you say to them: Now, can you back off? Can you do it less? Don't relax, do it less, just like you did it more. First simply make small little steps in reducing the tension pattern of alarm—which is the startle posture—and then they realise that they can affect the intensity of their anxiety. Then they realise, hey, wait a second, if I can manage myself this way I might not totally get rid of the anxiety, but I now can manage it. I don't have to

be so anxious that I become a reflex animal, I am not a victim to overwhelm. They learn to say, "I can do this. I know how to influence myself to be less anxious. " Then they can notice the feedback of being less anxious facing an authority, or their own anxiety. How does this change my actions and feeling? So learning to change a body behavior in small managed increments has a very practical application in managing different forms of anxiety.

Then we can take that into depression. I wrote an article for USA Body Psychotherapy on the nature of depression being a series of motor acts based in the startle reflex: from alarm, to helplessness, to getting ready to withdraw, to being defeated and collapsing. There are four or five different bodily states—very identifiable—where somebody has gone from the stiffness of being in fight or flight, to the stiffness of being frozen and unable to do anything, to the body shape of being collapsed or defeated. These shapes can be addressed—just like we did with the anxiety pattern by changing muscular intensity in small steps. When the body pattern is less intense you have a different state -- less depressed and less defeated and less confused. Then an accompanying feeling could be "I can at least relate to something I don't understand rather than being overwhelmed by it", and that means you have a new shape and you can practice coming back to that shape over and over again until you develop it as sustainable behavior. This changes the relationship to yourself and another person.

Dr. Dave: When you talk about somatic shapes based on processes such as constriction, expansion—and you enumerate a bunch of processes—it sounds a bit like Reich's concept of character armor; but you seem to have elaborated on it, taking it further.

Keleman: I don't think so; I think I'm closer to what Nina Bull has elaborated. She talked about tension states and instinctual behaviorial patterns and the emotional and social expression such as submission and defiance. I'm linking body posture to inherited patterns of behavior, and they are linked. As I illustrated in the stress continuum anxiety is part and parcel of the alarm pattern, the alarm pattern is part and parcel of the investigation pattern. Anxiety and depression are body shapes. Reflex patterns, inherited body shapes, are invoked to deal with situations that the organism doesn't have a more appropriate response to. A body posture is a whole muscular behavioral pattern that carries with it the readiness to act, and all the accompanying feedback that you recognize as emotion or as feeling.

So it's different than what Reich meant by armoring. I'm saying the organism has a series of inherited behavioral shapes, and those behavioral shapes, whether they're going forward to hunt, to look for a way of attacking another animal, or a way of retreating and preparing to run, these are inherited patterns. The same as to reach out, to bond, to hold on to, cling to the mother so you don't fall, to hold onto something so that you can hold your balance. These are behavioral shapes that are invoked in situations that call for a specific action.

Dr. Dave: Is it fair to say then that somatic change leads to psycho-emotional change?

Keleman: You know there's nothing that happens in this arena that isn't the body. The body is a very complex anatomical organization that interacts with itself in generating its behavior. So in my opinion how a person is motorically organized is directly linked to the way he or she thinks and feels. Rehearsing, practicing an act is a way of generating the sensations that are the fuel for thinking and emoting.

Then you understand that the person who plays the fiddle and is pressuring the strings on the fret with different intensities is in fact engaging in the basic language of the organism: pressure, duration, intensity, sequence of movement, and all these managed motor patterns become part and parcel of how words are formed and how language is organised. You see that an act is not only muscular but it's now invoking all the neural mechanisms and feedback sensations that begin to form language, with the images and sounds that accompany it, and also inherited memories and memories that you have formed about how you act as part and parcel of an internal subjective dialogue which is accompanying the action.

Dr. Dave: I want to ask you a question which is probably perpetuating the dualism that you're wanting to break through, and the question is: How are you feeling these days about psychotherapy through a body approach, versus through a talk therapy approach? Is it an "either/or," or a "both/and"?

Keleman: Well, I would say to you, first of all, talking is fundamentally a muscular act—you cannot escape that—talking involves how you breathe to oscillate the laryngeal muscles. You are sending up sound waves, sound waves that are sequenced in a particular way in which people understand movements of the larynx as a form of communication. So talking, and how you talk, and how you use yourself is really important in how you conduct interactions with people who are seeking help. So to me, working physically requires also talking and how you talk, it's part and parcel of your social conversation and your internal conversation. You can't work with somebody bodily and not involve language, so I think the split is artificial.

My big insight coming out of my chiropractic training was understanding the fallacy of Psychoanalysis—when I say the fallacy it doesn't mean that what they do doesn't work in some cases. What I mean is using language as an attempt to reorganize behavior does not necessarily

engage the underlying motor patterns responsible for the behavior. Psychoanalysis made the assumption that reframing language could effect sustainable behavior. Because you could reframe the way you use words and make a different concept of how you're talking to yourself about something, did not mean that you disengage from the motor pattern that was perpetuating how you were experiencing and feeling. And this made a split between verbal language and body action. The intent was that talking, verbal language, would disengage some of these motoric patterns which were at the basis of the person's discomfort. I recognized, no—you can't do that—you have to make sure that the motor/feeling connection is happening. So you see the organism is not a dualism, but it's a very complex organizational wholeness based on motor patterns seeking expression, including language.

Dr. Dave: Yes, okay.

Keleman: I write in a way that has a philosophical bent, I write in a way in which I am trying—and I love doing it—to form a language of the body. When I talk about basic organismic states, porosity, rigidity, motility, and density I'm talking about the patterns of behavior, and tissue states—I'm trying to create an embodied language because there is none, it doesn't exist out there. I searched through the world of literature, mythology, psychodynamics, philosophy—it's not there. We have to create it, and I see it as a stage in the evolution of how the organism is able to relate to itself. So clearly, creating a lexicon for the embodied life is one of my intentions, but the work is also extremely practical. For example, working with dreams is an effective entrance into the body's interior experience and understanding the body's primary language as it is expressed in dream images.

So somebody tells me their dream … I saw this man, and this man seems to be trying to open a door. And I would ask, can you show me muscularly the way the person in your dream is using himself to try to open the door? Show me the muscular shape of all the different steps how he reaches for the knob, or bangs on the door. Now, when the person imitates the action he is making a new image of the action in his own brain (which has made the original dream image). We have now linked image, cortex, muscular action, voluntary imitation, new image and differentiated action. What has been created is an interconnected event, a muscular, emotional, vascular, cognitive event that becomes the basis of a real somatic dialogue.

When the person realizes, hey, wait a second, I am now creating a voluntary muscular act with all the thoughts and associations of my dream. This brings the dream back to the source of its origin—which is the body and its brain —and the organism has learned to voluntarily influence itself. When a person comes to understand how they can influence their behavior they have not only opened a door to the body's interiority but also opened an intra-organismic conversation with themselves and with another person.

Dr. Dave: What would guide your choice in choosing a bodily action in a dream that perhaps is long, and has a lot of different kinds of interactions and symbols and so on in it?

Keleman: Well, the first thing I would say to people is, "Just tell me, what in your dream imagery attracts you?" So that would be one step. They may say, "Oh I'm really excited about the figure opening the door." Or I would say, "Just choose one, whether you like it or not, let's just choose one." Or if I know something about the person I might understand they have a pattern, let's use the word "density", which is a kind of hunkering down, hibernating pattern in which the organism tries to mute its reactions and be restrained about being in the world. He or she doesn't want to be exposing themselves, or they are very cautious in how they reach out. Then I may see and point out—"Hey, the way the guy is opening the door is rather opposite of the way you're in the world. So let's see how you would practice opening the door as a way to reorganize your hunkering down attitude." So I may use that approach.

Dr. Dave: Great. Now I read that you're actually working on a book about dreams and the body, and I got very excited about that because dreams have been a longstanding interest of mine for many years. I taught a course at Sonoma State University called Myth, Dream and Symbol, and of course I drew heavily on your friend Joseph Campbell's book, Hero with a Thousand Faces. I imagine in your book you will have some case examples; might there be one that you could take us through briefly?

Keleman: Well, I just gave you one about this person opening the door. Do you have a specific one? Just tell me the dream and I'll …

Dr. Dave: Ah, I don't have a dream off the top of my head, let me think a moment here. I don't have a dream just off the top of my head and you did give us a good example—so rather than press you on that point …

Keleman: Let's take it this way. If I explained to a person, "Look, the situation you're in is calling for a change in the way you're handling the situation." Let's say that's the way I'm talking to you, and you respond by telling me you feel helpless. Directly from our conversation I ask you to make the pattern of helplessness more explicit—so then you organize a muscular model, as I've explained with opening the door.

Then at a later time you may come back to me and say, "You know, I've had another dream. I was in a well and I didn't know how to get out of the well." So I would

then say, "Wait a second, we just were talking about a helpless pattern, about how you densified and made yourself very compressed. So you have felt that and now you have dreamed about that, so let's organise how you are in the well. Show me, how are you in the well?" Then you would likely see that the person is pressing his body together, and making a gripping movement with his hands. Then I'll say "Do it a little more" and then he'll say to me, "Oh, my throat! I feel I'm strangling myself, and I feel panic that I won't be able to breathe and I'm very confined." And then I would say, "Could you loosen the pattern of this squeezing a little, could you undo it in small steps, so that you can get a sense that you don't have to squeeze so hard in a confining situation—whether that situation is you confining yourself, or something in the environment." Then he does it less, or she does it less, and they get a different experience of being less confined or less confining. Then we talk about what this experience is like, and how he can use this variation in the confining pattern to be less confining when he's at work, when he feels pressured, when he's in a sexual situation, when his children make a demand on him.

Then he begins to use his new experiences, and his internal cortical reality to voluntarily alter his behavior, and form a different way to use himself in the world.

Dr. Dave: There are some ways the example you have just given reminded me of Gestalt therapy, but it seems to me the difference is this very careful and gradual attention to the patterns and the body.

Keleman: Yes, but maybe I should put it this way. When we try to describe how we think or act what we learn from our culture is: Think before you act, or feel, or check your feelings, don't be reactive. Action is never in first place, but the fact of the matter is, action is always in the first place! You can't live without acting, whether it's involuntary or voluntary. Most people don't realize that the body is always in the preparation of maintaining a particular action pattern to keep itself alive; whether it's to turn over and sleep, whether it's to stand up, whether it's getting ready to brush your teeth, there's always a readiness to act and thinking accompanies that. So I try to get back to the primary pattern of motor behavior, which is the foundation of the motoric sensory dialogue of self informing, which is the basis of thinking. Cognition arises from motor activity not the other way around.

Dr. Dave: Okay, that's really clear. I wonder, what's your view of the present state of affairs for the body therapy movement in general? I mean, you must be aware that there are other approaches out there, other people who …

Keleman: A while ago I wrote an article for the Body Psychotherapy Journal on the difference you mentioned between the bodied life and the embodied life … pointing out that although great strides have been made in recognizing the bodied life is important and how it's brought into the arena of our daily life. But there is not a lot of understanding how you form an embodied life, how you form a personal way of being in the world, and to that degree it is easy to fall prey to mindfulness, or to a spirituality which is disembodied.

I feel that if I have anything to say, it's that we have to think Formatively, evolutionarily, how the organism has created in a few thousand years an epigenetic organization and a cultural organization that is transmitting new behavior that can be both imitated and repeated. This means behavior not programmed by our genetic code, but which allows the organism to do two things: one is to shape its environment, and then to shape its own body. This ability for epigenetic change is an evolutionary event, and this is what we're living, and this is what is going on and we have to pay attention to this forming process.

Dr. Dave: You said something about a few thousand years—so are you now embedding this in terms of cultural evolution?

Keleman: Absolutely. When you think about how many years the cortex has been exploding in its ability to symbolize language, and events and behavior, we're talking maybe fifty thousand years. I'm just sharing data from Joe Campbell and some of the anthropologists who have dated it to slightly before the caves of Lascaux. Here we begin to see the first images people portray of their reality. They reproduce the animals they see, but leaving their hand prints on the wall is telling us about authorship and importantly, also tells us about subjectivity. Then you realize that in those years there is an enormous evolution in voluntary behavior and that this is not totally programmed, it's transmitted culturally and sometimes we don't know how to actually aid that, and that creates difficulties.

You know Marshack, the guy out of Harvard, who wrote a famous book about the roots of writing (Roots of Civilization by Alexander Marshack) and points out writing existed before any language. The evidence is showing you carvings on ivory, shapes that look like the lunar cycle—which may be related to menses— but before there's any formalized language we know of to talk about it. So this tells you the act of writing is a physical act that took place before there was formalized language, and that's what I'm saying—that the physicality of behavior has generated the ability to create behavior, including formalized language

Dr. Dave: I wonder if you have any reflections about this current moment that we're in, this sort of digital transformation of our lives?

Keleman: Well, I know that it's happening, and I assume this is part and parcel of a different way of forming contemporary behavior. Let me put it to you this way, and this is just a generalization David, that the human organism has gone from adapting to nature, to having some influence over nature—how it controls the environment, or creates environments—and now there is this adaptation that exceeds creating environments which are more friendly toward us, like cities. We are in a new forming stage of developing how the organism is relating to itself, how the human organism is talking about and with itself as an environment that can to be cultivated.

What this really means is an increasing cortical complexity still based in muscular movements. What's happening is a kind of digitization, where the frontal cortex is increasing its richness, its neural sophistication, and its ability to re-sequence patterns and make fine motor acts which change the organism's internal environment and therefore its way of being in the world. And you could say then that this digitization that's appearing so strongly as a quick way of being able to influence your own life has two aspects: one to grow a rich cortical ability to influence the rest of the body's structure and to form a particular kind of human being, and to relieve the organism's limitation on available memory by creating an external memory. So what is external memory? Stone tablets were, and now hard drives are, and so forth, so that there is more availability for the cortex to create behavior, and make new memories for epigenetic evolution, internally so that the organism has a different way of relating to a world it's creating inside itself, and outside itself.

Dr. Dave: Okay, very interesting. Well, as we wind down, I wonder if there are any final points you wish to make, or something that my questions didn't give you a chance to express?

Keleman: Well, I hope that I've not been too cryptic, and I hope that I've not been too philosophical, and I hope that I've been practical. An embodied life is an emerging truth about what human existence is about, and we are now in this stage of our life that is a gigantic revolution about what human values are, what human life is about, how humans can live and how they protect their internal environment. This is going on, this is a giant evolutionary step in my opinion, and we are living it—we are in it!

Dr. Dave: There's no question that we are in it!

Keleman: Yes!

Dr. Dave: And Stanley Keleman, I want to thank you for being my guest today on Shrink Rap Radio.

Keleman: My pleasure, and I hope we meet again.