

# A Biological Vision

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## Abstract

This article, written almost 30 years ago for the first edition of *The Journal of Biological Experience*, illustrates the consistency of Stanley Keleman's vision of the human being as a biologically based organizing process. Making a clear distinction between a psychological approach and a biological approach, he lays the foundation for his current practice of somatic work, as well as for his ongoing pioneering efforts in creating a language and method based in the embodied reality of human existence.

## Keywords

A Biological Vision – Human Forming – A Basis for Somatic Work

In this issue of the *Journal of Biological Experience*<sup>1</sup> I want to tell you about the development of my philosophy of human life as biological process. It is from this growing vision that my work has sprung, my books and the work I do with individuals and groups.

From my earliest days, I sought an image of mankind upon which to base my own life. There was in me a longing for an overview, and I pursued the ideas of various disciplines that attempted to answer the question of man's place in the universe. I was interested in psychology because it represented for me a hope for understanding the *elan vital* in man, and an ideal of who man could be. But I became dissatisfied with psychological descriptions of human activity that did not take into account the body, the soul, or man's destiny.

Because I had been trained in both the healing sciences and athletics, I was also attracted to those approaches that tried to understand the body as the basis of our existence and our satisfaction. The early notion I had, of course, using the language of the time, was "a healthy mind in a healthy body." Psychology had tried to say it the other way around: "a healthy mind makes a healthy body." By hindsight, I understand that my interest represented my future course. But, at the time, I was also dissatisfied with the option of the healthy body as it was generally used because it left out the idea of the person.

The situation I found myself in was that most people thought that either the mind dominated the body or the body dominated the mind. I was repelled by the attempts to reduce man to a materialistic event, and I was equally repelled by the metaphysical and idealistic notions of the body. We were more than a collection of particles in a pattern, I thought, and certainly more than the organization of impersonal energy fields or materializing entities infusing matter with life. W. Reich and A. Lowen had tried to work out a functional relationship of mind and body based upon a common energy source, but while this dialectical model was more acceptable to me than prevalent dualistic models, I was still dissatisfied.

The pursuit of this dissatisfaction eventually led me to grasp that experience itself would lead me to the conception I needed. Just as Einstein was required to reject the language of Newton, we must, I felt, reject both the mechanistic and spiritualistic languages concerning the body. We must develop a vision, a cosmology from our actual experience of living.

I experienced myself as a connected series of events that had a unity. I thought, I dreamed, I felt, I sexed, I got excited, I moved, I had concrete experiences and invisible ones. I had a hormonal existence, a muscular existence, a social existence. We have more than one body, I thought. When we go to sleep, we become the body of the dreamer. When we go to work, we become the body of the worker. In loving, we become the body of the lover. We are, at the same time, one body and many bodies. My life was composed of a multiplicity of excitatory experiences in which I formed myself.

This led me to the idea of the Formative process. I realized that, in my experiencing, I was continually organizing myself bodily, creating the shape and form of my life. I *was* the energetic process that organized the chain of experience, the chain of bodies I called me. People are constantly in the process of forming their bodies.

I realized that I was involved with the mystery of making a body. We are the development of a series of life shapes from childhood to adulthood, changing structures and qualities of experience. It could be seen embryologically, a series of bodies, connecting to each other, generating other bodies. Bodymaking generates more bodymaking, experiencing generates more experiencing. We are constantly changing the shape of our structure and the form of our experience.

Building upon these insights I was led to the notion of biological process. Seen outwardly, biological process is the development of the different bodies we have in our life time. Experienced inwardly, it is the different realms of our subjective life. It is the process we are, organizing ourselves, shaping ourselves, seeking satisfaction. It is manifested as all the events and experiences that make up our lives.

With this idea of biological process. I was no longer involved in a conception that split our experience into two realms. I could begin to talk about how persons form their world by their life activity, their gestures, their imagery and their feeling. This conception helped me to understand the Formative process, and this understanding led to a practical methodology of working with people. When I worked with someone emotionally, I now wanted to know what kind of life body, what kind of person was trying to shape. I wanted to know what the person was trying to satisfy, how desire sought satisfaction, how feeling became action or thought.

In the course of this work, I recognized that the human being is capable of many reorganizing, that we are more plastic, mobile and remoldable than we have been taught to believe. At the same time I was struck by the fact that life is situational, that

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we live in a sea of constantly altering situations. We are presented with a stream of constantly changing internal and external realities, new desires, new people, new environmental conditions. I realized that a person capable of experiencing his process is also capable of being in these changing situations in a way that is not stereotyped.

Such an individual would be enabled to experience the situation he was in rather than an image he carried with him from the past. More importantly, he would be able to shape both himself and the situation, to make his world. He would be free from behavior that was obsolete for his survival and could reformulate the nature of his actions and images based upon his experiences. He would be capable of forming his life and his environment, of being flexible and responsible. And this would lead to increased possibilities for both survival and physical, emotional and intellectual satisfaction.

I now wanted to develop a language and a work that encouraged the growth of this kind of individual, a language and work that addressed the shaping of our experiences that spoke of transitions and biological processes. From this vision, my current work has generated itself.

Let me now take you through a story and a talk with my students that dramatize and concretize these abstractions. By the time you have finished this article, I hope you will have a good idea about what a work based upon the idea of biological process is and how it differs from other models of human existence.

As I was sitting in a public Jacuzzi pool one evening a woman psychologist who knows my reputation complained to me about a problem she was having swimming. She was having trouble breathing and speculated that the problem might be caused by emotional tension. This was alarming for her, because it had never happened previously. She believed the problem to be caused psychologically, by events in the mind. The mind affected the body. She added that she had been experiencing her conflicts more lately since she had been in therapy.

I responded by saying that, in my view, somatizing should be the goal of all therapy. The tension should be felt bodily because it arises as bodily conflict, later to be rationalized in symbolic images. Stress and anxiety are not events of the mind that somehow cause tension in the body. They are, rather, organismic patterns expressed as muscle and organ contraction.

The woman said that she was engaged in a kind of massage therapy in which she was now experiencing the contact her mother couldn't give her growing up. She was able to experience qualities evoked in her body, such as maternal touch, that brought her pleasure and contact.

"Yes," I replied, "Organismic learning is meant to give you your body. Conflict, tension is an organismic state, not simply a conflict of ideas in the brain. The body is, in fact, doing two or three things simultaneously, maintaining two or three opposing action patterns. Why you couldn't breathe was that one part of you that you didn't want to move or was frightened of moving, perhaps frightened of all the sensation that had been evoked in you while another part of you - your determination, your ideas - pushed you to move, to exercise."

In our next meeting at the pool, the woman said that she had understood my idea of conflictual action pattern states. But, she argued, these bodily states must be caused by something. Thoughts or images in the mind, she maintained, made feeling in the body, and these events give rise somehow to pain.

I told her that to speak in this fashion was to follow a way of conceiving our experience that was no longer useful. In my language, I use the term biological process. Our biological process includes what formerly we have called both mind and body, thought and feeling. Feeling, thinking, imaging and acting are all part of our biological process.

This idea is extremely useful when we think about how conflict is generated. Children have a need for stimulation through touch, for example. In a family whose members cannot support this need, or are positively hostile toward touching, there is both a pattern to reach out and the action to hold back from fear of harm or disappointment. The child does something that inhibits the movements of his or her desire, he or she squeezes the brain as well as the belly. The conflicts are not states of mind that somehow cause problems in the body. They are opposing patterns of the organism's actions which, when prolonged, become the source of pain.

The child perceives the bodily states of desire and the bodily stance of inhibition as muscle and organ pain. Then the brain perceives or recognizes that this is taking place. There is then a further distancing from the pain, and we believe that the perceived event in the brain is the real event.

Originally, the experience is of the total organism—muscle, brain, organs. Then the experience is localized in the recognition pattern of the brain. Traditional psychology has taken this one step further and developed methodologies such as free association, problem solving, or hypnagogic image releases that concentrate on mental functioning and ignore the rest of the somatic components in the conflictual situation. The goal of working biologically is to allow you to feel throughout your organism how you have enacted your desire or your inhibition. You are then enabled to develop new patterns that will bring you more satisfaction.

Having now made the distinction between a psychological and biological vision, I want to describe more fully the biological approach. To do this, I have transcribed a presentation I made to my students last year:

The goal of the work we do at the Center is to assist people in recognizing and developing an identity that comes from their own excitement, their emotionality, and their body's living process. Most people are totally identified with their social personality, their mental imagery. They are identified with the part of themselves that judges and controls their excitement and that strives to attain socially acceptable images they have introjected.

We teach persons to experience themselves bodily, to feel their lifestyle as a pattern of bodily shaping that permits certain kinds of excitation and prohibits others. When we say bodily, we don't mean to reduce the person to the materialistic, mechanistic body implied by contemporary science. Neither do we imply an occult vaporization. We mean the concrete experience of one's existence. We work on the ground floor of the instinctual life where there is no separation between biology and personality.

Through the use of somatic exercises you learn how you enact your desire and longing—whether for food, touch, sexual contact, or self-expression.

Working with yourself physically is working with your own desire. Working with the body is always working with the process of need as it seeks satisfaction. You begin to experience, in your body, the conflicts you may have around these issues. The Center's work is meant to help your body change itself, to live differently so that you can allow your emotional experience to reorganize your life.

At the heart of our concern is the cultivation of the ancient biological soup from which the currents of creation emerge. Excitement is a cosmological event, the fuel for the sun as well as cellular activity. The generation of energy, the transference of energy, on a biological or cosmological level, is the basis of existence. We can talk about it as the evolution of particles, the process of photosynthesis, or as cellular replication. We experience this in each of us as a primordial, nonverbal, excitatory process that gives rise to the tides of feeling, needs, vision, and actions, moving toward the world and away from the world, expanding and congealing itself.

The excitatory process is something we have in common, yet it is differentiated from person to person. Each person's excitation organizes differently, creating unique qualities by the ways it shapes itself. This notion is most basic: there is an excitatory pattern. Out of the currents of liquid, hormonal flows, ion exchanges, each person is formed. Excitation is structured differently by different people. You will see some persons with a high-pitched, gothic quality, others with a kind of intestinal, rhythmical lethargy. Some persons make consistently invasive, prickly contact while others shrink in fear whenever the excitement emerges in them. There are some people who exude a buoyant warmth, or a bright radiance.

Whatever I do with someone in terms of physical, social or energetic exercise, I am always seeking to perceive and to bring to the foreground whatever quality of excitement is present. I want the state and quality of the excitement to be experienced and expressed, to become part of the consciousness of the person. I may ask people to kick or breathe or reach out so they may better experience bodily their process of seeking satisfaction. We work physically to encourage, alter, bring out, intensify, and escalate the basic energetic metabolism to allow persons to experience somatically the movement of their desire. I may ask people to kick, jump with joy, breathe or reach out—not only to help them with emotional expression, but also to teach them how they can function with different levels of excitement.

Our excitatory process teaches us directly how we generate behavior that moves toward satisfaction or how we inhibit the movement of our excitation. People experience in their bodies both how they create various qualities and the possibility of alternate excitatory patterns. In the course of this work the source of people's knowledge of themselves changes. They are no longer identified with the memory of what other people have told them about themselves, or their analysis of their behavior. Instead their ability to recognize their own pattern of sensation and feeling becomes their self-reference. They begin to identify with a chain of somatic movements and events. The source of our knowing, then, is not in our memory or in our analytical powers, but in our biological life. The social personality which grows out of our somatic process begins to recognize that its nourishment comes from excitation and its fulfillment.

The psychobiological exercises that we do are an attempt to help the primordial ocean's own organizing tendency toward structure and satisfaction. We employ four kinds of exercises, each corresponding to different levels of biological organization and experience.

The first group of exercises is meant to develop and bring to the foreground the basic rhythmical states of the organism—vibration, pulsation, and streaming. These exercises are concerned with the movements of the basic excitatory processes—the intercellular movements of liquids, oxygenation, metabolism. We are concerned here with the cardio-vascular processes, pulse rate, breathing pattern, the flow of blood and lymph, the flow of excitation throughout the organism. We are concerned with increasing our perception of our basic rhythms. You could say that this group of exercises corresponds to the biological level of cellular function and survival.

On the next level are those exercises that consciously increase the instinctual movement of reaching out, of extending oneself. These movements carry the instinctual needs of sexuality and nurturing into the world. Carried along with them are the feelings generated by these needs, such as tenderness, urgency and anger. They are the basic movements of social contact and are concerned with both the survival of the organism and the survival of the species.

The third group of exercises allows you to experience the bodily form of your social roles and to develop these somatic roles more consciously. These are the attitudes by which we create our social interaction; roles such as wife, husband or student. Here we are interested in the bodily movements by which persons enact a particular quality in the family, in work situations, in learning. We are concerned with the bodily attitudes by which we learn how to control emotional over-reaction, how we learn to shape our environment with other people. These exercises correspond to the biological organization of culture. We could say they are concerned with sociological survival.

The last group consists of exercise meant to generate what can only be called biological religious movements. These exercises aim to promote the feelings of joy, wonder, awe, and presence that fills us with the meaning and fullness of life itself. They are concerned with encouraging and fostering those experiences of the body that bring deepness and radiance, a sense of connectedness or pool of existence that seems universal.

When we work biologically with a person, we evoke in that working racial remembrances, uterine experiences, childhood states. We evoke the history of the person with their parents, the way they have shaped themselves in their family, the history of how they have structured their excitation. We help you recognize a somatic pattern as something that you have developed through time and are now maintaining. When you begin to work, for example, you may have a rigid neck and not be aware of it. In our work you begin to find out how you make yourself rigid, how you sustain this pattern, how it served you in the past and how it

serves you in the present. Or perhaps as a child you were provoked to be inflammatory or learned to inflate your own excitatory process in order to gain attention. Now the question is how do you continue to maintain this process of over-excitation somatically as an adult? What kinds of satisfaction does it permit and what kinds does it prevent? Most importantly, we help you recognize these patterns as something you are doing, something you have created in the past and are maintaining in the present. They are not something done to you, rather something you have invented and perfected.

The exercises are meant to provide you with a feeling of what is going on with you emotionally and muscularly, to intensify what you are doing so that you can learn from your social pattern, and to generate a continuum of excitatory experiences different from the range you normally allow. It then becomes possible for you to invent ways to bring to an end a habitual state if you so desire. Changing your mental picture is neither enough nor is simply learning to relax. You must learn to function with a different excitatory level and to practice developing the social actions and movements that bring satisfaction.

The exercises we teach differ from those of other physical approaches that try to avoid the emotional instinctual issues or are only concerned with mechanical improvement. There are approaches that try to inflame you, to whip you up and exaggerate who you are. And there are those approaches that try to calm you, sedate you, relax you and diminish or destroy the desire process. There are people who try to work with the body in a non-emotional way. But to work biologically means to try to deal with all levels of responsiveness. The exercises we teach are not simply mechanical; good posture, for example, is the result of emotional satisfaction, just as a lively sense of movement and grace is the result of a love of life. From our perspective it makes no sense either to try and whip the excitatory process into some direction or to deny it. Contactfulness with the escalation of your excitement provokes desire and builds the boundaries of containment which create a human world. To be overwhelmed or to be underwhelmed—both are to misread the nature of desire.

Many of the other physical approaches mistake this. In their breathing and physical exercises, they attempt either to whip up desire or deny it. Some techniques lead to hyperventilation, overbreathing, which is an alkaloid state, leading to a high chaotic charge and convulsive emotionality. Other techniques lead to hypoventilation, underbreathing, an acidic state, with an emphasis on quietness, fantasy and decreasing contact with the world. For me, the deepening of desire is the urge to live; evolution and creation are statements of desire. Both hyperventilation and hypoventilation are counter to this—whipping the organism up to some level of “aliveness” or quieting the organism until it is still. Neither encourages the full range of responsive breathing—from the ecstasy of sexual arousal to the relaxation of deep sleep. In my view, the full range of breathing is related to social action; it cannot be encouraged without encouraging appropriate behavior. Cardiovascular exercises imply and, in fact, should demand a new lifestyle.

What we teach persons is how to live from their basic excitatory ocean, to recognize their inner vision, to experience and shape their emotion and their desire. We are concerned with how persons construct their bodies and their lifestyles.

This brings me to a second area of my work, the notion of process and form. When someone comes to work with me, they are in some kind of transition. Something in them is seeking to express itself, or they are in a process of changing their life. After many years of working with people in these emotional turning points, I have come to distinguish three phases of experience involved in any change. I call these phases endings, middle ground, and new forming. Each of these phases has distinct energetic qualities and unique bodily problems to be solved by the person going through them. Some people have difficulty ending situations even if the situation is harmful to them. Others have difficulty living through the period in which things are unformed, where they have left familiar old patterns and have not yet developed new ones. And other people have difficulty in shaping new values and committing themselves to perfectly new behavior.

The process of change always has these three phases. The first thing that happens in any change is an ending of a condition that has existed. The child does not simply begin a life as a baby, it first has to end the uterine life. Before embarking on a new lifestyle, a person must end the life he or she was formerly leading. The qualities which accompany the ending process include feelings of abandonment, letting go, accepting one’s destiny, being finite, and a certain awe. One can no longer accept a particular way of life, a social situation. What he or she once identified with no longer works for him or her. He or she begins to feel that something must change, that a way of behaving must come to an end.

After we have ended something and before a new way of life has emerged occurs the second phase of the energetic process, which I call middle ground. I call it the “waiting room,” waiting for it to happen, waiting for it to come together. There is confusion, in that everything is up and down. When you and I are in that place, we are swimming in a sea of memories, sensation, disorientations, the past, the possible future, the now. The middle ground has qualities like life is bigger than us, a sense of being overwhelmed, a feeling that we are not masters of our own destiny, a sense that we exist without ego, an optimism, a struggle, and a hope. From out of the turmoil of middle ground, the waiting room, we develop the insights and the vision that permits the formation of new behavior.

When someone comes and sees me and says that something is dissatisfying in their life, or that they have problems that they can’t resolve, I interpret that as this person is now beginning to end a way of life in an environment and they don’t quite know how to do it. Or they need help in doing it, to get through the middle ground to the new place. There may be a fear of ending or there may be a conflict between ending and middle ground. But what they are saying when they enter the office is, “I’ve got to end the way I am using myself. This part of my bodily life is over and I need to organize a new bodily life.” With some of the exercises we do, we are facilitating the movement from endings to middle ground. We are going from order to disorder, from focused to unfocused, or we are trying to help the person live in the middle ground so that they can re-form themselves.

Our approach has two parts: the part in which you let something happen to you, and the part in which you participate in creating a different lifestyle. The first part involves coming into the office, engaging in the exercises, contacting the excitatory

process, learning how excitement wishes to form itself. The second part involves taking this out into the world. And this transformation is confusing for many people because they don't have the tools to make their private experiences public. We try to give them these tools. Most people are trying to generate an experience that they have had before rather than experience a new way of forming themselves.

The exercises we do in the office lead to working with oneself privately, and then taking this process into new interaction with others. A trap for people new to this work is to isolate themselves, to work with themselves solely on their own, and fail to bring it into the formation of a new community for themselves. You can be so independent in this work that you end up as a caricature of a person, incapable of any act of empathy or human sweetness. The goal of the exercises is not simply the generation of a particular feeling, rather it is the larger issue of how you use yourself.

So, each of us, as we enter the work, is either at endings, middle ground or new beginnings. We begin by looking at where we are in this process and that indicates the way of working with ourselves, of moving into what is forming. It is important that each stage be experienced. It is absolutely crazy while you are in middle ground to act as if you were developing new behavior. To focus on one's own process, rather than considering how one interacts with the other, is important at one stage of the process, for example. So that when you do reach out to make contact you are reaching out from your own excitatory soup and not from an old image of how you should reach out. It is equally crazy to ask - how do I stay with myself if I haven't created the space for myself by ending something or giving it up, or disorganizing it so I can allow the new formation to happen. Endings and middle ground are the surrendering of the present social self. New beginnings is the redevelopment of the social self. Something has to end, something has to form and then new behavior must be learned to accompany what wants to emerge. That is the process we teach.

The true issue of one's bodily life is the process of excitement, the way excitement gives satisfaction. In a certain way, the excitement and the desire are our teachers. Paying attention to your excitation brings you into contact with your body, brings you to your body's wish to live out its patterns of longing, its vision for itself.

The fundamental notion of the Center is that there is a basic excitatory process for all of us, that it goes through these stages: endings, middle ground, new beginnings. Our lives are lived in the qualities and shapes we form from this excitatory process. Working biologically assists us in contacting this process more deeply and discovering what wants to form in us. Any life situation then becomes an opportunity to experience ourselves, to plumb the shape of what is emerging, to participate in the creation of our excitation.

What is important is to learn how you do yourself in a situation. For example, in leaving my office you could ask how you do this, how you end the session. "How do I generate distance and leave? Well, I don't, I still feel Stanley and yet I walk away. So one part of me is there, another is gone." How do you do that physically, in terms of feeling, sensations, shapes? By asking this question you get somatic insights into how you use yourself. You may end the session with a really good feeling and then you can see how that feeling ends or goes away. Or you could ask how it feels in your body, muscles, brain, organs, to be waiting for the next session. What you experience in your breath, your emotion, your behavior. In our work together, I continually ask you how you do something, how you enact your excitation. This somatic questioning is meant to help you discover bodily, in your world, the process of your life.

In the end, you can only take what I teach and use it to discover your own process. The more you take our work together, work on your own, take it into the social world, record your experiences and how your process forms you, the more you learn from yourself. You literally become ever more deeply yourself.

Working biologically is more than the analysis of one's movements. It is more than the discovery of yourself or the expression of your feelings. It is, in fact, the shaping of yourself, your body, the living out of your process. In the past, we called this emotional and spiritual growth, the building of vision and character. To work biologically is to learn how to live your destiny.