

# Forming a Personal Shape: My Formative Journey

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## Abstract

This text describes my Formative journey, the process of forming my personal shape in the years I have worked with Stanley Keleman. I depict each phase in the forming of my shape: firstly, learning to recognize and embody my shape; secondly, forming a contained shape; thirdly, growing and managing my form in daily life; and finally, maturing my shape. This article can be seen as a practical illustration of working with oneself using Stanley Keleman's somatic practice.

## Keywords

Personal Growth – Personal Account – Working with the How-Method  
Bodily Practice – Formative Psychology

## The Importance of Bonding

This narrative relates the process of forming my personal shape in the more than ten years I have worked with Stanley Keleman. During this Formative process, I have learned to dismantle the basic bodily patterns I formed in the past, and to create from them a way to (re)organize myself. In this way, I grew a mature somatic self, closer to my own truth. This personal shape, which did not exist before, enables me to organize another form of being alive, of living a personal existence.

This could only take place in the teaching and training situation Stanley provided. The bond, the kind of connection I formed with him, established the living place where I could experience who I was and where I stood. I needed it in order to form every step in my growth. In this bonding, my way of moving back and forth from me to him formed a model for my functioning in the world.

Stanley pointed out to me with an ongoing generosity a way to form my own shape. For me, his responses throughout our Formative relationship were those of an older adult who considered me as a growing adult. He was friendly and helpful, continuously maintaining a firm boundary with me. I needed these qualities of connection and distance for my own growth. Depending on the process I went through he formed his answers: Support of and recognition for what was, encouragement to make form and to make distinct my own way, appreciation for my growing ability to organize, and, all-encompassing, an ongoing presence of love and connection.

This narrative consists of five parts. Each part depicts a phase in the forming and deepening of my shape, in my form and the effort I made to form, in the identity and behavior it provided me with and in the experience and vision it carried. These phases do not only have a sequential logic. They also evolve through a cyclical order, each of them open-ended, presenting themselves again through all the others.

I have written about this Formative journey from the point of view of the person I am now, with my present form, knowing and Formative language<sup>1</sup> and also with the comprehension and compassion I gained for myself over the years.

## An Imperative Urge to Grow

When I began to do somatic work, I was in a transitional phase of my life, at the beginning of menopause. By nature, I was fond of feelings of closeness, of being accepted, being together, and I had always had a lot of appetite. I mostly enjoyed my aliveness. I was used to being emotional, to identifying myself with feelings. My desires could become out of proportion, and if unfulfilled, take possession of me. My usual way to control them was trying to overcome or suppress them, which could be painful for me.

During my Formative journey, I learned to recognize this conflict as a constitutional dilemma, and myself as an endomorph to whom the closeness and attention of my family were not properly given in my early life. I was left with an incredible urge to “take in” and it had not been possible for me to form a membrane between myself and others.

I always formed bonds in the same peculiar way. It was delicious to be wanted, loved. But I was always afraid of rejection, of losing the connection with the other, although it was not the reality of my life. Although I was successful in the things I undertook, I suffered from a lack of self-worth. In my relationships with others, I was dependent on situations and principally reactive. I could be at ease, full of warmth and creativity, could even be seen as an authority by others. But I was inclined to put certain persons who were important to me into such positions of authority that I myself became diminished, or even terrified, as if I did not exist myself.

I was experienced in working with myself and knew this internal conflict but I had the feeling that, at this basic level, life was only happening to me. Now I know that knowing is not enough. I myself was generating my bodily responses; in this way I continually and automatically repeated this eternal drama of my existence. I did it without knowing it, without knowing a way to influence them fundamentally.

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<sup>1</sup> The Formative language and terms used in this article are those I learned while working with Stanley Keleman. Some terms he has coined himself, for instance somagram, underbanded, and accordion exercise while others are words used in specific meanings different from the ordinary ones, or in grammatical patterns that deviate from the regular ones; examples are appetite, swell, overwhelm (used as a noun), and grow (used as a transitive verb applied to humans and their activities rather than to plants). Some terms have been placed between double quotes to facilitate reading. I refer those readers interested in Keleman's Formative language to his own work.

I was looking for an adult identity, but felt powerless and unsure about being myself. I was longing to be present in the world, but this did not have a concrete representation or meaning to me: I did not experience myself as being and acting in the world. Instead I thought that my inside and outside worlds were so different that they would never meet.

I was eager to learn the vision and the Bodying Practice that Stanley taught, and excited about meeting him. I vividly remember the particular way in which I presented myself to Stanley in the group. I imperatively needed to make contact, thrust by the urge to prevent myself from disappearing in the mass and stimulated by the work of another participant. I had to make sure I was part of the group, to hear my voice, to feel present. I stood up, and this spontaneous action brought Stanley in front of me, and I said something like, "Here I am." At the same time, I held back impulsively, severely inhibiting any movement or word. Stanley said, "You just want me to see you, to stand in front of you, don't you?" I could only agree. He worked with me, helping me to do the contraction in my upper body more and less. At a certain moment, a wave of excitement developed in me as a "wanting to take in," and he said, "So, do you want to enter me? But I am a reserved man!" Later, I made the timid statement, "Stanley, I don't want to enter you, I want to become an adult."

Through these interactions Stanley and I formed a primary bond. Stanley's firmed-up stance reflected to me a powerful presence: Concerned and accepting, and simultaneously making a clear reserve and boundary. I had the intimate conviction I had found a teacher able to make the response I needed.

### Recognizing and Embodying My Shape

I went through a long period of instability. My process organized itself along two distinct movements that mingled with and influenced each other. Sometimes they seemed in conflict, which was confusing and stressful.

On the one hand, it was extraordinary to experience that shape exists. I began the process of recognizing that I existed by forms, that I was embodied. I marveled that the way in which I used myself produced my feelings; that my experiences turned out to be shapes, ways of doing, of behaving. I began to take time on my own and slow down in order to experience myself bodily, to look at my shapes, to see them, to feel how my own movements gave rise to inner sensations. I was enthusiastic and, soon, I dared to embody my shapes.

On the other hand, I expected it would work in the same way in the group. When simply listening to Stanley with closed eyes, I was very touched. Intuitively, I knew he voiced my truth for me, my secret longing to grow. I intimately understood him and felt recognized. At other moments I was full of longing; an enormous "swelling" developed in me as if I wanted to make Stanley's words mine, to incorporate them. It was very frightening, and when I looked at him, I did not dare to make contact with him anymore. He was big and I was small. I did not only have admiration for his work and his adult way of being present, I made an inaccessible authority of him. I judged myself and I had to keep it secret. I could not manage the difficulties I had with the group exercises and the language. I increasingly became caught in a dilemma. The more I was longing to be present in an "adult way" (my image of the *second adult*, which Stanley was talking about), the more I had to recognize I did not succeed. I finally became a prey to emotional storms that overwhelmed me totally.

The clue was embodying the experiences of my struggle. I wanted to learn to manage it. I drew soma grams. Various shapes from big to small appeared: Longing, wanting to take in; trying to keep myself together with criticism, disappointed. Even feeling overwhelmed was a form. In a similar way, many emotions and attitudes manifested themselves in my bond with Stanley: Admiration, envy, anger, distrust, fear, submission, despair. It demanded courage to begin to embody, to experience these shapes. I made strong movements, as a reflex, impulsively. It took much effort, and I inevitably lost all strength. To be able to recognize these emotional stances as shapes in order to body them was a good activity for me. It gave me a sense of participating, making an effort to create order and a certain rest.

My struggle was my way to show myself my own muscular patterns operating. I began to see how I was using myself, caught between two opposite directions. The more I swelled and made myself big, the more I compressed myself by making big bodily contractions, so I was continually in danger of explosion, ready to burst or lose form altogether. The result was feeling overwhelmed, helpless, distressed. These two shapes (big and small) formed a whole, two ends of a continuum, as a natural way to regulate myself. It happened to me automatically, in extreme ways, and I was at the mercy of that.

Over the years I learned to know my structure as motile, unformed. Excitement possessed me. I felt my lower body underbanded, with a lack of foundation that felt unstable, with a protruding belly. Some parts of my body, such as my lower back, shoulders, and neck were very dense in order to compensate for this underbandedness, but failed to sustain it. Releasing the tensions, by crying for instance, I could break through the pelvic floor and was in danger of being flooded by emotion. When I learned that membranes are created bodily in the process of human interaction, I realized that it had not been possible for me in my early life to grow membranes. My family used to do things for me or I was left feeling alone and overwhelmed.

I tried to speak with Stanley about my learning. In our interaction, my constitutional drama was fully present, and not being able to express my thoughts was very frustrating for me. Now I see how Stanley answered by means of attempts to prevent explosions, in order for me to contain myself. He gave me support by giving me his hand. I might press his hand with different intensities. I learned to do the same by myself, pressuring myself in a gentle "assembling" way. It was a revelation to me. Stanley saw me as "somebody who could be destabilized by so much vitality." All of a sudden my situation became un-dramatized. This was part of the process. It was essential to learn to do it another way: To do the pressure exercise.

It demanded a lot of time and effort to allow this deep process of undoing an old pattern and forming another shape to take place. I was willing to act differently, but did not yet have another form to support myself. I intuited an underlying stream, but another urge thrust me forward: To be better, to have power, to go faster.

I impetuously resisted the unknown. I finally faced the fact that the familiar ways to protect myself were not useful any more. I really needed to take them in hand. I recognized them as my alpha-adults. Although I was torn by hope and sorrow, the desire to share with Stanley won. I decided to write to him and to share my process.

This action marked a turning point, a first step in making a boundary absolutely necessary to affirm myself. It was important to be able to sustain the (imaginary) risk of rejection and an enormous relief to end this unbearable situation. It meant to me that I was ending a deep pattern of functioning. It became very clear to me that my familiar behavior of being helpless versus coping on my own was based on distrust and served to avoid being present in the relationship. I was also beginning the process of reshaping myself.

The way Stanley received me made me understand I had been longing to be received in my own power, while realizing at the same time how terrifying it was. He formulated my struggle as *“a struggle to make form, to give shape and express my interiority.”* His words penetrated me. It was true. My cry was not for help, but for *“contact to be with myself, and with others.”* It was my deepest desire.

I needed form. My *“two shapes needed a middle.”* I had *“to do the practice with care and love,”* as Stanley said. I deeply wanted to commit myself to this. I felt a kind of promise, for more human ground.

### Toward a Contained Shape

I entered a constructive phase. I formed a way to do the practice with more confidence and its reality was a powerful learning process.

*“Doing the exercise is hard work. Its practice is subtle and asks patience,”* Stanley had said. I practiced in gradations the two shapes of my dilemma: Intense longing to be present, doing it less, then less, then doing the same thing with “holding back.” I especially tried to maintain contact with my belly and feet. I learned organizing and disorganizing, using my muscles volitionally. I used them very strongly, very intensively, doing my utmost. In two-three steps I was at the top of my ability, unable to sustain the effort; then I finally went back to giving up all pressure.

*“Do the practice slowly and deeply, and the power of your overwhelm when given form will be a powerful presence and interiority,”* Stanley had written, but I enjoyed doing it as I did. Later on I learned to make more discrete steps, not to give up the form too quickly, to wait a little. Every time I did the “accordion exercise” with the shapes of my dilemma (the big/middle/small, as I called them), I held myself in a contained space in between that I began to appreciate.

Working in the group was more difficult. The urge to “enter” manifested itself directly. In my whole body I recognized how the “raw” in me could possess me, in my head, muscles, gestures, in breath and belly, but I accepted how essential it was to form boundaries. I was continually working, doing and undoing the shapes of my emerging states. I was often more involved in my own doing than in listening to or doing the group exercises. I saw how my quick movements served to draw other people’s attention, to keep me away from myself. It was very difficult for me to wait, to hold the impulse to swell, to bear the emerging scary feeling in my belly. So I learned to make form, to prevent being overwhelmed, to have some say in regulating my excitement. Gradually a shift appeared. I became less dispersed. To be more and more able to contain my excitement and to give it form slowly quieted the state of “overwhelm.” I was glad I began to participate in the work of others. Mimicking their stances or gestures when working with Stanley, I applied them to my own shape-forming. I obtained a certain experience, freedom and rest. I was mostly proud of my growing ability to influence my shape.

Another aspect came up, when I began to stop myself volitionally—for example, my cries. I had to make a firm gesture with my hands, to mobilize a bottom in my pelvis, a wall in my belly, a straight back, a serious face: “No” emerged. My ability to give continuity to my shape grew; if I lost the connection, I knew the way back, and made more appropriate little steps: My first steps in self-discipline.

A creative phase occurred. I progressively entered an inner world. I occupied a middle ground in myself. I experienced it as a kind of gestation of the newly conceived. Dreams made their appearance. I immersed myself in their abundance. There were beautiful dreams, signaling the old, announcing the next step. I mostly trusted my dreams: Coming from my cellular depth, speaking to me, willing to become flesh. Embodying the figures was like planting each piece of the dream as a little seed in my inner soil. Motile shapes of my impulsiveness always appeared, and, when inhibited and given duration, led to the creation of boundaries. Experiencing pulsations in my pelvis, head and legs for the first time, I understood that my head needed to nestle into my viscera and I was able to help hold myself in an inner space. I marveled that it was possible to feel the quiet warm tide of my own sea inside. I was creating a container for my own bodily life.

I understood I gave Stanley the role of being a receptacle for my excitement, in order to form my own receptacle. I learned to build a friendly cooperation with him. We were engaged in common work, the forming of my somatic adult. He literally lent his body to help me to contain myself. By experiencing how he held me, I was able to take that holding ability into myself. I repeated exercises at home using him as a model containing me. It was marvelous to learn to give form to the continuum of shapes emerging from my “devouring” waves. There were various different selves each with a pulsatory rhythm, a different size, simultaneously malleable and firm: reaching out, enthusiastic, timid, wondering, yielding and encompassing the whole, full of a soft vitality: There I was doing myself. To write about my work to Stanley helped me to stay with myself.

I remember very warmly the time I showed my forming shape in the group. Using my gestures of intimacy, I made a firm boundary between Stanley and myself with my right arm and hand; with my left hand a fist, close to my belly, telling me, "Stay here!" It was really new to organize myself in such a way that a contained form appeared. My gestures provided me with connection and separation, distance and closeness with myself and with Stanley: There I was. Stanley taught me to go back and forth with the movement of my hands, in small steps. I was able to maintain contact with the shape while slowly moving, learning to make variations in the shape. It was a pure delight to have such a close and powerful contact with my warm full tide inside, certainly in the company of others. I brought about a profound shift in my shape. I taught myself to form a container to be present with myself, and with others. My *second adult* gently wanted to make her appearance; I was simply happy.

### Managing My Shape in Daily Life

Applying somatic work to my recurrent dilemma changed my life progressively; the changes extended to different fields, in private and professionally.

My contained shape provided me with a somatic structure allowing me to be present, and to act in a different way. In the process of organizing my actions, I kept supporting my shape by using voluntary muscular effort. This ongoing process encouraged the forming of new behavior and a new identity in a fruitful way. My shape gained more body, solidity and stability; it more and more became its real size.

It took time, experimentation and patience, and was quite challenging. I learned to enjoy effort and activity. I revealed myself as willing to be present and to live my formativeness. My mesomorphic layer came fully into play in working somatically, in reorganizing, redefining the shape of my emotional behavior. I made different layers inside the contained shape. It functioned as a frame within which I could begin to exist with connection and separation. I formed a body wall, making flexible boundaries that could vary in intensity and duration. My muscles sometimes presented the dilemma of how to undo my shoulders, if not mobilizing the holding pattern from inside out. I found answers by practicing, using my muscles and brain differently, engaging in an inner dialogue. Rigidity and motility went together, solidity and liquidity, softness and firmness. In daily life I was able to live more with different feeling states; I could, for instance, assert myself just by asking questions, or express a request or a simple wish. It was a big change to have more appropriate behavior and to shape a more satisfying connection between myself and others.

Increasingly the practice became a kind of lifestyle. I now did exercises not only when in trouble, to prevent unwanted experiences, or to prepare for some (new) situation, but in quiet, just out of interest, for myself. My practice was more in being attentive, in becoming intimate with my own organizing pattern, my Formative process. It was a creative process to incorporate my learning in many situations: Looking, speaking, walking, waiting, driving the car, eating, buying clothes, writing, working and so on. I did not know I could enjoy activity so much. The result was that I was filled with fresh vitality, rest and satisfaction. Most importantly, it served to help me remember: "Danielle, stay with yourself!" I acquired another kind of relating to myself, a more self-reflective attitude. This self-management provided me with a solid container for my own power.

In my work too, I altered my position step by step. More and more I learned to use the Formative principles and method. From a therapist who worked traditionally by being present for others, I formed a shape that allowed me to be present with others. I became more of a teacher-therapist. In the collaboration with my colleague Piet, I also deepened, brought myself more apart and together. Working with him, joining our efforts, knowing and competence, is a real gift for me to put into the service of our common work. It is a joy for me to teach people to participate in their own bodying process and to transmit the vision and method of Formative Psychology.

My following step was attending the Professional Class. I took part in this group very seriously; my participation was a personal act of being present. I was able to be with myself and others. I formed a new position in the group and with a distinct way to participate. It was a great experience for me to write case histories and to present them for supervision. Writing formed a way to express a dear wish: Sharing my way of working. I was thankful for Stanley's appreciation and for being embedded in the peer group. Being an adult now began to mean taking my emotional life in charge and giving it form. The boundary I was now creating made distinct my own way to be present with my knowing and competence. This meant that I now knew how to make order, to organize myself, and, when contained, express myself as a way to conduct my life, to be my own authority.

In fact, the relationship I began to have with myself gave me a warm inner company I deeply appreciated. A yielding stance arose in me announcing the next phase: To mature.

### Ripening, Deepening My Shape

The connections I am "growing forth" are reflected in my relationship with myself, with the biosphere, in my relationships with Stanley and others.

A sacred dimension becomes present in daily life, a sensation of letting the world come to me. I receive the habitual more deeply and re-appreciate what is. What abundance there is around me! I experience a faithful stance, a generous look in my eyes, joy in my heart. Living is more giving and receiving, is being more alive with what is growing in a shared space or rhythm. I recognize the difference of the other more, and at the same time I am more with the situation of others. I feel grateful for the love and intimacy I share with my husband and with friends. I now see life and death as part of our natural process. With my very aged sick mother, I can

maintain a connection, and I can be tender and enjoy being with her. This all endows my life with luminous moments and a warm glow.

Dreams had announced this intimate and strange dimension, this depth of experience, as a call for the deep ancient woman to be received into my present woman. To body the dream figures and spheres led me to a special place: A kind of experience of eternity. To do and repeat the work, applying the method, making layers of each phase, made me more and more able to savor each depth. The dream work I shared with Stanley enabled me to receive even more deeply into myself this mysterious source.

In the workshops I am now present in a silent and intense way. I participate by doing and applying the exercises Stanley is offering, guided by my own rhythm, interest and “visceral” brain. A distant proximity with Stanley and others gives me a warm sense of power, of belonging while being able to exist in my own knowing. The more I individuate/differentiate, the more I experience my somatic self, the more I feel connected with others.

Being able to stay with myself while sharing with Stanley, is leading me to the essential next step, which is learning to make connections. Last year I faced two points in my interaction with him. First, I experienced how strong my (over-) dramatizing pattern was and how deeply it served me to arouse other people’s interest and draw them close to me. Never before did I see so fully how my constitutional dilemma functioned: Being close to the other meant giving up closeness to myself. Being close to myself excluded the other, meant loneliness. At the same time, I saw the transformation. Closeness could begin with being close to myself, and this could become the starting point of connecting to the other, as my way of being in the world.

Second, I saw how strongly my pattern required boundaries. Stanley’s response made it possible for me to vigorously experience his bodily boundary. He was present for me without allowing himself to be invaded. He taught me the following step to take, namely how to use minimal muscular intensity. This interaction helped me to further create my own sense of adequate limitation of bodily respect and of sanity.

I did the practice again for myself and revisited my basic constitutional organization. It made clear to me that a new ending was coming. I felt respect for my own limits. I was tired of proving my power, my goodness; it was time to stop. My mature body was telling me to take it easier. Fatigue or some pain in my lower back signaled that I had to use my muscles yet more slowly, gently. Minimal effort was already effort; mobilizing my body mass one imperceptible step was enough.

In this way I am forming a more differentiated somatic interior. It is an exquisite experience to be softly connected, receptive. If tears appear, they are contained, tender and precious. Even with the tiniest amount of pressure, or simply by closing my eyes, a full warm streaming bathes me. Presently I am learning to grow layers of connections in my shape, by practicing the assembling and disassembling exercise with the hands. Sometimes this works in a very natural way. Assembling is a gathering together: I connect to my inside. By stiffening I give some firmness: I swell and expand slightly. To disassemble I have to compact, in very measured steps, in order to keep connected. It is a kind of experience of being close, not only in one place inside me, but also while moving from this place to another, making layers, staying with and influencing the closeness and distance to myself, and consequently to the other.

I keep close to me the last time I addressed Stanley in the group. I was able to apply to our living interaction the assembling and disassembling exercise. I felt the wish to simply be with what was. I felt how the excitement of my contact with him filled me, and how I was able to contain. I managed the continuum of responses I successively generated and stayed connected with each of them, by assembling and disassembling myself with the hands, as an example of what I had learned. I made distinct two-three layers, regulating distance and proximity between me and Stanley, back and forth. I was able to savor the qualities of the connections I made, to finally receive the closeness of my hands on my breast. I was impressed that I gave voice to my doing and experiencing. I had a shape allowing words for who I truly was.

Stanley listened to me; his quiet empathy, his sincere faith resonated in me. When I stopped, I was filled by a wave of intense peacefulness that seemed to spread to the people around me, sharing in a profound silence, in pulsating together. In living space I formed a personal shape able to grow connections as a way of being present in the world I live in.

#### A “Journey” in the Journey

Honoring Stanley’s person and work with this piece of writing is part and parcel of my ongoing moving from me to him, and back to myself, following the course of our bonding. Stanley taught me my own way to proceed, and to be true to it. I thank him infinitely for being there with me.

His books have always accompanied me, helping me to incarnate his vision and method, to understand more of myself. But in the period before writing this article I positively immersed myself in them, and never before did I have the sensation that I could so deeply receive what living our formativeness is about, what it means to become a Formative human being. I understood I had grown up and began to embrace my own journey.

By the act of writing, I committed myself to sustaining a firm form. As a result I obtained a deeper understanding and a clearer vision of the Formative processes I had gone through. I especially saw fully my ongoing way of forming myself, and my life. I received even more deeply the evidence that I am the actor, the creator of my personal shape and experiences.

While I was writing, this deeper understanding and clearer vision in their turn influenced the form and content of the narrative; in this way it took its present form. It was funny to see how many of the processes depicted occurred in a nutshell during the writing: Bubbling with activity, being hampered and not being able to go further, pausing, starting again and making order, reorganizing the whole, and especially, maintaining and enjoying the effort.

**Biography**

**Danielle Chauvelot** lives and works in Groningen, The Netherlands. In 1970, she began a career in Gestalt therapy and Bioenergetic Analysis. She has had a private practice for individuals and groups for more than 20 years. Over the last ten years, her source of inspiration has been the Formative Psychology of Stanley Keleman, and she has participated in his workshops and professional classes. Her practice is now growing into a Center for teaching Somatic Education and Therapy. Email: [chauvelot@freeler.nl](mailto:chauvelot@freeler.nl)