

How to View the Body: A Formative Application of the Developmental Continuum

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Abstract:

The process of growing a mature adult body follows a developmental continuum of shape and behavior that is inherited and involuntary. When a person learns to use voluntary effort to influence anatomical shape, the process follows a Formative developmental continuum; voluntary participation becomes the basis of subjective experience and a personally formed adult.

Keywords

Body Shape – Developmental Continuum – Formative Continuum

My work and my interest is understanding how somatic shapes change over time. I have developed my approach and Formative methodology from observing the natural developmental processes of the body. The human soma is an ancestral genetic template replicating itself and forming individual, subtle variations. Each soma has an innate, instinctual urge to form the next stage of its existence by interacting with itself according to a developmental continuum of shapes that come into being, disassemble and reorganize. This involuntary, prepersonal process gives clues for how individuals can personalize their own forming.

In my teaching seminars and private practice I participate with people in discovering how their individual embodiment is organizing to fulfill its possibilities for a personal, mature adult. Whether a person is seeking help with a specific life dilemma or desires a deeper experiential and personal life, I approach each situation by asking which somatic shapes are here and which somatic shapes are trying to come into existence. I take into account the overall shape of the body and its tissue state as well as the emotional expression and subjective description from the client. Together we investigate which somatic-emotional shapes are present, which shapes are ending and which ones are seeking more form.

The Inherited Developmental Continuum

All behavior arises from anatomical structure. There is no behavior without anatomical structure, yet behavior can also influence structure. I am especially interested in how the organism interacts with itself—how it develops a relationship with itself to influence itself. Because shape *is* behavior, I use the terms shape and behavior interchangeably.

The natural evolutionary process of life makes shapes. These shapes follow a developmental continuum from simple to more complex and from more form to less form—from conception to birth to maturity to aging.

I use four behavioral organizations to describe the developmental continuum of how shapes come into being, change and reorganize. These organizations are motile, porous, rigid and dense. The movement from one organization to another along the continuum is fluid and pulsatory. The movement from one end of the continuum to the other is from highly motile to highly stable, from the least complex to the most complex.

The first organization, *motile*, is characterized by rapid change. Shapes are of the shortest duration and are the most unstable. Behaviors are mostly instinctual and involuntary and often difficult to voluntarily influence. We see motility in early cell division of the blastula or in fleeting ideas or dream images or in behavior that has mercurial changeability. A motile somatic shape is constantly shifting and changing, swinging between expansion and contraction, inflation and deflation. It communicates: I will be what is needed. Motile shapes are seeking porosity or rigidity.

In the second organization, *porous*, motility slows and shapes have somewhat more duration but there is not yet sufficient stability for structure to be reliably sustained. Boundaries are permeable and easily influenced by inside and outside pressures. The porous somatic shape is yielding and malleable, posture may be softly slouched, with loose muscles and joints that look akimbo or as if about to come unglued. It communicates: Support me, receive me. These shapes are seeking rigidity.

In the third organization, *rigid*, motility continues to decrease and there is more duration and stability. Shapes now have a firmer form that can be repeated and sustained over time. The rigid somatic shape is well formed and reliable. Muscles are taut, ready to spring into action. Posture has a vertical appearance of ramrod straight. Muscles can be very stiff or spastic and the range of expression is narrow. It communicates: I am ready to act, my way is the only way. These shapes are seeking porosity or density.

In the fourth organization, *dense*, motility is minimal. Structure is the most stable and has the longest duration. Dense shapes are layered and compact. They are slow to change and have the ability to sustain shape and hold form under pressure. The dense somatic organization is compressed like a coil. It can be hunkered down in a protective withdrawal. It can fluctuate between slow, deliberate expression and flashing eruption. It communicates: I move at my own pace; don't make demands. These shapes are seeking porosity or rigidity.

The Formative Developmental Continuum

The relationship of the organism with itself is for me the most important relationship. The use of voluntary muscular effort stimulates the participation of the cortex, and it is the ability of muscle and cortex to influence each other that enables the organism to form a voluntary personalized relationship with itself. The development of a personally formed adult is different from the growth of the inherited adult because of the voluntary participation in one's own forming. The learned ability to differentiate somatic shape is how we influence our anatomical inheritance and how we create complexity within ourselves. It is this ability for self-influence that insures the development of the personal adult.

When a person uses voluntary muscular effort to influence inherited behavior to personalize their embodiment, the process follows what I call the *Formative* developmental continuum. The ability to voluntarily influence a somatic shape by increasing and decreasing muscular intensity is also the ability to invoke the stages of dense, rigid, porous and motile. The *Formative* developmental continuum is distinguished from the *inherited* developmental continuum by the use of voluntary effort. The process by which shapes change form is the same. To voluntarily organize a somatic shape, to give it more form, more body, means to first muscularly organize density or rigidity. Differentiating a somatic shape by disassembling the muscular pattern in small steps means to invoke porosity and motility. Dense and rigid organization gives a somatic shape more form. This firmer shape can then be differentiated by invoking porosity and motility. The differentiated layers can be given more form by again invoking rigidity or density. This is the back and forth pulsatory process, by which shape and behavior develop layers and complexity. The *Formative* developmental continuum makes manifest the sequence of how somatic organizations can be voluntarily differentiated and reorganized into complex gradations of shape that give a person choices of behavior.

When a person uses voluntary muscular effort, the body is in a relationship with itself and is able to create a continuum of shapes. This developmental anatomical process is both simple and complex, predictable and novel, personal and universal. The ability to embody what is predictable and at the same time novel is what makes each person a somatic poetic sculpture. To understand the human soma as it struggles to live its dilemmas of forming an embodied existence is to comprehend its universal and individual organization. The ability to influence our shape is a source of personal power and satisfaction, and even happiness.