

The Sudden Loss of Stanley as Catalyst for Growth

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Abstract

In 1989, Stanley Keleman described the organismic experience of sudden loss and how we can work with our somatic structure to form a personal ending rather than be lived by the inherited startle and shock reactions. The author describes how she used this talk and Voluntary Muscular Cortical Effort to help form her own responses to the sudden death of Stanley.

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My father died at the same age and in the same manner as Stanley: one day I was speaking with him and the next day he was gone. The kind of death we are unprepared for, except perhaps by virtue of their increasing years. This is the loss that Stanley described so deeply and eloquently the first time I met him. It was 1989 at the Zen Center in San Francisco and he was speaking to many people who worked in their Hospice services and a friend of mine suggested we attend. The title of that talk is *Coping with Loss: The Somatic States of Grieving* and I have been listening to the CDs of that talk over and over since he died. The memory of something he said called to me and I searched for it finding unexpected gems too many to enumerate here.

He was talking about our relationships as a physical structure both inside and outside us when he said “*sudden death... is as if somebody ripped out this membrane – reached in and disrupted this inner structure.*”¹ It’s a graphic image of a reality anyone who has experienced the grief of sudden loss would recognize. I learned that Stanley was describing experience as the organism knows it and how that organismic experience forms our subjective reality. That day at the Zen Center I began a lifetime process of learning and experiencing how he understood human experience and how to use what I learned for my own personal and professional life.

He differentiated the sudden death from a death we are prepared for like the one I experienced with my 100 year old mother-in-law several years ago. She lived near us for her final five years and I participated in forming her ending in me exactly as Stanley had described in his talk. By the time she died I had grown a new structure for her to live on in me and so did her son, my husband; our grieving process was short and we were ready to go forward in our lives with her inside us and no longer outside us. There was sorrow and the adapting to her absence but there was not the shock which accompanies sudden losses.

“*In the sudden death basically what you are dealing with is shock... and the cardinal distinction about shock is that it’s accompanied by anesthesia... shock is a total freezing of the organism... every time there is a resolution of some of the shock, you will be flooded with old feelings, old images, old behaviors that come from nowhere as part of the attempt to piecemeal, reorganize, what was.*”

¹ All quotations are from *Coping With Loss: The Somatic States of Grieving*. CDs are available from Centerpress.com

This description applies to all shock experiences and the five somatic formative steps Stanley called Voluntary Muscular Cortical Effort (VMCE) can be used to manage ourselves when we experience this inherited shock reaction. As he made very clear, these steps are a natural organismic function that we can learn to use to participate in the forming of our own lives.

Although there was shock for me when I received the call Stanley was gone, I had been lucky enough to have him help me with the sudden losses of both my brother and my father many years ago. Now I would use what I learned and walk myself through the process of using VMCE without Stanley to turn to if I got stuck.

Grieving and mourning are meant to be a reforming of the survivor's relationship to the lost object. Grieving and mourning is a temporary withdrawal from the active field of being engaged with the world because you don't have a proper form inside yet of what was lost. So it requires a withdrawal, or a self-gathering, or a retreat in which you are reorganizing your feelings, how you act and what you think, and the relationship you had with this person. We can get caught in this shock pattern. Grieving is, in its function, an attempt to reorganize what was unformed by a loss.

He shared in this talk his insight that endings are in reality how something new forms, differentiating this from the more familiar notion that we have to end something to start something. It is not a linear process. Inbuilt into the forming process is the ending, the disorganizing of a form, and it is in the unforming that something new appears and eventually takes shape. An example he used is that a baby being born does not begin its infant life at birth but is involved in ending its uterine existence. This insight could only come from a deep interest in organismic life that Stanley possessed. A deep interest he shared with all who would listen.

There was a community of people that formed around Stanley which he described to me as "loosely knit". Many involved themselves with him and his work for decades, in their own ways and timings, some traveling long distances across land and sea to participate in the workshops where he shared himself so generously. Each of us shares the loss of his sudden disappearance and has the opportunity to use VMCE to make something from what is ending, for ourselves and for the community of people still living. Some might find helpful another description he gave of the pain of sudden loss.

An internalization (of a person) is not a picture; an internalization is a field of excitement, a field of feeling that you and the other person have an interior that you share. Well then, a loss is a wound to that structure; it's a wrenching, twisting, breaking of that membrane, that form. There is no surface to react with you... The pain (of an addict) is that the open-ended receptors are searching for the key that will fit in the receptive side so there is a wholeness... When there is... a lack of that, then the person feels out of their gourd. They are in agony because they don't have the surface to respond to. It's the same thing with a loved person... the life field sustained between two people is gone. They are abandoned, deserted, in a desert... loss, especially of a personal event... you have a loved one, you give it personal meaning and then it is pulled out, you are literally pulling a skin off the person, pulling a body out. The sensing organs and the pulsing organs, the heart, belly, skin, no longer expand out and meet a familiar structure but meet nothing – confusion: pull back, reach out, pull back, reach out; obsession.

Listening to this talk on loss, I am reminded that he has been writing and speaking about many of these things long before I met him and that there is an extensive body of work from which I can continue to grow myself and deepen my internal experience of what he communicated both publically and privately. I learned from him that we co-body ourselves in relationship with others and this process is critical for growing ourselves. I smile to remember some of the times and ways that he pushed me to know that he was available for this co-bodilying relationship. In retrospect, I see only kindness and caring but at the time more painful feelings were present for me. By listening now to his voice on these CDs, remembering him, myself and others on that day I met him, I am gathering into myself a shape for giving meaning to the years of knowing Stanley and forming a future that contains and gives value to all that he is to me.

He continued to differentiate, deepen and apply his vision of life's organizing processes right up to his last day and for many of us it was a full-time job keeping up with him. Being with him, whatever the context, required my full presence and attention and this co-bodilying relationship called on me to voluntarily engage with myself in the present. It is a rare relationship that recognizes us in ways we have yet to experience and supports the forming of attitudinal shapes wanting to be lived. It is even rarer that relationship be with someone who had such a sophisticated understanding of what he himself was doing, an understanding that grew out of his own embodied life, his unfailing interest in embodied life, and his powerful desire to share that with others. He continually gave voice to the process of bodying, an experience universal to all of us. He took pains to order his insights into practical form for all of us to apply in our personal forming, our evolving processes of living. And he made it seem simple despite the depth and complexity of what it is to be human. Stanley and I spoke often of the value of living an ordinary human life and the choices he made to do that. He was many things to many people and in the multiple settings I was fortunate to know him, he was first and foremost a man making the same efforts to form his life as he was helping others to do.

All of us are living in an animate field. We are part of a living field and individually we are like raindrops in an ocean. Each of us is born from a living field, an animate field of aliveness, and each of us has a boundary of aliveness that we share with the bigger ocean. Each of us represents an organized field of life inside a bigger field. Every person as they grow to be an adult sustains a life field, in a life field that sustains them. And this is experienceable as being alive.

He told me years ago that it was okay with him when people hear his voice inside themselves, as he understood this is a natural process of bonding, an aspect of co-bodilying. His voice inside me was strong in the weeks after his death and I knew that what I and others were doing in response to his absence was choosing "...from where comes the value that will help you reconstitute your life – that will be the major crisis...a loss is either a gift, a challenge, catastrophe or injustice. Either you have organized a victim helpless stance or an investigatory stance...you are going to consider an event as a catalyst to your own self-forming or you consider it only as an insult that has to be accommodated."

For me, the choice was made years ago, even before I met Stanley, and he and his work is what got me through the impasses I did not know how to navigate. His deep trust in the organizing formative process of life is growing in me as my memories of Stanley weave a new form inside me from which I will carry him, extend his life as he described it, to my own

ending. My work now is to attend to and participate in the ending of the physical contact and connection with Stanley. As I shape my grieving, sadness and loss I can enjoy, as I know he would, anticipating how and what will appear as the future reveals what is yet unknown in this asymmetrical open-ended life formative organizing process that I learned from him.

It's in this wave, this field that we know we belong and that even though someone is not here, we're in some big ocean and we're together and we can live and we live again and we keep living...In the pulsatory continuum there is a powerful life intelligence, a source of knowing something that higher centers can use as a reference, a source, so that the pulsation for me, the pulsatory wave, the organizing process is the basic life self that feeds us what we need to think from, to image from, to act from.

BIOGRAPHY

Christina A. Loeffel, Licensed Marriage Family Therapist, maintains a private practice in San Francisco and San Anselmo, CA, including supervision of trainees and interns, where she applies the principles of Formative Psychology® learned from Stanley Keleman.

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