

Less is More In Remembrance of Stanley Keleman Max Strecker

Abstract

The author summarizes some of the major aspects of Formative Psychology and gives a personal review on encounters with Stanley Keleman and his way of working.

Keywords: Formative Psychology®, Stanley Keleman, embodiment, personal evolution, living your dying

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Anybody who has attended a workshop with Stanley Keleman, will probably remember him at some point saying, 'Less is more'. And when people gathered at his center in Berkeley on August 19th in light of his sudden death, some recalled this memory too. And this has confirmed and strengthened my resonance on this little saying in connection with my teacher and mentor over 18 years. So I want to use 'Less is more' to frame some aspects of his work. My selection is personal and incomplete but may illustrate the tremendous and life changing impact that Stanley Keleman has had on a large number of people in very specific and personal ways. It is not for nothing that he was no friend of curricula or Institute building.

Less is more – at the beginning of my work with Stanley these words sounded like a bitter although unavoidable medicine. But the more I proceeded they sounded sweeter, like a proven remedy and a promise.

Less is more. Less stories – more embodied experience

All life is embodied life. All human life is embodied. Most, if not all people working with different approaches to working somatically with clients, would agree on this common ground. And still, it seems to me, that a theory about the body sometimes dominates in body therapy.

Stanley Keleman on the other hand was radical in doing our embodied existence in personal exercising, using what individually (genetically and situationally) shows up.

To understand human embodied existence, Stanley used a typology by which a person is predominantly ectomorphic, mesomorphic or endomorphic.¹ For me, as a heavily ectomorphic person who is strongly connected to his cortex, categorizations and radar system, I had been proud of my theoretical smartness, my story telling, my brain stuff. With Stanley on my side, I would reconfigure and use my cortex instead as a decision making and confirming part of myself

¹ William Sheldon, in his theory of constitutional types, describes three temperaments based on the three embryological layers of the body. In the endomorphic, metabolic type, the hormones and tissues of digestion and respiration predominate. This temperament is oriented toward nurturing and intimacy. In the ectomorphic type, the neural hormones and organs of sensation predominate. This temperament is oriented toward collecting sensory information. In the mesomorphic type, hormones of action, large muscles, and bones predominate. This temperament is oriented toward action.

Stanley Keleman, *Myth and Body*, Center Press, Berkeley, California, 1999, p.9-10.

when investing experientially into stopping, identifying my action patterns and learning from them. Only from there could I become aware of the seduction mechanisms of cortical narrating and image making. Philosophical smartness, indulging in associations and cortical pleasures did not count for Stanley. Learning experientially how you go from embodied form to embodied form did, and through that, developing your embodied life and eventually a new life story as consequence and by-product.

Less is more. Less method, more function

With Stanley as your therapist or teacher you learned some very useful tools such as the 5-step exercise, also called the accordion exercise. It consists of identifying what is, intensifying the muscular tonus in discrete steps, disassembling it in small steps, waiting for the resonance and implementing what you learned.

But you would learn this not as a method like, “Do these three or five things and you will feel better”. Instead Stanley taught you to exercise in such an individual way that you trained a function. A little child learns to walk in an individual way by investing muscular effort. It falls down and stands up again and starts walking again until its doing becomes an automatic behaviour. To be able to do this it learns to inhibit a movement and to influence the innate arousal patterns. And doing this it deals with its pulsation, waves of expansion and contraction that move through the living organism: it deals with the cellular tissue qualities that are unique in each person, which constantly change from motile, to porous, to rigid, to dense. This function within us human beings is re-evoked and trained by VMCE, (voluntary muscular cortical effort). You use VMCE in the accordion exercise. Stanley Keleman pointed out that VMCE is the royal road to self-management, controlling and differentiating your life and having a say in your developmental process. For many of us It was not easy at the beginning to honour the seemingly small achievements of regular exercise, and to stick with it, as this training of a function needs continuous effort - while also not overdoing it. Less is more. Stanley has been a brilliant motivator to do this precisely and help you find your own special way to combine intensity, speed and duration in order to enhance your personal development. It was heart-warming how he could rejoice over the steps his students or clients would take in developing a personal and satisfying life style.

Less is more. Less macro, more micro

In contrast to other somatic approaches Stanley Keleman was not emphasizing macro movements such as swinging an arm around or kicking the feet. He would rather use involuntary macro movements that showed up when a person would talk about him/herself as a starting point. Often when we talk we make gestures with our hands and arms. At certain crucial points in a person's talking about issues of his or her life, Stanley would ask the person to freeze the movement and then work with micro movements, which are discrete movements in the tension patterns of muscles and tissue. I was amazed to experience and learn how tiny movements in intensifying and de-intensifying the muscular tonus in my hands would spread in very personal, complex and sophisticated ways into all different parts of myself and how this would indicate many ways I could handle myself and discover choices in behaviour which go together with feelings and thoughts.

In his last workshop this past July, Stanley talked about macro and micro dimensions. The astronauts saw a tiny planet Earth, he would say, but when you are living on this planet it is huge. And then, the other way around, when you look at tiny particles under the microscope they become enlarged and are big universes in themselves. So, when we deal and learn to experience

the micro world in ourselves, we dive into a stunning complexity and come in touch with what surrounds us. Stanley had explored the quantum theory of scientists like Planck, Bohr and Heisenberg and he called the multidimensional experience around the micro world the 'human quantum experience'. The more refined and discrete your way of personal exercising becomes, the more you learn the dialogue of voluntary effort and involuntary resonance, and the more you are in connection with the micro sphere and the quantum world that is you.

Less is more. Less healing, more evolution

In the 70's and 80's Stanley Keleman kept his own course of trying to understand better, and using more fully, the formative function of human existence when being confronted with approaches of body therapy that you might call esoteric or magic. 'To free the inner child' or 'to free the real self' were slogans that influence therapeutic work right up until today.

Stanley Keleman was always very clear that for him there existed no 'real self' that could show up after all the distortions and deformations of education and biography had been peeled off. His sober analysis was that there existed no healing in the sense of finding the perfect condition under the surface area of alienated existence. So you have to deal with what you have developed so far, involuntary and voluntary. The good news is that you can continue in your personal development by applying VMCE. You will create new voices that speak to you, that help differentiate your under-bound and your over-bound structures. You learn to control and stabilize yourself which for instance is especially important for people who suffer from traumatic stress. And you learn to influence yourself step by step. Self education is the key. Stanley, more and more, called his work educational rather than psychotherapy although he saw the importance of the therapist-client-relationship which he reframed as 'co-bodying'. He definitely refused any ideas of catharsis or rebirthing but would encourage people to engage in a process that leads to personal growth. And this growth gives you a changed life perspective. This developmental growth is what personal evolution is about. Stanley was also excited about researching the implications of personal evolution in the field of epigenetics for instance.

Less is more. Less spirituality, more poetic beauty

For me as a theologian, Stanley Keleman's view on religion and spirituality was challenging and inspiring. As I experience myself as a liberal-progressive protestant I have no problems to deconstruct and let go of any rigid tenets or dogmas. I like Paul Tillich's idea that religion is not one of the columns of the architecture of life amongst others like politics, economy, culture, etc. but religion (or I could say spirituality) is the force of life itself that is energizing all aspects of humanity. I understand Stanley's reluctance to embrace theological theories that are not grounded in the concrete experiences of subjective daily life. Stanley was, for his own good reasons, very cautious and would not go into spiritual map making. And still he would use words like 'sacred' rather often in his workshop papers. The wonder and multidimensionality of life, the openness of development and evolution on many levels of existence would make him express himself in poetry and metaphors – which then he tied in carefully to experience and exercise, so as not to be misunderstood.

I remember a participant in a workshop in Solingen, Germany, about six years ago, who got stuck with some spiritual metaphor Stanley used. She spoke up, "Stanley, what is this? Do you want to lead us to God?" Stanley's clear answer was, "No. Who am I to do so?" His answer sounded to me as if he was setting a boundary to cortical speculation, and staying with human modesty and the experiential ground.

As I love the language and the images from the Bible as well as from other spiritual texts, I sometimes tried to get Stanley into a discussion of the experiential value of these images. Sometimes he would say, “Thank you, no interest on my side “. And later I often understood that in this moment the direction of our talking about concrete personal experience had been the better choice.

Sometimes Stanley was up for a ‘mythological-philosophical’ talk and it was fascinating for me how he could dive into these waters without losing touch with the ‘here and now’ of our embodiment. Sometimes we found a ‘compromise’ together, a word with religious roots, which was also valuable in the formative world. I remember one time when ‘creation’ was this word. In his book *Myth and Body*, a result of seminars he did together with mythologist Joseph Campbell, Stanley looked for the body, its development and its growth, in the myth of Parsifal. The human organism has created the myth, this piece of literature, to announce a developmental task. Stanley showed some curiosity when I had the idea to read the biblical stories as organismic tasks of human beings as well.

Less is more. Working on dreams

I know people who were especially waiting for the next dream workshop each year. It felt so natural and intuitive to start with a personal dream, sometimes just dreamt the night before the workshop, and from there go into formative work and a personal exercise, which everybody could go along with, pick up, imitating or adapting it. The atmosphere that was created by exercising we called ‘sitting in the soup’. Probably Stanley had come up with it himself first and he used it, too. For Stanley a nightly dream was a personal myth, a task the organism was presenting to itself. Often a dream comes and goes but if you embody it and work with it somatically, you really get to the core of its purpose and by doing the 5-step-exercise you can work on your own development.

‘Less is more’ sounds so true about Stanley’s work with dreams. When I did my first dream workshop in Weggis/Switzerland in 2000, Stanley would let the person tell the dream backwards and sometimes not even to the end of the dream. By telling the dream backwards the dream was no longer in a linear sequence but was a multidimensional event. Some years later Stanley would often not even let people tell the dream. When they recalled their dream internally, just for themselves, Stanley would take the posture that they showed when they were just about ready to tell the dream and lead into exercise from there. At the end of the work the dreamer would often rejoice about all the insights and experiences the dream had given her/him – although not a single word of the dream had been told.

Less is more. Living your dying

In his book *Living your dying* (1974) Stanley Keleman unfolded the discovery that ‘living your dying is the story of the movement of your life’. “We are always dying a bit, always giving things up, always having things taken away. Is there anyone alive who isn’t really curious about what dying is for them? Is there anyone alive who wouldn’t like to go to their dying full of excitement, without fear and without morbidity?”¹ Less is more in living your dying means to take little moments and episodes in your life to experience yourself in preparing your dying.

Stanley was a role model for this approach. He also adjusted his workshops to his own aging process. When I stepped in, they were a week long – in the last years they consisted of three half days. Less is more: Stanley’s ability to create a workshop had been developed over the years so immensely that we as participants were not missing anything. And he was still so available to so

¹ Keleman, S., *Living your dying*,..., front cover

many people. When, once in a while, I had a question, we would skype and he usually answered my emails within a couple of hours. I remember, years ago, having talked with others about the prospect of Stanley getting older and we imagined how it would be when he was ninety-five or even older. We would gather around his armchair and he would give a ten minute' workshop that would satisfy everybody.

And now he has died. And his 'living his dying' was different, and it surprised and shocked me. It feels so sudden and final. But undoubtedly it has been his own death.

In July, at his last summer workshop his new book *Forming your aging – Porosity and Poetry* was released. In an email a few days before his death he wrote to me, "I do hope the Aging book speaks to you". I wrote back that I was learning to slow down and had just begun to read it, in a very experiential slow pace, taking it in, digesting it, enjoying it, piece by piece.

Over 18 long and very fruitful years with Stanley I have learned, step by step, what it means to live in the mode of 'Less is more'. And the journey continues.

Thank you, Stanley!

BIOGRAPHY

Max Strecker, after studying theology, politics and education, became a protestant minister. He worked ten years in a Lutheran congregation in Wuppertal and 15 years in the campus ministry at the University of Duisburg-Essen. Since 2016 he has worked as a hospital chaplain in the Alfried-Krupp-Krankenhaus in Essen. In 2007 he was certified in Formative Psychology by the Institute of Formative Psychology in Solingen, Germany. In 2016 he was certified in Psychological Counseling in Life counseling, couples counseling and family counseling.

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