

Don't Panic, Get Curious

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Abstract

This is a personal account of managing an ectopic heartbeat with Formative Psychology. It includes the discovery of the extra heartbeat by an acupuncturist; initially reacting with panic; dialoguing with Stanley Keleman through workshops, email and individual sessions; using the Bodying Exercise, which lies at the heart of the Formative method, to contain panic and influence the body wall and to create more structure and form to support the heart function; learning to see the ectopic heartbeat as a friend, a sign to be listened to, respected and responded to; as a personal challenge in how to influence anatomy and behavior.

Keywords

Ectopic Heartbeat – Boundaries – Formative Psychology – Somatic Emotional Exercises

This article reflects my process and how I have lived my life over the past eight years, and that I have at certain times experienced as unwieldy, overcomplicated and unmanageable. I have overwhelmed myself with information, struggled to find a form and to create a structure that would work for me. I had to get past my initial and familiar pattern of looking for the approval of others; asking myself, “Would I be good enough?”

I became more internally referenced, curious and properly engaged in my process.

This internal dialogue led me to structure my writing around the communications I have had with Stanley by email, in workshops in Germany and Berkeley, and individual sessions between March, 2004, and the present day.

These dialogues over time have given me a container and a chronological sequence enabling me to manage my overwhelm.

Discovery of My Ectopic Heart Beat

In March, 2004, my acupuncturist picked up an extra heartbeat when taking my pulses. “You should get this checked out.” Up to this time I had felt proud of my “athlete’s pulse,” as she had previously described it.

I felt shocked and overwhelmed by fear and catastrophic fantasies. When I had disorganized shock enough to think more clearly about what I could do and where I could seek advice, I emailed Stanley.

SK: “My first response is do not panic. Start immediately to disorganize shock and fear...I would not respond with worry, only with curiosity...I would hold your form, not disorganize, and become porous. Small micro movements will help lessen the anxiety and give support to the heart.”

A Journey of Exploration and Information Gathering

I’ve always wanted to learn, even been driven to do courses, as experiential as possible, using myself to understand the information I was receiving.

But this was a journey of exploration and new learning at the deepest layer of my being, my organism ... my heart.

Since then the words “don’t panic get curious” have been part of my vocabulary almost daily, in my personal life and in my work with clients. A signal for me to stop, wait, interrupt what is happening inside me, perhaps allow something else to happen.

The discovery of my ectopic heartbeat was a “wake up call” and a turning point in my decision to learn to put myself first. It was an opportunity to look inside myself as an organism, to learn more about my body. I had lived most of my life picturing my heart and lungs with little real connection to myself. But I hadn’t known HOW.

Formative Psychology and Stanley’s support gave me the confidence that I could influence myself and not be helpless in the face of my body’s dictates. I started to engage in a new kind of dialogue with myself.

My Situation Around 2004

I had been under a great deal of strain for several years in managing my mother’s care in a home nearby. She had rapidly developing dementia and I found it stressful and challenging to hold my form in the consequent readjustment to her constantly new behaviors, and the gradual and painful loss of my mother as I had always known her. I was menopausal. I had decided to leave a therapy center that I had founded and co-directed for 12 years, choosing to work from my home, so ending daily contact with colleagues. I wanted to put my energies into deepening my knowledge of Formative Psychology and to grow more of a personal life.

These were all factors contributing to my loss of external boundaries and containment. Over the past few years I had periodically had physical symptoms, such as sensations of tightness in my chest, shortness of breath, extreme tiredness and exhaustion, difficulty breathing and nosebleeds. I noticed and ignored most of these symptoms. I had thoughts about not having long to live, nor at times did I want to.

A Brief Personal History

I am a maturing adult with a chronological age of nearly 60. I have two adult sons. I am the middle of three daughters, predominantly brought up by my courageous and extremely critical ectomorphic-mesomorphic¹ Danish mother, who couldn't tolerate sad or angry feelings. I pressured myself to care both for and about her at a very early age.

My Anglo-Irish father was absent geographically and emotionally. He was intelligent, entertaining, irritable, alcoholic and ectomorphic-endomorphic. They separated when I was 10, spasmodically reunited and finally divorced when I was 13. He died at the young age of 57.

My experience of life to the age of 11 was of constant change, anxiety, shock and transition—I had lived in 7 countries, had 5 nannies and gone to 5 schools. I developed a social layer. My work has been to grow a personal layer and life.

I had to be practical, responsible and work hard to support my mother. A strong inherited pattern was to DO, to be my mother's "little helper."

Being ectomorphic-endomorphic and brought up by a mesomorphic mother, my constitutional dilemma is to slow down, give myself time and order in my daily life and an internal structure and boundary for my thoughts and feelings. I have, like her, historically relied on the rigidity produced by drama, crises and criticism to give me form.

My Heart

My ectopic heartbeat was confirmed by a consultant cardiologist in June 2004. My heart was healthy but my pacemaker was making an extra beat, was "irritable" as he described it.

SK: "A bradycardia is a slowing down of the heart like an athlete's heart which is well trained does have skipped beats and is reactively normal, comes and goes and is not persistent. There is also a bradycardia associated with anxiety, the heart slows, then the extra beat. I do not think this is a sinus arrhythmia, but the result of a slow down in the heartbeat. However, the porosity can lead to some cardiac arrhythmia because of the loss of form and the heart having to switch gears."

It seems to me that my heart is demanding more order, regularity, structure, rhythm, more stopping and waiting.

My inner dialogue calls for more listening to myself, more time for preparation and recovery.

It alerts me to when I overwhelm myself, when I am too speedy, to my swings between rigid and collapse as a result of driving myself, to the pressure and density I can create when I do too much, or shock myself with impulsive behavior or when I think obsessively or overstimulate myself.

Given a rigid body wall and a weak, overly porous internal structure I want to give myself more structure to support my heart function.

SK: "I think that forming a structure that has more form, and is not rigid, and decrease the porosity so that the heart has less variables will be beneficial. The work will organize another pattern or mobilize another pattern in the pacemaker. I think there is a conflict between the maturing adult and the younger, structurally speaking, so as to form and sustain."

I am working on ending my strong pattern of caring for others before me and looking outside myself for my next action.

Near the end of an individual session where I had been talking about my mother and working on my pattern of collapse, Stanley made the statement "It's you or your mother." I heard these words as a major challenge though I initially felt shocked. This dialogue was extremely powerful for me and was a major turning point in learning to put myself first.

HOW Am I Supporting Myself in this Somatic Emotional Dilemma?

How am I choosing to respond to myself, to listen and be in dialogue with myself so I can live my life as embodied and fully as I am able?

I do daily micro muscular exercises using voluntary effort. I select from a library of Bodying Exercises that I have learned over the years. Which movement depends on my state and which pattern it would be beneficial for me to differentiate at the time.

For example I notice a painful tightening, a constriction in my left arm and fist as if grasping or holding on more tightly than is now necessary in my life. I stop, intensify the shape, make more rigidity with both hands, I then disorganize in increments making a more porous shape with a small rigid boundary.

This pattern of constriction is an action pattern or pattern of behavior of pulling away, turning away, of withdrawing into myself. It is partly and particularly strongly expressed by a constriction and a rotation in my left arm, my neck, the left side of my chest, my mouth tight and pulled down. At extremes of constriction, I find it impossible to speak, to find words. I become numbed. As I use effort to disorganize and wait, layer by layer, I notice my rigidity and criticalness, anger, disappointment, loneliness, a gradual

¹ See Body type in "Glossary of Formative Concepts (1996-2006) in this publication
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softening and an experience of warmth and love and expansion. I experience a fullness, and make a rigid porous shape. I have a firmness and can receive myself. In this shape I have a possibility of moving forward, of finding words to express my thoughts, feelings and experience.

In thinking about how else I could support myself to create more inner strength I decided to do some gentle weightlifting and to walk regularly.

SK: "You need to give the body wall more firmness which takes the load off the heart to give support that is costly because the muscles are not doing the work. The same with micro movement, to use more effort taxes the heart, again using firmness with the right effort. This support of the body wall may suggest that you re-evaluate all other approaches for a time, i.e., yoga, stretching, to let the build-up of tonus go on."

I now walk every morning, holding my hands in a rigid porous shape, which I experience as supporting and giving a structure to my upper body.

In my daily activity I stop more often to check with myself how I am in any situation, and make personal choices.

I choose to move more rhythmically and slowly when walking, outdoors and indoors, up and down stairs, biking, swimming, jogging and other physical activities.

I have noticed how obsessive or circular thinking gets in the way of taking action on any of these new behaviors that can potentially enhance the quality of my life.

I am more often aware of how I interrupt myself with a sudden idea and shock myself by an immediate impulsive action, then feel the resulting heat, inflammation or overwhelm.

Through the Bodying Exercise using voluntary muscular effort and other physical exercise, I can feel how in creating more body mass I become more considered, more deliberate, wanting to be slower.

At times I miss the familiar adrenalized excitement of starting projects and feel bored. I am learning to deepen, be slower, wait, be full with myself, and to make layers, to differentiate my patterns. I am learning to see my ectopic beat as friend rather than foe, as a sign or symptom of how I am using myself. I am learning to judge my rigidity less and to see it as necessary for my structure, to choose how much rigidity is necessary for what I want to do, assuming I have stopped and interrupted myself first, or practiced enough that it has become reflex behavior.

Having done the Bodying Exercise more regularly over the past few years I experience myself less fragmented, cut off from myself, divided between head and torso, above and below my diaphragm. I feel more solid, "whole," "joined up," rarely anxious, rigidly contracted and gasping for a fuller breath. My breathing is deeper and wider.

I notice that after exercise my heartbeat can go back to what used to be "normal." This sometimes gives me hope that this could become permanent. If not, I am learning to accept that my heart and I are settled into a different rhythm, or that maybe it comes and goes.

Sometimes in moments of quiet after doing the Bodying Exercise and after rhythmical physical exertion I can feel my pulses beating at different rates, yet in harmony through my body. It is a deeply satisfying and moving experience to be present with myself in this way. To know that I *am* a body, I don't just *have* one.

It is a strange and at times a disconcerting experience to see myself aging, yet to feel more alive, confident, in touch with myself, more in charge of my life than ever before.

I truly believe in and increasingly live this Formative way of seeing the world, inside and out, and as I grow in confidence, increasingly use it in my work with clients. I feel excited at understanding that anatomy is behavior and am moved at the power of Formative Psychology/philosophy to influence my life, and at the heart of it, the Bodying Exercise: I experience myself as a biosphere moving and existing within a biosphere.

I feel excited at the potential for learning and understanding myself at a deeper physical, emotional and spiritual level. I know now that no one "out there" can have the answers for MY organism. This leaves me with the very real responsibility for how I use myself, how I choose to live my life.

Biography

Josephine Dahle, MA Ed., is a UKCP registered and Accredited Psychotherapist with a private practice in Southampton, UK, working with individuals, couples and groups, personal and professional. She initially trained to be a teacher, working for 15 years with remedial, special, adult and parent education, training and counseling. With a growing interest in her relationship to herself and others, in 1987, she retrained to be a Humanistic psychotherapist at Spectrum Therapy, a Centre for Personal and Professional Excellence in London, England, specializing in Gestalt. Since 1993, she has studied with Stanley Keleman in Europe and America.