

Two Thought-provoking Challenges to the Topic of Aging appeared in the Spring 2009 issue of The Official Publication of THE UNITED STATES ASSOCIATION FOR BODY PSYCHOTHERAPY.

USABP editor Jacqueline A. Carleton, Ph.D. writes,

Stanley Keleman, one of the most prodigiously generative people I have ever known, provides a creative insight into what has been called the second half of life. He has contributed two thought-provoking challenges to the topic of aging. In a poem provocatively entitled "Mirror, Mirror" and in a poetic essay, he delineates a view of mature, late adulthood. "Making Later Life a Formative Somatic Adventure" articulates how the cortex and voluntary effort are a unique duo in forming a personal somatic identity. He sees them as the agency of self-development, thankfully far more powerful than the gene story.

Mirror, Mirror

above the sink,
the mirror's face is mine,
the expected one,
no different
from what I see,
it tells the truth, like it or not

my face, is my mirror.
the one I show,
and others recognize,
as my age,
acknowledging,
I am in time with myself,

to see, the truth,
of impermanence,
the face I do
and do not recognize
like it or not.

the face, the mirror,
the clock of time,
shows and tells,
the shapes of experiences,
temporalities,
the shadows, memories
of what has formed.

my expressions
mirror
my present.
like it or not
showing
the times

Making Later Life a Formative Somatic Adventure

Abstract

From a formative perspective addressing our adult body during its aging is not about loss, it is about how one shape of existence ends and how we make a transition to another shape and way of being in the world; it means taking the time and making the effort to develop new behaviors, new ways of thinking and expressing. Maturity and aging offer the opportunity to engage and experience deeply what is present and what is forming in the next phase of life.

Forming my own adult life has always been a somatic adventure where the new and unpredicted are permitted and valued. Charting the unknown, taking the time to be in the transition of middle ground, disorganizing what is passing, and using voluntary effort to form what is emerging --- all these endeavors bring their own challenges and rewards.

As I approach the end of my 7th decade, this sense of adventure continues and my experience grows deeper and richer. The key for me is to have an orientation, an understanding of human life as part of a universal process that makes shapes, changes them and takes them away, and to use voluntary self-influence to form one's life, not just be lived by life.

Many people do not know the rules of our biological forming process, how shapes come into being, change over time and eventually disappear; for them life simply happens, growing older means losing youthful appearance, physical vigor, mental responsiveness and waiting to be either the beneficiary or victim of one's inheritance. This passive approach has never suited me. I have spent my life exploring and developing a conceptual and practical approach to living a formative, personally created life in which a self- dialogue takes place between our inherited body and the body we develop through voluntary effort.

All of us are destined to accumulate years. How do we grow older? Is it nothing more than a series of losses and trying to preserve what was? Or is it a question of how to make a transition to a new somatic shape? How to keep growing appropriate excitement and forming muscular expressions and relationships?

From a formative perspective addressing our adult body during its aging is not about loss, it is about how one shape of existence ends and how we make a transition to another shape and way of being in the world. In this short essay, I point to a few topics that may be of use in considering how to keep our soma and its cortex generating new possibilities.

Formative psychology and the formative method are based in the principle and process of how body shapes come into being and how they change over time. Understanding how our somas are formed, how our anatomical structures, shapes and behaviors, are assembled, disassembled and reassembled allows a person to cooperate with the universal forming process to influence what is

inherited by creating shapes and behaviors that are personally organized and which come to fruition by using voluntary effort.

In every stage of life, from conception to childhood and young adulthood, through what we call the middle years and maturity into the different stages of aging and even into our dying, the formative dynamic is operational in its assembling, disassembling and reassembling on an inherited level and on a personal level.

Muscle and brain inherently know how to dialogue to influence anatomic structure. But learning to voluntarily use muscle and cortex to influence our structure is how we create new possibilities for living. As adults we can learn to shape a somatic subjectivity, a personal realm of anatomic experience. By choosing to form ourselves, we have the opportunity to create experiences and values that give orientation to our lives.

As a mature adult this means taking the time and making the effort to develop new behaviors, new ways of thinking and expressing that are not born from trying to imitate or re-invigorate what has passed but to engage and experience deeply what is present and what is forming in the next phase of life.

The organism's innate formative urge is an orienting function that teaches us how to form behaviors in known and unknown situations. Knowing how to act, how to organize oneself to meet familiar or novel situations is dependent on forming and stabilizing tissue structures we call memory. Genetic, familial, and personal memories are anatomical structures, neural-muscular cell colonies that are essential to the orienting function which is how we know where we are and who we are so we can act in the outer world; it also helps us know our internal subjective states.

When the organism initiates a stimulus to itself with voluntary muscular cortical effort there is a direct response from the body about its efforts. The cortex captures these responses by making neural maps and thereby giving a muscular pattern duration and repeatability. Stable neural maps form complex, layered anatomic dimensions that become new memories of how to be bodied and how to respond and act.

Mature and late life is a metabolic ripening, a continuum of slow pulses displacing the dominant need to race toward peaks of instant expression. It is time to live the waxing and waning, the swells and troughs of desire and contact. Slow time organizes a porous, malleable new dimension that deepens contact with one's self and with others.

The key to personalizing our maturity and aging is to use voluntary muscular-cortical effort to manage our changing shapes. Making new memories by supporting and differentiating our anatomy makes it possible to orient ourselves toward a sense of new adventure and to create what has never existed before rather than retreat to earlier memories of what was lived.

An important ingredient in developing our maturity is a slow tempo. Slow tempo means taking the necessary time to wait for your responses. In the process of organizing and disorganizing a behavior pattern slow tempo means to extend

the pausing and containing phase, this allows the motor pattern of assembling and disassembling to develop stability and duration.

Slowing and waiting is especially important in the phase of disassembling because it is here that the greatest differentiation occurs; and it is here that we want to contain and hold a response in a malleable yet firm container. It takes effort to manage the tempo and the emerging expressions. Taking time for a response to collect itself and form another response gives us the sense of the time of our own existence.

Transition into the next phase of our bodied shape is where the action is. How we manage transitions and give them personal shape is the challenge. Using voluntary effort to shape our emerging maturity becomes the leading edge in forming our unknown selves. By making slow transitions, we can learn to live from our own waves and tides of swelling and gathering back. Voluntary influence makes it easier to be porous and malleable, to receive what is coming.

As adults who are acquiring age, we have experienced the swelling and gathering back of all the different body shapes that have created our lives. As older adults we form our future and personalize our lives by building new experiences, new neural maps and muscular patterns, rather than trying to replicate shapes and behaviors that are past. When we learn to form our coming shapes in an unhurried, malleable way, we are able to make unrushed transitions to receive what is coming. In this way, maturing becomes a style of forming and living that brings its own deep intimacies and satisfactions.