



Don Johnson

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## Charlotte Selver's Work is the ABC of Being Human

### Excerpts from a conversation with Don Hanlon Johnson

*This interview was conducted by Stefan Laeng-Gilliatt as part of the Charlotte Selver Oral History and Book Project. You can read and hear more of this interview on [www.CharlotteSelverBiography.org](http://www.CharlotteSelverBiography.org).*

**Stefan:** It seems to me that more than most other authors I have read in the field of somatics and psychology you emphasize the importance of Charlotte Selver and Elsa Gindler and of the German Gymnastik movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. How did you come to that understanding?

**Don:** If I were to list the three or four most important people to influence me, I would list Charlotte Selver in the group. And I would list Carl Rogers. What was really powerful about both of them was their radicalness in seeing a vast store of wisdom that's pre-conceptual, by comparison to which conceptual knowledge has to be judged, not the other way around. The two of them, and then Gene Gendlin in his ways, are the most radical people in really following that through. I saw the radicalness of Carl and Charlotte as articulating a sound approach to human dialogue and human understanding. Charlotte was wonderfully humble about being a student of Elsa Gindler, but I think what gets lost is her uniqueness. The uniqueness of Charlotte was not sensory awareness but her ability to question close to experience. I thought her questions were just amazing. And the reason that seems significant to me is that those questions open the work up to larger applications.

**Stefan:** I want to tie this in with something you said earlier in our conversation: that you often come from reading and listening to experience. It seems that many of us in the Sensory Awareness world find that suspicious or dangerous. It needs to be purely experiential. But that has not been my experience. I also find that ideas often help me to experience. But often they tend to stay separate. How do you integrate that?

**Don:** Well, that is the big issue. I will talk about two alleyways in my life because they're important in this question. What caught my attention in the spiritual tradition that I was raised in, which was Catholicism, was this notion of the indwelling of the holy spirit. There was this subterranean, although quite solid tradition in Catholic mysticism that what it meant to have the holy spirit indwelling is that the divine is in all of us and so all of us know the truth ourselves, and nobody needs to teach us anything. I spent one whole summer reading all of the works of Thomas Aquinas in Latin, and to my surprise this is what he says. He has this long treatise on the existence of God and after this long treatise on all these so-called proofs he says, what this really gets us to is the realization that we do not know God. We only know God because we have this infinite capacity to ask questions and to love.

**Stefan:** Did he not get in trouble with his own Catholic church?

**Don:** He was condemned shortly after he died for these ideas. And this is what the Inquisition was after, basically. One of the main things that they were burning people at the stake for was that idea, because it was very anti-authoritarian. The revolution of the sixties in the church was mainly theologians going back to those kinds of readings. It was really saying – like there's a quote from Charles that I quote a lot about trusting what we see and feel, that could have been right out of these people:

*"During my life, I have often rejected one authority only to accept another. Underneath, I was afraid at the thought of living in a world where there was not someone, somewhat like myself, who knew. But I have now come to feel that, to know what one is doing with life, it is no use to consult authorities. It is precisely through the veils which authorities have spun for us that our own ears and eyes and nerves must begin to penetrate if our hands are to grasp the world and our hearts to feel it. We must recover our own capacity to taste for ourselves. Then we shall be able to judge also".* Charles V.W. Brooks ([Reclaiming Vitality and Presence](#), p. 7)

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**Stefan:** In a way one could say that the core of Charlotte's teaching was that we have the capacity to know.

**Don:** Right. And the spiritual exercises of Ignatius of Loyola that I was a practitioner of – the whole goal of that was to get to a level where we were discerning that kind of experience. It was all a long preparation for Charlotte's work, which was a cleaner version of all of that. Another current, which was parallel, was my philosophical studies, where I really got into phenomenology and pragmatism. And of course Husserl, who has read the whole crisis in European thought as being detached from experience and from the body. That attracted me in the sixties before I ever heard of Charlotte. And it made total sense to me in terms of this other current going on that Husserl was saying that all this brilliant proliferation of theoretical constructs that are going on in Western Europe had become untethered from experiences, and so the whole project of phenomenology is to get back to immediate experience. But then of course the question is how? That was a huge question and Charlotte in some ways answered it.

I think Charlotte's work is like the ABC of being human. It's a fundamental work that is basic to being human, and I would like to see everybody having that course before they worry about the alphabet. More and more developmental psychologists are talking about this terrible gap that happens between the infant at the preverbal stage and then when the infant starts getting introduced to language. People don't know how to handle this gap and so the child becomes alienated from the preverbal world. I think that early on the work is quite important. Developmental psychology is saying a lot of human problems are in that separation.

**Stefan:** How does all of this translate into your work now?

**Don:** I'm on sabbatical, and I think a lot about Charlotte, because one of the things that originally got me into all this work was the politics of the sixties. When I encountered these kinds of work I felt that they were enormously important socio-politically. And it has been in some ways hard for me to implement that, because it gets very digested in a kind of self-care world of psychological and self-cultivation. But I just came out of two seminars where I realized how powerful it is.

An old friend of mine from Yale runs an invitational seminar at Esalen called Global Potentials, and it's about globalization in relation to poverty and global warming. He gathers people from all over the world and they discuss those problems. It was an extraordinary group of people. There were people from China, Japan, South Africa, India, West Oakland, Europe, Russia and several other people, all involved in big global things. We had conversations from seven in the morning until midnight every night, individual and group.

I came in the last morning and my job was to integrate, so I said a few words about my origins in getting into this work, about the connection between person and world, and how that connection gets to distorted and it makes it hard then to effectively work with other people changing the world if we're all disconnected. And then I just asked them to be quiet for ten minutes and did a simple sensory exploration with them sitting in their chair and with their breathing. And then I said each of their names – went around the group. It just blew their minds. And I still don't quite get it. I mean I sort of get it. I can say banalities about it. But it's the thing that you probably are aware of from this work that people with very good intentions get so wrapped up in the talk world that there's a certain disconnect from what they want to achieve in the actual world. And just the quiet makes a huge difference. And then the integration – what I had in mind about the names was, I thought the real integration is at the level of the people, not at the level of content. So getting them to just have that quiet experience of each person's name being uttered was kind of a sensory integration of the week that transcended content fascination.

**Don Hanlon Johnson, PhD**, is the founder of the Somatic Psychology Program at CIIS in San Francisco where he is a Professor. His lifetime of writing and teaching has been focused on the role the body plays in social transformation. His latest books are [Everyday Hopes, Utopian Dreams: Reflections on American Ideals](#); and [The Meaning of Life in the 21st Century: Tensions Among Science, Religion, and Values](#).