

Stanley Keleman

## A Conversation with Stanley Keleman

*Stanley Keleman, founder of Formative Psychology, talks about his connection with Charlotte Selver and Charles Brooks, New York City in the 50s, the revolution in the humanistic movement at that time and Charlotte's place in it. This is an excerpt of a longer interview conducted as part of the Charlotte Selver Oral History and Book Project.*

Stefan Laeng-Gilliatt: You told me that you met Charles even before Charlotte. Was that in a Reichian or Lowen circle, or how did that come about?

Stanley Keleman: I met Charles through a woman that I was dating, maybe 1958 or 59. She invited me to one of Charley Brooks' famous parties. He lived in the Village then and he was a first class woodworker. These parties were salons; they were top-of-the-line. And they were fun. And Charles was working his way through paying for his therapy with John Pierrakos in the Lowenian movement by making his desk and chairs and stuff.

Charlotte was not part of that episode of me knowing Charles. It was Charley and the gang around him, and the dances, and the let's say the rebellious psychological people.

SLG: Can you tell me a bit about the parties and the people.

SK: How could you describe these parties? There was irreverent talk about the nature of life, society, condemnation and the exploration of sexual reality and sense reality, and whatever we want to call the life of the body.

As I remember it, Charlotte had a reputation coming through the Korzybski movement and Erich Fromm. She ran these sensory workshops, I think Erich Fromm sent people and supported Charlotte. In those years there was a tremendous revolution in the humanistic movement in places like New York. All these immigrants that flooded the world and changed the humanistic dynamics. Charlotte was part of that movement.

An influence besides Elsa Gindler (Charlotte Selver's teacher) was the Korzybski movement, which at one time was extremely powerful in the States. A lot of hot shot, upper echelon intellectuals in the social movement were involved in that. I knew about Charlotte and her workshops through the people that I knew in the Korzybski movement. She did her workshops and classes, non-Aristotelian experiences. I would say that there was this group of people, the Korzybskian people, the F. Matthias Alexander gang – not him directly but one of his disciples. And one of the Gurdjieffian guys. It may have been Orage, I'm not sure about that. And just a little around the corner also Feldenkrais. Who else was in that package? Ida Rolf. Erich Fromm was very strong, and Gindler was involved by reputation – she wasn't there.

SLG: But you knew about Gindler. People knew about her.

SK: Oh yes. Charlotte and Carola Speads were linked back to that. And Charlotte was a student of Karlfried Graf Dürckheim. [Keleman studied with Dürckheim in the 60s].

SLG: She was not a student, she was friends with him.

SK: Well, she was also his student in his classes in philosophy [in Leipzig in the early 30s?], according to what Karlfried told me. She was a friend. But she also was a student. . . . Anyway, the connection with Dürckheim was the strongest personal connection between Charlotte and I then. Because I was in Todtmoos (Durkheim's Center) and Charlotte and Charles showed up. And we were talking about our sessions and who Karlfried was. Karlfried was a new Alan Watts. He was famous in Europe.

In my opinion, Charles was more organized than Charlotte. Intellectually, he was more informed than Charlotte. He could – you know Alan Watts – I don't know if you really know how incredibly intellectual this man was. He had a first class intellect, and Charles could hang out in that. So, I just think that for comparisons . . . But obviously they were married quite a while!

SLG: And they did beautiful work together. Charles wrote a beautiful book about their work.

SK: Yes. You could see who he was in how he wrote that book. He lead people intellectually into the realms of experiencing.

SLG: What do you know about Charlotte's work with Alan Watts?

SK: Charlotte and Alan rented the studio of Annelies Widman for their workshops. Annelies Widman was my girlfriend at that point, she was a Lowenian and she knew Charlotte. She was a recognized dancer in the dance world, and they were both German.

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SLG: I thought Charlotte always had her own studio where she'd give the classes.

SK: But if you had 35 or 40 people, her studio held only a small number of people. Alan Watts was very popular and he was the darling of a small part of the avant-garde psychological movement. So the workshops were quite large.

SLG: You say you were aware of Gindler in New York, and maybe you knew other Gindler students also? You mentioned Carola Speads.

SK: Carola Speads. I would have to think of others. But she was a name that was known as a reference.

SLG: And Gindler's ideas, or her work, did that play in at all into what you were doing, or the Reichians or Lowen – was there a connection that you know of?

SK: My recollection is that Charlotte was mentioned as the resource for movement and sensing and how to sense yourself. I don't remember if this was discussed in a way that influenced me. What influenced me was the life of the body, and the Reichian stuff – I should say, I never was a Reichian. I came at this thing in a completely different way. I had a degree at that time as a doctor of chiropractic practicing in New York, and that's how I ran into Lowen – but my basic orientation was through Nina Bull. She has a motoric understanding of human nature. She wrote some books on it. The Attitude Theory of Emotion is a famous book. She knew all those people like Orage and F. Matthias Alexander and other people, so they were all in the same circle. And she knew also Erich Fromm. I came from her side, the life of the body and how an individual expresses themselves with inherited social patterns of behavior. So it was a different place that I was coming from. Action made the person.

The conversations that I could have with Charlotte (Note: "I could have had" this sounds odd. Do you think this what Stanley means to say?) were about the nature of a natural sense of self that didn't need mysticism. Didn't need a magical approach. It needed the deepening sense of being able to communicate with yourself and your environment. She did sensory mechanism; I did motoric mechanism, but that was the basis of the conversation.

Just to make a [clarification]: she was in the sensory-motor business, the sensing, the expansion of the sensory apparatus in every sense of it. And I say it's the action that precedes the sensing. I'm not critical but there is a difference. You could be critical, but not when you know somebody like Charlotte or Charles Brooks, because then it's a conversation about how you explore reality.

SLG: I'm curious about this distinction between action and sensing. I don't think Elsa Gindler used these terms, but certainly she was interested in how people function in the world. In other words, how they act. It wasn't just sensing. But through their sensory experience they connect with the world.

SK: That's where the difference is. Right there. It's not through the senses. It's action that generates sensation. But, again, although I make differentiations from the Charlotte, we're on the same wavelength. Different ways of looking at it.

SLG: What is that same wavelength?

SK: The experience generated by how we act in the world. If you ask yourself in the history that we have of the human race in the Western world – I don't know about the Eastern world – the single most important thing about any philosophy is not what it means, it's about how to act. How you should behave. All mythology is about how to behave. And I don't mean there's a rule of how to behave, but that the behavior is what is demonstrated. We might call it heroic, we might call it compliant, whatever. So that's what I think. Charlotte is telling you: experience your world.

SLG: Absolutely. And how we function, how we behave in the world.

SK: Right. So that we agree on.

SLG: Yes. My questions have more to do with Charlotte than it may appear on the surface because I am trying to understand who she was as I write about her. Who she was through her work, and why this work was so important to her, what kind of an expression that was of her understanding of life and living.

Change to: SLG: Yes. Through these questions I'm trying to understand who she was... who she was through her work, why this work was so important to her, and what kind of an expression that was of her understanding of life and living.

SK: I did the same with Karlfried Graf Dürckheim, and I did it with Alexander Lowen – and people will do it with me. Who Stanley was and who Charlotte was.

Gindler and others came out of a certain group at a certain time, and I would say she represented that beautifully and at its best for the life of the individual in the world. She and Karlfried were born just at the edge of the **Continued on P. 10**

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## Keleman interview continued

Austro-Hungarian Empire, into a particular kind of movement away from Germanic and European romanticism. Knocking on the door of modernity. So I would put it in a context of who this woman was.

When I went to see Charlotte toward the end of her life, she was a very small, shrunken woman who had become frail and used her hearing to the best advantage I'd ever seen anybody use themselves without hearing. The sensory modality was paramount in her life in trying to understand the communication from another person. You would have to say that the development of her sensory system may have been a lifetime of work that had prepared her for being deaf.

SLG: But you never worked with her. You never took a workshop.

SK: Or she with me!

SLG: Of course she would probably not have with you.

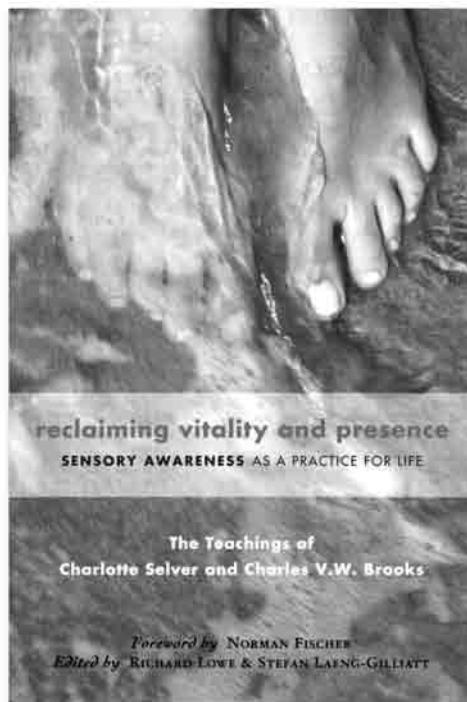
SK: Right. Oh, I was a bull. I was this powerful force in the life of the body and what it meant to be instinctually alive, and the hell with this awareness stuff. I mean I had that attitude. Just – we are a force in existence and we have to do that, and to be emotionally involved, but not to be the victim of our emotions.

SLG: (Laughs) Thank you for sharing that.

SK: (Laughing) Well that's two different worlds.

SLG: Yes, those are two different worlds. Thank you so much. I really enjoyed this conversation.

*Stanley Keleman, a pioneer in the study of the body and human experience and founder of Formative Psychology is the author of numerous books including Emotional Anatomy, Your Body Speaks Its Mind and a soon to be published new book about dreams and the body. He lives in Berkeley California where he maintains a private practice and an active public teaching program. He was a featured author in Vol. 6 No.1 2007 spring issue of USA Body Psychotherapy Journal.*



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