

Where the Sea Meets the Land: Remembering Gregory Bateson

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*“To see a World in a grain of sand,
And Heaven in a wild flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour.”*

William Blake, 1863

For as long as I can remember, like Gregory Bateson, I have been fascinated with the patterns of nature. As a child, I remember pondering the structure of the majestic maple tree in our front yard. Each jagged leaf contained the perfect design, complete with living veins that carried nutrients from Mother Earth. I was mesmerized as I counted each ring of life inside its limbs that fell during the mid-western thunder storms of my youth. Insects, especially ants, also intrigued me. When an occasional army of them found their way into our kitchen, I closely surveyed them. Before I allowed my mother to reach for the deadly poison, I made her follow their path with me, observing the tiny pieces of food they carried in their mouths on the round trip from our cracker cupboard to their ant hill. She did not appreciate them as I did, seeing them as pests to be reckoned with, a battle to be won. But I entertained myself for hours, watching them move together to accomplish a great and wonderful task that was much bigger than themselves. I imagined their relationships. Who were the parents, the children, the aunts and uncles? Who were the leaders and the followers? I watched as they cared for each other, sometimes transporting an injured family member home to die. Like the maple tree, I thought ants were a beautifully designed part of nature.

By my late twenties, my fascination with patterns in nature had grown to include the observation of people. My skills at observing their processes led me to a career in human resources in a large bio-technology corporation. As I spent my work week leading team-building sessions, facilitating meetings, and designing management training programs, I continued to feel a desire to stretch myself personally. While working on a graduate degree in organization development, I began attending workshops at Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California. By the late 1970's, Esalen had evolved from its more hippy-days of the early human potential movement to a personal growth retreat for professionals with designer jeans. I was one of many who enjoyed the transformative workshops, the famous natural hot springs, and the beauty of where the sea met the land on this rural California coastline. It is here where I met Gregory Bateson, a man who would change the way I viewed the world, helping me discover how majestic maple trees, ant hills, shells and shorelines were more like people than I ever imagined. A lover of William Blake, Bateson would also lead me on a path through life that continually reminds me to imagine the world “in a grain of sand.”

Bateson and I met over dinner one evening in 1978 in the large wood-paneled dining hall that overlooked the crashing Pacific surf. It was here that fresh vegetarian food from the Esalen garden nourished our bodies while talk of nature and the human journey fed our souls. Bateson was a soft-spoken, slightly eccentric man in his mid-seventies who had been recently diagnosed with cancer. His face was deeply wrinkled with the wisdom of age. Extraordinarily tall and robust, his wavy grey hair rested gently on the collar of his plaid woolen shirt. From the moment he spoke with his dignified British accent, he commanded deep respect from those around him. Laughing was central to his nature, often exploding with loud, deeply felt snorts at the slightest provocation. I knew I had something to learn from this man, although I often questioned my ability to understand the flow of his abstract thoughts and ideas. Our initial dinner conversation, mostly a reflection of the day's events with a few other students, was a hors d'oeuvre to the conversations we would have over the next several years.

Admittedly, I had never heard of Bateson before my chance encounter with him across a table of organic food. He lived in the intellectual world of an academic scholar, a man whose long career crisscrossed half a dozen sciences, including anthropology and cybernetics. I lived in the world of an organizational practitioner, working with managers whose daily foods were deadlines and profit-margins. The morning after we met, I purchased Bateson's book from the tiny Esalen bookshop, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (Bateson, 1972). A collection of his writings over thirty-five years, it challenged me to understand this deep, thought-provoking man. It also gave me the courage to talk with him again and again, asking questions that would deepen my understanding of the words he wrote. I quickly learned Bateson liked to answer a question with a question rather than with an answer. He wanted me to discover the answer for myself through thoughtful deliberation with others. He loved story-telling and often used stories as parables to make students think about the network of relationships that bound us together. He relished periods of silence, seeing them as potential moments of creative genius. I was fortunate to have many encounters with Bateson at Esalen in the several years before his death in 1980. Most of our conversations took place on a weathered Redwood deck with the sounds of the surf and a gentle wind ruffling the trees above us. Sometimes our group comprised three or four people; sometimes five or six. They were always filled with stories, metaphor, laughter, and the subtle presence of a wise, visionary teacher.

The specific memories of my conversations with Bateson have faded over the years but there are a few vivid recollections I carried with me into my work and life. I once remember him saying, "When man lost touch with nature, he lost touch with himself." My initial reaction was one of confusion. What did he mean? I loved nature and did not feel I had lost touch with it. After a round of dialogue that included stories and more questions, I had what we called at Esalen an "ah-ha" moment, a flash of inner discovery. For my entire life, I had been observing nature and people, thinking of them as different species. I failed to see the connective tissue between them, the common patterns that linked natural systems to human systems, that we are all part of nature. We are nature. Mind is nature. We mimic the beautiful patterns of nature, the ones I noticed in the maple trees and the ant hills. I began to see that organizations, families and communities were organisms too. When they moved together, they were like an army of ants on a mission. Their purpose was greater than themselves. When inevitable change occurred, relationships often withered and died like the leaves in the autumn of life.

Thanks to Gregory Bateson, metaphor took on a profound role in my life. The image of the Big Sur coastline became a vivid learning tool as I worked in organizations observing how

people created their unique culture. The relationship of the sea to the land is always changing. So are the boundaries between individuals, groups, and organizations. With each wave, a new relationship is born. I became fascinated with how that change is managed in human systems, how it is connected through patterns of communication and qualities of leadership. I always remembered and often referred to Bateson in my workshops as I visually depicted the organization as a living organism. I went on to specialize in “human systems design,” creating new intentional patterns of communication when organizations merged with or divested themselves from one another. And although I always honored Bateson in my own heart and work, I admit I never realized what a profound impact his thinking had on the world and that he is referred to as “the most brilliant holistic scientist of this century” (Harries-Jones, 1995, p. 3). For me, he was simply a wise elder I met during my life journey almost thirty years ago.

Bateson would be pleased to hear of my decision to pursue a doctorate at the age of sixty. And he would smile as we reminisced about our days at Esalen, the sweet smell of the surf and the magical moments spent bathing in the hot tubs. I imagine our conversation would take place on a weathered bench alongside the rugged coastline and go something like this:

Gregory: Marilyn, your hair has turned to grey, but you are as beautiful as ever! I hear you returned to school. Now tell me, what do you hope to learn?

Marilyn: Well, I still have many questions without answers! It’s not that I think I’ll ever discover “truth” with a capital “T”, but my questions are more perplexing than ever.

Gregory: What concerns you the most?

Marilyn: I’ve been blessed to have a remarkable and fulfilling life, despite many obstacles along the way. I have everything I want – a loving family, caring friends, a beautiful home. But there are many people in the world who are suffering.

Gregory: Yes, we live on the edge of paradox, don’t we? This was true when we met thirty years ago. And it is even truer today. I too became more aware of this paradox with age and it made me very angry.

Marilyn: How did you resolve this dichotomy?

Gregory: There is no resolution. We are simply a part of something that is much bigger than ourselves. I found my beauty in seeing the patterns that connect us.

Marilyn: Yes, I’m still curious about those patterns. And I’m on a journey to discover how those connections can be put into action in the world.

Gregory: I admire your quest for action. It is something I regretted toward the end of my life, not being able to put my thoughts into action to help others.

Marilyn: Gregory, you who know *connections* and *patterns of nature* better than anyone surely understands that your thinking *has* been put into action in the generations of those who followed you!

Gregory (laughing heartily): Ah, Marilyn. You observe all too well! And, yes, I do take great pleasure in seeing the evolution of my ideas and their applications.

Marilyn: What is your advice to me? How can I best expand my learning in this field of organization and human systems?

Gregory: I suggest you listen carefully to your own life experiences, share your own stories and wisdom. See how your stories connect with what others believe to be true. Observe the patterns and the beauty within them and dialogue with others. Think and teach through metaphor. And most importantly, enjoy the humor in the journey!

Bateson saw circular processes in the natural world and formed an understanding of similar processes in the human world. To him, change and transformation occurred in circular conversational patterns that enabled respect, co-learning, and cooperation (Bateson, 1972, 1979). He believed all things are created through interaction. If we see things in rigid dualisms, like right and wrong, good and evil, then the system becomes broken. Instead, if we view the world as a circular pattern, we begin to see how we are related rather than separated. He reminds us to look at patterns that connect us to one another just as we look at the patterns in nature that unites and connects the ecosystem. “Break the pattern which connects the items of learning and you necessarily destroy all quality” (Bateson, 1979, p. 8).

The science of systems-thinking that Bateson helped to pioneer does not look at organizations, families, schools, or history in pieces or small parts. Realizing that complexity has some degree of order but too many elements to understand it in simple cause-and-effect ways, systems-thinking examines how systems survive by learning, adapting, and influencing their environment. The benefits of this thinking provide a path to building flexible and adaptive organizations and families who are better able to perform in a complex environment. It requires us to experience higher orders of cybernetic thinking and to combine many levels of mind – unconscious, conscious, and external – to generate learning. We must change our frames of thinking and stretch the mental models that make us believe, “I am my position.” We must begin to look at dualisms as complementary rather than divisive, to realize that we cannot ever be objective observers to the process of change in our families or in the organizations we work. As we embrace this type of worldview, we see that learning is much more than taking in information; it is the act of co-creating a future together.

(Gregory Bateson (1904-1980) was a British anthropologist, Cambridge scholar, social scientist, linguist, and cyberneticist whose work intersected many fields. Systems theory and cybernetics is a science he helped create as one of the original members of the Macy Conferences held from 1946-1953. His first marriage was to American cultural anthropologist Margaret Mead.)

References

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