Gregory Bateson: The Mindful Wizard

BY CARL NAGIN

Here is a story about teacher you might wish you had known:

A tall, gawky Englishman wearing a wild Hawaiian shirt enters your classroom and dumps a large crab onto the center of a table. Next he tells everyone to pretend they are Martian anthropologists with no presuppositions about life on Earth. From that perspective, he asks you to demonstrate that this crab had been produced by a living organism. He repeats this exercise, varying the props: Instead of a crab, he offers a painting by William Blake, a seashell, or a copy of the Bodhisattva Vow to Save All Sentient Beings.

One student, author Stephen Nachmanovitch (author of Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art), recalls the assignment this way: “Our job was to start from a concrete object, of a size we could hold and turn over; and step by step extract from it (or rather our developing relationship with it) an understanding of what it is to be part of a living — and therefore sacred — world.”

The teacher was scientist Gregory Bateson (1904-1980), a brilliant scholar whose contributions to a dizzying array of disciplines will be the subject of a major centennial conference — Gregory Bateson @ 100: Multiple Versions of the World — set for Saturday, November 20 at UC Berkeley’s Lawrence Hall of Science. Nachmanovitch will be joined by Oakland Mayor Jerry Brown, Bioneers founder Kenny Ausubel, Oxfam-America co-founder Nathan Gray, the World Bank Institute’s Tim Campbell, and a host of international scholars gathered to honor the legacy of man widely recognized as one of the great minds of the 20th century.

Bateson was a visionary whose intellectual range could not be confined by the constraints of “specialized” knowledge and the bureaucratic templates of traditional academic departments. Consequently, much of Bateson’s eclectic work was dismissed by his colleagues — the narrow-minded gnomes and hedgehogs of Academe. Yet, in retrospect, his contributions are unmistakable. With his wife, the famed anthropologist Margaret Mead, Bateson pioneered the new discipline of visual ethnography. In psychology, he applied communications theory and breakthroughs in cybernetics to understanding alcoholism and schizophrenia, laying the foundation for the field of family therapy. Later, his journeys of ideas led him to undertake research on cetaceans, working at John Lilly’s Dolphin Communication lab in the Virgin Islands and at the Oceanic Institute in Hawaii. Bateson is also credited with introducing notions of sustainability into academic thinking. As a biologist and naturalist, he gravitated to ecology and he addressed, with conviction and concern, the catastrophic impacts of famine, pesticides, overpopulation, pollution, and the arms race.

He devoted his talents to a life-long search for what he called “the Pattern that Connects.” In his final summary work, Mind and Nature, Bateson asks: “What pattern connects the crab to the lobster to the orchid to the primrose and four of them to me? And me to you? And all six of us to the amoeba in one direction and the back-ward schizophreinic in another?” Bateson came to believe that understanding “the pattern that connects all living creatures” was fundamentally important to the survival of the whole biosphere.

Gregory Bateson was born into a family of distinguished British scientists. His father, William Bateson, was a founder of modern genetics (he named the science) and was a naturalist deeply enmeshed in the controversies of evolutionary theory that toppled the post-Darwin generation. He named his third son, Gregory after Gregor Mendel, whose work William Bateson had re-discovered.

After completing undergraduate work in biology, Gregory Bateson escaped his domineering father by pursuing anthropological research on a tribe of New Guinea headhunters. During sojourns in New Guinea and Bali in the 1930s, he did field work with Margaret Mead. Bateson, a brilliant photographer with a gift for capturing gesture and behavior, became Mead’s eyes. Their seminal work, Bali nese Character: A Photographic Analysis, challenged ethnographic research by directly capturing the lived world, rituals, customs, and daily experience of their subjects. Bateson and Mead’s approach was radically different from that of traditional ethnographers who translated the materials and behavior of “primitive” societies into the categories of Western culture — often ignoring the complex web of relationships that sustained the exotic peoples they studied.

Bateson’s academic career was peripatetic; he became what the French call an intellectual bricoleur (“knickknack peddler”) of ideas and theories, moving across disciplines as a brilliant synthesizer who thought holistically and refused to specialize. After World War II, Bateson’s search for a new synthesis of knowledge led him to the emerging science of communication theory. Working with Massachusetts Institute of Technology mathematician Norbert Wiener, Bateson helped expand the new field of cybernetics, which played a crucial role in the IT revolution of computers and space exploration. Cybernetics provided a perfect trans-disciplinary framework for Bateson’s emerging ideas about the interrelated workings of living systems and the mind. In this quest, he amplified an idea his father had suggested in 1900. When he wrote: “We commonly think of animals and plants as matter, but they are really systems through which matter is continually passing.”

Bateson’s Breakthroughs

Bateson was part of the tide of European intellectuals who flocked to America during World War II. In 1949, he wound up in California where he taught at Stanford and worked until 1976 with schizophrenics at the Veterans Hospital in Palo Alto. Bateson’s application of cybernetics’ system theory to the treatment of mental illness revolutionized psychotherapy and psychiatry. Based on his observations of how schizophrenics and their families communicate, Bateson developed his famous “double bind theory,” which holds that contradictory and punitive interactions — call them “mixed messages” — among family members predisposes some children to schizophrenia. In Steps to an Ecology of Mind, Bateson offers this example: “A young man who had fairly well recovered from an acute schizophrenic episode was visited in the hospital by his mother. He was glad to see her and impulsively put his arm around her shoulders, whereupon she stiffened. He withdrew his arm...”
and she asked: ‘Don’t you love me anymore?’ He then blushed, and she said, ‘Dear, you must not be so easily embarrassed and afraid of your feelings.’ The patient was able to stay with her only a few minutes more and, following her departure, he assaulted an aide and was put in the tubs.’

What makes the double bind so devastating is that dynamic remains invisible to the very people who are caught in its web. Perhaps Bateson’s anthropological perspective enabled him to recognize these interactions more clearly than the specialists who dominated the field at that time. Eventually, Bateson’s theories profoundly influenced an entire generation of social scientists, including British psychiatrist R.D. Laing, whose 1967 book, *The Politics of Experience*, is still considered a landmark of independent thinking.

Bateson was acutely sensitive to the reductive tendencies of our frames of reference, be they cultural, social, or personal. He believed that “we cannot directly perceive something without distorting.” We see and construct reality through a lens, a set of codes and biases — a variation of the physicist Heisenberg’s principle that what we observe is altered by the tools we use to observe. Bateson argued that just as a frog’s neural filtering system is designed to identify movements of small dots as a swarm of flies, humans similarly interpret and construct the world according to their own filters, codes, and myths. Like the characters in Kurosawa’s classic film, *Rashomon*, we generally describe events according to our self-interest and beliefs, articulating the causes variously as the result of accidents, karma, miracles, conspiracies, economics, or fate.

Bateson had another phrase for unmasking these codes. He admonished his students to: “Wipe your GLOSSES!” when their explanations and observations seemed unconscious or limiting. Our understanding is projected through description and the stories we tell. And these glosses have consequences. When we confuse our description with the thing itself, we mistake the map for the territory. The name, Bateson insisted, is not the thing named. As a biologist and naturalist, Bateson recognized observation as the critical tool of consciousness — uncovering wisdom in the particulars of the living world. Hence the classroom lesson of the crab: The key was to connect patterns and search for the Pattern of patterns.

**The Myth of Power**

Bateson believed that, historically, the besetting sin of Western thought was its separation of self from experience, mind from body, intellect from emotion, and the external world from our inner life.

“There is, he wrote “an ecology of bad ideas, just as there is an ecology of weeds and it is characteristic of the system that basic error propagates itself. It branches out like a rotted parasite through the tissues of life.” High up on Bateson’s list of bad ideas was the self-validating myth of power. In the pursuit of power, he wrote presciently in 1960, “if you do not get what you want, you will blame somebody and establish either a jail or a mental hospital, according to taste, and you will pop them in if you can identify them. If you cannot identify them, you will say, it’s the system...’ Then of course, there is the question of weapons. If you believe in that unilateral world and you think that the other people believe in that world (and you are probably right, they do), then, of course, the thing is to get weapons, hit them hard, and ‘control’ them... Perhaps there is no such thing as unilateral power.”

For Bateson, many of our world’s most daunting dilemmas are rooted in outmoded myths, structures, and habits of mind. It follows that the world’s catastrophic problems require new paradigms and ways of thinking. Changing people’s minds he conceded, (particularly politician’s), required a degree of self-awareness on their part that was rare.

During the final decade of his life, Bateson became a favorite teacher at Esalen in Big Sur and at the Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado. His synergy with leaders of the human potential movement is not hard to understand. Bateson had contributed original thinking to the seemingly distinct domains of anthropology, psychiatry, environmental biology, and communication theory. His uncanny ability to see what others could not — a skill he shared with Einstein — enabled him to understand the essential interconnectedness of all things. Well before ecologists described “the web of life,” Bateson had devoted a lifetime to exploring the frontiers of humanity’s knowledge.

After a long struggle with emphysema, Bateson died on July 4, 1980 at a guesthouse in the SF Zen Center. And nearly a quarter century later, scholars and activists are re-discovering the enduring legacy and gravitas of his ideas.

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For registration forms and information on the Bateson Centennial conference visit [www.BatesonConference.org](http://www.BatesonConference.org)