ORDERS OF CHANGE

Gregory Bateson

Anybody who tries to talk about change is in trouble from the word go. So, before we begin, I'm going to complain a little about the nature of that trouble.

The monstrous thing about language is that it contains words like "it." The difficulty with change is that you never know what *it* is. You remember Alice going through the woods and finding a mushroom, I suppose an amanita. On top of the mushroom is a caterpillar, who is sort of a prototype of all psychiatrists. The caterpillar, when he finally notices Alice (like a good guru, he pretends not to notice), turns to her and says, "Who are you?" Alice says, "I don't know because you see I've been changing so much." The caterpillar says, "Explain yourself." And Alice says, "I cannot explain myself." That is *it* for Alice, but the *that* which has been changing is not something that you can point to. Is Alice, at the moment when she's talking to the caterpillar, the same Alice with a difference, or is she a totally different Alice? Now that difficulty of being unable to identify the *it* runs through all discussions of change.

Alternatively, if you avoid talking about some substantive, some *it* which undergoes the change, and use the word *it* to describe the change, to refer to the change itself, "it's" what I am studying, then you have condensed into that single word a whole mass of sentences, and everything is as ambiguous as before. So it occurred to me that one should take a good look at a word like "stable." Surely one should be able to use the word "stable" without getting into these troubles.

I wanted a way of dissecting the word "stable" with regard to what I was trying to describe, and suddenly I saw that what I was engaged in was a false natural history of my own procedure. The truth of the matter is that the word "stable" is not applicable to any part of the cat, or the chair. It is applicable only to propositions in my description. *The cat is black* is a proposition which is stable. I discovered that I wasn't talking about *the cat*, but that I was talking about my *description* of the cat, and that that was all I ever had to

talk about anyway. You know, inside my head I have no direct experience of a cat. I only have the reports from my eyes, my fingers, my ears, my sense of smell, and with all that I can build up quite a good picture of a cat, but all I've got is a picture of a cat. Maybe it's endowed with smell, feel, weight, movement, sound, but it's still only a picture of a cat, so when I say something is stable, the word *stability* refers to a component in that picture, that description of the cat. This realization was such a relief. But carried along with that, there is a problem: that a description of a complicated animal or a person or a human relationship or a ritual in New Guinea or whatever, contains items of very different degrees of particularity, of concreteness. For instance, I say a cat has claws. If I begin distributing the claws among the toes, this begins to get complicated. A one-toed cat would still have a claw on each toe; a five-toed cat has five claws. I obviously don't have to enumerate the number of toes in order to say it has claws. The statement about the claws is independent of the number of toes and vice versa. Yet in the organization of the cat, those things must somehow be connected. All these connections inside a description are difficult to deal with, and they have to be unravelled if you talk about stability or if you talk about change.

So you see, it's an awful mess. When you have this sort of a mess, which obviously is an artifact to some degree of your use of language, what are you going to do? You cannot throw away language, which happens to be the most beautiful and elegant tool that we are provided with. So, let's see what you can do to make some *order* out of language without trusting all the habits that you had before. Throw them away. Just be naked in front of a lot of descriptive chips and bits of information. Are you going to find enough order not to have to handle all the little bits separately?

Let's look at change. By change I mean a ceasing to be true of some little chip or big chunk of descriptive material. When I look at something, the lens in my eye throws an image on my retina. That's a real image, just as real or unreal, as samsaric or unsamsaric, as the image in a photographic camera. If I move my eye, this rather static image is translated into events in time, into changes. I can only pick up change, news of static differences which I, one way or another, have converted into changes, states one to states two.

I started to study change on the assumption that there was something called "not change," and I arrived in a world in which the only thing that is ever reported to me is change, which either goes on independent of me or is created by my movement — change in relationship to me. Either it moves or I move. Whichever way, the relationship has got to change and this is all that I can get data on. So the static physical world is at best a guess.

How are we going to start classifying changes to introduce order? One of the best classifications, I think, is in terms of reversibility. If I go out in the sun, I'll go brown, and if I stay indoors at my desk I go pale again. When I go out again, I'll go brown. Now it takes a little while, obviously. It may take some days before I reach a new equilibrium. The amount of my brownness shall probably be a fairly simple mathematical function of the amount of sunshine. Now that goes both ways. Reduce the sun, the brownness is reduced; increase the sun, the brownness is increased. So I can make statements about the changes in brownness, and now I can also make another statement lying behind that about the relationship of brownness to sun.

In addition, I can ask a more abstract question. If I'm interested in, say, evolution or learning, one of the things I will ask is the old, old question: can I pass on the brownness to my offspring? You'll notice that that question is already bankrupt as a result of what we've been saying. That question should be phrased, "Can I throw away the self-correctiveness and fix the brownness on one end of the scale?" The LaMarckian theory always assumes that you're going to throw away your flexibility in favor of rigidity in the next generation. But it's not whether I'm passing on the brownness, it's whether I'm passing on the fixedness of the brownness — a fixedness which I never had and therefore wasn't in a position to pass on.

In order to maintain that freedom of whether to turn brown, or of whether to increase my blood pressure when I get excited, whether to remind myself that I need food when I get hungry, my entire self-corrective mechanisms need all sorts of much deeper background stuff. If you really think about this, you'll find that you've now got another layer of ways to classify change. First we said that change is either reversible, part of a self-corrective circuitry, like tanning, or it's not self-corrective — if I cut off my little finger, it doesn't grow again. The question is, is the change reversible and self-corrective, and is it fast or slow? If I don't have the power to go brown in the sun, the power to change my blood pressure to fit my excitement, the power to know when to put more food in me to replace low blood sugar, the power to warm myself

when my body temperature falls and cool it when it rises, I'm in for trouble. The deeper things in us get disturbed to the point, possibly, of death. A major descriptive proposition *Gregory is alive* may be disturbed in its truth by an inability to control my temperature when I get a bit of malaria. So that the top balancing changes are in fact the safeguard for much deeper things which preferably should not change. I mean, I prefer to be alive.

We now have deep changes, or deep propositions, whose change when it occurs becomes very serious. It's like an acrobat. He's walking on a highwire, and he's got a balancing stick. Now whenever he feels himself fall over that way, he tilts his balancing stick, pushing this side down, raising this side, and thereby gets a little bit of torsion in his own body to balance himself, to not go over that side. If he overdoes it, he'll have to do the reverse to not go over that side. He may wobble, he may oscillate like any other self-corrective system with a governor. What he's essentially doing is using the changeability of his relationship to the balancing pole to preserve a basic proposition: *I am on the highwire*. When you're riding a bicycle, you've got the same thing, or you steer with the front wheel in order to maintain your approximate verticality. If the front wheel is clamped you will fall off.

Now what I've done is to begin to place us in a rather strange world which doesn't contain anything except news, reports of difference, reports of change, preferences for change, preferences for stability, etc. There is really no highwire, no balancing pole, only states of a balancing pole, states of you on a highwire. From the moment I saw that the word "stable" refers only to states, not to the cat, not to me, and not to the object — from the moment when I discovered that "it" was an error, I was living in a world of ideas, very important ideas and elegant ideas. To live in a world of ideas is to be alive. I don't really think a water jug lives in a world of ideas, it doesn't have the necessary circuits. It doesn't have experience, it doesn't have information.

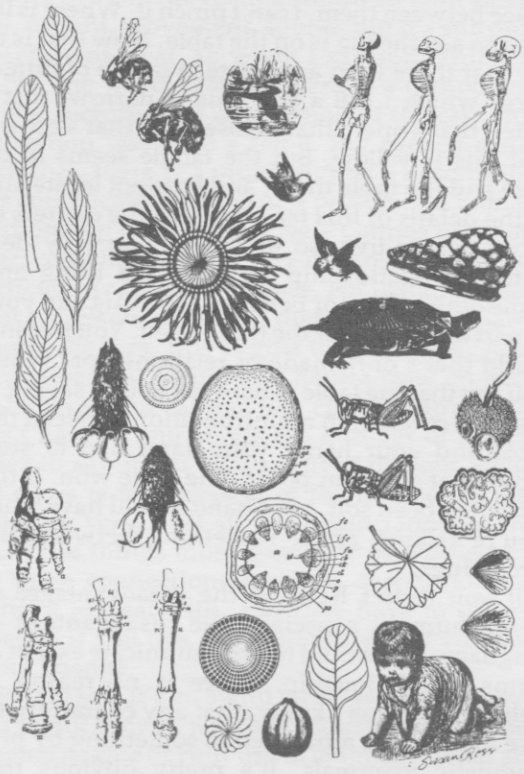
So here we are floating in a world which consists of nothing but change, even though we talk as if there was a static element in the world, as though it was possible to say this shirt is green, that one striped or blue. But all I can really say, as I explore the world in front of me by rubbing my retina against it, is that all I get is reports on where things feel different. And so we live. And within that we say that things are beautiful, things are ugly, we have pain, some food tastes better than others, we're tired, we're bored, we get angry — all sorts of shinnanigans. And I think probably the next thing to suggest to you is that that world of news can in a very curious way either destroy or enrich you.

The difference between *this* and *that* is not, of course, in this, it's not in that, it's not in the space between them. I can't pinch it. Where is it? We can say the jug is on the table. Now that is to say that there is an aggregate, a tangle of differences which I call a jug, this is narrow, that's fatter, that's open, that's closed and that's brown and this is yellow. But the tangle seems to be here and the table there, and I cannot locate any of the details of this tangle where the carriers of those details live, so to speak. You only deal with the relationship between the thing and some other thing, or between the thing and you, or part of you, never the thing itself. You live in a world that's only made of relationships. When you say that the table is hard, all you're saying is that in a conflict, in a confrontation between the table and your hand, your hand had to stop moving at a certain point. The table won. If the table had been soft, your hand would have won. You're talking about something between the two things.

If you didn't have all the disadvantages of being human, especially the disadvantage of language, you would not communicate except in terms of relationship. There is no reason to believe, as far as I know, that any characteristic like hardness is attributed to something by prelinguistic mammals. It's pretty obvious that porpoises with their sonar can tell the difference between one sort of ping and another sort of ping, and I think they probably refer the ping to the object that they're sending out their sonar beam against. It takes a beam and an object to make a ping, and the ping is really only a state-

photo/Allyn Lyon

ment of relationship. As far as I know, all prelinguistic animals only know about relationships. That is, when they talk, the cat's meow when you come home from work is not "I'm hungry." It is "mama." It's a statement of the relationship between cats and you. The sound which the cat



makes is in general a filial sound — the sound of a child to a parent. It identifies the relationship between you and the cat, and upon the identification of that relationship, you are supposed to go to the icebox and get out whatever you generally get for your child, the cat. And this goes for almost all of animal communication. It's noises or gestures or bodily movement which suggests a certain sort of relationship, and upon that suggestion of the relationship, the other organism is supposed to act.

Now you are not so very far from the cats and dogs. You are near enough to them so you care more about your relationships than about any other single thing in the world. You may have put various sorts of shields and protection on them. We all do. But still under all that protection that's where you live, that's where love and hate and self-respect and pride and shame and a thousand things of that nature all are — in what is between you and other people, and your clues to all this all the time are the sort of thing I'm talking about.

So I'm interviewing a thirty-five year old mother of a "problem" child, a little boy of five. I should say that I'm on one end of the couch, average length, and the mother is sitting on the other end and the little five year old is on the floor. Across the room twenty feet away is a young man with a movie camera recording it all. (It's wonderful what people will do to each other.) The mother starts to say, "Mr. Bateson, you know, bedtime in this household, in this house, it's awful. It's hell. We say to him fifty times 'go to bed, stay there,' but he always gets up, he won't stay, and then he goes, he gets this little puppet. He calls it Tucky." Tucky is a little finger puppet, you know, little dog-shaped finger puppet. "Can't think why he calls it Tucky. I've looked in all the children's books, there's nothing, no little dogs called Tucky." I say, "Yes, he gets the puppet." "Yes," she says, "he gets that puppet and then he comes and he says, 'Mummy, Mummy, Tucky wants to kiss you.' Gee! He knows all the tricks of getting through, doesn't he?"

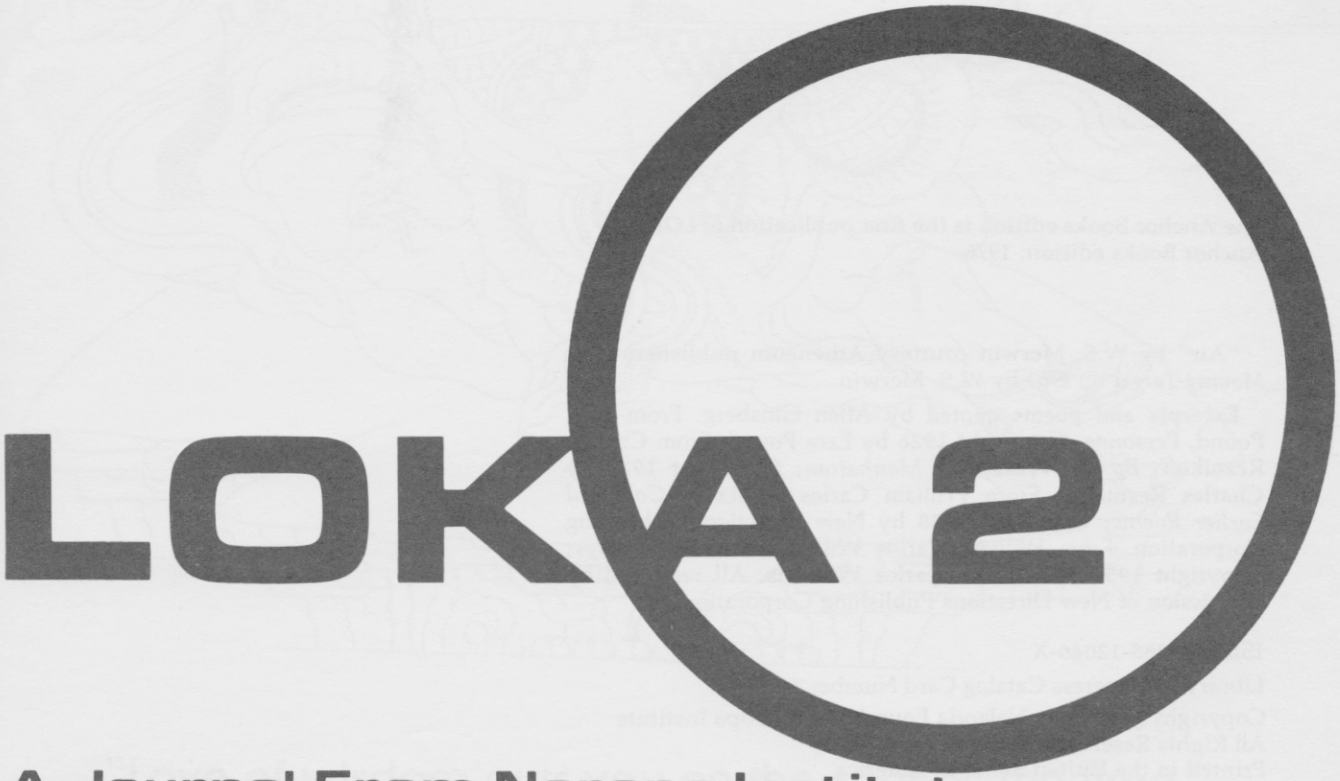
Now what is the sequence? The sigh in the mother's voice between the quote "Tucky wants to kiss you," and "Gee, he knows all the tricks for getting through," — in the middle of that pause there is a sigh which is clearly audible on the tape, a deep, almost heartbroken sigh. That is Mama knew that "Tucky wants to kiss you" is a heartbreak statement, and that already the child is substituting Tucky for self because it's safer. But in substituting Tucky for self, the child has made a comment on this thing between himself and Mama, and he is now to be put in the wrong about this thing between himself and Mama with the statement, "Gee, he knows all the tricks for getting through." It's near enough to being a true statement, so she can make it and not see exactly what she's doing, but at the same time, what at one level was a statement of tragedy becomes at the next level a statement of wicked manipulation, worldly tricks. "He knows all the tricks for getting through." And, you see, he mustn't hear that sigh. Or he mustn't signal that he heard it. So, what we have is a buildup. You can build up this tangle to a point of no exit, and this is what, on the whole, my patients always do. When I say they build it up, of course, this is only one-half of the truth; the other half of the truth is that their parents, the authorities around them, their siblings, and I too, help them do it.

Now we get to the next question of change: when you build up by a succession of changes which are in the end all changes about propositions about where you are, and which are mostly unconscious ones, what are the moments by which such tangles get dissolved? I can give you

one example: I'm filming a six year old boy in his own home, with Mama and a stuffed animal. He's on a couch, the stuffed animal is on the coffee table in front of the couch, the camera is over on the other side of the coffee table. Mama goes and sits with him on the couch; he picks up the stuffed animal, and the battle starts between him and Mama. He hits Mommy over the head with the stuffed animal. Now she freezes because she is in front of the camera too, so she gets out from in front of it as quickly as possible. I go over and sit on the couch, and ask young Mark what the name of the stuffed animal is. Mark says, "He does not have a name, nobody has a name." You know, one of the terrible things about psychosis is that the psychotic is accurate on the nature of the self, the nature of names, the nature of all the things that I started talking to you about at the beginning of this talk. I say, "I thought there was a little boy here named Mark." Mark says, "Stop talking. Shut your mouth." And I say, "I can't talk with my mouth shut." Mark says, "Don't be funny." He then picks up the stuffed animal and hits me over the head with it. Now we have a battle with a stuffed animal which I quite enjoy, and at the end of the battle he looks at the stuffed animal and the silk scarf around its neck has come undone. "It's come undone." Tears. And I say, "Don't you know how to tie it?" "I can't tie it." "I'll show you. You put this piece of the silk across that piece, like that. You do that. Right, now give it to me. Now you put this one under. You do that." And in about three minutes he has made a bow around the animal's neck, and he then says, "And his name is Bimbo."

Let me conclude by coming back to the change which I referred to earlier when I said that the first piece that came loose was the word "stable." When the word "stable" came loose this was a great opening up for me of a whole realm of thinking and re-examination of other aspects and ways of weaving life together. I think these moments are the things they call satori, mindless satori of one kind or another, the moment of resolution of a koan, that sort of thing. And I think that the place to put these moments, as a sort of final level to our classification of change, is on top of the ladder of the whole scale of changes, the whole structure of organization into which one puts one's ideas, sense data and all the rest of it — one's experiences of dealing with one's friends, as well as what the sunsets look like in the trees. There is a possibility of change in the system of all these built-up structures. This is not something we know much about, but the existence of a place like Naropa Institute is obviously somehow related to those possibilities.

photo/Rachel Homer



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