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# **“LIVING LIFE IN AN EVOLVING CONTEXT AND THE ECOLOGY OF SELF”**

## **INTRODUCTION**

This essay (submitted as part of a collection of papers for the Bateson Symposium in Poland, June, 2017) is dedicated to all those who have taken up the challenge to work toward an ecology of respect that will make a difference that is a difference that mitigates within the contexts of our current socio-political and environmental patterns.

When I was a graduate student at Columbia University, I always carried a tattered, re-read – many-times copy of Gregory Bateson’s *Steps to an ecology of mind* (1972). Ever since, in my practice as a Psychotherapist and Homeopath, I strive to view interactions in a simultaneous part to whole framework. Part one, “Living life in an evolving context” explores the process of evolving in a systemic manner. In several chapters, Bateson used what he called “Metalogues”, a dialogue between a father and daughter discussing different aspects of the ecology of mind. What follows in Part two is my metalogue, “The ecology of self”. Both parts are based on applying the systemic epistemology advanced by Gregory Bateson and adapted from my forthcoming book, *Widening your lens: Commentaries on how to see your life differently*. The style and presentation is influenced by Nora Bateson’s book *Small arcs of larger circles: Framing through other patterns* (2016) and her use of the term *symmathesy*, contextual mutual learning.

## **PART ONE: LIVING LIFE IN AN EVOLVING CONTEXT**

“Remember not only to say the right thing in the right place, but far more difficult still, to leave unsaid the wrong thing at the tempting moment.”

Benjamin Franklin

“The major problems in the world are the result of the difference between  
how nature works and the way people think it works.”

Gregory Bateson

Both William and Gregory Bateson as well as many anthropologists (Bateson, Nora, 2016) believe that context is where we evolve. Every interaction is a transformation of experience, as in the metaphorical flash and flow of an Aikido movement, which I practice, or a well-choreographed dance. The Latin “con” means “with” or “together” and “texere” is defined as “to weave.” The thing that we call “context” is a description of patterns that connect and give us meaning to grow, learn and share. In other words, it is how we relate to the total environment that allows a resonance to influence and create not only everyday reality but also our very own legacy. Context allows us to navigate our journey of life quicker and wiser than our preceding generations as described by Rupert Sheldrake’s *Theory of morphogenesis* (Toronto: Park Street Press, 1988). Sheldrake demonstrated how succeeding generations of mice would navigate a maze quicker than preceding generations, implying that an energy field of information is available as a means of evolution.

Content alone sucks because we live in a culture that defaults to facts. Facts and data without context are limiting. Think about this. We cannot tune into an energy field when we are only given facts. Try seeing for instance how things are interconnected when using a one-dimensional map or trying to understand a complex problem. We can look at pieces and segments of anything but without understanding its connections there is little real applicable wisdom. You can always tell for instance when a politician or salesperson is duping the public when they distort facts by eliminating the context i.e. “This president is the worse president ever,” or “We need access to guns in order to protect ourselves.” No context, just fear. The ecological movement of the sixties explained how we can be short sighted by depending on content alone. Nature and all that is part of nature, social and biological, evolves through context. Not recognizing this causes havoc.

When I worked on a multi-school improvement project several years ago, I initially assessed the climate and ethos of the presenting context. What was on the walls, the colors, the nonverbal cues and expressions on the faces of teachers, students, parents and support staff? If an administrator asserted that we tolerate no disruptions I would ask how this was accomplished. Usually

the answer consisted of punishment. During one project at a large urban high school, I was told that they had fifty trouble makers. I encouraged the principal to round them up and put them in a self-contained program temporarily. This was happily accomplished, however within one week, the staff was able to identify fifty new (previously not labeled) “trouble makers.” Systemically, this classification of students was needed to perpetuate the established cultural context of the school, harsh discipline. When later the school was divided into smaller units based on a climate of positive collaboration and a context that supported a new mission of working from the needs of the students, (not the bureaucracy of the school) achievement and attendance went up and discipline problems went down.

In another large urban high school that had one of the lowest attendance and graduation rates in the nation, I helped develop a test project utilizing the concept of context. Half the freshman class would continue their regular home room period as usual. This consisted of taking attendance and reading announcements. The other half would take five minutes and do a simple centering exercise that consisted of thinking of something that each student was grateful for and an induction of being collaborative rather than adversarial. The control group, where the context was changed, continued doing the centering exercise over a semester. The result was decreased discipline instances, increased attendance, and when surveyed, students expressed that they felt more positive toward their peers. The other half of the class remained near the national low in these areas.

This experience motivated me to work with several community-based programs through the Educational Improvement Centers in New Jersey. Several community schools were developed using a collaborative context that housed public agencies in the school and encouraged inter-agency cooperation and multi – age learning environments. My doctoral dissertation (“The School-Community Education Paradox,” 1981, New York: Columbia University/ Dissertation Abstracts International, vol. 42, #52) was based on Gregory Bateson’s “Double Bind Theory,” where I looked at how these initially successful programs would unfortunately fail in most cases. The answer to why they did not continue was painful but simple, when programs based on holistic collaboration were governed by narrow and myopic bureaucratic goals the resulting double binds (i.e. yes, it is a great idea to have seniors in the school but insurance and difficult stairways just would not allow for this, etc.) would co-opt the innovations. The moral is that collaborative environments need

collaborative language, support and representative governance as a context. When the decision making was decentralized and the context represented the life of parents, teachers, students and community members, the programs succeeded.

We indeed evolve and grow through context. This is not easily grasped. Our very own language makes this difficult by separating subject and predicate. Integrating ourselves into a framework that recognizes the interconnections of our existence can meet with great resistance. It is hard to move beyond business as usual, but we may eventually have little choice but to understand how nature actually does work.

At one time in my life, I received a National Defense Scholarship to study South Asian culture. A stipulation was that I had to study a South Asian language. I choose Tamil, which much to my surprise was mostly based on idioms. The prose and communication rarely had subject and predicates. It flowed like a harmonious rhythm. This taught me that I can construct and re-frame my mental images with what later I realized was a process of widening my lens. I was simultaneously seeing how the whole and its parts are flowing together in a distinct unity. Content provides many building blocks but when you step outside of content into context you connect with the environment and dance with its essence. It supports collaboration because it allows for a sensitivity to adjust and grow from many different angles and entry points. In simple terms context is myopic interruptus.

Lao Tzu, (Dale, Robert Alan, Translator, 2002, "*Tao Te Ching*," New York: Barnes and Noble) the ancient Chinese poet and philosopher, states that the energy that is the origin of the universe is the Tao, the oneness of all reality, which can easily be equated with Mother Nature. It manifests itself in "Being" rather than "Doing" or "Trying." We have the technology to resolve many of our world's problems but we lack full understanding of the interconnections inherent in being in context. The verses of the Tao Te-Ching are full of this wisdom. The message is context over content; cooperation rather than competition; knowing instead of knowledge; aesthetic contrasted to commercial; the whole being more than the sum of the parts, intuitive beyond analytic and so on. Content has its place within context. Facts and figures help create benchmarks for accomplishing things. But context, if it is overshadowed by content, will hinder creativity.

Our cells respond to our environment, which in turn sends messages to our brain, that then, releases the hormones creating our reality. We are not

victims of our DNA, genetically trapped in a self-fulfilling prophesy. The fields of Energy Psychology and Medicine have now proven that we can be master of our lives. How we mature is to recognize our interconnections and our attainment of wisdom understands how we are connected. Content alone brings fear since we cannot conceive what the consequences will be without context. It also prevents us from seeing viable directions. Mahatma Gandhi referred to the positive power of truth that comes out of seeing things in perspective (context) when he said:

*Your beliefs become your thoughts; your thoughts become your words;*

*Your words become your actions; your actions become your habits;*

*Your habits become your values; your values become your destiny.*

When I walked on the low tide flats in Provincetown, Massachusetts many years ago, I saw the remarkable evidence of nature's plan of growth and demise. All this was within my view. I could recognize that these pieces were connected, yet was not sure if I understood how. It did not totally dawn on me at that time, what it would take to truly understand these interconnections. Thich Nhat Hanh the Vietnamese Buddhist monk, provides insight to make sense of this process. He describes wisdom as being able to embrace nature's intent with compassion. This can be manifested for example by simply respecting that flowers are always on their way to becoming garbage and garbage is on its way to producing flowers.

There are no isolated fragments or opposites in nature, but rather a unity that is in the form of energy that connects us all. So whether our task is as mundane as washing dishes or acknowledging a sunny day, or seeing the Cape Cod shoreline, it is part of a wider connection. In my case, I was a mile from the shore at low tide picking shells and other sea treats, when I felt the earth stop and move at the interface of the switching tide. The sea had reversed itself and I realized that, not being the best of swimmers, I may not have time to get back to the shore. The town looked so small and insignificant from this distance, in reality it is a thin land mass that is thirty miles out to sea and its' narrow snake-like curvature could easily be overwhelmed by what looked like a violent impending storm.

I thought of the story of a little girl frantically throwing starfish back into the ocean after thousands were marooned from a violent storm. A passerby looks and says to her "Why bother, it doesn't matter, there are so many," and she replies "But it matters to this one." At that moment I realized that I mat-

tered. It was in this context of nature’s powerful intent, that I draped my net bag over my shoulder and with a strange surrendering of my anxiety, floated toward the flickering dim lights of the town until I felt the sand beneath my toes. It would have been injurious to say the least, had I framed my being as independent or separated from this awesome environment. It would have come back to me with a vengeance if I did not blend with the context of that moment and feel nature’s compassion.

The founder of Aikido, Morihei Ueshiba, who encountered many such conflicts and contexts in his life, was once asked if he ever loses his center. Of course, he replied “I am human, but I get it back quickly.” Similarly the Dali Lama has said that he too gets angry, but he puts things into perspective in a very short time. I always ask myself when I feel out of sorts how I can widen my view and see things in a part to whole stereoscopic lens and find my center. I have done this many times, because I too am human. I also ask myself on a regular basis what does it mean to be alive and how can I reframe being “stuck” in the inevitable content that surrounds me and move into a context that evolves into even larger ones and so on. Widen your lens is what I learned.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR HOW WE EVOLVE IN CONTEXT

Lao Tzu bemoans the ubiquitous, inescapable everyday conflict resulting from the imposed separation of time, space, and matter and encourages us to step above it and feel the “integrity” or unity of our existence. This is much more available today than ever, especially with resources emanating from the powerful insights of quantum physics, which have given us scientific verification of a universal unity. However, we still live in societies where elected decision makers in many cases ridicule environmental warnings such as the Green House Effect that threaten our environment. Abandoning this ecological reality is part of westernization’s legacy. It can also be seen in developing nations throughout the world as “technological progress” alters traditional ways, and disrupts centuries of ecological balance.

The paradox here is obvious, and the solution is possible as we learn that there can be no awareness of humanity without inhumanity, no justice without injustice and no right without wrong. In the total scheme of unity or integrity, such dichotomies will dissolve when we believe that the whole is more than the sum of its parts. As in “Gaia” if we can truly respect our interconnectedness, and with the advances in technology, there is the possibility of fulfilling

everyone's needs on this planet. According to the Tao Te Ching, respecting nature and its many interconnected contexts is the greatest integrity one can achieve.

### SOME QUESTIONS TO BE CONSIDERED

What implications regarding contextual assessment would an over dependency on content have for medical, environmental, educational, business, religious, and socio-political institutions?

What does it take to have a perspective that goes beyond the dependency on content?

How does cause and effect reasoning influence ecological processes?

In what ways, can a more holistic view of your surroundings be implemented?

How do situations where content is emphasized at the expense of context affect socio-political outcomes?

How have imposed dichotomies such as "good" and "bad" and other polarities like the "haves" and "have nots" create barriers to an ecological process?

### POEM

#### SUNDAYS AS A CHILD BY KENNETH SILVESTRI

In the early fifties, Paterson still had remnants of trolley tracks peeking out through the pavement near what was once the end of the line on River Street, across from our Sunday late afternoon ritual of many years at Johnny and Hanges Jersey Weiner hot dog stand.

My mother was so afraid that I would spill sauce on the car upholstery of their 1951 Pontiac that she had my father lift me up on to the hood keeping the engine running in winter so I did not freeze to death. I wondered about that since she was continually disappointed that I was not a girl.

My father was well known there having once had this neighborhood as his patrol beat.

Ann, who looked more masculine than Johnny or Hange,  
worked the front by herself, miraculously and with gusto yelling out all and  
every order

Seeing my father, she would always say "Hey Lieutenant, whata you have?"  
"two all the way for Kenny, one each for me and Louise," his response  
"and two orders of fries and coffee," Ann would embellish the relay with  
"two two daugs all the way, two two fries," never saw my father pay.

I can still smell the boiling oil and hear the franks pop up from their sub-  
merged cremation

as Hange, one hand cradled the cardboard plate  
the other slapping mustard, onions and the secret gravy  
meticulously on each roll.

meanwhile Johnny got the coffee, its a deep rich aroma threading its way  
through the throngs,

pushed by the breeze of the equally distinct smell of the adjacent Passaic  
River.

All followed a well-orchestrated system

That I would, when I later studied anthropology, fully appreciate.

Afterwards, like clockwork, we would drive a few blocks to East 18th Street  
to Noni's house, her kindly empathic 4'11" frame was contagiously expan-  
sive.

I seldom remember my father's father who seemed to live in the basement  
by the coal furnace with his couch, tv and indigenous wine  
occasionally calling out in Italian for Rosalie to bring him his coffee and  
cake.

She would pinch my cheek, call me chickie

cut some provolone for me

serve my parents dessert

then sit comfortably by the window hands together rotating her thumbs  
with one eye overseeing her backyard garden with a trance-like smile.

An hour or so later, a few blocks away

I was home in my room with a view of the grape vines,



of hanging squash, rock gardens and a late-night train  
heading north to Hawthorne...

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### PART TWO: THE ECOLOGY OF SELF

"Thus, having prepared their buds, against a sure winter, the wise trees,  
stand sleeping in the cold."

William Carlos Williams

"To err is human, to forgive, divine."

Alexander Pope

Daughter: What is "self" Dad?

Father: Hmm, good question, I remember something that Carl Jung, the famous psychoanalyst, wrote about the "self" being continuously striving for wholeness.

D: Does that mean we all will have wholeness eventually?

F: Well, we all have that potential.

D: What stops us from getting there?

F: I think it could be those barriers that are part of our culture; materialism, entitlement, egocentric tendencies and judgments.

D: How can we avoid those things that stop us from being whole?

F: I have often thought of this very question. It seems that a good place to start is posing another question: "How might shifting our focus to our 'center' be more supportive of our self-development?"

D: What does that mean?

F: In practices like Yoga, Aikido and meditation one is taught to balance themselves, sort of combining their mind and body into a kind of a unity. This practice helps create less pain with life's ever present conflicts and centers us.

D: Can you explain this?

F: Here is an example. Put your fist out and push against my fist. As I put pressure on your fist, what are you doing?

D: Putting more pressure on your fist.

F: Ok, I reduced my pressure, what did you do then?

D: I reduced my pressure too!

F: Well force blindly follows force doesn't it?

D: I see, then pushing slowly and with less force allows for the other person to push less and in a more gentle way and stay centered?

F: Kind of how nature works.

D: I don't get that one.

F: Well if you look at our problems in this world, it is not a good thing to screw around with nature.

D: Are you saying don't mess with nature?

F: Well at least we need to recognize how things are all interconnected.

D: That is not always easy since lots of people don't care about pollution or even what they eat.

F: That takes what is called “wisdom,” which is to understand the connections and what will happen if don't respect nature.

D: How does this all relate to being centered and the growing “self” Dad?

F: Yes, thank you. You see, what we are talking about is “conflict,” which we normally experience as a big barrier in the journey toward wholeness for the self.

D: Yes, I don't necessarily like conflict.

F: Yes, I can understand that, but in nature conflict is neither bad nor good, it just is, and when we understand that, we can practice centering or blending and pushing in a gentler way as we did before.

D: I get it, in nature there really aren't any judgments, or selfishness or what would you call it?

F: Arrogance!

D: Ah I get it, any more examples?

F: Here's another, you heard the one about the glass being filled half way, what do you see?

D: Half full or half empty?

F: What do you see?

D: I know the answer, half full for those who are positive.

F: Well I am not sure what is right or wrong here, but half full at least is tangible, something you can visualize, half empty is abstract, something almost non-existent.

D: I rather touch, see and feel something positive.

F: Yes, that is wonderful, not many people get that!

D: And not being positive can stop the self from reaching that completeness?

F: Surely, we make up our reality from our perspective. We also make assumptions about our sense of reality. I really began to understand this when I went to the museum of Holography.

D: Yeah, like on Star Wars and credit cards.

F: Yes, that is part of it, a hologram contains the whole image of itself in every part, so if you have a holographic photo negative with a picture of you and me right now, and we cut that negative in half what happens?

D: You already gave it away! The whole image appears in each half!

F: I guess I did give it away, but this is not what so many of us were taught in school. We were told that the whole equals the sum of the parts, but the hologram demonstrates that the whole is more than the sum of the parts. So we now have access to what I call a "Holographic Crap Detector." It reminds me how great artists have always been able to describe the larger possibilities of their perspective. William Blake for instance could see a whole landscape from a single grain of sand. He did not travel much out of his village, yet his writings are worldly. Another example is how Michelangelo could envision a beautiful statue in what was basically a slab of marble.

D: It makes me not want to pass up any liter on the street without putting it in a container. How can we keep doing this? You said before, something about being centered. It can't be easy?

F: In Aikido, a peaceful martial art, some movements are considered quite essential and yet never totally attainable, they are called Thousand Year Techniques. So we cannot ever stop learning. Let me show you what I mean. Stand up and place all your thoughts high in your head. Now as I stand beside you, I will gently push you if I may. What Happens?

D: Well I am ready to fall backward, thanks for catching me.

F: Now put all your attention in your center about an inch below your navel. This is the place where your chi or energy emanates. Now as I push you in a similar manner what happens?

D: I don't feel like I am falling back, in fact I am rather balanced and strong.

F: Over the years I have tried this with many people. Years ago I did this with some high school students every morning and there was a strikingly noticeable change in their attitude toward school.

D: Why do you think this is so?

F: Being centered is less about doing things; it is more about being present or aware. When you are just doing things without this awareness you are driven by expectations and consequent disappointments.

D: We have to do certain things or we might not survive.

F: Yes we need to, but if we are centered and more aware of the consequences of our behavior then we can appreciate how sacred our life can be.

D: How can people start thinking this way?

F: I am not sure if I can answer that except to say that we have to start at the beginning and not get hung up on looking for the end.

D: The Thousand Year Technique?

F: Yes, it is also called “Beginner’s Mind.” It is just jumping in the present of any part of the circle of life. This way we can celebrate possibilities and change.

D: Could you be more specific?

F: Let’s see, well, if you can think of life as allowing your “self” to participate, then you can sense the way you are making a difference in your life as well as in the lives of others.

D: So this is Beginner’s Mind.

F: Yes, and it is what is called “mindfulness,” the art of being present without preconceived ideas or labels.

D: OK, how do you get to be this way, another Thousand Year Technique?

F: Time and expectations are not important in this sense of mindfulness, it is keeping your ego in check and not being hard on that evolving self. The living symbol of mindfulness is to appreciate each and every different unique breath as it replenishes your body.

D: Wow, each breath is different?

F: Like every snowflake is different, your breathing has different nuances as do all our many contexts of life.

D: How can people ever say they are bored?

F: That is a judgment, and sadly with injurious consequences. Let me demonstrate the subtle but powerful differences of which we are capable. Hold your arm out and resist my pushing down on it.

D: I can’t keep this up for long, uncle!

F: Now, try it again, but now imagine an endless reservoir of water in your center attached to your arm. Visualize it being like a fire hose shooting water at an object. What happens as I push down on your arm now?

D: Hey I can hold my own against your pressure, no problem! This is sweet!

F: So it is my sense that we have to nurture the self so it can better move in the direction of being whole.

D: Wait a minute, not so fast. What about things like fear and anger, they can get in the way to self-growth.

F: Very good point. It follows if we relax, breathe and avoid the statements like “I could have done this,” or “I should have done it this way,” etc., we are ready for these emotions in a positive way.

D: How?

F: Our emotions are like our muscles, we can be tense and heavy or light and relaxed. Fear can be celebrated and embraced and anger can be assertively communicated.

D: That is definitely a lesson worth learning.

F: Yes, by not letting emotions hold you back, takes communication skills that are based on creating a win-win potential rather than win-lose encounters.

D: Meaning?

F: Cooperative communication is like a volley on a ping pong table. If I spike the ball we both lose since the rules are win-win.

D: How does that translate into communication Dad?

F: I say something, you check to see if you understand it, I agree or disagree, then you say something, I check and you let me know if I got it and so forth.

D: Any other things about communication?

F: Probably many more than we have time for, but I would include being caring, trustworthy, recognizing our connections and taking the time to be passionate about them.

D: You mentioned Carl Jung earlier. How did he come to believe that the self is always trying to reach wholeness?

F: He believed that we live and act each day through our conscious self; actions like getting to school and work, doing the things that get us through our day. However, he also felt that our unconscious self, where our dreams and inner thoughts come from, are connected to a “collective unconscious” which to him was like a reservoir of all living experiences.

D: Sort of like the hologram you talked about.

F: Yes, and in this holographic reservoir there are symbols that he called “archetypes” that allow us all to be connected.

D: What are these archetypes?

F: They are invisible, but they come to us in universal symbols. They are things we recognize in our own way that connect us to our legacy. We never really see them but we use them as reference points. They are like seeds of readiness. We see a tree for instance, but it is constructed and understood through our own unique mental process. It is not the archetype; it is our own perception of a “tree,” that may have been stimulated by past collective images that we found in art and verse.

D: Where do they exist then?

F: In dreams, stories, poems, fairy tales, and art. You can look up at the sky in

the evening and contemplate the constellations and then relate that to your experiences. There is a word that I believe is important in understanding all of this, it is “Aesthetic” which loosely means “something of beauty and art.” This word along with one of my other favorite words “context” is the human metaphor or symbol for “nature.” You see, we never totally see nature; the word itself is not the thing. It is sort of how a map is really not the territory that we encounter with our senses. It is in our “contexts,” the environment that our self evolves and grows within, that uses these symbols as reference points like on a map.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR THE ECOLOGY OF SELF

D: Wow, you said a lot there. Are you saying that we have the potential to be part of all human experience and use this map to be more whole and peaceful?

F: Yes, and you said peaceful. I agree, you see if we can get over seeing nature as a bunch of fragments, we have a chance to be peaceful. Splitting nature up is an illusion. Another famous thinker, Martin Buber, (*I and Thou*, New York: Charles Scribner, 1972) wrote about our choice of seeing nature as “I-IT” or “I-Thou;” In other words we can separate ourselves from say a tree and view it as a nuisance because of its leaves clogging our gutters or we can be connected to it in a spiritual way and recognize our interconnectedness with it, then the leaves can find their place.

D: I am sorry Dad, I was dozing and missed this last part, it was meditative but I didn’t hear much.

F: That is fine; you helped me to get this all out into the collective unconscious.

D: Hmm. No more questions... for now...

### SOME QUESTIONS TO BE CONSIDERED

How might the evolution of “self” be described in a systemic manner?

What obstacles hinder self-fulfillment?

How can poetry and other forms of art help make a difference that makes a difference for the evolving self?

In what ways, can temperament (thinking, feeling, sensate/angry, sanguine/passionate) help navigate self-development within an ecological framework?

## POEM

oh the zen like great falls by Kenneth Silvestri

stepping out of my front door  
the mist of the great falls caressed  
my prelude  
to the day to come.  
its mult-appearances  
dressed by seasonal nuances,  
like ice coated cotton clouds.  
also suds and old derelict debris  
circling in whirlpools.  
a gathering red brick history  
of my grandparents soaked in its spray,  
their tilting looms ten hours a day,  
the churning turbines  
of my parents' child labor.  
near smoldering fire remnants  
that found their way there.  
a block down  
steam locomotives were built with her power.  
shinning unused trolley rails  
peeking through cracks  
on McBride Ave covered by her droplets.  
the only all-the-way-onion-sauce-hot dog-stands  
were always there.  
as were the potential floods along her raceways.  
she was part of my walk to school,  
sitting at stationary wooden sepia coated desks,  
looking out of windows covered with her grime.  
she was always showing  
either a drip  
or thunderous pummeling  
over the gray geology  
where I found native arrow tips

and 19th century glass bottle pieces.  
her persona wavering  
her shadow side devastating  
her rainbows soothing...

Source: “The Great Falls: An Anthology of Poems about Paterson, New Jersey,” 2014, Edited by Maria Mazziotti Gillan, Paterson, N. J.: The Poetry Center, Passaic County Community College).

## CONCLUSION

“Common sense and a sense of humor are the same thing, moving at different speeds. A sense of humor is just common sense, dancing.” William James

It all starts with communication which obviously includes aspects of our individual style and how we describe and understand the nuances of our world. Again, the simple act of recognizing how all these aspects of communication connect is the first step to enhancing one’s life. The resulting eventual wisdom occurs when the connections are understood systemically.

I remember duplicating an experiment that I had read about regarding a teacher who was told that he had the “advanced” higher tracked students in his class rather than the labeled low achieving students he was usually assigned to teach. He was given students from the same bottom category regarding student achievement. At the end of the semester all his students mastered the higher, advanced curriculum because he raised his expectations that all had the capability to achieve what they did. His attitude, aura and the way he communicated celebrated a context of possibilities that were inherent in all the students. He produced a context for them to understand and achieve. Sure enough, when I utilized this technique in various forms while running an alternative school program for “disaffected, low achieving and troublesome students,” the results were nowhere like the previous self – fulfilling prophecies of failure.

This exemplifies the steps to an ecological way of thinking, now called “mindfulness,” the art of being present without preconceived ideas and labels (with yourself too). Time and expectations are not important in this sense of mindfulness. But keep your ego in check and don’t be hard on that evolving self. The living symbol of mindfulness is to appreciate each different unique breath as it replenishes your body.



Connecting, merging, blending and respecting; produces “win-win” environments. Obviously adjusting and sustaining this harmony leads to creativity and health. Although it seems simple, there is an element of needed rigor to get “unstuck” and maintain this flow, which is where accepting a systemic world view as Gregory Bateson described is essential. This brings in the importance of context over content and connections rather than fragmentation. All this necessitates being open to the ever-present possibilities inherent in an ecological epistemology with its prerequisite of energy sharing and celebrating the paradoxes of life (the yin and yang and the I and Thou).

Then of course, we have the ongoing paradoxes of life, those everyday seemingly opposing energies and situations that throw roadblocks to our journey of finding peace and well-being. If we falter, and we will at times, we go to the realm of a double bind. Yet low and behold this too has further opportunities to challenge our cultural constraints of labels, language, and judgments. This is the ultimate reality show of widening the perspective and stepping out of the box and pushing the limits of our brain into that hologram awaiting us. Once we achieve this skill then the quantum leap is to see how opposing views all have credence and all are part of Gaia, which embodies our ultimate aesthetic context. \*

#### \*RELATED AUTHOR’S ARTICLES TO SYSTEMIC INTEGRATION

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Other relevant publications are listed on the website [www.drkennethsilvestri.com](http://www.drkennethsilvestri.com)

## APPENDIX: THE USE OF THE DOUBLE BIND THEORY

A paradox is a contradiction arising from something being, for example, good on one level (i.e., DDT spray enables farmers to grow “better” crops), and in conflict with something on another, wider level i.e., DDT spray has been found to destroy different species of birds (Commoner, 1972). A means of beginning to dissolve the paradoxes would be to see things in their wider interconnectedness. The use of the double bind, for instance, describes a holistic perspective for seeing conflicts in human communication and represents a shift from a linear mode of describing the mere content of a conflict to that of understanding its context.

The basis for seeing things in their wider interconnectedness is itself an epistemological or paradigmatic shift from the viewpoint of Bateson (1979). He believed that our mind is “a sequence of interactions between parts” (p. 90) and any explanation of mental phenomena must always reside in the organization and interaction of these multiple parts. Thus, according to Bateson, we must keep in mind that we are a “mental process” and that the natural world will show us similar mental characteristics. Another relevant criterion in this epistemology per Bateson (1958) is that the interactions of these parts is set off by news of “difference.” Thus, it is the reciprocal relationship between the parts, not the parts acting on themselves, that form systems (Harris-Jones, P.; 2016; Bateson, N., 2016).

This implication of reciprocal relations suggests that such circular casual systems must either seek a steady state or undergo progressive exponential change; and this change will be limited either by the energy of the system, or by some external restraint, or by a breakdown of the system as such. (Bateson, 1958, p. 288). Since the process of the mind be consist of a hierarchy of levels, Bateson (1979) states that “What used to be called character – i.e., the system of interpretations which we place on the contexts we encounter can [now] be shaped by genetics and by learning”(Bateson, 1979, p. 115). All this is premised on the existence of levels and suggests that learning occurs in the context of formal characteristics. It, therefore, depends on the idea that something happens in a wide context – a “meta-context.” This contextual sequence is believed by Bateson (1972) to be open and possibly infinite. Since things could be in conflict between context and meta-context this could result in a pathological and injurious situation (Bateson, 1972).

Here lies the basis for the double bind theory. Since the meta-message is the classification of the message, it cannot meet it on equal terms. Thus, in equating school with community education, for instance, the latter can be seen as meta to the former and could form a paradox (since school is part of the wider community level, but cannot meet it on equal grounds). Stewart Brand (1974) describes Bateson's thought as being based on Alfred North Whitehead's and Bertrand Russell's (1910–1913) theory of "logical types," which forbids paradoxical phrases like "this sentence is false (is this sentence true?)," "since no class can be a member of itself" (Whitehead & Russell, 1910). On this "meta-ladder" the paradoxes become contradictions, "in which you take both sides. Each half of the paradox proposes the other." According to Brand (1974), by dealing with one of these, Bateson believes one becomes part of a difficult voyage, but one could very well end up knowing his/her place in the universe. This further relates to seeing the part and whole in a simultaneous manner as mentioned above. According to Bateson (1972) this epistemology suggests that "the dualism of mind and body, and of God and world are all somehow faked up" (Brockman, 1977, p. 247). Rollo May (in Brockman's book *About Bateson*) paraphrases Bateson, writing that:

We look out at the universe through our own presuppositions, our own premises, our own expectations. We sift what we see through our own special meanings, opening ourselves to some interpretations by blocking out others which make us uncomfortable (p. 79). By doing this, we can easily miss the relation characteristics of our reality. Thus, in this epistemology, one shy away from absolute abstractions like sex, religion, family, etc., and deals with the relational levels of context, pattern and form. The contexts and meta-contexts can thus appear and be described in their natural circuits that relate to the wider wholes that contain them. This view also respects the union of feelings and thought, especially when one sees the whole through specific instances, which combine rationality with intuition.

However, our predominate cultural way of looking at things, according to Bateson has led us to "... the multiple insults, the double binds and invasions that we all experience in life, the impact (to use an inappropriate physical work) whereby experience corrupts our epistemology, challenging the core of our existence, and thereby seducing us into a false cult of the ego –what I am suggesting is that the process whereby double binds and other traumas teach us false epistemology is already well advanced in most occidentals and perhaps most Orientals, and that those whom we call "schizophrenics" are

those in whom the endless kicking against the pricks has become intolerable” (Brockman, 1977, p. 247).

In developing the double bind perspective, Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson (1967) concentrate on communication as it effects behavior. To them, any phenomenon remains inexplicable if the range of observation is not wide enough to include the context in which it occurred. Communication in this regard is the result of a sender receiver relation and its ensuing context. This follows from sensory and brain research which has “proved conclusively that only relationships and patterns of relationships can be perceived, and these are the essence of experience” (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967, p. 27).

This view is holistic in that, as long as science was concerned with the study of linear, unidirectional, and progressive cause-effect relations, a number of highly important phenomena remain outside the immense territory conquered by science during the last four centuries. (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967, p. 30. Bateson, N., 2016) In pursuing the connectedness of contexts involved with interpersonal systems, one must pay heed to feedback loops, “since the behavior of each person affects and is affected by the behavior of each other person. Input into such a system may be amplified into change or may be counteracted to maintain stability” (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967, p. 31). Thus, pattern and information are essential in the above ongoing description of communication, and any definition of “beginning” or “end” becomes meaningless. The axioms of communication that are set forth by Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson are that, firstly, it is impossible not to communicate.

Regarding even the simplest possible unit, it will be obvious that once we accept all behavior as communication, we will not be dealing with a monophonic message unit, but rather with a fluid and multifaceted compound of many behavioral modes – verbal, tonal, postural, contextual, etc. – all of which qualify the meaning of all the others. The various elements of this compound (considered as a whole) are capable of highly varied and complex permutations, ranging from the congruent to the incongruent and paradoxical. (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967, p. 50) Secondly, they believe that “Every communication has a content and a relationship aspect such that the latter classifies the former and is, therefore, a meta-communication (p. 54). It is thus believed by them that the ability to communicate about communication is linked not only to successful communication, but also with problems of awareness of self and others through ambiguities that may arise.

The third axiom is that “The nature of a relationship is contingent upon the punctuation of the communicational sequences between the communicants (p. 54). In this, there is a notion that every item of a communication sequence is simultaneously a stimulus, response and reinforcement.’ This does not imply a dependence on a “good” or “bad” value, but it relates to problems that arise in not meta-communicating about the perception of the punctuation. (For example, parents in a school may be withdrawn and passive because of constant suggestions from administrators to have their children “shape up,” while the school administrators on the other hand perceive the parents as being non-interested.) In not describing a beginning nor an end, one can avoid assuming this form of closure on the relationship.

Beck (1976) applies communication theory to social interactions by using the recent work of ethologist and evolutionary biologists who deal with communication disorders. His specific use of the double bind theory involves interactional contexts during the Vietnam Moratoria, between the peace movement organizers and the people of Richard Nixon’s administration, especially Spiro Agnew. His focus is on “thwarting and attention-switching in situations of conflict”(p. 273). In describing the organization of behavior in humans, he makes the point that: a message evokes a train of memories which is then pursued by virtue of the “trust” in the inter-subjectivity of objects that is necessary to any complex notion of concerted activities, (p. 273) The relevance to the paradoxes involved in community and school is that “thoughts, feelings, utterances and movements” can be generated even when objects (e.g. community people/resources) related to those reactions are not present.

According to Paul Watzlawick, , Janet Helmick Beavin and Don D. Jackson (1967) regarding the interaction and the maintenance of communication, the process can be classified as either symmetrical or complementary. It is a relationship of equality or of difference. In the former, interactants mirror each other and difference is minimized. In the latter, the behavior of the interactants complements each other, or a maximization of difference is maintained. In the complementary relationship, there is a superior or “one-up” position that, again, does not indicate good or bad, but does suggest the mutual interlocking relationship where one presupposes the other’s manner. This, for example, is very relevant to contexts of cultural or social origins, such as school personnel – community people, doctor-patient, etc. (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967, pp. 67–71) This suggests a maintenance of a:”world-in-common” as part of the biobehavioral structure of persons-in-action such that any

thwarting of their display of such activity without the availability of alternative pathways of response will be experienced as profoundly conflict-inducing. (Beck, 1976, p. 274) Behaviorally, this, according to Beck (1976), can be called a "lexicon" of a communicational mode which in the context of relationships constitutes ongoing interaction between interactants. He also believes, and quite convincingly demonstrates, that the meta communicational devices involved in the interaction which gives rise to paradoxes and consequent pathologies can be used as a "powerful silencing strategy." In other words, the maintenance of the interactional system depends on the use of equality/difference competencies of the lexicons of behavior as referred to by Bateson (1972) and others as being symmetrical or complementary. For instance, regarding a defeated group, representing strong convictions, in many cases they can neither continue, or abandon the cause.

Thus, Beck (1976) believes that "there must be some mechanism permitting the thwarted persons to escape, socially, if not physically" (p. 276). The double bind theory presents to him, a model from sociological and psychiatric literature based on the above-mentioned theory of "logical types" of Russell and Whitehead (1910), "Which holds that paradox and confusion often result from a failure to distinguish among levels of discourse" (p. 276). The properties of the double bind theory originated from the article "Toward a Theory of Schizophrenia" (Bateson, 1972) and further discussed in Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson (1967), Beck (1976), Bateson (1979), and Berger (1978). The basic ingredients include first that two or more persons or groups are involved in an ongoing relationship and interaction. Secondly, one party issues a primary statement or injunction which makes an assentation that has implicit meaning. (An example: school system personnel announce to community people that it will implement a merger between school and community through a community education program). Thirdly, the party then issues a secondary statement that is conflicting with the first statement at a more abstract level. This statement is called the secondary injunction and is meta to the first in that it provides a context for understanding it. Fourthly, a tertiary negative statement prohibits the second party, for instance the community people or community educators, involved with the community education program, from escaping or pointing out the paradoxes. This can be done by not allowing for the second party to have resource to a third party that might alter or restrict the situation. Also, once this process is learned, the complete set of the above is not needed to perceive one's universe, especially when the experience is

repeated or made habitual and can be transferred to other situations or relationships.

This is demonstrated by the parent whose message to his/her child is, "Tell me that you love me." When the child replies, "I love you," the parent says, "Why do I always have to ask you to say it." The child responds to a message of love, but it becomes meaningless because it is thrown in the frame of being a requested response. For the child to discuss this would place doubt on the parents' love, especially if the child discriminates accurately the intent of the original message. Also, if the parent's message consisted of the need for self-reassurance of love, and simultaneous hostility by being loved, the child would also be punished if he/she discriminates incorrectly (See Bateson, 1972). In applying this to the Vietnam peace movement, Beck (1976) was able to provide a model showing how statements from the Nixon administration, especially those by Agnew, forced the news reporters into a bind which placed the media people in a position of possibly losing their licenses if they did not report favorable news. Agnew also conducted tactics by which reactions of the peace activist to his attacks were not being answerable, but evidence of a one-sidedness on their part. This placed the anti-war movement in a position of not being able to appeal or communicate about their paradoxical situations. These paradoxes were maintained by statements from the president agreeing with the peace movement, and simultaneously saying that he would not give in to the rule of the street or any opposition to the will of the public.

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