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Reflections on Nora Bateson's "Small Arcs of Larger Circles : Framing through other Patterns" : a review

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REFLECTIONS ON NORA BATESON'S *SMALL ARCS OF LARGER CIRCLES: FRAMING THROUGH OTHER PATTERNS: A REVIEW*¹

Nora Bateson, as Gregory Bateson's daughter, has taken on the work, first in her film *An Ecology of Mind*,² and now in this book, of bringing his ideas about epistemology, about how we know what we know, to a wider audience and to a newer, different time. This is a challenging task, because he was someone who always emphasized the complexity of things, and often came at his points sideways. We should also remember, though, that Nora Bateson has her own mind, her own perspective, and her own ideas. In this book, in essays, formal and informal, in poems, and in other forms, she works on finding leverage points for better thinking and more informed dialogues, about how to face the kinds of problems that we find in our own lives and in the larger world.

Mark Engel, who was Gregory Bateson's assistant during the period when the book *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* was conceived and assembled, tells this story about it, which I heard from him at dinner in Santa Cruz. Gregory Bateson had not written a book, but had written a number of academic papers which had been published in diverse venues. His office had an arrangement of slots in which he kept reprints of all these papers, and when visitors were on their way out of the office, he would hand them the reprints that he felt they would most want or need to have. Mark Engel thought that these papers should be the basis for his first book. Gregory Bateson was reluctant at first, but he eventually relented. Through a process of selection jointly among the two of them, a key group of these slotted papers became the core of his first and most famous book. (If you want to read the story in more detail, Mark Engel has written it up in the journal *Cybernetics and Human Knowing*.)³

¹ N. Bateson (2016). *Small Arcs of Larger Circles: Framing Through Other Patterns*, Axminster, England: Triarchy Press.

² *An Ecology of Mind*, Nora Bateson (director), copyright 2010, Bullfrog Films (North America) or Mindjazz Films (Europe), <http://anecologyofmind.com/index.html> or <http://mindjazz-pictures.de/project/an-ecology-of-mind/>.

³ M. Engel (2016). "The Path to Steps to an Ecology of Mind," *Cybernetics and Human Knowing*, vol. 23 no. 3, pp. 85–90.

What I will attempt to do in this review is to give you some of my reflections on Nora's book, *Small Arcs of Larger Circles: Framing through Other Patterns*. And what I think, it is important to share with you is that you can approach this book in the same way that you can approach Gregory's book *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. You don't need to start at the beginning and read it page by page until it ends. It is a collection of articles, short stories and poems that do not need to be read in order. Think of them as each existing in its own slot, though they do in another way form a whole. In fact, I once heard Nora Bateson suggest to someone who was having trouble reading her father's book that they could skip to a particular piece that interested them and start again. This is exactly what I would like to do, it is to give you an idea of what different parts of Nora's book are about, so you might go to those and begin reading. In other words, follow your interest and start there.

So let's explore the multitudinous treasures in Nora's book. In her chapter at the beginning of the book entitled "(inter)Facing an Ecology of Mind," I suggest that you'll find a wonderful discussion of what ecology of mind might mean. I certainly have struggled with what it might mean over a number of years, and Nora puts it quite simply.

Once after she spoke at the American Museum of Natural History in New York, she asked me what I thought about her talk there, and I told her that I loved it because I felt like she was throwing out seeds. There were so many different ideas that had been bandied about, and I could see different people in the audience taking hold and grasping a thought with joy, but of course different ideas got a response from different members of that audience. In this chapter Nora uses a similar metaphor about her father's work. She says, "I like to think of *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* as a garden of thoughts growing, changing, dying and even composting in relation to one another. It is a dirt-under-your-nails transference of biological patterns onto conceptual and epistemological habits." (p. 20)

In her chapter "Practicality in Complexity," Nora talks about how a certain kind of demand for practicality rules the world today. It's the elevator speech, the few sentence summary of your idea that you tell Steve Jobs in the elevator so that he can rule on it (and you) right away. It's the power point talk, the scripted entertaining and hopefully viral lecture that always gives the audience the "take away." Nora is not about that. Nor is she about a formula for instant self-improvement. This is not about making things simple. As Gregory Bateson's daughter, she is about complexity, about context, about interdependen-

cies and patterns and unexpected connections both welcome and unwelcome. She says, “the *point*, the *deliverable*, the *practicality* of my work is not to offer complete solutions, or stepped improvement plans. It is to offer an invitation into a world that does not sit still, and encourage an increase in sensitivity to the complexity in all its glory and gore.” (p. 140)

On this past Election Day, my husband Phillip Guddemi and I were in Santa Cruz to do research in the Bateson archives. I had sent Phillip off ahead while I parked the car, and an Alan Watts talk came on the radio which stunned me. I couldn't leave the car for several minutes. I had to find out what it was. After some false starts I got hold of the radio station and learned that it was from his talk, “Net of Jewels, Lecture 4,” part of an advanced seminar on Buddhism.⁴ Alan Watts began by describing how certain Chinese philosophers had inspired Zen Buddhism. He continued by giving a lesson from one of them about an art of teaching. The point was to make people capable of “polar thinking,” as Alan Watts called it, so they can see that what are supposed to be opposites are part of the same thing. Figure and background are part of the same unity. When someone asked that Zen master about something sacred, the teacher would give an answer in terms of something secular. When the question was about something eternal the answer was to be something temporal. When it was about something abstract the answer was something concrete. Anything metaphysical was answered in terms of the everyday.

This Alan Watts lecture was brought to my mind by perhaps Nora's shortest prose piece in the book, “What's the Opposite of Opposites?” We are, as academicians, and in our culture as a whole, so intrigued with oppositions, polarities, sides. Nora here asks us, can we have “something wider please,” “without a winner or a loser.” (p. 63)

This reflection on conversation, debate, argument, is covered in depth in her piece on “It Goes Without Saying.” Here, Nora beautifully explores the context, the parameters, of conversation, invoking just how difficult communication can be. If we can get beyond the idea that there are yes or no answers, that we will either agree or disagree, that rhetorical arguments will ultimately persuade by winning, then we can make conversation more than an arena of oppositions (like our political and academic arenas have become). Reflecting on her experience communicating with a Thai friend, in some ways she found cross cultural communication easier because mismatched expectations are

⁴ Available on an MP3 CD, “Mahayana Methods,” from the Alan Watts Foundation, copyright 2009, see www.alanwatts.com

assumed, while with her fellow English speakers the mismatches which are not expected can lead to disappointment. There is no magic formula for communication, but caring is one of the ingredients that is perhaps most necessary. If we can continue in a relationship of love and respect, “the sun that warms the seeds of misunderstanding so that they may bloom into mutual learning – that sun is courageous affection.” (p. 49)

I feel this, Nora’s conclusion to “It Goes Without Saying,” is a far from trivial insight. Nora expands on this insight in her chapter, “An Ecology of Hurt.” She describes how we are often asked in a superficial or rote way to forgive someone who has harmed us, but actually forgiveness “as a token of high morality is not an effective strategy for achieving peace.” (p. 115) Furthermore, “faking forgiveness, like faking orgasms, is not good for the overall ecology of the relationship.” When true forgiveness does happen it is a form of mutual learning – one type of what Nora calls a symmathesy. It is a transformation, one which can’t be rushed, one which when approached in a surface way can lead to detachment rather than relationship.

In thinking about the future, “The Fortune Teller” sometimes tells us things we don’t want to hear. Global warming scientists, economists, and newspapers all confront us with prognostications that alarm and frighten us. How do we deal with uncertain and scary futures? Can we cheat what looks like our destiny? Can we “adjust the momentum and redirect the course” (p. 131)? Why do we want to do this – to protect a status quo that cannot be protected? It takes change to keep things the same, but if that is the goal, often the precautions that we take to avert disaster lock us more into the pathways that lead to disaster. Nora Bateson recommends a hard to imagine procedure she calls “pre-hindsight.” Project yourself into the world where the disaster has happened, and observe how things got to that point. Then think back to what kind of options we might have had to prevent it. Gregory Bateson taught us about the dangers of “conscious purpose,” which leads to so many plans made with good forward looking intentions leading us astray. The road to hell is paved with good intentions, but Nora Bateson asks, “what is the road *back from* hell paved with?” She answers, “Another version of hope.” “Apocalypse,” she reminds us, “is a linear idea, and we do not live in a linear world.” (p. 136) In a non-linear world maybe pre-hindsight can help lead us into insight.

In her essay on “Identity with an I,” Nora points out that the independent “I,” the individual who might consider themselves the center of the universe, is just an illusion. That “I” is always somewhere in a relationship. In systems

theory, you might say, the meaning is in the touch. By that I mean, as in the case of neurons connecting across their synapses, it is not the individual neuron, and similarly not the individual person, that has meaning. The meaning is in the touching that takes place in the relationship between the neurons, or the people.

What this book really is about is “Who are we Now?” In this piece near the end of the book, she asks what does it take to be alive now, to participate in the changes that are required as we look toward the future. We are past the point of listening to people practice the time honored art of debate, with its well established rules of point-making. We should stop pretending that emotion has nothing to do with conversation. We must recognize that emotions are a part of point-making, and again, returning to the metaphor of sun warming seeds, it will take courageous affection for those with whom we disagree. Nora, in this chapter, continues talking about the necessary transformation, alludes to a Kafka story by way of saying we cannot make our adversary into a cockroach. We must never be so dismissive as to “step on the bug.” It is in compassion, love, and patient willingness to practice the art of teaching one another, that we will find our way forward.

And this brings me to my conclusion, about what I feel Nora Bateson has taught me about wisdom, which is that it is about a convergence of compassion and an enlightened understanding of how we know what we know. From this inspiring book we learn that this happens in a context, an ecology of mind, Nora’s own symmathesy.