

Interview

Nora Bateson: An ecology of conversation

Interview by Mark McKergow

*Nora Bateson is a media producer and educator. She has recently produced and directed a film, *An Ecology of Mind*, about the work of her father, Gregory Bateson, celebrated anthropologist, philosopher, author, naturalist and systems theorist. The film includes footage from Bateson's own films shot in the 1930s in Bali (with Margaret Mead) and New Guinea, along with photographs, filmed lectures, and interviews.*

Nora was a special guest at the 2011 SOLWorld conference in Hungary, showing her film and participating fully in the event.

Gregory Bateson was your father. He died 31 years ago in 1980 at a pretty ripe old age. Why should we be interested in him now?

There was a certain amount of interest in him then, and a lot of his work has brought seminal ideas into several different disciplines. But because of the interdisciplinary nature of his lens, it has been very difficult for those fields to share the kind of understanding that he had hoped for. So while he influenced many different disciplines, his work remained, ironically, parcelled off in different channels.

So what we are becoming aware of now, very acutely, is that when we look at crises in any kind of organisation, organism or system, these crises are not located in a singular kind of causality. We are coming to a moment historically where we really need some of the tools he left behind for multi-disciplinary conversations and multi-perspective learning – so that we can see what we're not seeing.

One of the things that Gregory did was to leave us a toolbox for thinking in different ways. The first step to being able to utilise those tools is to embark on a reflective process about where the cultural, academic, linguistic and religious limits are to our understanding. First we have to destabilise the limits that we are in.

And your film offers people an introduction to this way of thinking?

The film offers a portrait of Gregory and an intimate look at the lens through which he saw the world – and it makes it a lot easier to read his books. And at the same time, after an hour, some people find there have been some threads pulled loose in the rigid structures of the way we are trained to go through our days looking at the world, and this is a really healthy beginning.

You came to the SOLWorld conference in Hungary this year and met some of the SF-in-organisations people. What connections did you discover with Gregory's thinking?

I saw a couple of things I responded to with a lot of affection. One of my frustrations is that currently, for all the right reasons, all the right people are desperately, anxiously searching for solutions to problems – global, ecological, personal, economic problems... The way we have been programmed to find solutions is through a linear building block system, so if you do A and then B, then C will happen. That's not how life works. So the situation goes from complexity to a disastrous complicated mess of misguided linear catastrophe. What you get is blame, what you don't get is learning.

One of the things I noticed is that you in the SOLWorld are not actually looking for solutions – despite the name! (Laughter). I found that to be very refreshing and healthy. The concept was based on kinship to my concept that if you

broaden the base of understanding, then solutions – if you want to call them that – emerge on their own. If you can take the thinking up a level, the solutions become not linear but expansive, and I really like that.

In the film there is a quote. *“The major problems in the world are the difference between the way nature works and the way people think.”* It was interesting for me to look at this quote from Gregory through the eyes of an SF audience – it made me think about how nature solves problems. The one thing nature doesn’t do is dwell on them – it simply continues to function in ways that work until a new level of organisation is formed. I found that to be very much in keeping with the SF paradigm. If a tree root grows and comes to a stone, it doesn’t sit there and think what a bummer it is that there is a stone in its way, and feel bad about itself or blame the tree or the landscape – it simply moves around it, or spreads out or figures out a way to function. It figures out a way to function. I see this as being in keeping with the way SF works, and I like that.

How were you and your ideas received at the conference?

First of all, it was a lot of fun. Maybe I got the wrong impression, but the SOLWorld group were about the least toxic group of organised people I have ever met! (Laughter.) So little griping and blaming and complaining, at least up front. There may well be some of that behind the scenes, but for the most part it’s not full of whingers, and that’s very nice.

How were the film and ideas in it received?

The ideas were accepted, welcomed and appreciated. For some people there was some real traction to delve into the ideas and really work on them, the slippery fish that are metaphors, looking at what kind of messages are within messages, and it was fun to get some space to play around the communication dynamic.

Additionally there was a basic appreciation that has everything you need in it. It was nice to have late night discussions about the nature of nature and so on, to play with second order concepts but there was a purely aesthetic integrated intellectual and emotional response which is equally valuable. I found both of those.

Steve de Shazer said in an interview I did with him (Norman, McKergow & Clarke, 1997) that Bateson was a f*ing awful writer. Lots of people find his writings difficult. What would you say to that?**

It depends on what you're reading. I don't think he was a f***ing awful writer, so I have to disagree with Steve about that! The first step is not accessible unless someone is really willing to dive in and do the work. This is not Disney! If you wanted to criticise Gregory about his writing, as opposed to his lectures, you could say that he didn't bother to seduce the reader into his world of inter-relationships and dynamic systems, he just talked about the dynamics. So if they didn't have an entrance point and couldn't see where he was going, then some people would never get into it.

On the other hand, 40 years after the publication of *Steps To An Ecology Of Mind* (Bateson, 1972), we are much more accustomed to the ideas of interconnection: things being linked to each other. We are starting to be familiar with some of the basic premises that Gregory didn't really bother to unpack. He said that once you are on the other side of the threshold, these are some of the tools we can use to talk about the structure of life. But he left it to the reader, student or politician to find their own way across the threshold.

I should say that I think Steve de Shazer's comment shows that he thought there might be value in the ideas but regretted that they were not as clear as they could be.

He is not alone in that criticism. One of the criticisms I get in the film-making world is that the movie is not about any particular problem. Every story is supposed to have a conflict, and I didn't put a conflict in my film. However, at some parties you have to bring your own beer! To some movies you bring your own conflict. The real rip-off would have been to have claimed a particular conflict and jammed it down my audience's throats. I would have lost the possibility of each viewer working on their own thing they are working on – some personal, some political. The same can be said of Gregory's work – if he had spelt it out and nailed it down, it would have lost applicability in a wider spectrum.

Some people make similar observations about Wittgenstein – he gives examples of general idea, but can't state the general idea as to do so would over-claim it. It then becomes too tight and holes can be found.

Exactly – at a time when we are looking for thinking about things that are inclusive of other thinking about sustainable dynamics, this is the kind of thinking we have to employ. But our habit is not to be satisfied by that. We want a recipe, a sound bite, a formula – and all these recipes are causing more problems than they are solving. A more resilient kind of thinking is needed and we have to try to get used to it. And actually it's fun and *enormously* practical. That's always the next question: this is all philosophical and big and abstract, but where does it touch the ground? It touches the ground everywhere, nothing could be more practical.

Where are some of the places you see it touching the ground at the moment?

They are everywhere. Economically, it's pointless to try to resolve the unemployment issue without also taking into consideration the ecological issues and also social infrastructure. We have to be looking at these from three different directions – so that not the answers we find but the questions we ask reach to different levels. So the response and the effort can be different in its nature.

On a smaller scale, every day we are faced with what I call the Renoir dilemma – how the little workings in our lives fit into a larger context. When you look at a Renoir painting from up close, there are tiny brushstrokes and as you step back you see that this blur up close actually makes sense at a distance. It's the muscle of looking at how details fit into the larger context – making breakfast, spending time with our children, the kinds of conversations we have with our colleagues and friends . . . It's that practical.

You mentioned the word 'ecological' there, which comes up frequently in Bateson's work... what do you think he meant by it?

That's a great question! We sometimes use the word 'system'. I think that for Gregory – this is out on a limb and he is not here to defend himself – ecology is any organisation of multiple parts that are acting in reaction in a co-evolutionary process with each other. An interdependent set of participants. It can be a pond. It can be the relationship between your heart, lungs, skin and environment. It can be a set of ideas that are responding to one another and compensating for one another, some are emerging, some are dying, some are composting, some are blooming. An ecology can take place in a conversation.

So we think of ecologies as rainforests, oceans, and so on, and they are. However, nature repeats its patterns and I think it's really useful to think in terms of ecologies of all sorts of things – an ecology of family, of conversation, of education

... There are multiple entities or thoughts or rules that are interrelating in response to one another.

One of the SF connections is the roots of our practice going back to his post-war research project and this real paradigm-busting idea that what might be thought of as mental illness might also be thought of as broken or disrupted patterns of communication. Do you think he gets enough credit for that? He never seems to get mentioned in histories of social constructionism, for example, and I think he was there 30 years before that.

We haven't yet begun to use his work in the way in which it can be used. So, credit, schmedit. There is so much happening in many fields, ecology, psychotherapy, anthropology, all over the information sciences. For some reason people don't like to give him that credit. I don't really know what it is. Maybe they have used a piece of his work and don't understand how it relates to the rest of it, and they don't want to attach themselves to the whole thing.

Also we have a suspicion of anything that's intellectually difficult. I don't think Gregory's work is difficult; it's just counter intuitive to our cultural paradigms. So until we open that up it may be difficult to get access to – but it's not difficult to understand. Also some Bateson fans get into this kind of sport, an idea exchange that's frankly daunting, and they do it with lots of philosophical rhetoric. The hitch is that I don't think the work is philosophical rhetoric. I don't think it's all philosophical by any means. It's biological, anthropological...the philosophers can't touch it because it's not all abstract, and the social sciences can't touch it because some of it is abstract... and that was the balance he was trying to maintain. Our culture has not been ready for the integration of ideas. Maybe it is now. We certainly need it now.

Also the movie is a great introduction, excellent Pass Notes! It makes reading the books enormously easier – a key to the door, a way in.

The movie is gradually being shown around the world. Who are you finding is coming to see it?

The audiences are so diverse. Each time I have a screening it's always sold out, there are lines down the street. I desperately wish my father was here to see that! They are really vigorous – they are men, women, young, rebels, scientists, politicians, activists.

What do you think Gregory would think about the movie and the attention?

I think he died feeling largely unheard. He used to say 'I write good books and people put them on coffee tables'. This is a sign that that's no longer the case, and that there is a thirst for this level of integration of thought and perception.

Having seen the movie, actually seeing Gregory in action was a revelation. It was so much clearer than working through the books. It's an excellent collection of ideas. It made so much more sense when I could see him speak.

In the books he doesn't draw you in, but when he speaks he does – he is so charming and so funny. He is a terrific teacher, he brings you in, and then suddenly you realise he has just destabilised every single concept you based your life on – and you have a smile on your face!

There is a sequence in the film I call the 'boot' footage, about how you perceive a geometrical shape. In that four minutes of footage he has taken down geometry, linguistics, philosophy, algebra, semantics, psychotherapy and cognition, and you come out laughing, and then about two days later it hits you – 'Oh my God!' He was such a rebel.

What are your forthcoming plans?

The promotion of the movie has become another project that I'm really enjoying. It was unexpected and a delightful surprise that at the end of showing the film you can have hundreds of people who can engage in a kind of conversation at the moment, together, about the inter-relationship of all the systems we live within, in a way that you just don't find elsewhere – it's such a privilege to be a part of that conversation. That's what I've discovered is the real gift of the movie. I am calling this portion of it 'An ecology of conversation'. It's such a treat to engage with that size of a group, and the audience is very diverse – it's a touchstone for when we all go back to our respective lives.

How can people find out more about the movie?

There is website www.anecologyofmind.com and a Facebook page which is frequently updated. A DVD release is coming, and I am setting up several tours through Europe, UK, South America and the USA hosting panels and conversations, and these will be broadcast with the film. Then we can have a public DVD release. The movie is available for academic institutional licensing from Bullfrog Films.

Thank you very much.

References

- Bateson, G. (1972). *Steps to an Ecology of Mind: Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution, and Epistemology*. Chicago: University Of Chicago Press.
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