

# Bateson @ 100: Multiple Versions of the World

## A Conference Celebrating Bateson's Centennial and His Continued Influence



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**For AERA Chaos and Complexity Special Interest Group Newsletter**

**“Reading Gregory Bateson can be dangerous for your mental health” (Mary Catherine Bateson)**

On November 20, 2004, a group of 150 people met at University of California-Berkeley's Lawrence Hall of Science in celebration of Gregory Bateson's work. Sitting atop the mountain overlooking the town of Berkeley, San Francisco Bay, and the Golden Gate Bridge, the meeting delved into reminiscences of the life of Gregory Bateson and a variety of ongoing themes and issues stemming from his work. Sitting and talking with Lois Bateson (Gregory's third wife) at the reception the evening before, her final statement to me captured the essence of this conference. Softly, yet with conviction, she looked me in the eye and said, “you know what it was about Gregory's thinking? He thought with his heart. He had a big mind, but he thought with his heart.”

The array of individuals who presented at the conference included, Nora Bateson (Gregory's youngest daughter of Lois), Mary Catherine Bateson (Gregory's oldest daughter of Margaret Mead), Jay Ogilvy (co-founder of the Global Business Network), Charles Hampden-Turner (Senior research associate in International Strategic Management, Cambridge University), Kenny Ausubel (Bioneers and Collective Heritage Institute), Carol Wilder (Associate Dean, New School University), Tyler Volk (Associate Professor, Department of Biology, New York University), Terry Deacon (Professor of Biological Anthropology and Linguistics, UC-Berkeley), Stephen Nachmanovitch (author, musician, computer artist, and educator), Jean Houston (Co-Director of the Foundation for Mind Research), Jerry Brown (former governor of California and Mayor of Oakland, California), Nathan Gray (co-founder of Oxfam and current director Earth Train International), and Peter Harries-Jones (emeritus professor, Department of Anthropology, York University, Toronto). Interspersed among the presentations were an audio-tape-slide show of Gregory's commencement speech to the University of California-Santa Clara and a preview of Nora Bateson's upcoming documentary on the life of Gregory Bateson: *That Reminds Me of a Story* (available on DVD in late 2005).



**Nora Bateson**



**Mary Catherine Bateson**

The “meat” of the conference centered around a number of themes, all of which seemed to be subsumed by Mary Catherine's discussion of *epistemological shock*. Deeply rooted in our

emotional stakes of our own versions of the world, epistemological shock was the approach Gregory Bateson took to teaching and mentoring. The human conundrum of confusing the map for the territory is what Gregory, through a variety of means, tried to undo. In his UC-Santa Clara commencement speech, he, with great humor, presented the shock in explaining how everything these graduates had learned in their past four years was wrong. What they had learned through language was to subdivide things into things creating a mistaken dualism that missed the essence of the “unity of relationships to relationships.” Mary Catherine suggested that children need to learn about paradox and logical types as ways of understanding the double binds (the dualistic conflicting messages) that we live with throughout our lives.

Schizmogogenesis, the process of separation and disconnect, permeated most of the presentations and informal discussions, with special focus by Charles Hampden-Turner. The term “schizmogogenesis” was first used to describe the rise of Nazi Germany, with obvious corollaries to the current political situation in the United States. The common schizmogogenetic splits we encounter are those of mind and body, will-power and weakness, strength and relaxation. All of which oscillate in feedback loops as in the alcoholic who goes from on-the-wagon to off-the-wagon and back again perpetuating a fundamental mind-body disconnect. Such schizmogogenetic patterns can be found in the political rhetoric of loving sacrifice combined with the reality of war in the trenches. The fundamental disconnect manifests as “moralizing our way into violence” (Hampden-Turner).

Tyler Volk’s (author of *Metapatterns: Across Time, Space, and Mind*) presentation briefly reviewed metapatterns, then delved into the notions of *creatura* and *pleuroma*. He suggested that their may be another category associated with consciousness, which for a lack of a better term called *humana*.



**Jerry Brown**

In 1976, Governor Jerry Brown appointed Gregory Bateson to the Board of Regents of the University of California, which was truly a skillful political epistemological shock. In Jerry Brown’s first post-midnight meeting with Gregory, he learned that “the part cannot control the whole,” which translated into “humans can’t control the biosphere.” In essence, much like Lois Bateson’s description of Gregory as thinking with his heart, Jerry Brown described Bateson as the epitome of “caring and thinking with clarity.”

Gregory Bateson was and still is hard to pigeon-hole. His thinking spanned many disciplines. However, at the core, he was concerned with unity, with approaches to thinking that connected and avoided the dangerous path of disconnect and schizmogogenesis. These are ideas, which we all need to ponder.

### **Gregory Bateson’s books:**

Bateson, G. (1936; 1958). *Naven* (2nd ed.). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.



**Charles Hampden-Turner**



**Jean Houston & Tyler Volk**

Bateson, G. (1972). *Steps to an ecology of mind: The new information sciences can lead to a new understanding of man*. New York: Ballantine Books. (back in print)

Bateson, G. (1979). *Mind and nature: A necessary unity*. New York: Bantam Books. (back in print)

Bateson, G., & Bateson, M. C. (1987). *Angels fear: Towards an epistemology of the sacred*. New York: Macmillan.

Bateson, G. (Donaldson, R. E. [Ed.]). (1991). *A sacred unity: Further steps to an ecology of mind*. New York: Cornelia & Michael Bessie Book/Harper Collins.

**The conference proceedings and videos will be available as a DVD set:**

\$75 plus \$5 shipping and handling

Proceeds will benefit the completion of the upcoming film about Bateson's life: *That Reminds Me of a Story*.

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