

The Milton H. Erickson Foundation NEWSLETTER



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Remembering Gregory Bateson

Opening with a champagne toast between John Weakland and Jay Haley, to the memory of this great scientist, whom Haley calls the social scientist of his generation, *Remembering Gregory Bateson* is a loving and fact-filled tribute. It includes an overview of the historical status of this eminent contributor to the fields of communication, psychology, psychotherapy, social psychology, biology and anthropology — among others — as well as interesting and personal remembrances.

Bateson was a highly innovative and creative thinker whose influence far transcended the actual work he did. In fact, even Weakland and Haley seem to be in awe over the scope of this man's genius, contributions and ideas. Holding the book, *Steps to an Ecology of the Mind* which is a collection of Bateson's

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papers, the two men, luminaries on their own merits, share commentary on the magnitude of his contributions. They then agree that whatever is said about Bateson's sweeping ideas, there are whole other ideas that are not even addressed. His ability to raise questions, to refocus ideas to fundamental concepts obviously provided a framework for the examination of the nature of mankind. Bateson's framework which stimulates an ongoing quest for knowledge, still provides a valuable tool decades after his initial work.

Bateson had a lengthy and highly productive collaboration with Margaret Mead and the two of them made a comprehensive and still valuable study of the culture of Bali. Weakland pointed out that Bateson thought on two levels — either very abstract or very specific. He was not easily able to fill in the "middle-ground." Mead once remarked that in her and Bateson's collaboration, one of her functions was to fill in that middle ground. Pieces of the original film of these Balinese studies are interspersed in this part of the video. The Mead and Bateson study of trance states in Balinese dancing had led Bateson to Erickson. That friendship and collaboration was instrumental in Haley's work with Erickson and his own study of hypnosis. Bateson's ongoing interest in hypno-

sis and trance later influenced Haley's own work. Bateson once mused, "What is trance?" a question of clarification. As Haley thought about this, he knew he wanted to study and write about the interpersonal side of hypnosis.

Indicative of the interesting conversational style of this video, Weakland and Haley remark how their own interest in studying the use of film and the impact of film on the viewer is one of the common bonds between them and Bateson. Haley had been studying films, analyzing them from a Freudian perspective, still a useful framework. Bateson used films as a vehicle for study in a more social context. Weakland's incisive abilities contributed to making this part of the project even more valuable. The two continued to speak about other areas in which Bateson asked provocative questions, which stimulated their future work. There was considerable freedom in the Communication Project which allowed basic work on the understanding of the importance of hierarchies, influence, manipulation and power, and how these are achieved within a social structure. In this video, even the different dialects used in a power structure, the differences between those who have power and those who do not, in families as well as in society at large are mentioned. Weakland and Haley each made significant contributions in this broad

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aspect of family therapy.

Anthropological studies led to Bateson's interest in psychiatry in 1949. In 1951 he co-authored with Jurgen Ruesch *Communication: The Social Matrix of Psychiatry*, which still contains basic principles for understanding psychiatric ideas. Bateson received funding from the Rockefeller Foundation for his seminal project on communication, which then developed into a long-term undertaking lasting from 1952 to 1962. The initial grant was given after Bateson met with Chester Barnard, a maverick in the field of organizational psychology. From Bateson's landmark communication project came a large number of innovative ideas and studies about specific aspects of the human condition, including work on the nature of schizophrenia. The project changed the face, practice and theories of psychotherapy and marked the beginning of family therapy as we know it, as well as giving broad understandings and insights about people overall.

Bateson worked in a style, which was creative and certainly innovative. The standard way of learning about an idea was to examine data and produce a hypothesis, which was then tested. Bateson reversed that. He believed in beginning with a fundamental idea about the world, an idea that had been developed by mankind

over the eons, and then going to the data. He did not think significant ideas could be reached starting with an examination of data. As Haley describes, after evaluating the gathered data, "you produce a new fundamental idea or modify the old one. It is a different process of reasoning." This paradigm shift perhaps remains one of Bateson's most powerful legacies.

A man on the cutting edge of science, Bateson was a visiting professor at respected universities throughout the United States and even a Regent for the University of California systems. However, he was never a tenured professor perhaps because his innovative and creative way of thinking did not fit well in academia. In fact, Bateson was a provocative and influential man, a creative and confusing thinker. Both agree that if he were sitting with them, "you and I would shift to a higher level of discourse. Because that's what he did. He forced you to work at your highest level of thinking. To have a research director who does that, what more could you ask?" Indeed, what more can a student of anthropology, psychiatry, communication, therapy, or thinking ask?

Reviewed by:

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