

An Ecology of Relationships

The importance of mutual learning.

A WIDER LENS Blog by Dr. Kenneth Silvestri

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"It takes two to know one."

—Gregory Bateson

When I was a graduate student at Columbia University, I always carried Gregory Bateson's book, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind** with me. In several chapters, Bateson used what he called "Metalogues", a dialogue between a father and daughter. What follows is my metalogue about an ecology of "Relationships."



"All The Grouchos"

Source: Artist, Natasha Rabin (c)

Daughter: Dad, why do you talk so much about the importance of Relationships?

Father: Hmm, good question, I remember hearing that to know oneself you need to be in relationships.

D: Does that mean we will eventually know ourselves better through relationships?

F: Well, we all have that potential.

D: What stops us?

F: Viewing our world as having many separate parts with injurious consequences such as narrow-minded education, unequal distribution of wealth, and discrimination to mention a few disconcerting outcomes.

D: Whew! Ok, can you show me what that means?

F: Here is an example that I learned from Aikido, which you know is the martial art that I practice. Put your fist out and push against my fist. As I put pressure on your fist, what are you doing?

D: Putting about the same amount of pressure on your fist. Not a real good feeling, since we seem to be in a stalemate.

F: Ok, I am now putting put less pressure, what are you now doing?

D: I reduced my pressure too it feels a little safer!

F: Well force can follow force, but it can also develop harmony.

D: I see, then pushing slowly and with less force allows for the other person to push less and in a gentler way.

F: Kind of how nature works.

D: That is a big jump. I don't get it.

F: Well if you look at the problems I mentioned before you can trace them from screwing around with nature.

D: (Laughing), Are you saying don't mess with mother nature?

F: At least we need to recognize how things are all interdependent in the natural world.

D: In what way Dad?

F: You see, what we are talking about are "conflicts," that hinder our journey toward mutually learning and respecting each other, which is the root of today's needed antiracist movement and the reassessing of so many of our institutions and behaviors.

D: I do not necessarily like conflict.

F: I can understand that, but in nature conflict is neither bad nor good. It just is and can be the grist for creativity. When we understand that, we can practice pushing and harmonizing our relationships in a more beneficial way.

D. Ah I get it!

F: You see, we make up our reality from our own unique perspective and then make assumptions about it. I really began to understand this when I went to the museum of Holography.

D: You mean 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, and we cut that negative in half what happens?

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

F: I guess I did, 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. It reminds me how great artists have always been able to improvise and describe larger possibilities. 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 and artwork are worldly.

D: Why do you think that is so?

F: It depends a lot about "being" with rather than doing things to nature. This allows for an awareness of being part of larger contexts.

D: We must do certain things, or we might not survive.

F: Yes, we need to, but if we understand how the consequences of our behavior affects others, we can appreciate how reciprocity and life can be sacred.

D: How can people start thinking this way?

F: There are many things in our world that seem to be contradictory. They are called paradoxes; and are seemingly all around us. They are the source of humor and in some ways pain, but they are different parts of the same thing, like the yin and yang, not recognizing this can stifle our relationships.

D: I thought you said that nature has no opposites.

F: Yes, it really does not, but we humans especially in industrial nations tend to separate our world as if it is the only way to make sense of it. This can create and perpetuate opposites in our mind, missing how nature works and not resolving those inevitable paradoxes.

D: This seems heavy Dad, like people not understanding each other or climate problems not taken seriously.

F: Good point, the consequences can end up in what we call a "Double Bind."

D: Being between a rock and a hard place?

F: Exactly!

D: Let's get back to how relationships can help. You said that it takes two to know one, what if two people lie to each other or cannot get along?

F: Another good point, that is why we also need "many to know many" learning from each other so we can have support resolving those double binds.

D: What about fear and anger in relationships?

F: Our emotions are like our muscles; we have the choice of being tense and heavy or light and relaxed. Fear can be redirected like in our Aikido exercise and anger can be assertively expressed.

D: That is a lesson worth learning.

F: Yes, which takes collaboration skills based on win-win ways rather than win-lose encounters.

D: Meaning?

F: Meaningful relationships are like a volley on a ping pong table. If I spike the ball, we both lose if the rules are win-win.

D: How?

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: Another way to avoid double binds!

F: Yes, but I would include being caring, trustworthy, recognizing our connections and taking the time to be passionate about each other and our surroundings.

D: Sort of like the hologram.

F: Well yes, again it depends on not seeing nature as a bunch of fragments, which is an illusion. In other words, we cannot separate ourselves from each other and our surroundings, rather we can recognize and understand our interdependency.

D: I am sorry Dad; I was dozing and missed this last part.

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

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

**See "An Ecology of Mind: A Daughter's Portrait of Gregory Bateson," a film by Nora Bateson, (Bullfrog Films).*