

The Map Is Surely Not the Territory

Implications of what we can learn from COVID-19.

A WIDER LENS Blog by Dr. Kenneth Silvestri

Posted by Psychology Today on March 16, 2020

During a recent tai chi class, we had a discussion of how the form we all practice at the same time manifests itself within each participant. In other words, how do our individual experiences come together to create this incredible unity that we all feel in different yet similar ways?

Anthropologist Gregory Bateson once told me that, "The proof of the pudding is in the tasting," when I asked him how I can understand wholeness. He would also say, as so many others who contemplated this question, that, "The map is not the territory, and the name is not the thing named." It took me some time to figure out how important and wise it is to understand that phrase. If you focus on it closely, it is the segue to knowing that it is through relationships and the resulting shared information, both verbally and nonverbally, that allow us to continually pursue new possibilities.

Nora Bateson, Gregory's daughter, coined the word "Symmathesy" to describe this process as a verb which she defines "to generate mutual learning through interaction." This happens even despite our different temperaments and learning styles. This synchrony when we are harmoniously connected in conversation, in and out of awareness, supports and nurtures a unity based on our ever-changing contexts and most of all our interdependency.



"The name is not the thing": Artist, Natasha Rabin (c)

A Collective Awareness

We are now in an unenviable and frightening crisis regarding COVID-19. Beyond the disruption, pain, and devastating loss of life, it makes us aware of what has gone unnoticed for much too long. We are systemically, globally, and ecologically interdependent. Using the same paradigm or tools that produced this failure to now remediate the situation will only repeat a similar episode from

failed old habits of narrow cause-and-effect thinking. This is in stark contrast to recognizing instead that we have access to an ecological understanding of how our world works.

Top-down bureaucracy, egotistical defenses, and denied environmental problems will not cure or prevent future chaos. This in no way is meant not to acknowledge and respect the dedicated professionals and all others who are working hard to alleviate this crisis. But it points to a future where we can make use of our knowledge to avoid the systemic injury and pain that is occurring. Gregory also mentioned many times that, "The major problems in the world are the result of the difference between how nature works and the way people think." This pointedly reveals not only what is not happening but what needs to occur. It is the zooming in and out with a lens that sees the present situation simultaneously as part of the wider contextual implications that will maintain our existence.

Moving Forward

What does this reveal for the present and future? We need to advocate for a collaborative approach to health care and living. This cannot be in isolation, as is obvious today with fragmentation and unequal access and distribution of needed resources. All of us and our institutions that educate, i.e. medical, media, religion, climate, government, and socio-economic entities, are interdependent. We need new ways to ensure that this is understood and of utmost importance. It needs to be allowed to exist and interface without barriers.

A child, for instance, is within the context of family, schools, and community. Mental and emotional issues should be dealt with using a wider all-encompassing lens. Climate and environmental patterns need to include all aspects of nature from the animals that feed within their habitat to the drops of rain that nurture forest growth. All this should be driven by mutual learning and support for novel possibilities, which may not all be predictable but will evolve through ecological processes as it is in nature. When we interact in win-win relationships, there is that sense of liminality, a space or transition where meaningful interactions and even improvisation become the norm.

Caring for Each Other

We all have a role, no matter what status has been previously imposed upon us, to work together to avoid the current unpreparedness and inequities that have created this injurious domino episode. It is time that we all take care of each other by dialoguing, using more verbs rather than labels and learning from each other to allow the patterns that connect us to come to a healthy fruition. Be safe and well!