

The Ecology of Making Sense

Personal Perspective: Exploring a wider world.

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"My Wife and My Mother-in-Law"

Source: By Ely Hill, Public Domain

"The rules of the universe that we think we know are buried deep in our processes of perception." —

Gregory Bateson

"We are living in a culture entirely hypnotized by the illusion of time, in which the so-called present moment is felt as nothing but an infinitesimal hairline between an all-powerfully causative past and an absorbingly important future." —Alan Watts

Somewhere in my late adolescence, it dawned on me that the world is mentally constructed. I was looking at a photo of a woman's face and was asked if I saw an older woman or a younger one. I identified the younger one but blinked my eye for a fleeting moment and saw an older woman. It was mind-boggling.

Later in life when I became a teacher, I would use this and other optical illusions for discussions about how one's temperament, family of origin, and learning-to-learn style influence different

perceptions. For myself, I grew up in a very red-brick working-class city of Paterson, NJ. Speaking of how one's legacy bakes you, I went to a neighborhood grammar school where my grandfather, mother, father, brother, and other significant adults attended with the same resources and curriculum. They even had the same teachers who were by the time I had them near death.

Metaphorically it was the end of an era, inkwells were gone and ballpoint pens were no longer sinful. When I later studied anthropology in graduate school, a linguistic anthropologist said without previously knowing me, you must be from Paterson. "Hot daug," I replied, "You are right on."

I am not saying we are forever stuck in a specific worldview, sometimes we need variation, however adapting to one framework at the exclusion of another can be harmful. My experience at P.S. 10, consisted of a deep-rooted view of the world that was driven by cause-and-effect reasoning with little opportunity to step out of the box.

Unfortunately, a large proportion of individuals in our society have become vulnerable to manipulation, especially when exposed on a regular basis to misleading facts with limited context. The result in not seeing the forest beyond the trees. This construct of reality is supported by an imposed linear way of viewing life. It is driven by content and based on the belief that the whole is equal to the sum of the parts with little wiggle room for dialogue.

Unfortunately, this framework can be blindly enforced and justified as to how things should be. In my case, at 19 years old, I read *Siddhartha* by Herman Hess and recognized that there was another framework based on context and immediately switched my major from business administration to philosophy. I did away with my best hot-combed Peter Gunn haircut that I had religiously received from my trusted barber, Damascus Sam. Yes, there is another way to understand that the whole can be more than the sum of the parts and even Sam sensed it when he said without any malice, "Enjoy the journey, Kenny." This is how the ancient Greeks viewed the earth, Gaia being an entity in and of itself.

Is adhering to limited perceptions at the expense of seeing the whole picture the source of our current polarized society? This has enormous implications traceable as far back as Greco-Roman antiquity. Western society evolved to focus on an industrial complex that molded its educational, economic, and health systems to support and maintain a cause-and-effect model. The problem is that models are tautologies, i.e. $A+B=C$. Gaia or quantum physics doesn't work that way. Any woodsman or hiker knows that nature is both simultaneously beautiful and messy, as is life.

How do we make sense and live harmoniously with nature and amongst ourselves? Cracks are now appearing in the prevalent linear model. Climate and environmental problems are not resolved by prepackaged solutions nor are most illnesses. Economic disparities are frustrating the future aspirations of large segments of our population. Racial, class, gender, and diversity advancement are threatened and justified by narrow reasoning and accusations. Mind/body problems such as obesity, depression, anxiety, cardiac and neurological dysfunctions are now admitted, by the American Medical Association to have an etiology based on stress. The late anthropologist Gregory Bateson said, "The major problems in the world are the result of the difference between how nature works and the way people think."

How do we use all our senses simultaneously within a world that is still struggling to justify fragmentation? Simply put, any context to evolve needs to interface with another context. It is much easier now with modern technology to recognize our need to make connections with all the parts that make up our environment, but we need to understand how these connections can nurture our interdependency. In what manner for instance does a child flow through different contexts of family, school, media, nutrition, and community? Yes, there are and will be many contradictions within a wider perspective however, paradoxes are the source of all humor and creativity. If aestheticism, the human metaphor for nature, is not allowed to emerge then wider perspectives and new possibilities will be stifled.

Making sense is celebrating and accepting our complexity. It is a mindful process, enhanced by having a zooming-in-and-out lens that perceives the parts of life simultaneously and interdependent, not static or separate. This way of widening one's lens is to provide different avenues that manifest solutions to maintain healthy living. It is a process that fosters hidden patterns of resources profoundly expressed by Nora Bateson, who coined the word "aphanipoiesis," which is "how life coalesces toward vitality in unseen ways." The resulting consequences are an ecology of making sense of our world.

Here are some suggestions and prompts to help you explore making sense of the world from an ecological perspective. Go over them, share them collaboratively in small groups, and look for ways to foster cross-contextual dialogue:

Start by asking what differences will make a difference that you would like for yourself, your family, and your community.

What is it that you are not getting in life that causes concern and stops you from making your life work the way you would like it to?

What insights, sensations, modalities, and strengths arise as you consider your concern from a wider perspective?

How can different institutions and contexts that educate work together?

Start a short poem or narrative with the phrase: *If I can make changes in my life and community it would be_____.*