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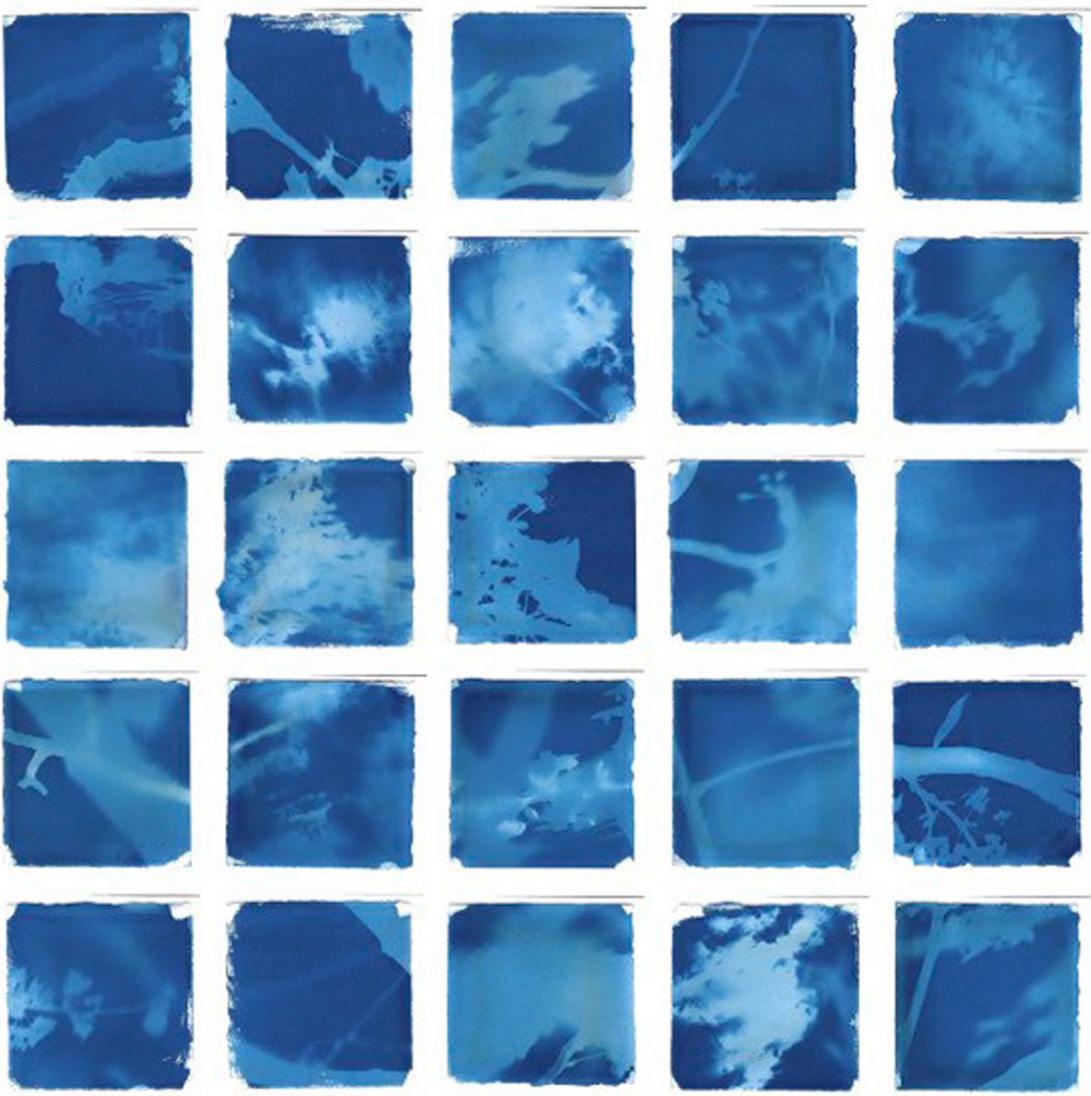

an anthology of warm data

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warm data:
resolving injurious adaptations and encouraging awareness of our interdependencies

In conversation, we can hold thoughts and reflect on problems sometimes for hours on end…Human thought is inherently dialogic.
– David Graeber and David Wengrow from The Dawn of Everything

Collaboration *is the readiness to show up and do what needs to be done, in improvisation and mutual learning.*
– Nora Bateson

IF YOU CAN RELATE TO OUR WORLD being an ecological process, one where we and all non-human entities are interdependent, then it makes sense to view the totality of nature as more than the sum of its parts — all have a role in supporting our planet. Yet at Public School in Paterson, NJ, I was taught that the whole was merely equal to the sum of its parts. This paradigm, still very dominant, is mistakenly based on the theory that we function separately.

looking at my reflection

in the yearly shiny still shellac-smelling wooden floors
near shoe-like worn impressions on aging slate steps
bolted wooden desks in rows
inkwell holes surrounded by sepia-coated stains
with carved ancient initials
musty green painted walls
misted by the piano-shaped sizzling radiators

bordered by Palmer Method alphabet cards
above the dusty chalk-covered blackboards
that I could not duplicate with my left-handedness
like a rubber stamp as
my pinky finger created a fuzzy trail of my penmanship
as I stared with guilt at
the half-finished portrait of George Washington
in front of all this regimentation
stood my teachers, grade after grade,
saying "the whole is equal to the sum of its parts."

Seeing things as separate parts has been made implicit in our culture. Institutions, driven by ego, power, and competition, sustain this view systemically. Politicians and media outlets capitalize on it, focusing on people who are easily manipulated. And our language enshrines it—words and nouns can be used as devious tools, targeting especially the most vulnerable –which may very well be at the root of our problems.

"time" as a noun is defined as the indefinite continued progress of existence.
time is a solace.
as a verb, when (something) should happen or be done.
such as comfort with family is timed for tomorrow,
i am intrigued by how life can be improved by using less nouns
which always creates static labels,
whereas verbs live in the world of context
where we have room to question and grow,
whereas "time" as a noun
its purpose is facts
a word void of a thing
little to do with relationship opportunities,
while verbs avoid maps and explore terrains
like darts thrown randomly,
without a singular purpose but to land
allowing us to adjust our fallibilities,
making sense of the gift of conflict
the grist of creativity,
of where those darts may have landed
as is in nature's timeless manner

Focusing on parts also denies the existence of an insidious mix of emotional issues and societal atrocities: pollution, educational standardization, misguided health services, disproportionate wealth, discrimination, the current polarization of our society. All have been exacerbated by the pandemic. Does it make sense to go back to “normal” when these injurious patterns have never been resolved and have become even more obvious during these past two years?

Those seeking to make beneficial systemic changes, however, find themselves pushed into unexpected double binds and too often these are created by the ways we communicate. Despite a human instinct to connect harmoniously, we fall prey to lies and generalized fears, e.g. "socialism will take away your rights and guns.” And the institutional psychologies of our culture are mostly antithetical to perceiving interdependency. You would think that communicating should be a natural skill for everybody, yet after 50 years of facilitating communication as an educator, therapist and community organizer, I have witnessed countless contexts where relationships are sabotaged due to poor communication.

To help us dissolve these double binds, we can explore a terrain of communication based on relationships, going beyond words and maps. This approach will require us to tend to our nervous system, as most communication is actually nonverbal, driven by a strong biological urge to connect. While our mind/body potential moves in and out of awareness, we can increasingly tune in to not causing harm to others. If we don’t pay attention though, it will function automatically, adapting to imposed patterns that can easily become addictive and resistant to change.

One temporary way out of the quandary is to alter our breathing, a proven segue to getting unstuck. I use a method called Coherent Breathing, developed by Steve Elliott — six seconds inhale, six seconds exhale, while holding a positive thought. This practice activates and soothes the Vagus Nerve, which is the largest part of our parasympathetic nervous system; the nerve of compassion and security. When the Vagus Nerve is compromised through being revved up too often, it becomes the origin of many emotional issues such as paranoia, anxiety, depression and poor relationships.

A more lasting way I’ve found to help our nervous systems function properly, however, is the healing process of caring for each other through mutual learning and sharing stories. No expectations, just letting the flow of collaboration naturally happen. This can lead to a wider experience of interdependency. I have long been a proponent of collaborative decision-

making, and am indebted to the work of Gregory Bateson and Paul Byers.[1] They both taught me the value of systems thinking and communication theory. And recently I became a Warm Data host, which not only rejuvenated and reaffirmed my work as a systemic thinker, but also created a wider perspective for fostering a sense of interdependency.

Gathering warm data involves a human-centered process based on interdependent relationships. This differs from standard ways of collecting cold content-driven information that have little room for empathy. The term "warm data" was coined by Gregory Bateson's daughter, Nora Bateson, President of the International Bateson Institute[2], who describes it as "information about the interrelationships that integrate elements of a complex system."

We are all complex individuals, and what feels so inviting when doing a Warm Data process is that we can share our own unique stories that connect to others' stories, within an ecological wholeness that is reflected in all that exists. Sharing my stories and listening to others share theirs, I've realized how beneficial it is to learn from each other in our quest for both self-fulfillment and a sense of interdependent belonging. Stories and metaphors prime our subconscious, that collective holographic reservoir of all that was ever said, good, bad, or witnessed.[3]

Here's a story I wrote that originally came up from my subconscious while I was taking the Warm Data training:

> *Willie Mays was my childhood hero. I followed his stats religiously, imitated his style of running, and chased down fly balls with his famous patented basket catch. I realize now, many years later, that his uniqueness was a lesson in harvesting possibilities.*
>
> *Willie is a systemic embodiment of a "liminal" master in perpetual motion. He never repeated his skills in the same manner, but rather adapted them in different situations. Watching Willie was like experiencing a holographic improvisation. There was a holistic essence about him that was more than the sum of choices that he utilized. He kept evolving by learning and unlearning, by using a peripheral vision that allowed him to see simultaneously the larger intertwining contexts: his teammates' capabilities, the ever-changing moments to resolve the inevitable paradoxes of what and who was on first base, (apologies to Abbott and Costello from my hometown of Paterson, N.J.) as well as the attributes of his pitchers and the opposing batters.*

> *All this was miraculously exemplified during the 1954 World Series at the unusual, nearly rectangular-shaped, Polo Grounds Stadium, which once adorned the Upper East Side of Manhattan. Vic Wertz of the opposing Cleveland team hit what could have been the game-winning towering drive to that spacious center field. Mays, who was playing very shallow, like a samurai warrior contemplating how to use all his senses, turned at the crack of the bat. Head down, he ran to 425 feet beyond home plate, timing his seemingly impossible behind-the-shoulder catch. Willie immediately twirled around off balance, throwing the ball with amazing accuracy, distance, and the usual flare of losing his cap. He stopped the runners from scoring (one of whom was the famous Larry Doby, also from my hometown of Paterson, NJ), and the Giants went on to win the World Series.*

I've seen many examples where gathering warm data, had it been done, could have made a difference. Over my years as a family therapist and at one time Director of School Improvement Programs for the State of New Jersey, I have been involved as an advocate with several urban school projects to integrate the community into the schooling process. Public education concerns are much like the weather, constantly scrutinized, seldom resolved. What I encountered both then and now, however, is that most of these attempts fail due to rigid double binds that could have been avoided.

Not only have I learned from these experiences, but I have unlearned what it is that doesn't work in making a difference. Several years ago, I was involved in a large federally funded project, which was the basis for my doctoral dissertation. I was asked to research a "community involvement program" with a "low-achieving" urban middle school. The program aimed to provide community services within the school setting, and to integrate available resources into the classroom curriculum, e.g. historical information, health services, local artisans, public library, social services.

Meeting the program's objectives would require structural and attitudinal changes so that the needs of everyone — students, teachers, families, businesses in the immediate community — could be addressed. These changes were agreed to be important and welcomed wholeheartedly by all involved, yet the process was constantly stifled. People were not allowed to fully share their concerns. Instead the linear bureaucracy of the school context used only short surveys about proposed programs, to be used only by school personnel. "Yes, but…" became the theme of the responses.

The teachers' union was against uncertified community people "teaching" in the school, curriculum mandates were based on required standardized tests, and insurance issues hindered physical involvement of non-school personnel in the building. A double bind that separated and prevented any viable relationships between the school and community stifled potential. Shared decision-making was difficult to put in place without a forum for mutual learning about the many interfacings between the school and community. What could have been a collaborative experience became one of adversarial communication that stopped the program from being implemented.

What I learned from this experience is that to help dissolve such impasses, all involved in any shared context would need to be part of a process where they could learn about each other and their roles through stories and dialogue. This is the only way that the deep hidden needs of both school and community could be expressed. All contexts carry unique patterns of class, ethnicity, and diversity within them. Without the sharing and understanding of the relationships that bind them together, however, unresolved paradoxical issues will solidify into double binds that stifle any sensing of the existing interdependency.

From this moment on, my involvement with school improvement efforts has been based on integrating input from family, school, and community into the learning process. Although this was not called "Warm Data," it consisted of many hours of sharing stories and perspectives empathetically. This process emerged into what is now called "Community-based Schools," and integrated social services and curriculum to perceive the ecological essence of those involved.

It's an ongoing battle, though, since the institutional psychology of public schools and current reactionary politics can still frustrate this type of collaboration. But reform movements are occurring and succeeding. Many cities have created smaller schools, better means of citizen involvement, and equity. New questions are emerging, such as "Why can't all public schools be charter-like and decentralized to meet the needs of our children and their families" and "How do we create better parent/community collaboration." These are setting wonderful examples for change. We can and should learn from them.

Past collaborative reform efforts have given us many research-based resources, but if there is one thing that I could see making a difference, it would be a process of gathering "information about the interrelationships that integrate elements of a complex system." Warm Data could be an integral part in this context.

Mutual learning, in safe spaces, encourages recognition of our interdependency. Our relationships are complex and much more than the result of mere cause and effect. It takes two to know one and many to know many—this includes all parts that make up our world. When we focus on and pay heed to what is occurring in between these parts, we can avoid falling prey to imposed dichotomies that perpetuate separateness, solipsism, and fragmentation. This is how the yin and yang of nature functions. It is messy and beautiful at the same time, providing many contexts in which to be creative.

Over the past 40 years, I have worked with hundreds of families in crisis, every case different like every snowflake covering a winter's meadow. When I work with families in therapy, I have family members share their different perspectives of presenting problems. Recently I had two parents and their three adult children in my office. I won't get into their backgrounds except to mention their presenting problem was "communication discord". What concerned me most was how they had been continually repeating roles, patterns, and issues that in turn produced painful grievances and concerns. There was blame and narrow views of "this caused that." I struggled at first with how I could motivate them to share their perspectives in a caring manner. I thought of my conflict resolution skills gained from many years practicing of Aikido and my recent Warm Data training. Aikido, a martial art based on harmony, is based on mutual learning about how to resolve confrontation, and Warm Data emphasizes sharing stories.

Being that I'm Italian, I had just bought a loaf of bread during my break. I am not sure what possessed me to do this, but I placed the bread on the floor and asked each of them to describe five different contexts of using bread that were unique to their own perspective on life, using personal stories, humor, poems.[4] After some time, the family provided over 25 poetic narrative scenarios, many of which I could not have imagined doing with my beloved bread. The tension subsided, and there was much laughter. Most importantly, there was mutual learning and numerous "I never knew that about you" moments. Subsequent therapy sessions consisted of new dialogues that created a sense of wisdom for this family about how they were connected. The pain of not having allowed those complex pieces of unpredictable information to be shared is what had brought them to therapy. Like a work of art, they created new meaning for the future.

When we understand more about the contexts of our relationships, what previously seemed to be unknown can emerge, and this is how evolution occurs. Who can deny our need to move into a healthier world? The key here

is to create wider perspectives that celebrate our complex interactions, using all our senses to zoom in and out. This avoids our being static — each context is at the same time part of wider contexts — helping us recognise how we and everything in our world are interdependent.

Sharing our stories, we can experience symmathesy. This is a word Nora Bateson uses to describe the "[generating of] mutual learning contexts through the process of interaction between multiple variables in a living entity." Nora also points to the way in which " life coalesces toward vitality in unseen ways," a process she calls "aphanipoiesis."[5] The sharing of stories expands possibilities: what was thought to be impossible yet which may only be unseen or unheard and waiting to emerge. These are "transcontextual" descriptions, allowing us to produce new perspectives from novel inquiry. We can then use these improvisational explorations to help resolve injurious situations.

We are living in unprecedented times — it is obvious that we can no longer rely on the social/political reality that existed prior to this pandemic. We need to create new relevant ways that benefit our children and ourselves. I believe it is essential to respect and actively participate in our ecological existence and there are warm ways to do this.

We can support small diverse communication forums to engage in questioning and mutual learning. This can then help change the narratives of our education institutions. We can inquire about dominant views that have produced inequitable and hurtful situations. Interactions can encourage a wider systemic view, and the resulting Warm Data can celebrate our interdependence and dissolve polarization.

We can practice communication, starting with our significant multigenerational relationships as well as dialoguing with children, their caretakers and other community members. We can experience communication as a win-win volley exploring the interactive actions and behaviors, giving new personalized meaning to such words as empathy, care, respect, trust, sharing, and being non-judgmental.

We can create safe environments to explore possibilities , using poetry, humor, and other aesthetic resources to help us improvise and better navigate paradoxes, especially at liminal moments or gaps. We can use caring touch where appropriate. Touch helps release oxytocin, the "cuddle" hormone, producing comfort and happiness, which is something we can never get enough of. These will all help with transitioning us out of the restrictions the pandemic has imposed on us.

We can learn to understand our fallibility — there may be a constant temptation to adapt to existing injurious patterns, instead of trusting our ability to adjust, We can learn to learn and unlearn, as in the harmonious martial art of Aikido's "thousand years" techniques, and in the ebb and flow that nature offers us. This is something we may never totally master, but it is worth trying every day.

This article is an expansion of my Psychology Today blog post: A Post Pandemic Perspective, Using Warm Data: A Process to Address Emotional and Relational Needs, July 5, 2021

NOTES

1 See my Medium article *How to Widen Your Lens and become a Systemic Thinker and Communicator: in memory of Paul Byers* https://medium.com/illumination-curated/how-to-widen-your-lens-and-become-a-systemic-thinker-and-communicator-in-memory-of-paul-byers-276516bba6f0

2 https://batesoninstitute.org

3 Carl Jung felt that resolving the ever-present conflicts, contradictions, or paradoxes was an important segue to self and relational fulfillment.

4 Poems are a profound segue to mutually sharing and learning from each other when we are feeling down and/or having the sensation of being stuck, especially in times of crisis. Contradictions can be humorous when pain is not minimized or condoned. As John Fox, author of "Poetic Medicine," asserts, "a way to weather the storm of paradoxes is to express oneself courageously through poetry."

5 Nora Bateson, medium.com, November 5, 2021