

Gregory Bateson
An Ecology of Mind



GREGORY BATESON: AN ECOLOGY OF MIND

In Charlottesville & at the
University of Virginia
April 10-12, 2013

With Nora Bateson
& Stephen Nachmanovitch

Organized by
Stephen Nachmanovitch & Ira Bashkow

Two-part main event:

April 11 • 7-9 PM at the **Vinegar Hill Theatre**: Nora Bateson's award-winning film, *An Ecology of Mind: A Daughter's Portrait of Gregory Bateson*, with audience discussion.

April 12 • 1-4 PM • Symposium on the continuing impact of Gregory Bateson's ideas, with a multidisciplinary panel, and audience discussion, at the **University of Virginia, Brooks Hall**, followed by a reception. Moderated by Ira Bashkow. See below for the list of panelists. Free & open to the public.

Additional events:

April 10 • 12:30 - 1:30 PM • Special preview presentation at the UVa Medical Center Hour, Jordan Hall. Moderated by Daniel Becker. Free and open to the public.

April 11 • 9-11 AM • Showing for local high school students, hosted by Tandem Friends School.

ABOUT BATESON

by Stephen Nachmanovitch

My colleagues and I are happy to help bring to Charlottesville and the University of Virginia a series of events celebrating the legacy and continuing impact of my friend and mentor, Gregory Bateson.

Bateson was born in England in 1904 and died in California in 1980. He was one of those people impossible to put into a niche. Author of *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, *Mind and Nature*, and other books, Bateson was a pivotal thinker of the 20th century. His work ranged across the worlds of anthropology, philosophy, systems theory, psychology, biology, aesthetics and other fields. Though his career and contributions ranged across many fields – “interdisciplinary” or “transdisciplinary” doesn’t tell half the story – he steadfastly pursued a unitive vision, revealing underlying patterns that knit the living world together.

Most people have not heard of Gregory Bateson, but we constantly use ideas he developed or enriched. We have heard of learning to learn, we have heard of framing, we have heard of double binds, of family therapy, of co-evolution. Thirty years after his death much of his work is now beginning to be fully appreciated by a wider public. His ideas have broad implications for how we live, think, and communicate in the rapidly changing world of the 21st century.

Bateson drew upon an astounding range of experience: from biology in the 1920s to anthropology in New Guinea, and then in Bali in the 1930s collaborating with his first wife, Margaret Mead, where he pioneered visual anthropology, using film and photography to systematically and minutely explore dimensions of nonverbal communication in Balinese culture. In the 1940s and 50s, he participated in the ground-breaking Macy Conferences that gave rise to cybernetics and systems thinking, providing a formal framework for seeing the texture of life as a vast recursive interplay of information and communication. In the 1950s, he worked in a VA mental hospital with schizophrenics and alcoholics, elucidating the multi-layered and recursive nature of human communication, whether it be everyday, pathological, or creative. His work and that of his colleagues inspired the development of family therapy. He deepened our awareness of how all creatures learn and communicate on multiple levels and contexts through studies of play in otters, studies of learning in dolphins.

In the 1960s, he explored how our ways of perceiving color the world – our hidden assumptions and unexamined premises. He delved into the roots of the ecological crisis and its related addictions. He said “The major problems of the world today are due to the difference between how nature works and the way people think.” Perhaps our biggest task is to learn to shift our ways of thinking to incorporate greater awareness of the living systems of which we are part, and Bateson is one of the guides on that path.

Gregory’s father, the biologist William Bateson, who invented the word *genetics*, prided himself on being an atheist, but read the Bible to his sons at the breakfast table “lest they become empty-headed atheists.” This set the tone for one of the major themes in Gregory’s life: education as balance. A scientist who was steeped in poetry and art, he pushed himself to explore deeper into the twin realms of aesthetics and religion. As an educator, he was interested in putting the *uni-* into university. Scientists needed to learn from art, artists needed to learn from science. He taught psychiatric residents at the same time he was teaching young beatnik artists at San Francisco Art Institute, and giving each of them a dose of what the other knew – lest they become empty-headed psychiatrists or artists. He said that the practice of any art or science requires both rigor AND imagination, and that people who excel in one of these need a dose of the other.

In the 1970s, when he was a Regent of the University of California system, he wrote to his fellow Regents: “Break the pattern which connects the items of learning and you necessarily destroy all quality.” He spoke of wisdom as recognition of the pattern which connects: recognition of the recursive, systemic nature of the world in which we live. Recognition that everything we see or touch is a small part of an immensely interconnected system, which has the characteristics of mind and life.

To him everything we look at must be seen as a matter of context and relationship – a biologist, psychologist, poet or artist can study living organisms in and through the fact that he or she is an organism too. We are embedded together in recursive networks of the ecology of mind.

Gregory’s writings give only a partial picture of his ideas, which came out more fully in Gregory-in-relationship: in conferences, seminars, conversations, and other live interactive situations. Fortunately, some of these have been preserved on audio tape, and on film. Only there do we get a dose of the playfulness, the sense of humor, and love of laughter that were essential to what he had to say and how he said it; and his love of the minute particu-

lars of nature: plant, animal, human, society, ecosystem, and the intricate patterns by which they all fit together.

Gregory's wife and companion for his last 20 years, Lois Cammack Bateson, helped him weave together a community of students, colleagues and friends focused on propagating transformative ideas in ever larger contexts. Their daughter, Nora Bateson, has made the film around which our symposium constellates.

Bateson's writing can seem difficult, not because it speaks to us at the graduate school level, but rather at the sub-kindergarten level. He is asking us to excavate underneath the accepted assumptions and presuppositions we have grown up with, about what the world is and how it works. That is why Nora Bateson's film is remarkable. She was 12 when Gregory died. We are introduced to his work not only from the perspective of specialists but through the eyes of a child, or rather through the more powerful *double description* that arises from *both* the eyes of a child and the eyes of someone who knows the fundamentals of science and culture. This double description was a mode of communication that Gregory himself loved. His book of collected essays, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, begins with a section of "Metalogues" – fictionalized father-daughter dialogs. Bateson's older daughter, Catherine Bateson, was the little girl at the time he wrote these; they were a throwback to Socratic teaching. One message that is carried by the form of the metalogues is that the little girl represents what Buddhists call Beginner's Mind – an observant, logical mind with fewer pre-established premises than we have as adults.

The goal of this symposium is to reignite interest in Bateson's work and to help bring it forward into the future, to encourage other people to do their own work, informed by his perspective and those of people like him. It will be an opportunity to revisit one of the seminal thinkers of the 20th century, at a time when the world may be ripe for receiving and extending his ideas into the future.

ABOUT THE PRESENTERS

Nora Bateson is a filmmaker based in Vancouver. In addition to hosting discussions at film festivals from Brazil to Budapest, she is currently writing a book about the practical application of systems thinking and complexity theory in everyday life, entitled, "Small Arcs of Larger Circles."

Stephen Nachmanovitch is a musician, author and multimedia artist based in Charlottesville. He received his Ph.D. in the History of Consciousness in 1975 for work with Gregory Bateson. He is the author of *Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art*. He has taught and lectured widely on creativity and the spiritual underpinnings of art.

The symposium was co-organized by Stephen Nachmanovitch and **Ira Bashkow**. Bashkow teaches cultural anthropology at the University of Virginia and is the author of *The Meaning of Whitemen: Race and Modernity in the Orokaiva Cultural World*. He is currently writing a new book, *An Anthropological Theory of the Corporation*.

The panel at Brooks Hall on April 12 will also include:

Phillip Guddemi, the president of the Bateson Idea Group, was a student of Gregory Bateson's at UC Santa Cruz in the 1970s. He did Ph.D. fieldwork in anthropology in Papua New Guinea. His fields of interest are cybernetics and biosemiotics, and he is managing editor of the journal, *Cybernetics and Human Knowing*.

Katie King is Professor of Women's Studies at the University of Maryland, College Park, and a Fellow of the Maryland Institute for Technology in the Humanities (MITH). She is the author of *Theory in its Feminist Travels* (Indiana) and *Networked Reenactments: Stories transdisciplinary knowledges tell* (Duke).

Manuel Lerdau is Professor of Environmental Sciences and of Biology at UVa. He studies interactions and feedbacks among plants, soils, and the atmosphere, relationships between evolutionary biology and large-scale environmental change, and the maintenance of diversity in complex systems such as tropical rain forests.

Angeline Lillard, Professor of Psychology at UVa, is a leading researcher on children's pretend play and a Fellow of the American Psychological Association and the Association for Psychological Science. She received the Cognitive Development Society Book Award for *Montessori: The Science Behind the Genius* in 2006.

Kurtis R. Schaeffer is Professor and Chair of the Department of Religious Studies at UVa. He studies the cultural history of Tibet, and teaches courses on Tibet, Buddhism, and religion. His recent publications include *The Culture of the Book in Tibet* (Columbia 2009) and *Sources of Tibetan Tradition* (Columbia 2013).

Sandra Seidel serves undergraduate students in the College of Arts and Sciences as an Assistant Dean and Associate Professor of Biology. Her course offerings include Human Biology and Disease; What Makes Us Tick - cardiovascular physiology, and Science with no Borders - an integrated science University seminar course.

Chip Tucker holds the John C. Coleman Professorship in UVa's English Department. He has written several books on 19th-century literature, and edited several critical anthologies. He is associate editor for the UVa-based journal *New Literary History*, where Gregory Bateson's ideas on culture and cognition are not strangers.

“Nora Bateson presents viewers not only with an intellectually challenging and inspiring work of art, but also with a glimpse of evanescent hope.”

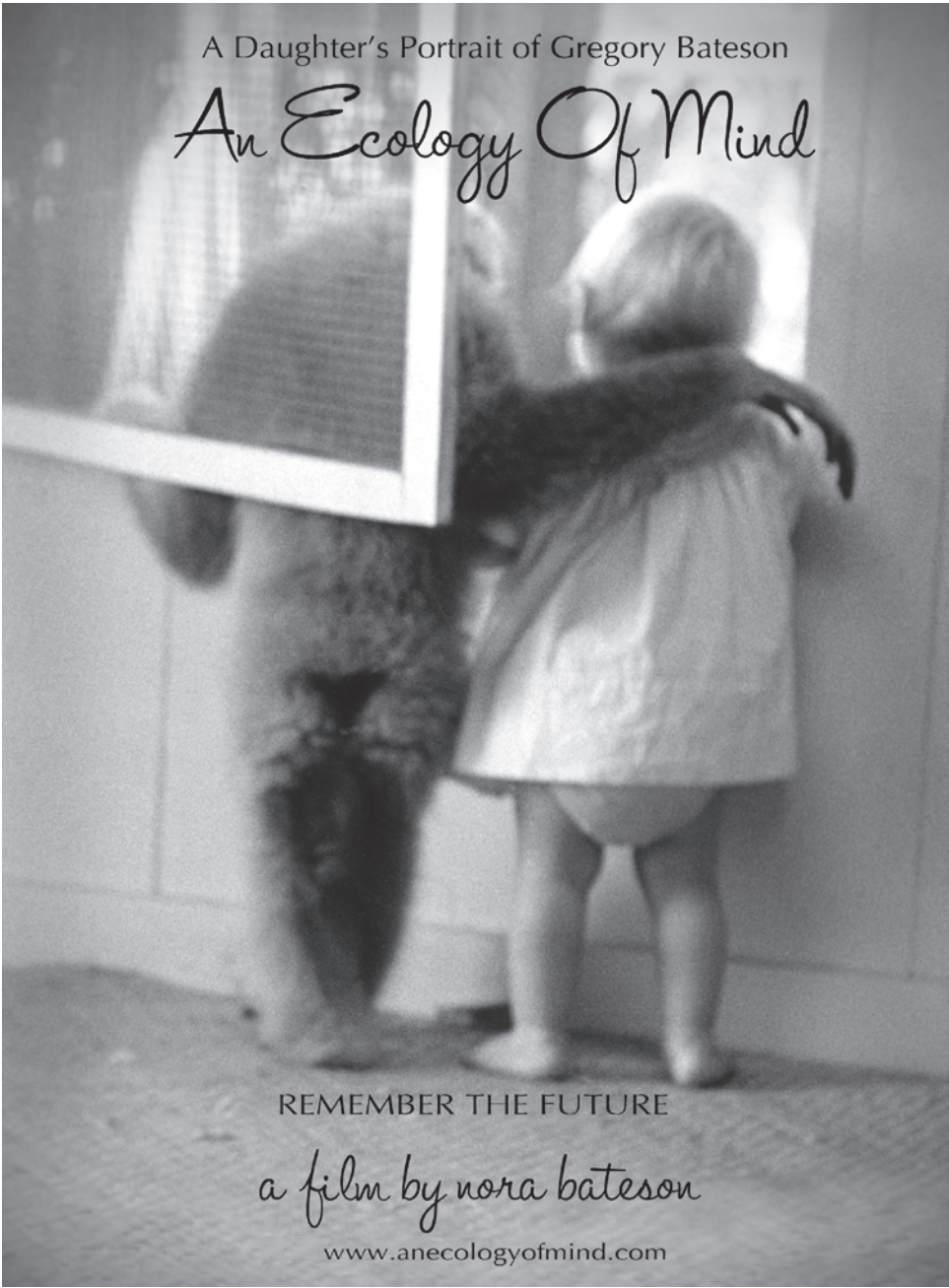
– Marilyn Wedge, Huffington Post

“The task she took on was hardly easy. Pinning Bateson down takes a fair amount of effort. Coming up with a simple definition of, say, systems theory is one thing. Doing so in a way that educates the average filmgoer without making her film feel like a mere academic exercise is something else entirely. Yet Nora Bateson manages to do so by always keeping the man she knew at the center.”

– Dan Webster, National Public Radio

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Photos of Gregory Bateson by Barry Schwartz
Photo of Nora Bateson and gibbon by Gregory Bateson



A Daughter's Portrait of Gregory Bateson

An Ecology Of Mind

REMEMBER THE FUTURE

a film by nora bateson

www.anecologyofmind.com