# Gregory Bateson

–

# Old Men Ought to be Explorers

Stephen Nachmanovitch
1981

*As we grow older*
*The world becomes stranger, the pattern more complicated*
*Of dead and living. Not the intense moment*
*Isolated, with no before and after,*
*But a lifetime burning in every moment,*
*And not the lifetime of one man only*
*But of old stones that cannot be deciphered. ...*
*Old men ought to be explorers*
– T.S. Eliot.[1]

It is quite possible for this world to be destroyed by human folly. We used to think at once of nuclear war, but that is only one edge of a many-sided emergency in which human damage to the earth can come back on us.

The perils manifest in many forms: proliferation of weapons, nationalisms, racisms, destruction of animal and plant habitats, of soil, air, water, cities. Yet there is a pattern that connects them. These individual symptoms interlock to form a very big runaway system, which is the enactment of our own presuppositions, the underlying habits of thought that are deeply embedded in our everyday life as what we call 'common sense.' Our whole way of thinking and seeing has got to be renovated from the inside out.

It is a crisis of mind. It's a case of wake up or die. We have the whole nightmare-history of political revolutions against bloody regimes, replacing them by still more bloody regimes, to teach us that *that* is not the way out. The only way out is a spiritual, intellectual, and emotional revolution in which we learn to experience as biological facts, first-hand, the interlooping connections between person and person, organism and environment, action and consequence – when we are able to talk a language that includes the context in each thought. Our present language *excludes* context.

---

[1] T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 'East Coker.' *Complete Poems and Plays*, Harcourt, Brace & World, 1952, p. 129.

I had a beloved friend and mentor named Gregory Bateson, an English anthropologist, philosopher, biologist, psychologist, who exemplified this kind of renovated thinking and seeing. He articulated a body of ideas that show the links among the symptoms, the weave of the total pattern, and – not answers, but a way of asking better questions, tools for ("Steps to...") thinking our way out.

I want in these pages to paint a portrait, to give some sense of my own experience of him, not just because of who he was, but because he pointed toward something very important, and because who he was and what he pointed to were so intimately related. That is why he is worth writing about and remembering, for he certainly was not interested in personal monuments and memorials, and is probably snorting at me right now from his refuge in the Unconditioned.

We first met in the summer of 1972 on the redwood-forested campus of the University of California at Santa Cruz. We just sort of bumped into each other on a path. I was a graduate student in psychology seeking a more authentic academic path than I was finding at Berkeley. He, in spite of being at 68 a senior figure in half a dozen sciences, had never fit a conventional niche in the academic world, and was now coming to Santa Cruz as a part-time lecturer. He was physically enormous, six foot five stooped over, slow-moving, with a shock of white hair and a benign smile that mixed inexhaustible good humor with the sadness of one who's seen it all. The voice was a deeply resonant King's English. We spent some time walking circles round each other; didn't say much. But there was an arresting sense of recognition – of what? There weren't words for it that day, but it's what he came to call "the pattern which connects." The following week I moved down to Santa Cruz to become Gregory's student.

On Independence Day, 1980, at noon, he died, aged 76, in the guest house of the San Francisco Zen Center.

What happened in between, for me, was a permanent shift in how I saw the world, or rather, a sure confirmation of a way that was always in there, in the background, but only in bits and pieces, hints and rumors.

Gregory had a favorite trick for letting a new group of people "get their feet wet" in "what it's all about." I can still see him walk in, towering and gawky in his wild

Hawaiian shirt, and somewhat defiantly throw into the center of the table the body of a large crab. With a salacious twinkle in his eyes, he would ask us to pretend that we were Martian anthropologists, that is, intelligent beings (whatever that means) who have no presuppositions at all about what "life on earth" might be or look like. From this point of view, he would ask us to show that this object had been produced by a living thing (whatever that means). Over the years he used crabs, seashells or other remains of organisms; or he would put on the table a painting by Blake or some native artwork from the South Seas; or a copy of the Bodhisattva vow to save all beings. Our job was to start from a concrete object, of a size that we could hold in our hands and turn over; and step by step extract from it (or rather, from our developing relationship with it) an understanding of what it is to be part of a living – and therefore sacred – world. From there it was like opening an infinite series of Chinese boxes (except that each succeeding box contained a bigger one!) getting into abstract, formal, global issues, but always securely grounded to that crab or other piece of data that we could see and hold.

## Teaching ...

Anything I write 'about' 'Gregory' is in a sense a deception, because there was no Gregory other than Gregory-in-relationship. This carried over so clearly into his way of teaching, which was dramatic (Socratic) rather than expository. As a lecturer, delivering a one-way message, many people found him hard to understand. You had to be able to excavate under the common ground of art, science and culture. But in small seminars and conferences he was devastatingly effective: becoming one with a group of people he wove together and inspired but who were freely exercising their own powers and ideas, creating a collective self that really *thinks*.

He said, "It takes *two* to know one."

The organic wholeness of the group was paramount. He had no tolerance for intelligent remarks and showing-off. I remember catching hell from him one day after class when I was his teaching assistant: "You monkey!" he splurted at me, "I had a nice juicy little silence cooking away in there, and you had to stick your big feet in and muck it up!"

'It' is so hard to talk about not because it's too complicated but because it's too simple. We tend to think of knowledge as a kind of pyramid, with what we learn in our mothers' arms at the base, what we learn in kindergarten at a higher layer, and so on up to the pointy top. We think of 'difficult' ideas as being 'higher' in the pyramid than 'common sense.' Bateson takes a cut below common sense – a cut more fundamental – to expose the basic assumptions or axioms that underlie common sense, the unconscious rules of evidence (epistemology) we use in courts of law, legislative bodies, university faculties, the media – axioms like belief in materialism (the world is made of things and forces that act on the things), belief in lineal cause and

effect, in lineal time, objectivity, specialization.

We had, in other words, to unlearn a great deal of what we had absorbed from kindergarten up.

The principal skill he taught was *awareness of context* – to see the world not as a collection of things or persons, but a network of relationship, that network bound together by communication. This way of seeing is not an abstraction, but a tangible experience that can be cultivated by practice. It is, in itself, one of the answers to the deep crisis of mind that bedevils our civilization.

He had a teaching toolkit of bits of information, data from experiments, from experience, from art, poems and savory quotations he loved to recite, which were in and of themselves important, but they were not 'it': they were, rather, "illustrative of 'it.'" They were, he said, "a sort of carrier wave." He worked with a repertoire of stories, three or four dozen multipurpose parables. Gregory's explanations were built from these stories, combined, inverted, end-linked in various ways, much as giant protein molecules are built from a fixed repertoire of 20 amino acids.

And there were the gaps he left, for that inexpressible yet palpable feel for complexity to set in around the table; for the multiple levels of meaning to ripen: then he recited:

*It was when I said,*
*"There is no such thing as truth,"*
*That the grapes seemed fatter.*
*The fox ran out of his hole.*
...
*It was at that time, that the silence was largest*
*And longest, the night was roundest,*
*The fragrance of the autumn warmest,*
*Closest and strongest.*[2]

❖ ❖ ❖ ❖

## ... and Looking

Ray Birdwhistell describes teaching a graduate anthropology seminar that

> had been discussing the implications of the film *Trance and Dance in Bali* and the books *Balinese Character* and *Naven*, when a student asked whether Bateson and Mead had a methodology. The other students treated the question as though it

[2] Wallace Stevens, "On the road home," in *The Palm at the End of the Mind*, Knopf.

had merit and seemed uncomprehending of my "Of course not. They are experienced ethnographers and not technicians."[3]

To date, no anthropologist has done anything to quite match *Balinese Character*, Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead's 1942 photographic record of their fieldwork in Bali in the 1930's. In both their very different careers, they were consistently concerned with transmitting the clearest possible picture of the data, pointing at the experience itself, rather than statistical clumpings of experience or inductive projections from experience. Bateson pioneered the medium of ethnographic film, which is becoming an ever more precious record of humanity as the last and remotest of the primitive cultures are finally swallowed by the global money economy.

As I write this I am looking at Gregory's photograph of a magnificent trio of African lions, full of presence, ease, and grace. They seem to be right here in the room with me, purring at each other. He was a superb cameraman, on both the technical and artistic levels.

The photographer as ethnologist (watcher of other cultures) or as ethologist (watcher of other species) must cultivate the skills of using his eyes, of sitting quietly to watch and wait, for hours or months if need be, until the event he wants to study occurs naturally. These are the virtues of the 19th Century naturalist, as opposed to the modern lab scientist. They are also Zen virtues.

Both Zen and Gregory's brand of science derive from close observation of how things are rather than how we may want them to be.

And curiously, when this faithfulness to observation is really followed through, the higher-order abstractions, contexts and contexts-of-contexts, suddenly become seeable and touchable.

He packed a great deal of importance into epistemology as a fundamental fact of life. Epistemology normally means the theory of knowledge: a branch of philosophy that asks, How do we know? What do we know? How do we sort our inputs into knowledge vs. nonsense? Gregory and Warren McCulloch transplanted this word into biology, realizing that even a rat in a learning experiment 'has' an epistemology, an internalized theory of knowledge that calibrates its perceptual biases. Epistemology thus becomes greatly extended in meaning: the neural filtering

[3] Ray L. Birdwhistell, "Some discussions of Ethnography, Theory, and Method," in *About Bateson*, ed. John Brockman, Dutton 1977, p. 103-4.

that sensitizes a frog's eye to movements of small dots that are likely to be flies, and the cultural filtering that predisposes a person to believe or disbelieve in miracles, or in economic determinism, are both epistemology.

Gregory believed that we cannot directly perceive a thing-in-itself without distorting it – there are always multiple layers of neurons and habits, languages and codes, processing and reprocessing the information, filtering it through scarcely knowable physiological, personal, cultural biases. The biases *are* our epistemology. He continually quoted Korzybski: "The map is not the territory,"[4] the name is not the thing named. As Wallace Stevens wrote:

> *They said, "You have a blue guitar,*
> *You do not play things as they are."*
>
> *The man replied, "Things as they are*
> *Are changed upon the blue guitar."*[5]

Gregory also liked the word *glosses* to describe the concepts and images we form of our world, and which, at the price of all sorts of mild or severe pathologies, we mistake for the world itself. The objects we perceive 'out there' are glosses – marginal comments and explanations – to the real thing. (Inevitably one evening, one of Gregory's students jumped up and shouted, "WIPE YOUR GLOSSES!").

Culture and personality *punctuate* reality, break it into units which we treat as real. "The big enlightenment," he wrote, "comes when you suddenly realize that all this stuff is *description*."[6]

Armed with his disbelief in objectivity and direct perception, Gregory was paradoxically able to do and teach observational research of the most direct kind. He spent the better part of his life poking around the edges of the Pacific, looking in, looking around at the life forms: butterflies, porpoises, religions, social structures, patterns of child-rearing. He was a naturalist.

Data for Gregory were generated by a kind of sandwich to be made between the fundamental verities of science and the direct observation of living, the things the naturalist sees. In his theorizing, he ruthlessly applied Occam's razor (the principle of not multiplying explanatory principles beyond necessity) to slash away at the often meaningless concepts in which social sciences entangle themselves. He was after "simple thinking." He often read these lines from Blake:

> *Compel the Reasoner to Demonstrate with unhewn Demonstrations;*
> *Let the Indefinite be explored and let every Man be Judged*
> *By his own works; Let all Indefinites be thrown into Demonstrations*

---

[4] Alfred Korzybski, *Science and Sanity,* Lakeville, CT: Institute of General Semantics, 1933.

[5] Wallace Stevens, "The Man with the Blue Guitar," in *The Palm at the End of the Mind.*

[6] G.B. "The thing of it is" in *Earth's Answer*, Lindisfarne/Harper & Row, 1977, p. 146

*To be pounded to dust & melted in the Furnaces of Affliction:*
*He who would do good to another, must do it in Minute Particulars,*
*General Good is the plea of the scoundrel, hypocrite & flatterer:*
*For Art & Science cannot exist but in minutely organized Particulars*
*And not in generalizing Demonstrations of the Rational Power.*
*The Infinite alone resides in Definite & Determinate Identity.*[7]

Gregory said that the corrective for Job's piety, his – and our – excessive faith in abstract presuppositions, is natural history: minute observation of the living world.

Seeing *design* as a sacramental object.

Seeing the definition of *sacrament* as a fit problem for biology.

Seeing the symmetry and segmentation of a leaf or a culture as the immanent presence of some overall pattern – and beyond that, a Pattern of patterns. In this sense I came to see why Gregory's work always struck me as so real and grounded in common sense, for at an early age I was filled by my mother with very vivid ideas and feelings of pantheism – forest as God, ocean as God, cosmos as God. The data contain messages, the data are messages, but above all the data are a "carrier wave" for messages of a higher order of patterning. "Higher" here does not mean above or separate, it means more inclusive – no dualisms, no piety-in-the-sky.

The Bateson way or *Tao* is predicated on monism: Gregory believed in one world, an interactive, regenerative whole; but it is seeable in two ways. These ways of explaining the universe he called *pleroma* and *creatura*, Gnostic terms he mistranslated from Jung[8] to mean seeing the world as a nonliving system of objects and forces (*pleroma*) or as a living system of form and communication (*creatura*). For Gregory, knowledge can not be split into science vs. religion and all their subdivisions, the world can not be split into God over and against His Creation, not into "Man" over and against the other species. Gregory argued that God is *immanent* in the complexity of the world, that knowledge and learning are immanent in the way a rose grows.

Mind IS nature.

So out goes the ancient mind/body problem that has bedeviled our civilization for so long. Out goes our dominant structure of knowledge: inherited from Bacon, Newton & Locke, Descartes & Aristotle; burdened with dualism, atomism, reductionism, materialism; rushing in with oversimplified questions that produce hopelessly tangled and convoluted answers, answers that split organisms, cultures, and the biosphere itself into little pieces that don't seem to fit together any more. Like Humpty Dumpty in *Finnegans Wake*, the Giant Albion in Blake. The new science, presently in its infancy, points us to the holisms, to the algorithms of equivalence for mind/body, subject/object, culture/nature, as Relativity theory did for matter/energy and space/time.

He felt that in any sort of livable future, our dualisms would be museum pieces,

---

[7] Blake, *Jerusalem* p. 55 (1808).

[8] Carl Jung, *Seven Sermons to the Dead,* 1916, reproduced in *Memories, Dreams, and Reflections,* 1959.

looked upon as monstrous superstitions that nearly killed us.

Gregory loved to brag that he was a "fifth generation unbaptized atheist." Under this cover, he was safe to evolve, in his last years, into an honest-to-god spiritual figure.

> Freudian psychology expanded the concept of mind inwards to include the whole communication system within the body – the autonomic, the habitual, and the vast range of unconscious process. What I am saying expands mind outwards. And both of these changes reduce the scope of the conscious self. A certain humility becomes appropriate, tempered by the dignity or joy of being part of something much bigger. A part – if you will – of God.[9]

❖ ❖ ❖ ❖

## The Heart's Reasons

> Men are admitted into Heaven not because they have curbed & governed their Passions or have No Passions, but because they have Cultivated their Understandings. The Treasures of Heaven are not Negations of Passion but Realities of Intellect, from which All the Passions Emanate Uncurbed in their Eternal Glory.[10]
>
> – Blake

Gregory's big laughing belly and sense of humor were so very central to his nature – I remember so many explosions of incredible horse-guffaws, snorts, chuckles, grunts, grumbles, growls and moans of all kinds. And a speaking voice that ranged freely over an octave and a half, flexible and precise, relaxed, outward and audible sound of an inward and spiritual grace. If Gregory was talking nonsense verse (as he often liked to) the quality of the voice alone was sufficient to transmit his fundamental message, of a reality compounded of relationship, communication, and a fused scientific/aesthetic truth. He could be inspiring as a reader of poetry. The delight would just spill over in him as he recited bits of Shakespeare, Blake, Eliot, Cummings, or limericks lifted from Cambridge University toilet walls.

His conferences, books, papers, are there to be read, and should be; but for me, the really important things lie elsewhere. It's how he *felt* about what he was saying that gave significance to it. It was that big heart of his that came through in the voice, that infused his ideas with life. Yet he worried so much about whether the

---

[9] G.B. "Form, Substance, and Difference" in *Steps* p. 467-8.

[10] Blake, *A Vision of the Last Judgment* (1810). *Poetry & Prose* p. 553.

words and content got through. As an intellectual he so wanted appreciation for the elegance of his work and his statements, and showed such glee when he (or someone else!) found a whole new way to say something; while underneath it all, the real meaning leaked through in the music of the voice, unimpeded.

He taught that when you do ethnography, trying to render the materials of one culture into the categories of another, the very first thing that can drop out is humor. So many anthropologists have dutifully collected reams of data, not knowing that their native informants were kidding.

This is because humor, like love, like culture, is almost totally contextual; it is *meta-* to the actual words and actions. When Gregory, in the early 1950's, began to see that the study of context was the vital link between his researches in biology, culture, psychiatry, and communication, his next step was to study *play*. His double bind theory of schizophrenia is also the double bind theory of laughter and humor – and creativity.

Someone walked into his office in Kresge College in Santa Cruz and started talking earnestly about researches in higher consciousness. Gregory rolled way back in his chair and sang, "Nearer My God To Thee."

He made everything palatable, even the most terrible truths, by his outrageous charm.

*Uncompromising*. He deeply valued what he called the critical faculty. He told and

retold the story of Samuel Johnson's (1783) stroke. Johnson was lying in bed when suddenly there was this terrible pain, and lights going on and off in his head. Frightened, he got out of bed, onto his knees, and prayed to God, "Do what You will with my body, but please leave my mind intact." Prayers were in Latin in those days. When Dr. Johnson got back into bed, he noticed that the prayer was in bad Latin. So he got back down on his knees and thanked God for having preserved his critical faculty.

Gregory's critical faculty was manifested both in his shining integrity and his obstinacy. At times he could be stubborn and hidebound, assuming that everyone participated in his own preoccupations and vocabulary. He could get so uppity when speaking of people who used words like *impulse* rather than *news of a difference*; or, supreme horror of horrors, *psychic energy*.

Aristocratic. Intuitive. Maddening. Noble. Encompassing. Cheeky. Present. Playful. There were times when he was the very embodiment of what he taught. There were times when he was the very opposite.

Simplicity of person. Old, comfortable clothes. Shaggy. Pleasure in eating, drinking, sleeping, sitting in a chair, giving and receiving jokes, gifts, and other sorts of information. An easy way of being with children. Easy communication with animals. "Bateson knows something which he does not tell you." Yes he did tell, but in his own koan-language.

He lived with a sharp awareness and anger at what a "beastly," "monstrous" world this is, balanced and paradoxed by his equally sharp awareness of what an unfathomably pretty world this is: the fearful symmetry of it. The tension can only be reconciled in humor, whether it be sardonic and bitter, or simple delight and whimsy. For while his own resolution of the contradictory voices was benign and creative, this living on the edge of paradox is indeed akin to madness; it is easy to see why Gregory had such an intuitive sympathy for the inner world of schizophrenics.

There are algorithms of the heart, precise ones. He recited Blake:

> *For a Tear is an Intellectual Thing*
> *And a Sigh is the Sword of an Angel King*
> *And the bitter groan of the Martyrs woe*
> *Is an Arrow from the Almighties Bow*[11]

Gregory was surely cerebral, preoccupied in his critical faculty, yet he could point to that passionate, wild Englishman, Blake, as the one who knew more than any what it is to be alive. His favorite movies were Marcel Carne's *The Children of Paradise* and Françoise Sagan's *One More Winter*, love stories of unmitigated romanticism. I remember the tears rolling down his cheeks one night as we watched *One More Winter*. Significantly, these movies are very French, a culture which for Gregory ex-

[11] Blake, "The Grey Monk" *Poetry & Prose* p. 481.

emplified Pascal's phrase, "The heart has its reasons which reason does not perceive." The heart's reasons: intellect and passion are not opposites of each other, they are simply parts of aspects of a something that is very big. "What is beauty?" I asked him that night. He said, "Seeing the pattern which connects."

## Dying

> *The roaring of lions, the howling of wolves, the raging of the stormy sea, and the destructive sword, are portions of eternity too great for the eye of man.*
> – Blake [12]

One of the extraordinary things for me now, as I look back on it, was to watch the extent to which Gregory, an old man, grew and changed. After his cancer experience in 1978, when he was told he had a couple of weeks to live and instead got radically better, the undercurrent of sweetness in him, which usually surfaced as a gruff, curmudgeonly kind of charm, began to come out unalloyed. He was readier to hug people. He started writing poetry. He reached a kind of outer clarity about what he was saying – and coincidentally his audience became much broader. Before, he was talking to professionals in anthropology, psychology, and so forth; but now all sorts of people were interested.

When I would visit him at Esalen, our old pattern of immediately jumping into long animated discussions of anything and everything was gradually displaced by hours of sitting together, not saying a word, looking at the shifting shapes in the Pacific or in his fireplace, or playing chess. Deep silence that said so much.

In *Mind and Nature*, he finally stated his contribution to the fundamentals of science, paid his dues to William Bateson and the lively and present ghost of Charles Darwin. At Esalen he was beginning to fully focus in on his lifelong interests in aesthetics, poetry, religion, and education. In his 75th and 76th years, he was in some ways ready to cross over into a whole new sphere of activity. And he was just coming round to the view that it is important not only to propagate ideas, but to act on them.

But he found that to act, to change people's minds, is very much an uphill battle, whether it be with a power structure deeply invested in its materialist premises or with seekers after a new age who are invested in no premises. He simply did not have the energy. One advantage he had enjoyed because he had not found his niche until late in life was that people would fight with him, stimulating the creative excitement of intense discussion. But in the last few years, as his belated fame grew,

[12] Blake, *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* p. 8. Poetry & Prose, p. 36.

many of those who came to hear the "great man" would not argue and challenge, were too ready to accept "new" ideas without a struggle. So it was difficult to engage at a deep level. He complained that in the "new age," those who see the old premises are bankrupt often move into a kind of anti-intellectual stance that anything goes. "God is not mocked," he quoted from St. Paul[13]: truth is multifaceted, but it is not just anything. What he wanted was not to be misunderstood *and* not to be uncritically admired.

So toward the end of his life there was a new kind of excitement, and at the same time he was very, very tired.

Gregory was a chain-smoker for much of his life. It is ironic that he produced perhaps the most exquisite study ever done on the nature of addiction: first on the special case of alcohol addiction,[14] then laying the groundwork for seeing how many of the life-and-death social problems we face, the armaments race, economic and ecologic inflation/explosion, etc., can only be understood and handled in the context of addiction.

He had survived episodes of emphysema in 1970 and lung cancer in 1978; during the whole time I knew him, he was powering that massive body on a little bit of lung tissue.

I remember how Gregory used to say that coughing was so much work!

I keep seeing a scene that occurred on many of the mornings of my visits to him during his last year. Esalen is famous for its wonderful hot mineral baths, perched on the rocky Big Sur coast. We would walk back uphill from the baths in the crisp air, slowly; Gregory huffing and puffing, stopping, to rest and breathe, cough raucously, survey that magnificent ocean, spit. He would look at me and say "Hm!" nodding his head assertively, "a good one."

Looking out again over the ocean, whose dark, clear-sweeping waves way out to the horizon code so much information we humans will never understand, he would point out some piece of nature, always different (he knew all the plants and animals by name); that indicated the biosphere as we have known it is confronting death too. We saw otters flapping and playing down there with unbelievable grace and ease. But twenty years ago Gregory saw fifty otters out there; today only five. The kelp was thinner and farther out from shore. The birds fewer – smaller numbers and fewer species.

Then he would say something about the importance of death in keeping evolution going – recycling matter, ideas, species, civilizations – no matter how fine they might be they had to get cleared away to make room for the next step, "Lest one good custom should corrupt the world."[15]

---

[13] Galatians 6:7 "Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap."

[14] G.B. "Cybernetics of 'Self': A Theory of Alcoholism." in *Steps*.

[15] Tennyson, *Idylls of the King*.

Back in Gregory's 1968 conference on the Effects of Conscious Purpose on Human Adaptation, Anatol Holt said:

> "All of you will probably remember the disaster that took place in Florence with the floods and the great damage that was done to those stored artworks. I had very mixed feelings about it. I thought, from a certain point of view, that it could well be regarded as good rather than bad; that is – yes, it's an occasion for mourning, but on the other hand, it also makes room. You know, there can only be so many masterpieces in the world, quite apart from the physical space in which they're stored, and new masterpieces must be produced, ones whose relations to your old masterpieces are perhaps hard to understand."
>
> Gregory lifted up the blackboard eraser. "You can't live without this."
>
> "Yes, that's right."
>
> "Which is death."[16]

The otters may have belonged to a dying world, but God how they played! Tossed about by the powerful surf, flipping and swinging around – tossed again and again onto the jagged rocks, they bounced off, ready for more. "They don't give a damn for the rocks!" he said, with that special grin he used for indicating that here was a beautiful little piece of data, something to be admired out there in the world, the toughness and grace of a living organism.

It was that particular grin and tone of voice that was the essence of Gregory Bateson.

On June 11, 1980, Gregory's doctor, Michael Stulbarg, telephoned to say Gregory had been admitted to the hospital. The diagnosis was pneumonia. It was expected he'd be released soon. But what developed instead was a month-long final illness. A small group of family and friends came together daily to help his wife, Lois, tend him. Halfway through that time it became clear that Gregory was dying. Finally he was moved to the San Francisco Zen Center where he spent his last days.[17]

At first he was nicely tucked into his bedclothes (the hospital could never find a bed big enough for him!), very tired but joking and carrying on as himself. Then the unexplained pain he had been suffering from hit him full on. For days it continued, plus the effects of drugs; he transformed into a giant naked tormented figure from the Old Testament, heaving and crying out, "Oh my! ... Oh my! ..." in a voice that was ripping our hearts. Pounding tides of pain alternated with times of relief and quiet smiling that would come through like dazzling sunshine in the middle of it all. It was as if the earth's rotation had speeded up tremendously, so that the sun seemed to go whirling around – mild days and terrible freezing nights every half hour. Exhausting!

---

[16] Mary Catherine Bateson, *Our Own Metaphor*, Knopf, 1972, p. 310.

[17] Mary Catherine Bateson tells very movingly the story of Gregory's death and the days before and after in "Six days of dying,"' *CoEvolution Quarterly*, Winter, 1980.

There was incredible passion there: primitively real. I found myself wishing I could take on some of that pain for him. But somehow, Gregory's going did not seem wrong or evil or depressing (as it had during his illness 2½ years before, when it clearly was not yet time).

Lois, who was such a courageous and calm presence, holding it all together, orchestrating the right kind of support for Gregory, said, "If we can only learn to act as if it's a beneficent universe, everything changes."

And that was so. In *Mind and Nature*, Gregory had written,

> I surrender to the belief that my knowing is a small part of a wider integrated knowing that knits together the entire biosphere of creation.[18]

There was no way I could sit and watch him lying there without confronting my own death, whatever shape it may take. I would slip into feeling myself inside his flesh and bones.

One of the first pieces of data he socked me with when I was his student was Blake's 11th *Job* engraving, showing Job squirming on his bed of undeserved pain. "My bones are pierced in me in the night season & my sinews take no rest ... Why do you persecute me as God and are not satisfied with my flesh? ... Oh, that my words were printed in a Book, that they were graven with an iron pen & lead in the rock for ever ..."[19] With Gregory's encouragement, I ended up devoting months and then years to exploring all the levels of meaning in those 21 *Job* pictures, that supreme myth of what suffering is all about. And here was the old man himself, suffering through it in the flesh, and there wasn't a damn thing I could do but help with the feeding and cleaning of him, and witness. Play music for him.

Suzuki Roshi, the founder of Zen Center, once said, "You learn best from things that are dying."

As they slip away, the dying often become like infants again in the sense that they are nurtured and cleaned by their children, whom they once nurtured and cleaned. But there was something deeper here. As the pain receded and his breath slowed and quieted over the last days, there was an element of exploration and even play in him. He had a way of examining his hand as though it were a brand new thing in the world. Quietly exploring his new body-of-a-dying-person.

---

[18] G.B. *Mind and Nature*, p. 88.

[19] *Book of Job* 30:17, 19:22.

I asked him, "What's it like where you are, Gregory?"
"Well, everything's very simple." Big smile.
The sweetness of those smiles was beyond any beauty I had ever seen.
But also the ugliness. Both poles, very close together.

It was during this time that some of us began seriously practicing zazen. In my own continuing education in "what it's all about," this was significant. The principal gap left in Gregory's work was this: he showed what's wrong with our conventional dualistic way of thinking, and he articulated the benchmarks of what a better kind of thinking, a better kind of science, might look like. But what's missing is the technology: *how*, once we are adults, to shift our context of thinking. This is just the piece supplied by Zen, which is systematic, practical training in non-dualism. I don't think it was at all accidental that the Zen folks in San Francisco were so attracted to Gregory; or that he, though not a Buddhist, was so attracted to them; or that he and Lois chose to place himself in their hands as the fittest way to take care of his dying. They had a quality of being right *with* whatever was happening: rigorous precision *and* open-endedness.

In his last couple of weeks, Gregory found speaking difficult and tiring. His throat was clogged, articulation weak, thoughts did not come out "organized." Yet there was a great deal communicated, a sense of peeking around the corner of death, telling us things, with few words, but with eyes and smiles more strongly than ever. Saying good-bye to each person in a special way.

Everyone present during those intense days has their own sense of what it all meant.

He seemed to have lost the ability to make ordinary talk, but kept very much intact his way of talking in multi-connective metaphors that establish some truth and simultaneously poke fun at it.

He asked me, "How do you get off the side of this when you can't get off the side?"

"Of the bed, Gregory?" – falling for it.

"Of life." Big smile.

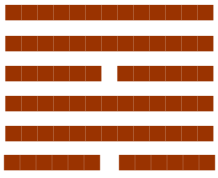
One night some people came in with the Governor of California, who himself was a friend and student of Gregory's. As they left the room together, Gregory quietly cackled, "They're all in a procession ... out of body!" Here was this dying man, muzzy and fatigued, yet his impish grin intact, making fun as usual of transmigration and other supernatural beliefs about death. Many times over the years he said that when you're dead you're dead; living on in the sense that your molecules recycle to the maintenance of the biosphere and your ideas to the maintenance of culture. The supernatural and miracles, he liked to say, "are a materialist's attempt to escape from his materialism."

Yet there was another moment, the morning before his death, when he whispered in an arresting tone that evoked complete sincerity, "I think this visit is about over."

He asked me, "Can you speak at the end?"
"Yes, Gregory?" I felt like a little boy.
"Good, because I can't."

My good-bye with Gregory was an endless hour of reverberating silence, smiling, seeing, pointing. The intensity of that finger pointing at me dwarfs any other experience of my life. I was reminded of the spot on Michelangelo's ceiling where the Elohim's finger points towards Adam's across a little empty gap that seems alive with a million volts of electricity. And that phrase that identifies Zen: direct pointing at the human mind; a finger direct to the human heart. Some kind of pouring was going on. I still don't know how to say it.

Gregory Bateson is not important. What is important is breaking free from the self. What is important is breaking free from our idea of who we are. The power boys in the world's capitals are not, I think, living out of a conscious desire to kill us all. They are living desperately, out of a fearful feeling of entrapment. "They are doing it, so we have to do it;" and the boys on the other side are saying, "They are doing it, so we have to do it." There is a deep relationship between such desperation and the world-eating greed we see around (and in) us. To break free from the glue means to break free from piety-in-the-sky, belief that the rules of life, the axioms, are such and such and we have "no choice" but to play the game out to the end. (Blake's phrase for it was "mind-forged manacles"). We can die and break free. But perhaps we don't need to die in order to pour our little-selves out into the larger system that holds us, into the pattern that connects. What is important is to "realize that all this stuff is description," and slip out, each in our own way, from our tiny ideas of who we are.



*The Gentle, the Penetrating (Wind, Wood).*

I think, finally, of Gregory's ashes in their little cardboard box. A long line of us trailed down to the tide pools below the big house at Esalen. We were scattered over the rocks like those flocks of sea-birds Gregory used to watch on his slow walks up from the baths. Here there was quite a flock of us. Reb, the Zen priest, opened the box and poured some of the ashes out to the ocean. But just then a wind came up and blew the fine powdery white stuff right in our faces. Particles of Gregory clung to hair, eyebrows, moustaches, as we climbed back up the cliff.

❖ ❖ ❖ ❖

This article was first published in *CoEvolution Quarterly*, (1982). A longer version was published in *Leonardo* (MIT Press, 1984). German translations published in *Bevußtseins (R)evolution*, ed. Rudiger Lutz (Julius Beltz Verlag, 1983) and *Pläne für eine menschliche Zukunft* (1988).
Reprints may be obtained from Free Play Productions, P.O. Box 667, Ivy, VA 22945. *www.freeplay.com*

## Bibliography:

Bateson, Beatrice, *William Bateson, Naturalist*, Cambridge University Press, 1928.
Bateson, Gregory, *Naven*. Stanford University Press, 1936/1958.
Bateson, Gregory, and Margaret Mead, *Balinese Character.* New York Academy of Sciences, 1942.
Bateson, Gregory, *Percival's Narrative*. Stanford University Press, 1961.
Bateson, Gregory, and Jurgen Ruesch, *Communication: The Social Matrix of Psychiatry.* Stanford University Press, 1968.
Bateson, Gregory, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind.* Chandler/Ballentine. 1972.
Bateson, Gregory, "The thing of it is" in *Earth's Answer*, Lindisfarne/Harper & Row, 1977, p. 146
Bateson, Gregory, "Letters to the Regents, 'Armaments Races as Epistemological Error'" reprinted in *Zero: a Quarterly of Buddhist Thought*, 1978.
Bateson, Gregory, *Mind and Nature*. New York: Dutton, 1979.
Bateson, Gregory, and Mary Catherine Bateson, *Angels Fear: Towards an Epistemology of the Sac*. New York: MacMillan, 1987.
Bateson, Mary Catherine, "Six days of dying,"' *CoEvolution Quarterly*, Winter, 1980.
Bateson, Mary Catherine, *Our Own Metaphor*, Knopf, 1972.
Birdwhistell, Ray L., "Some discussions of Ethnography, Theory, and Method," in *About Bateson*, ed. John Brockman, Dutton 1977, p. 103-4.
Blake, William, *Complete Poetry and Prose*, 1783-1827. ed. David Erdman, New York: Doubleday, 1970.
Blake, William, *Illustrations of the Book of Job,* London: 1825.
Carl Jung, *Memories, Dreams, and Reflections,* 1959.
Eliot, T.S. *Complete Poems and Plays*, New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1952.
Stevens, Wallace, *The Palm at the End of the Mind*, New York: Knopf, 1971.
Tennyson, *Idylls of the King*. London, 1859.

## Photo credits:

2. Kai de Fontenay, 1979.
5. Gregory Bateson, 1971.
9. Michael Stulbarg, 1980.
14. Kai de Fontenay, 1979.