

Edge

Summer Reading from the Archive

CROSSING CULTURES

A Conversation with Mary Catherine Bateson

[October 2000]

I think of my daughter and myself as having been born in different countries. We were actually born 30 years apart in the United States of America. That means we were born into massively different cultural environments. What occurred to me, and this is something I've felt for a very long time, is that you can use what people learn in the home, especially from age differences, to deal with other kinds of diversity. After all, we learn more at home before we get to school than we learn in school. And we learn about the nature of learning, fundamental things about relationships, so that we need to be more systematic in using learning within the home for the insight it offers to understanding things outside the home. Including learning to learn, of course.



Introduction

Cultural anthropologist and writer Mary Catherine Bateson asks us to "notice what it takes to communicate effectively across that generational gap. And then to realize that unfamiliar groups are different in the same kinds of ways, that you know how to bridge the gap, so that there's no need to be put off by the sense of strangeness, you can learn how to deal with strangeness in the home."

Sociologist Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot has made note of Bateson's "unique signature: Her uncanny ability to find the strange in the familiar, the ordinary in the exotic." In this regard, Bateson is rather unique among the third culture scientists on these pages as her particular writing style itself is key to an understanding of her work and ideas. "What I always wonder about with my writing," she says, "is whether people will be able to move from the specific, rather personal stories that I bring together to the general issues that I believe they represent. I need people to be able to move from the women in my new book *Full Circles*, most of whom are African-American, to the situation of men as well as women, people of all ethnic groups, people outside the United States who also live in a time of rapid change and increasing longevity. It's that capacity to apply analogies that some people seem to have while others don't."

Bateson purges abstractions from her books and makes way for stories, sometimes of people whose lives you might not think would be of interest to you, and allows those stories to carry the kernel of the ideas. "And in the process" she says, "the ideas become more nuanced, less cut and dried."

Given this context, I decided that one way to approach her work was to talk to her about her own story.

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MARY CATHERINE BATESON (1939–2021) was a writer and cultural anthropologist who taught at Harvard, Northeastern University, Amherst College, Spelman College, George Mason University, and abroad in the Philippines and in Iran. Her books include *With a Daughter's Eye* (on her parents Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson); *Our Own Metaphor*; *Angels Fear: Toward an Epistemology of the Sacred* (written with Gregory Bateson); *Composing a Life*; *Peripheral Visions: Learning Along the Way*; *Full Circles, Overlapping Lives: Culture and Generation in Transition*; and *Composing a Further Life: The Age of Active Wisdom*.

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BATESON: People learn from stories in a different way than the way they learn from generalities. When I'm writing, I often start out with abstractions and academic jargon and purge it. The red pencil goes through page after page while I try to make sure that the stories and examples remain to carry the kernel of the ideas, and in the process the ideas become more nuanced, less cut and dried. Sometimes reviewers seem to want the abstractions back, but I figure that if they were able to recognize what's being said, it didn't have to be spelled out or dressed up in pretentious technical language.

Edge: Your approach is somewhat the opposite than that which a journalist might take, namely going out and finding famous subjects to write about—in your last two books the women you've chosen to write about are not known to the public.

BATESON: Famous people are interesting, but there's a kind of a distancing phenomenon there. I'm interested in the creativity that we all put into our lives. Picasso's life story is not empowering to the creativity of ordinary people. What is empowering is looking at someone that they can identify with. And becoming aware of what they're already doing.

Edge: Would you care to mention two or three of the women you write about in the book? Why you chose them?

BATESON: I didn't choose them. The younger women were traditional undergraduates who signed up for a course at Spelman College, and the older women in the group were part of a larger group that Johnnetta Cole had told about the opportunity of joining this course. So the women came from two different generational groups, which is what I had asked for, but they were basically self-selected; they thought this would be interesting.

I put quite extended statements by two of the women into the second chapter. In most of the book the life histories are partial and interwoven, but I felt that these two longer stories gave a particular kind of flavor and bracketed the cultural differences between the two groups. One was from the oldest woman in the group, a woman named Marymal Dryden, talking about her first marriage and about the decision to leave that marriage. She's 70 now; when she left that marriage she already had two small children. Leaving was an act of considerable courage, partly inspired by the painting of a poor black woman sharecropper,

whereas she said she saw herself as being drawn into a very comfortable but superficial middle-class life, and she left. That to me is an example of a creative act. Next to that is the story of a woman undergraduate, talking about her issues around bisexuality and the relationship she had with another girl as a high school student. The process of self-discovery was involved for both of these women. And both are fine story-tellers too.

Edge: Let's go back and talk about how you got to the place where you began researching this project.

BATESON: I grew up in an anthropological family—both of my parents, Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson, were anthropologists. But I had no intention of being an anthropologist myself, although as a child I was always encouraged in being an observer as well as a participant. I had a lot of experience of moving back and forth between different households, where I was told to follow the rules of the household instead of saying, *at home we do things differently*. When I was 16, I went with my mother on a visit to Israel and decided to live there for a year. I learned Hebrew so I could enter a regular high school, and fell in love with the language and with the notion that when you move into a different language you are moving into a different way of thinking, acquiring a whole new world along with a new language. There's a lot of interest today in the biological potential for language, that most human beings have in common, but I am interested in the potential for cultural and individual distinctiveness that comes out of our biology and also underlies our creativity.

At the end of that year, when I went off to college, I had decided that what I wanted to study was linguistics, and that linguistics would allow me to explore this insight. Nobody had told me that this way of looking at languages was developed by anthropological linguists—people like Sapir and Whorf—and I happily chugged along, getting started in linguistics, and then realized that what I was doing was part of anthropology. In the meantime, linguistics was going off into much more formalized fields that were not my primary interest. I was interested in how people communicate with each other, and the diversities among groups and how these are bridged. So when my husband and I went for a two-year stint in the Philippines, I got a teaching job at a university in Manila that allowed me to teach some linguistics and some cultural anthropology, and that let me retool as a cultural anthropologist. Since then I've defined myself as a cultural anthropologist with a particular interest in patterns of communication, symbols, ways of seeing the world.

Edge: After the Philippines?

BATESON: After the Philippines I got a job teaching anthropology at Northeastern University. Before we went to the Philippines I was teaching Arabic at Harvard. But that was obviously not a very marketable skill in Manila. The teaching I have done since the Philippines has been in cultural anthropology. Then a few years later we went to Iran. My husband was interested in international management training, but I was not interested in going to a country where I would have to start again from scratch in terms of knowledge of the language and culture. I argued that if he wanted to be involved in international management training, I was willing to go abroad if we went to the Middle East.

We went to Iran—I had wanted to learn Persian for quite a while anyhow. We were in Iran for most of the next six years, where I did various jobs in educational planning and some field work. This was before the revolution. There's a good deal about Iran in *Full Circles*, where I'm trying to set the experiences of these American women in comparison to other cultures. I was there while the revolution was heating up. At the point where my daughter Vanni and I left Iran, all public educational institutions were closed down by strikes.

I came back to the United States in January and started looking for a job. It was clear that the best place at that time for me to look was in administration, since senior teaching posts were overloaded, but I also agreed to write a memoir of my parents. Then I became a Dean at Amherst College for three years.

Edge: Let's talk about that.

BATESON: There are two things to be said about that experience. One was that it was an opportunity for me to think about how whole systems function. Think of a college. It has a physical aspect, a financial one, there are human beings involved in it, their ideas, information flows around it. But very few people in a college think in terms of that whole process. Looking at that was very useful to me; I learned a lot from it. And got a lot of pleasure out of trying to understand the sub-cultures, the different departments, and what were the various kinds of cultural lags and blockages in the institution. For instance, I took the lead when I was there in moving from a situation where only a few scientists were using computers in rather advanced ways, to really bringing computing into the life of the institution. It was extremely interesting to see the blind spots of people, and the way they went about their business in terms of competition between the different units of the college instead of understanding that effective synergy of all of those units was what they depended on. That's the positive side—it was a situation where I was able to learn a lot, and in a sense it's good that I got out of it because one's capacity for being a participant observer is eroded by the

pressure of a job like that. My ability to analyze it in those terms was fading as I was trying to keep up with the day-to-day stuff.

Now the negative side of it is that Amherst College had just become coeducational, and department after department had chewed up and spit out the women they had hired for faculty positions. I was in many ways caught between senior members of the faculty who didn't welcome women, particularly not in positions of authority, and the women who thought everything should be solved for them overnight, which it wasn't going to be. That was a very stressful position. Amherst is a place that is very suspicious of administrators anyhow. Then when the president died, without warning, of a heart attack, a few senior people, acting in an "advisory" role, saw the opportunity to stage a coup. And it became untenable for me.

Edge: I bet you weren't observing too clearly then.

BATESON: No, but I was able to look at myself in retrospect. I spent a lot of time trying to find out exactly what had happened, and looking at my own reaction. I think that one of the things that many women find is that they are all too willing when something goes wrong to say that it must be their fault. Certainly that was my emotional reaction initially. It was important for me to understand that other people were taking advantage of an opportunity to pursue their ambitions, while I just was too much in shock to be thinking in those terms. I was too focused on the fact that someone I'd worked very closely with had simply dropped dead, and there was a need to keep things together and move along. This is one of the stories that went into *Composing A Life* as part of the exploration of how people deal with discontinuities and move on.

Edge: So how did you move on?

BATESON: I took a year's leave, finally finishing the memoir of my parents, *With a Daughter's Eye*, went back and taught for a year. Then I took an extended leave, which allowed me to write two more books, *Composing a Life* and then *Thinking Aids*, with an Amherst colleague and friend. And then I took a job at George Mason University in Virginia and resigned from Amherst.

Edge: Why?

BATESON: I knew so much about what was happening there and could see things happen that I felt were unfair that it was very hard to maintain the necessary distance. When a junior member of the faculty was denied tenure, for

instance, they'd come to me wanting me to comment. There were a lot of people in positions of authority that I knew better than to trust. Then the offer from Mason came along, and they were willing to agree to give me a regular faculty position and allow me to take a semester leave without pay every year so that I could write.

After Amherst I rediscovered myself as a writer. And I was not going to go into another position that would prevent me from writing. Certainly not a deanship or a college presidency. And not a full-time teaching job. It's important to me to do some teaching, because you can develop your thinking in the interactive context of a classroom in a way in which you can't through lectures and writing articles.

Edge: What are you teaching at George Mason?

BATESON: After I got my doctorate, when I was teaching Arabic at Harvard, I volunteered to teach a section of Erik Erikson's course on "The Human Life Cycle," which planted a seed of interest in the way people live their lives. I picked that up when I wrote the memoir of my parents and then I went into writing *Composing a Life* where I looked at a number of women's lives. So although I had not taught on life histories since the Erikson experience, when I went to Mason I began teaching courses related to life histories, autobiography, the life cycle, in various different forms, sometimes about men and women, sometimes just women, sometimes memoirs of adolescence. I've also taught a course with the title "Ecology and Culture." And in some years I've taught a course about the relationship between medical risk on the one hand and race and gender on the other.

Edge: What do you mean by "Ecology and Culture"?

BATESON: What I mean by that is, of course, not what was meant when the title was put into the catalog. Ecology and Culture is most commonly taught in terms of the way a given environment determines the possible cultural patterns that human societies develop to adapt to that environment, sometimes also in terms of the impact of a given human community. What I was mainly focusing on, however, came out of work that I'd done with my father, namely the relationship between the ideas, the beliefs, the understandings and so on of a group of people and the way they impact their environment. Gregory believed that the way we in industrial civilization mistreat the natural world comes from a set of cultural premises, starting with the body-mind separation—deeply embedded cultural premises that are built into the experience of growing up, are deep in our theoretically secular educational system and played out in the economy and so on. Such premises are often expressed in religious terms, but of course such

socially constructed concepts as "money" or "credit" are our equivalent of deities or ancestral ghosts, telling us how to run our lives.

I was very interested in the work of an anthropologist named Roy Rappoport, who wrote about the way the ritual cycle of a New Guinea people regulated both their impact on their environment and their rhythms of warfare and peace-making. Basically what I did in "Ecology and Culture" was to pose the question of how ideas, particularly religious ideas, but not exclusively so, and the way they're expressed, may regulate or moderate the impact of a group on their natural environment.

I've always taught the first half of the course using examples from preliterate peoples, ethnographic examples, let's say, and the second half of the semester, looking at different religious traditions, old and new, trying to get the students to think about what their environmental implications might be.

Edge: Examples?

BATESON: Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism, Islam. I work with class presentations, so a group of students explores a given tradition and then tries to extrapolate from the belief system to the potential effects on population growth, on the way resources are used and technologies adopted. Then we look at some of the new systems of ideas, like deep ecology.

Edge: How about saying a little more about the key themes of your new book?

BATESON: *Full Circles* came out of a convergence of two lines of thought. I had been thinking of writing a book based on a cross-cultural look at the life cycle and the way it is changing. In the process of thinking about that I'd become very aware that not only are individual life cycles changing as we live longer, but the way the life cycles of different generations overlap is changing. Let me put this differently. Where will I be in my life cycle when my first grandchild is born? This is obviously going to have an effect on the nature of our interaction. The fact that many of us will live to see great-grandchildren is also going to have an effect. In the book I say we sort of assume that human beings have synchronesh—that the gears of the different generations can just fit smoothly together when the ratios between them have changed. But that's not self-evident. The relationship between generations is fundamental to the transmission and development of human culture. That was one line of thought that I was following, and it's fun to look at.

The other line of thought, which is not unrelated, came about when I was working on *Peripheral Visions*, which emphasized learning in situations of cultural difference. You go to another country, you live with another group of people—they see the world differently and you learn not just to see it differently but also that there is more than one way to see it. You move up the logical ladder and think about thinking, in that context. It suddenly occurred to me that given the rate of cultural change, the cultural difference between generations offers an analog to cultural difference between groups from different countries.

That's the abstraction. Now I'll give you an example: I think of my daughter and myself as having been born in different countries. We were actually born 30 years apart in the United States of America. That means we were born into massively different cultural environments. What occurred to me, and this is something I've felt for a very long time—is that you can use what people learn in the home, especially from age differences, to deal with other kinds of diversity. After all, we learn more at home before we get to school than we learn in school. And we learn about the nature of learning, fundamental things about relationships, so that we need to be more systematic in using learning within the home for the insight it offers to understanding things outside the home. Including learning to learn, of course. So my argument is that one way to learn how to adapt if you go and live in Japan, or in Kenya, or in Venezuela, is to talk to your grandparents about how they've adapted to change in this country, and notice what it takes to communicate effectively across that generational gap. And then to realize that unfamiliar groups are different in the same kinds of ways, that you know how to bridge the gap, so that there's no need to be put off by the sense of strangeness—you can learn how to deal with strangeness in the home.

Okay, so this book is a sort of marriage of those two themes, that came out of my teaching at Spelman College, which is a historically black liberal arts college in Atlanta, in which I had traditional undergraduate students and a group of older women. We had in the same room two different generations of African-Americans who have experienced massive cultural change between those generations. The older women all grew up in the legally segregated deep South, and lived through the years of the civil rights movement, and the younger women were all born after it was over. So we had that historical and age difference to work with, along with the issue of communication between black and white, because I am white. For more perspective we could set other versions of the life cycle in different cultures next to our own. So that was a moment when the thinking that went into *Full Circles* really crystallized.

Edge: Is this just an American phenomenon?

BATESON: The issue of people watching their children grow up culturally different from them? It's world-wide. And the issue of learning to live side by side with population groups that are racially and culturally and religiously different is world-wide. In Germany, for instance, not only are parents puzzled by their own children, they are puzzled by the influx of a Turkish workforce who are Muslims. England now has a substantial Black population—an Afro-Caribbean and an African population, so in addition to being puzzled sometimes by their own children, they are puzzled by their neighbors. It is inside the family that we can learn that it is possible to deeply love someone without complete understanding, so it should be possible to practice civility and respect without complete understanding.

You always have to talk about people starting from the specifics. And then you have to say, well, how does this specific story concerning a computer programmer from India, say, who has settled in Germany, encapsulate a truth that is relevant to a Greek who immigrates to Australia? Some people don't even do that with their own lives. They have an experience and then they just leave it behind instead of reflecting on it and learning from it.

The other theme that is very important, is the effect of ongoing learning through the life cycle. Changes in the nature of authority, where the people in authority are of necessity continuing to learn. It makes for a different kind of classroom, a different kind of campus, a different parent-child relationship. We are moving increasingly into the era of the pluralistic family, where it isn't just that women and children have rights, it is that they have knowledge and skills that they bring to decision-making, which changes the whole nature of decision-making and interaction within the family.

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