

Original Thinking

Jan van Boeckel is inspired by a film about the life of the late Gregory Bateson

An Ecology of Mind
Documentary film, 2010
Directed by Nora Bateson

Gregory Bateson was one of the most original thinkers of the late 20th century. His research covered a vast array of different fields: anthropology, biology, psychology and philosophy of science. He would often cross the boundaries of disciplines, and do so in highly innovative ways. Until now, though, his work has been largely inaccessible to those outside of the academic community. With this film, *An Ecology of Mind*, this is bound to change.

For me, watching Nora Bateson's film portrait of her father was overwhelming. At the start, Nora says: "I am inviting you to do the thing he did best, which is to look at a thing – be it an earthworm, a number sequence, a tree, a formal definition of addiction, anything at all – from another angle."

Her father would twist things around endlessly to ensure he didn't get stuck in a singular way of thinking. He would ask himself, "What is the pattern that connects the crab to the lobster and the primrose to the orchid, and all of them to me, and me to you?"

To learn about this pattern was his life's purpose. But his approach was so radically different from that of conventional science, he was a voice crying in the wilderness. "Why do our schools teach us nothing about the pattern which connects?" he asked in despair. There was another side to this, and a cause for great concern. "Break the pattern which connects," he stated, "and you necessarily destroy all quality."

In the film, Mary Catherine Bateson, the daughter of Gregory Bateson and his first wife, Margaret Mead, relates that her father was preoccupied by why humans so frequently behave in ways

that destroy natural ecological systems. What is it that makes us ignore the delicate interdependencies that give an ecosystem its integrity? As she observes, "We don't see them, and therefore we break them."

In *An Ecology of Mind*, several people who knew Bateson well, such as Fritjof Capra, Stewart Brand and the governor of California, Jerry Brown, share how they too have been inspired by his thoughts. But perhaps Nora Bateson's biggest achievement is that she is able to explain abstract and rather inaccessible concepts in a clear way.

A recurring theme is Bateson's focus on the relationships between things and the importance of context. He holds that we live in a world made only of

relationships. And without context, these words and actions have no meaning. Though this may seem self-evident, when practised thoroughly it can lead to a dramatic and surprising shift of focus, as comes across compellingly in this statement of his:

"You have probably been taught that you have five fingers. That is, on the whole, incorrect. It is the way language subdivides things into things. Probably the biological truth is that in the growth of this thing – in your embryology, which you scarcely remember – what was important was not five, but four relations between pairs of fingers."

The most profound insight for me came towards the end of the film. Nora Bateson relates here how her father taught her that to be really complete, incompleteness must be included in the system. The key here is the ability of "learning to learn". For Gregory Bateson, anything else is just static and finished, because it doesn't evolve. Even in death, relationships continue to grow: "I am still learning things from my father," Nora Bateson says as her last line in *An Ecology of Mind*. R

Jan van Boeckel is an anthropologist, art teacher, visual artist and film-maker.

The film tours the UK in February; for more information visit www.anecologyofmind.com



Nora and Gregory Bateson Photo: Lois Bateson