Gregory Bateson:
Old Men Ought to be Explorers

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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

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

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.

I had a beloved friend and mentor named Gregory Bateson, a huge Englishman, an anthropologist, biologist, psychologist, and philosopher of science, 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.

His central contribution was the expansion of our idea of biological processes to include mind (organisms secrete not only bones and tissues, they secrete behavior, communication, arts, religions); and the expansion of our idea of mind to include nature (learning and evolution mirror each other; the embryo *knows* when it grows hands and feet with their intricate patterns of segmentation, branching and symmetry; a culture *knows* as it grows rituals over the generations). All biological data, the crab as well as the poem, are, in his friend Warren McCulloch's phrase, "Embodiments of Mind."

The effect of this view is not to bring the psychological and spiritual "down" to the level of material (as behaviorism or positivism does), nor to evaporate the world

of bodies and behavior "up" to the level of mind and spirit. It just isn't divided that way. In 1793 Blake wrote:

> Man has no Body distinct from his Soul for that call'd Body is a portion of the Soul discern'd by the five Senses, the chief inlets of Soul in this age. ...
> Every Thing that Lives is Holy.[2]

All this is well-understood in philosophies like Taoism and Buddhism. But Gregory showed that if we take on the data and theoretical groundwork of our own dualistic Western science, if we follow them very carefully, they will lead us right out of our habitual dualism into what we now call a paradigm shift.

There is a genre of scientific writing called the "principia," which deals with fundamentals. Perhaps *Mind and Nature*, Gregory's final summing-up of his work before diving into new territory, is a kind of *Principia Creatura*, a work that asks what are the axioms that underlie a science of all living, communicating, evolving systems, i.e., all minds:

> What pattern connects the crab to the lobster and the orchid to the primrose and all four of them to me? And me to you? And all six of us to the amoeba in one direction and to the back-ward schizophrenic in another?

I want to tell you why I have been a biologist all my life, what it is that I have been trying to study. What thoughts can I share regarding the total biological world in which we live and have our being? How is it put together?

> What now must be said is difficult, appears to be quite EMPTY, and is of very great and deep importance to you and to me. At this historic juncture, I believe it to be important to the survival of the whole biosphere, which you know is threatened.
> What is the pattern that connects all living creatures?[3]

[2] William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* p. 4. See *Complete Poetry and Prose*, ed. David Erdman, Anchor, 1973.

[3] G.B. *Mind and Nature*, Dutton, 1979, p. 8.

Teaching ...

> And then there was, almost every year, a vague complaint which usually came to me as a rumor. It was alleged that "Bateson knows something which he does not tell you," or "There's something behind what Bateson says, but he never says what it is."[4]
>
> Kai – "Hm ... there's just a little bend ... There's a little place where you bend around the corner, and I just see the tail end of you disappearing, when you're talking."
> Gregory – "You should come around the corner too!"[5]

Gregory was perhaps most prolific as a teacher. In his last four decades he had a rich crop of mind-children, who have carried a certain spirit and viewpoint into their varying fields. Multiple versions of relationship: all of us are different and see Gregory differently – he did not try, and could not have succeeded, in turning out imitation Batesons. Yet something is there, not quite definable, a shared experience of integrity and authenticity. When we met we tended to become friends. Often we would first bump into each other at the Batesons' house, and become involved in vivid, fruitful conversations that would last way into the night. Just as we really got going Gregory would excuse himself and go to bed, muttering on the way out, "They're breeding!" He had done his part and the rest was up to us.

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, he could be almost incomprehensible unless you already knew what he was talking about. 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."

That is why, for my money, the clearest, most accurate written exposition of his

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[4] G.B. *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, Chandler, 1972, p. xix.

[5] From an unpublished film, "The Pattern Which Connects," by Kai de Fontenay, Marlow Hotchkiss, and Stephen Nachmanovitch. Footage by Kai de Fontenay.

material is found in the metalogues, the fictionalized Platonic father/daughter dialogues published over the years and collected in the first part *of Steps to an Ecology of Mind*; and likewise *Our Own Metaphor* by Mary Catherine Bateson, her account of her father's 1968 conference on the Effects of Conscious Purpose on Human Adaptation – in which we see Gregory's way of thinking embedded in a matrix of give-and-take with others, a live stochastic process of people and ideas mingling, disagreeing, coevolving into an open-ended whole.

A metalogue is a discussion in which the language is isomorphic – similarly shaped – to what's being talked about. His everyday way of talking was in metalogues – his own metaphor; what you had in front of you was the Real McCoy. In talking with Gregory about something, I felt that the talking was closer to the something than with anyone else I knew.

He served rather as a kind of nexus where the ideas met and propagated outward – not self, but organism-plus-environment; not causality, but interrelatedness.

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.*[6]

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

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

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!"

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.

"Bateson knows something which he does not tell you." Many people say that Bateson is such frightfully difficult stuff to read, that it needs to be unwrapped: is it anthropology or philosophy or psychology or systems theory or what? – some forbidding hyphenated combination of fields and disciplines? Interdisciplinary we say. But 'interdisciplinary' implies a hybrid, or one field using the material of another. What Gregory was after (no, where he sat) was the necessary unity of science, art, and religion. Though specialization is provisionally necessary in order to gather data and bring out the details of a field, it is ultimately misleading to split knowledge down into cubbyholes – more than misleading, it is, to use one of his favorite words, monstrous, in that the mess we are in today is partly due to our culture's breakdown of knowledge into departments and specialties.

He did have trouble calling his subject by a name. Sometimes he settled on one, most often anthropology, but also epistemology, or ecology of mind; but often he would fall back on calling it "these matters", "what it's all about", "the nature of this whole business." Often he spoke of *thingamabobs* and *whosits* and *whatsits*, or "subjects which have not yet been properly formalized." He spoke of hanging paradigms up in his larder.

To express non-dualistic thoughts in English and related languages is very difficult.

To express non-dualistic thoughts, or basic matters of preverbal learning, in the language of almost any academic discipline is just about impossible.

'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.

The axioms are like genotype or deep structure, the actual happenings in the culture are like phenotype or surface structure. Axioms are, or their nature, self-sealing and resistant to change. So Gregory had quite a job cut out for him as he declared that he wanted to set us "free from thinking in material and logical terms when you're trying to think about living things."

We had, in other words, to unlearn a great deal of what we had absorbed from kindergarten up. It was quite something to experience this, and later as his assistant to help subsequent roomsful of people giving themselves up (fighting every step of the way!) to the intensity of what was going on around that table, "getting their roots rattled." Getting their roots rattled not by Gregory alone, but by each other and the whole process. His "little heart," he freely confessed, "was going pitter-patter along with the rest of us."

... and Seeing

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 had merit and seemed uncomprehending of my "Of course not. They are experienced ethnographers and not technicians."[7]

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

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

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. He was a virtuoso at creating and interpreting both still and motion picture photography and is remembered in cinema history as well as anthropology.

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 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,"[8] 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."*[9]

Gregory also liked Carlos Castaneda's use of the word *glosses*[10] 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*."[11] Acutely aware of the provisional nature of concepts and words, he said of *Mind and Nature*, "Strictly speaking, every word in the book should be in quotation marks."[12]

If our language tends to foster the delusion of misplaced concreteness, it is particularly *nouns* – substantives – that get in the way of our being able to clearly see the flux and interconnectedness of our world. Anatol Holt wanted to encapsulate this teaching by printing up a bumper sticker that said, STAMP OUT NOUNS. "You've got to remember," Gregory told me one night, looming and leering over a heavy Mexican dinner, looking very substantial indeed, "there is no substance."

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

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

[10] Carlos Castaneda, *Journey to Ixtlan* and *Tales of Power*, Simon and Schuster, 1972 and 1974.

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

[12] G.B. *Mind and Nature*.

Yet the problem is not so much words per se as our relationship with them. "Language," he said, "is a remarkable servant and a lousy master." And there exists something called poetry, which is the practice of using words to say what cannot possibly be said in words.

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*
> *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.*[13]

In the *Book of Job*, another of Gregory's important teaching texts, we are assailed by all the great unanswerable cosmic questions: Why is there evil? What does it all mean? Why me? But when the Lord finally answers Job out of the whirlwind, He steers clear of such illusory topics as good and evil (God is not a theologian!) and speaks instead of the rain, the dew and the wild goats, how the foundations of the earth were laid, implying that wisdom lies in the minute particulars of natural history:

> *Hath the rain a father? and who hath begotten the drops of dew?*
> *Out of whose womb came the ice? ...*
> *Knowest thou the time when the wild goats of the rock bring forth?*

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

Or canst thou mark when the hinds do calve?
Canst thou number the months that they fulfill?
Or knowest thou the time when they bring forth?
They bow themselves, they bring forth their young ones,
they cast out their sorrows.
Their young ones are in good liking, they grow up with the corn;
they go forth, and return not unto them.[14]

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.

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.[15]

[14] *Book of Job* 38:28, 39:1-4. (King James Version).

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

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.[16]
>
> – Blake

Imagine a white, growling mountain of a person, uh-huhing and harumphing, who lets you peep, through him, to Bali, to warm shores. Enthralling, almost photographic storytelling, transmitting his world of experience: clear, bright, distinctly outlined.

His 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 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.

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

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*. At times his critical faculty could shine a pinpoint of light onto a problem, onto an ingrained habit of thought that we all took for granted. The struggle to find the exact word, the exact statement of a question, is like poetry or mathematics, eliminating illusions and delusions, a key to unlock the beauty and simplicity within the complexity of life.

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.

I think of stupendous meals and drawn-out chess games, as well as the horrible night he talked me into believing that kidneys could be sautéed. The times in his last couple of years at Esalen, when we spent whole mornings in contented silence. Poking around in the Santa Cruz mountains; poking in the tide pools. The little jig we danced in the kitchen at Ben Lomond one morning over being the 1st and 2nd most underrated authors in English. All that seems so private, but somehow directly connected with the subject matter, the ecology of mind; the most intimate is the most inclusive. That is why he had many friends who couldn't care less about anthropology or big ideas, but who could see through to him easily.

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[17]

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 exemplified 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."

Synthesizing

> The poets have known these things all through the ages, but the rest of us have gone astray into all sorts of false reifications of the "self" and separations between "self" and "experience." ... It is the attempt to separate intellect from emotion that is monstrous, and I suggest that it is equally monstrous – and dangerous – to attempt to separate the external mind from the internal. Or to separate mind from body.[18]

Gregory was the third son of a brilliant, famous, overbearing biologist, a Cambridge don. William Bateson founded and named the science of genetics and was profoundly embroiled in the debates over evolutionary theory among the generation of scientists who followed Darwin. He rediscovered and brought into mainstream science the work of Gregor Mendel, after whom Gregory was named. William's eld-

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

[18] G.B. "Form, Substance, and Difference." *Steps* pp. 468-471.

est son, John, was marked out to follow in his father's footsteps. The second son, Martin, in a kind of stereotypical rebellion, was intensely romantic, an aspiring poet and dramatist. The third son, Gregory, was an unknown quantity. But John was killed in World War I, and soon after, Martin shot himself on account of a failed romance (under the statue of Eros in Picadilly Circus!). So there was Gregory, heir to a great quantity of what we now call karma. When he got his bachelor's degree he moved as far away as he could get; into anthropology and then off to the New Guinea headhunters. Anthropology was related to biology, but could only be practiced in far-off places, and dealt with the living processes of culture, a science that is soft and subjective. His career choices involved a strange and fitting combination of conservatism and rebellion. As his life and work developed and rounded itself out, in ways that could not have been foreseen then, he did in fact accomplish a unique synthesis of scientist and poet.

He contributed to many fields of research, seeming often to his colleagues to be "hopping" from discipline to discipline. As he hopped along, following the implications of the data, drawn by analogies and homologies, he began to see all those fields as scattered pieces of a single pattern.

But throughout, the tone of that half-formed pattern, his metascience, was dictated by his first science, biology of the 19th Century kind, natural history. He was profoundly and permanently affected by his father, who taught him to look primarily at the structure and macroscopic shape of organisms, the formal relations between the parts as they develop through time. This is in profound contradistinction to the current fashions in biological science, which tend to reduce all life phenomena to the microscopic and the atomistic.

Many people have found Gregory's writing obscure. I would submit that his writing is exquisitely logical, clear, easy to follow, easy to match up with how the real world works. But there are certain idiosyncrasies in his vocabulary, almost always words and phrases that refer back to 19th Century natural history, and in particular to the issues with which William Bateson grappled. Gregory was talking, as it were, not only to us, but backwards over his shoulder to his father, and perhaps never quite stopped trying to prove himself to the old man. Look at the unconscious parallel in the phrasing of the titles that father and son gave to their most significant books*: Materials For The Study Of Variation* by William Bateson, 1894*; Steps To An Ecology Of Mind* by Gregory Bateson, 1972.

In 1906 (when Gregory was 2 years old), his father wrote:

> We commonly think of animals and plants as matter, but they are really systems through which matter is continually passing. The orderly relations of their parts are as much under geometrical control as the concentric waves spreading from a splash in a pool.[19]

When Gregory later became an anthropologist, a psychologist, a communications theorist, a theorist of ecological and health issues, the questions he asked concerned how a ritual, a society, an artwork, a quarreling family, a redwood forest in climax, are like a living body: what are the symmetries, branchings, segmentations; how is mind immanent in the spatial segmentation of an animal's spinal column or the temporal segmentation of Bach's *Goldberg Variations*?

A most crucial, perhaps the most crucial, development in Gregory's work and thought came after World War II, with the Macy conferences on cybernetics. During these conferences, which continued throughout the late 40's and early 50's, the trans-disciplinary science of cybernetics was invented. He found that cybernetics could serve as a container class for all the emerging patterns he saw in the data of the life sciences. Cybernetics is the science of communication and control regardless of the medium carrying the communication, a way of formalizing questions of what is a system, what is a living being, what is a mind, how do they work. The first thing I ever read of Gregory's, a few years before meeting him, was a transcript of one of these Macy conferences, called "The Message *This is Play*," a hundred pages of unedited give-and-take[20] among a group of heavy hitters in the social and information sciences, which Gregory orchestrated in his trademark style of multilayered science and philosophy trying to get to the core of what it is to be human. Reading this transcript, my eyes popped open, aware that after studying so much in psychology and the social sciences in an attempt to grasp what mind is and how it works, I was now on the trail of the highest order abstractions which were fully authentic and true to life.

Gregory in his middle years became part of the California intelligentsia that made a distinct and important mark on the history of consciousness in our time. A large number of English and European scholars and artists settled here before, during and after World War II, and, because California stands at a geographical crossroads between multiple civilizations, ended up creating or contributing to cultural movements that partook equally of European and Asian influences. Alan

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[19] in *William Bateson, Naturalist*, by Beatrice Bateson, Cambridge, 1928, p. 209.

[20] *Group Process,* Transactions of the Second Conference in Princeton NJ, Josiah Macy Foundation, 1955.

Watts and others were busy introducing Buddhist and Taoist ideas into the thinking of Western philosophers at that time.

In the sixties, as he began to write papers relating his brand of systems theory to the re-emergent consciousness that there is such a thing as an ecology, it became clear that all his fields and pieces of data were "Steps to..." something. An Ecology of Mind. This, for him, was a kind of breakthrough, not instantaneous, but over the years, his work realizing (in the Buddhist sense) its true nature.

> It was only in late 1969 that I became fully conscious of what I had been doing. With the writing of the Korzybski Lecture, "Form, Substance, and Difference," I found that in my work with primitive peoples, schizophrenia, biological symmetry, and in my discontent with the conventional theories of evolution and learning, I had identified a widely scattered set of bench marks or points of reference from which a new scientific territory could be defined. These bench marks I have called "steps" in the title of the book.[21]

So here's the person I met in 1972: though he had spent nearly half a century breaking ground in several sciences, he had only just discovered in an explicit way what it was all about. He loved to quote Eliot's lines:

> *We shall not cease from exploration,*
> *and the end of all our exploring*
> *will be to arrive where we started*
> *and know the place for the first time.*[22]

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[23] 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.

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[21] G.B. *Steps*, Introduction, p. xviii.

[22] T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 'Little Gidding' *Complete Poems and Plays*, p. 145.

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

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, looked upon as monstrous superstitions that nearly killed us.

Confronted with the crisis of mind and nature in our day, many people believe that we must jump to some sort of political action. Gregory, for most of his life, was cynical about politics of any sort, and felt that even the best-intentioned and best-informed such action must inevitably backfire. He never voted. But in his last couple of years, especially as a Regent of the University of California, he started to change his mind. He became outspoken in the ongoing effort to brake our ever-accelerating addiction to nuclear arms,[24] in which the University, like many of our institutions, is heavily involved.

But he saw the matter as being infinitely deeper and more complex than saying no to policies and vested interests, difficult as that is in itself.

What evolved from his work were questions: What are the presuppositions of this culture, and particularly its science, which have led us to precipitate an ecological crisis that threatens the survival of all living things? What are some of the structural features that underlie phenomena of runaway feedback like addiction, armaments races, cancer, schizophrenia? Above all, what are the right questions to ask?

The world we have created with our thinking has evolved problems that we can't solve with that same kind of thinking. We have to dig. Deep, paradigmatic change does not take place at the level of merely rational discourse:

> Mere purposive rationality, unaided by such phenomena as art, religion, dream, and the like, is necessarily pathogenic and destructive of life; and its virulence

[24] G.B. Letters to the Regents, "Armaments Races as Epistemological Error" reprinted in *Zero: a Quarterly of Buddhist Thought*, p. 193.

> springs specifically from the circumstances that life depends on circuits of contingency, while consciousness can see only such short arcs of such circuits as human purpose may direct.
> Unaided consciousness must always tend towards hate, not only because it is good common sense to exterminate the other fellow, but for the more profound reason that, seeing only arcs of circuits, the individual is continually surprised and necessarily angered when his hardheaded policies return to plague the inventor...
> That is the sort of world we live in – a world of circuit structures – and love can survive only if wisdom (i.e., the sense of recognition of the fact of circuitry) has an effective voice.[25]

These modern notions of cybernetics and ecology are not all that new. Plato, in the *Timeas*, speaks of music and the other arts/sciences as not mere pleasure, but our essential ally in the recovery of our lost wholeness:

> The motions akin to the divine part of us are the thoughts and revolutions of the universe. These every man should follow, and correcting those circuits in the head that were deranged at birth, by learning to know the harmonies and revolutions of the world; he should assimilate the thinking being to the thought, renewing his original nature.[26]

Gregory felt that the corrective element of art (as in religion, science, or daily life) is to learn to address the world in a way that comprehends the unconscious totality, the inherent paradoxes. Aesthetics, paradox, sacrament, are the very things our modern epistemology drops by the wayside. When he died, Gregory left behind a still-to-be-completed book[27] on the nature of art and beauty, the nature of metaphor as a connecting principle that is "not just pretty poetry, but the glue, the logic upon which living things are built."

The world we see through our glosses is description, but it is not "just" description; different descriptions have different consequences, which may be all too real. The ultimate purpose of Gregory's science (at which his own work is only a beginning) is to discover more inclusive descriptions, to find in ourselves the "rigor and imagination" we need to break free from the objective, skin-bound idea of self that we so value, into something bigger:

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[25] G.B. "Style, Grace, and Information in Primitive Art" in *Steps*, p. 146.

[26] Plato, *Timeas*, paragraphs 47d and 90d; see Cornford and Jowett translations.

[27] Completed after his death by his daughter: Gregory Bateson & Mary Catherine Bateson, *Angels Fear: Towards an Epistemology of the Sacred.* New York: Macmillan, 1987.

> Consider a man felling a tree with an axe. Each stroke of the axe is modified or corrected, according to the shape of the cut face of the tree left by the previous stroke. This self-corrective (i.e., mental) process is brought about by a total system, tree-eyes-brain-muscles-axe-stroke-tree; and it is this total system that has the characteristics of immanent mind... . But this is not how the average Occidental sees the event sequence of tree-felling. He says, "I cut down the tree" and he even believes that there is a delimited agent, the "self," which performed a delimited "purposive" action upon a delimited object.
>
> The total self-corrective unit which processes information, or, as I say, "thinks" and "acts" and "decides," is a system whose boundaries do not at all coincide with the boundaries either of the body or of what is popularly called the "self" or "consciousness."...
>
> In the [alcoholic's] epistemologically unsound resolution, "I will fight the bottle," what is supposedly lined up against what? ...[28]
>
> If I am right, the whole of our thinking about what we are and what other people are has got to be restructured. This is not funny, and I do not know how long we have to do it in... Nobody knows how long we have, under the present system, before some disaster strikes us, more serious than the destruction of any group of nations. The most important task today is, perhaps, to learn to think in the new way. Let me say that I don't know how to think in that way. Intellectually, I can stand here and I can give you a reasoned exposition of this matter; but if I am cutting down a tree, I still think "Gregory Bateson" is cutting down a tree. "Myself" is to me still an excessively concrete object, different from the rest of what I have been calling "mind."[29]
> The step to realizing – to making habitual – the other way of thinking – so that one naturally thinks that way when one reaches out for a glass of water or cuts down a tree – that step is not an easy one... .
>
> There are experiences and disciplines which may help me to imagine what it would be like to have this habit of correct thought ...

This sequence of quotations points to the direction where Bateson's thought was leading him. But it also lays out a clear foundation for an understanding of *shunyata*: the fundamental Buddhist idea of the emptiness of inherent existence. Though Bateson was not a meditator, he understood that through an experience and discipline like meditation, one is able to realize this emptiness, realize in our own direct

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[28] G.B. "Cybernetics of 'Self': A Theory of Alcoholism." *Steps*, pp. 317-8, 320.

[29] I think here perhaps he underestimated himself. I never saw Gregory use an axe on a tree, but I did see him saw off a branch that kept poking in the ear of a rather stuffy and important lunch-guest out on his deck at Esalen. Gregory was sawing away, grunting and harumphing, with glee and abandon: there really was no separate Gregory or separate saw or tree, as far as I could see. It was a wonderful dance.

experience that ourselves and all things of our world exist only in and through a network of relationship that encompasses all other things. None exists in and by itself.

> ... And last, there is death. It is understandable that, in a civilization which separates mind from body, we should either try to forget death or to make mythologies about the survival of transcendent mind. But if mind is immanent not only in those pathways of information which are located inside the body but also in external pathways, then death takes on a different aspect. The individual nexus of pathways which I call "me" is no longer so precious because that nexus is only part of a larger mind.
> The ideas which seemed to be me can also become immanent in you. May they survive – if true.[30]

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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 [31]

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

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[30] G.B. "Form, Substance, and Difference." *Steps* pp. 468-471.

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

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, 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[32]: 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,[33] 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.

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

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

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."[34]

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."[35]

The otters may have belonged to a dying world, but God how they played!

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

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

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.[36]

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!

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,

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[36] 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.

> 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.[37]

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 ..."[38] 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.

And again like a baby or small child, he seemed to command, or focus, a kind of extraordinary vibrancy that defined a much bigger space than his body.

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.

A weary Lois said one day that Gregory, even lying there moaning and semiconscious, was still teaching us.

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

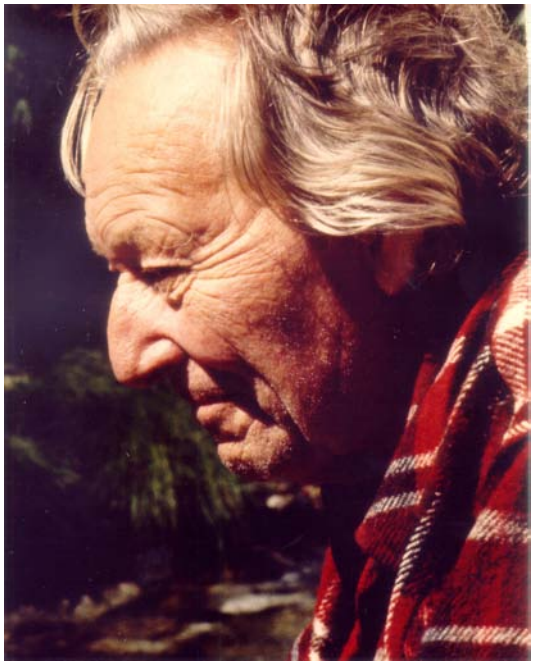
[38] *Book of Job* 30:17, 19:22.

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 very 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 nondualism. 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. It seemed that perhaps his going out in that particular place was a manner of pointing at the next step in the work.

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

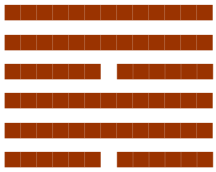
they left the room together, Gregory quietly cackled, "They're all in a procession ... out of body!" Here was this dying man, muzzy and fatigued, yet his impish grin intact, making fun as usual of transmigration and other supernatural beliefs about death. Many times over the years he said that when you're 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.

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1. Kai de Fontenay, 1979.

9. Gregory Bateson, 1971.

14. Michael Stulbarg, 1980.

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