Bateson and the Arts

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Abstract

Purpose – To elucidate the relationship between science and the arts in Gregory Bateson’s thinking, from the viewpoint of an artist-musician and student of Bateson.

Design/methodology/approach – Synthesis.

Findings – One theme that pervaded Gregory Bateson’s lifelong contribution was the rich and complex interface between art and science. Artistry (which may occur in either the arts or the sciences) plays across the interface between conscious and unconscious mind and environment. We come in actual practice to an appreciation and a facility for working with total cybernetic systems rather than the fragmented bits and pieces which are taught in conventional education and media. Through the play and discipline of creativity, we are able to experience this total systemic view of mind and nature.

Originality/value – Shows the reader significant ways of seeing the systems nature of our world through the experience and the practice of artistic creativity.

Keywords Cybernetics, Bateson, Art, Poetry, Seeing systems

Paper type Viewpoint/Conceptual paper

Art & Science cannot exist but by Naked Beauty display’d (Blake, 1804)

Gregory Bateson had a favorite opening gambit when meeting a class of new students. He would slap down on the table the remains of a crab or some other organism, and challenge us to examine it as the visible portion of a biological process. We would quickly be nudged toward an understanding of pattern and relationship, of what it is to be part of a living – and therefore sacred – world. The next week, he would bring in something quite different as a way into the same issues: a painting by Blake or Goya, a poem by Eliot. And very quickly we would enter into the essence of Bateson’s world view as a biologist when he told us that art is secreted by organisms. Form is secreted by process; art is secreted by living beings. We would begin to share his fascination with the rich, complex, and fluid relationships between science and art, and to see them as aspects of an essential unity.

On the first page of his first book, Bateson (1936) wrote:

The artist . . . can leave a great many of the most fundamental aspects of culture to be picked up, not from his actual words, but from his emphasis. He can choose words whose very sound is more significant than their dictionary meaning and he can group and stress them so that the reader almost unconsciously receives information which is not explicit in the sentences and which the artist would find it hard – almost impossible – to express in analytic terms. This impressionistic technique is utterly foreign to the methods of science, and the Functional

Thanks to Leslie Blackhall, Samantha Lane, Dianna Linden and Gregory Orr for critical readings of this manuscript.
School [of anthropology] ... has scarcely attempted the delineation of those aspects of culture which the artist is able to express.

Art and science are set out as parallel but incommensurate activities. We often hear about “the art and science of medicine,” or that activity $x$ is “both a science and an art.” What people often mean by these phrases is “science” as a set of logical, precise procedures and facts, and “art” as inspiration, subjective understanding, or the taking of intuitive leaps that cannot be taught or quantified.

At this first cut through our theme, the scientist has the task of collecting information, and of making connections and patterns explicit. Works of art can communicate a tremendous amount about the patterns of culture, not only by emphasis, coloration, context, and imagery, but by what is unsaid. In this paragraph, Bateson is poking toward the notion that the artist is able to participate, and to get the audience to participate, in unconscious information. The scientist must write for his or her audience in such a way that everything is unequivocally laid out, all the data and its interconnections held in conscious awareness. Since, the information inherent in any culture, in any human or biological interaction, is recursive, multilayered, and multidimensional, something essential always gets squashed or cut out.

Playing across the boundary/interface between science and art, we see Bateson’s subsequent work as redefining our epistemology so that science can begin to carry an awareness of the same unconscious and systemic richness that we find in art.

Many of the issues and themes in Gregory’s body of work were set in motion by his father, the dualism between art and science among them. William Bateson, the foremost British biologist of his day, rediscovered the lost work of Gregor Mendel, and established and named the science of genetics. He had an eye for pattern and the systems view of things long before “systems” were spoken of.

William Bateson was steeped in visual art and poetry, was an avid art collector, and one of the few people who kept the work of William Blake alive in an age when Blake was neglected or misunderstood. He introduced Blake’s work to Geoffrey Keynes, the surgeon who went on to become the great Blake scholar of the Twentieth Century, and who more than anyone else brought Blake into the public eye as one of the great poets, painters and philosophers. Bateson was made a trustee of the British Museum, not because he was a wealthy donor, but because he intimately knew the collections of every museum in Europe. He purchased an original set of Blake’s Illustrations of the Book of Job to celebrate the birth of his eldest son, John.

William Bateson expected his sons to follow in his footsteps. He was adamant that a Bateson could be a scientist, but was not equal to being an artist. Part of his attitude was the reluctance that many parents feel about their children going into the arts, for fear that they would not be able to make a living. But part, the imputation of “not good enough,” was a statement that artistic creativity exists somehow at a too exalted level for mere mortals. Much as he loved art, he set it upon a pedestal, and felt that to actually be an artist was simply too mysterious a condition. It required genius rather than conscious effort.

After John was killed in World War I, William’s forbidding attitude toward artistic creativity may have contributed to the suicide of his second son, Martin, who wanted to be a poet and dramatist. The third son, Gregory, inherited both the scientific legacy...
and the Blakes – and the conundrum or the koan of how to reconcile them. Gregory’s journey over the next half century became a tale of reconciling WB & WB. Blake, the prophetic, passionate, and spiritual artist who so precisely saw and drew his visions, may have served as a kind of placeholder for all those feelings that were beyond or outside for the elder Bateson. Those things for which Blake stood – a sense of wholeness, a recognition of the vastness of unconscious activity, and love, were the elements which Gregory Bateson later tried to integrate into the epistemology of science.

There are plenty of differences between art and science, but also many commonalities. Both artists and scientists are empirical, intimately involved with data and observation. They may have theories, which may come by intuitive leaps and seeing disparate pieces fall together into a whole – but the theories have to be tested by experience. If your theory results in a sloppy symphony or a sculpture that falls over as soon as you remove the scaffolding, it is not worth much. Blake (1810) said:

Every man has eyes nose & mouth, this every idiot knows; but he who enters into & discriminates most minutely the manners & intentions, the expression the characters in all their branches is the alone wise or sensible man & on this discrimination all art is founded.

There was no treat greater than watching Gregory Bateson observe a forest, a tide pool, or a couple interacting at the next table in a restaurant. He had an uncanny ability to get really close to the data at hand, to see things that others could not see but which then seem obvious when they are pointed out.

Data was a word which Gregory often pronounced with a kind of religious enthusiasm and gleam in his eye – a scientist who loved the act of observing the natural world. But, as his teaching methods showed – looking at the crab and the Goya painting as equally examples of biological phenomena – his idea of data was wider than that of many scientists.

Students often ask – and are sometimes even taught to ask – what does the poem (novel, painting, Bible, …) mean? It is as though art were a codebook and you could flip the page over to get the right answer. It is tempting to say that the meaning of this book is that Madame Bovary should not have done x, so she got what she deserved. For people who like to ask, “what does it mean?” the all-around perspective of art can be irritating or intimidating. It can take a while to figure out why artists cannot just say what they mean.

Artist and scientist are both in the business of uncovering reality. But neither can do so without reference to larger patterns and contexts. The artist uses story, image, and movement, to evoke layers of reality that cannot be explicitly stated, but which are ever-present. The data show up as though mapped on a Möbius strip or a Klein bottle, in that it can never be flattened onto a piece of paper. The scientific approaches that come closest to preserving the multidimensionality of data and awareness of context are natural history and systems theory – unsurprisingly the two most significant influences on Gregory’s work.

William Bateson passed on to Gregory the notion that in examining living systems, the most important question is not “what pieces is the system made of?” but “what is
the pattern?” What is the structure, how do the pieces connect to each other? He was interested in isomorphism: how is the crab’s leg related to the human leg and so forth. The primacy of patterning is central to Gregory’s work, and goes against the grain of our society’s preferred ways of thinking. We decipher the “genetic code” and think that if we can figure out which gene “causes” something, we can turn traits on and off and go on our merry way. Without a systems view, it is difficult to see unintended consequences coming, to understand the integrative qualities and influences of patterning and context, the dialectic of self and environment.

Gregory’s most central document about art is the 1967 paper, “Style, Grace, and Information in Primitive Art.” There he cites the statement famously attributed to Isadora Duncan: “If I could say it I wouldn’t have to dance it.” The information that is portrayed in art cannot be explained in terms of what is conventionally called “meaning.” We can talk forever in sequential explanations without getting close to what she can do in one gesture, what the filmmaker can do in one shot, or what the poet can do in one phrase. It is not a matter of verbal vs nonverbal communication, because literature can evoke the unsayable layers of pattern and context in words too. Since its essence is metaphor and interconnectivity, the work of art does not lie flat on the page (or on the television or computer screen, or in the time frame of music) and never can. Nor can a sequential explanation convey all the richness of Darwin’s Beagle expedition, or any other body of nature’s data.

In playing across the interface of art and science, Bateson was part of a long tradition of thinkers who have had a preference for seeing patterns which connect rather than a world of things and forces. It is a tradition of polymaths and renaissance men, going back to the great granddaddy of them all, Pythagoras.

He only takes portions of existence and fancies that the whole (Blake, 1790).

Freud taught Western civilization to see that conscious mind is merely a small portion of the total mind-body. But, he was hobbled by the mechanistic (and hydraulic) metaphors of his time, and talked about “the” unconscious as though it were a thing or a place. Jung came along with important efforts to refocus and expand Freud, but was limited by the same mechanistic metaphors. Bateson laid out the pattern in a way that was more true to life than Freud, thanks to his cybernetic view of things. He understood how consciousness cuts mental circuits into small arcs (Bateson, 1970, 1971). Mind and communication can be understood as circuits of influence and causation – of information transforming information at multiple levels. All life processes are vast complexes of such feedback loops. Consciousness, the gift of being able to focus in on single details of our perceptual or mental world, is also the limited view, snipping a feedback loop into a line segment; and we mistakenly take that line segment to be the whole. Hence, our preference for straight-line cause-and-effect thinking. Art – like religion, dream, and other experiences – restores a sense of the whole, which is far too complex to be handled in discursive consciousness or “meaning.” The activity of art, creating and beholding, takes us into the breach, the interface between consciousness and unconsciousness.
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, 1790).

The word cybernetics comes from kybernetes, the Greek for helmsman or steersman. The same root developed into the word governor. All words begin as metaphor, that is, as little works of art[1], arising from and evoking images, sounds, feelings, associations. Like many works of art, they may become fossilized, and may require new works of art to de-fossilize them. The steersman metaphor references the central cybernetic fact of feedback – respond to conditions, turn right, turn left, adjust and balance as cause and effect loop around the circuit to keep you on course. But, there is another aspect to the steersman image.

The kybernetes steers a course with the corrective feedbacks and goal-seeking behavior which we now know so well. But in addition, the steersman is aware of the whole field of stars above, aware of the qualities of the winds, the currents, the smells of the air and the sea and what that information tells him, the whole environment of complex, analog information that is best understood by feel and direct experience. This is how Bateson (1936) describes the gestalt perceptions in art and fiction, on page 1 of Naven. The all-around environment of experience is quite unlike our usual way of conceptualizing information. Linguists, computer programmers, psychologists prefer to see communication as a sequence of utterances: I say a, you say b, I say c, you say d. Even a model that comprehends feedback and recursiveness falls easily into the trap of breaking experience up onto a timeline, into events and utterances, breaking music into notes. The utterances are ascribed “meaning” and the total conversation is their sum. Bateson was frequently upset by researchers who wanted to count double binds, or more generally, to split human interaction into identifiable “events.”

But the steersman perceives the environment not in series but in parallel – a harmony or counterpoint of a total environment rather than a lineal string of bits of information. Rain is an integral, multisensory milieu, not a series of drops. If science is to help us understand and clarify the nature of real life, we need to understand more about parallel or harmonic processing.

The cybernetic conception of circuits of communication in self-environment systems is an advance over earlier ways of thinking, but does not go far enough. Much, probably most, of communication is harmony and counterpoint – simultaneous or parallel signals, images, tones, feelings, environmental factors that are continually blending and modifying each other. We live in a field or environment of co-occurring information, a great deal of it analog. I see this from the point of view of an improvisational chamber musician. My partners and I get up on stage and produce music by means of one technique only: total, intense, interactive listening. No one is in charge or plans anything in advance, yet a coherent piece reliably emerges; we inhabit an indissoluble environment of information.

Whether harmonious or cacophonous or both, this environment is a layering of multiple interdependent voices playing at once. A walk in a jungle, or a temperate forest in summertime, will give the same impression. So many voices from so many directions, yet the complete consort dancing together. Artistic functioning, particularly when the method is improvisation, puts us in conscious contact with the realities of system, such as continuous feedback and calibration, recursive self-modifying behavior, concurrency, ongoing interactional relationship. These qualities, as Bateson
teaches, are the hallmarks of being alive, but we seldom experience them consciously. In improvisation, these realities are right there for us to see, hear, touch, and play with.

Artistic functioning is a dance of equilibrium between motor and sensory. The productive and receptive sides of art each involve some of the other. We long ago came to understand that information does not simply come in through the senses and get registered on our nervous system – perception and memory are actively constructed. Bateson was influenced by the constructivist view in psychology, from Bartlett (1932) and Piaget (1937) on. We construct reality in apprehending it, so that perceiving is making, making is perceiving.

As we look out the window, our training, biases, learning, social conditioning, physiology, and chemistry, all are causing us to construct a perception of reality in a certain way. In this sense, we are always acting artistically on the environment simply by looking out the window. Active perception becomes a central fact of life when we make artwork or take in the artwork that someone else has made. Making and knowing, acting on things as an artist does, the action itself is constantly conditioned by feedback, by environment, by vast and finely differentiated ecosystems of unconscious activity.

For we now recognize the nature of our disease. What is wrong with us is precisely the detachment of these forms of experience – art, religion, and the rest – from one another; and our cure can only be their reunion in a complete and undivided life (Collingwood, 1924).

What is art? From one perspective, a professional life in the arts consists of three activities: refining one’s technical skills, keeping up with current developments in the field, and ingratiating oneself to people who can be helpful in one’s career. This is no different from any other profession. Many who pursue such a path produce beautiful and influential work. But this is not what is evoked by the word art in our present discussion. Seen in this light, we cannot say that composing music is art, while studying genetics is not art. “The arts” can be as limiting a line of work as any other.

What Bateson provides is an understanding not of art but of artistry. Artistry entails transformation and expansion of the person into something more inclusive than our limited concepts of identity and meaning. Artistry operates across the slash mark of conscious/unconscious, of self/other. Bateson makes us face a series of illusory dichotomies which we accept in our daily lives but which are false, such as mind/body, self/other, organism/environment, conscious/unconscious, thought/feeling. This is in the great tradition of scientific breakthroughs, like Einstein finding two separate realms, matter/energy, a fundamental dualism that everyone accepted, and realizing that these terms are a matter of perspective. Most particularly, we bridge the split of conscious purpose vs our unconscious totality or nature.

Bateson evokes a nonduality of body and mind which is very much akin to Buddhist perceptions, particularly Zen. From this nonduality is born our creativity and our ability to partake of the artistry of others.
We can reveal artistry in every field of life, even politics. I often return to the hopeful image of one of the most creative politicians of our time, Nelson Mandela. Artistry engages unitive experience, that is, crossing or erasing those slash marks. Mandela, along with Desmond Tutu and others in South Africa, was able to re-visualize the slash mark between oppressor and oppressed as an interface, with the invention of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission – a practical, empirical technique for enabling people to move on from a brutal past. This was magic, in the sense of doing something that seemed impossible, but involved nothing supernatural, only simple thinking.

Bateson (1980) reminded us, in a lecture he called “Simple Thinking,” that creativity finds a simple pattern that can contain the great complexities and contradictions without diminishing them.

grok, v.
a. trans. To understand intuitively or by empathy; to establish rapport with. b. intr. To empathize or communicate sympathetically (with); also, to experience enjoyment. (Oxford English Dictionary).

At the end of Mind and Nature, Gregory inexact quotes e.e. cummings. Gregory writes, “Always the more beautiful answer who asks the more difficult question” (Bateson, 1979a). As it turns out, cummings (1938) said, “Always the beautiful answer who asks a more beautiful question.” Bateson, with his own set of presuppositions and tastes, unconsciously substituted “difficult.” And why did he do that? He was making the connection between aesthetics and complexity, aesthetics and a fundamental understanding that the world is cybernetic, a vast interactivity of many creatures, many variables, ecological systems that are beyond the capacity of discursive thought to encapsulate in simple words and formulations – and therefore “difficult.” He told me that beauty is awareness of the pattern which connects. He was fleshing out Keats’ (1819) statement that “Beauty is truth, truth beauty.” While Bateson did not refer to the Keats line specifically, he went about showing how that equation works. For Bateson, beauty is (biological and systemic) complexity, and complexity is beauty. Difficulty does not mean something unnecessarily complex, but rather the necessary complexity and multidimensionality of the world that cannot be defined in the partial explanations of discursive thought, that cannot be handled in the kinds of proofs that we like to see in academia, law, politics, science, or journalism.

cummings, in the same text, tells us that we are going to hear “nothing proving or sick or partial.” So cummings groks a Bateson-like idea that cognition is always partial, and of its very essence leaves out the complexity and multilevel nature of the world around us. The real world is a totality, and conscious understanding is the small sliver that we can see at any time. If we turn our attention away from that small sliver, we see yet another small sliver. Sickness – of our relationships with the earth, with other human beings – arises from the inevitably partial nature of our perception. He says his poems contain:

nothing proving or sick or partial. Nothing false, nothing difficult or easy or small or colossal. Nothing ordinary or extraordinary, nothing emptied or filled, real or unreal; nothing feeble and known or clumsy and guessed (cummings, 1938).
which almost sounds like the wording of that foundational document of Buddhist epistemology, the Heart Sutra. In consciousness that goes beyond our ordinary thought processes, there is “no eye no ear no tongue no body no mind,” and so on. It cannot be grasped in ordinary ways. But it can be grokked.

We can look at any of cummings’ words and ask “what does that mean?” But that is the fundamental non-question about art. This non-question, which we love to ask, brings us back to “If I could say it, I wouldn’t have to dance it.”

cummings comes at the very end of *Mind and Nature*, where Gregory points toward the themes of beauty and ugliness, the sacred and the nature of consciousness, and how they relate to the fundamentals of science. These are the matters of *Angels Fear* (Bateson and Bateson, 1987). Dancing, playing the violin, photographing images, using words in the way cummings or Blake or Eliot used them – these gestures poke questions at nature, and at the perceptual constructs we impose on it. The activities of art and science, once again, while not the same, are related. The dialog with nature, if it is to result in real understanding, needs to be explored in a way that preserves the richness and multiplicity of the material. There is a lot of pressure on us to squash our thoughts into the plane of “what does this mean?” with bullet-pointed answers in the fashion of Microsoft PowerPoint. Drawing distinctions, laying out logical pathways of thought, clarifying words, without these activities we cannot begin to talk about things, and lose all points of reference. But, we have to regard these points as provisional. Too easily, we get drawn into the well established forms of reductionism and disciplinary blinders. We all know the Buddhist parable of the three blind men and the elephant. But, the problem is not that each of the blind men only knows one part of the elephant, it is that the entire elephant is flattened into a two dimensional “object.”

If this were the sort of message that could be communicated in words, there would be no point in dancing it. But it is not that sort of message. It is, in fact, precisely the sort of message which would be falsified if communicated in words, because the use of words (other than poetry) would imply that this is a fully conscious and voluntary message, and this would be simply untrue (Bateson, 1967).

“If I could say it, I wouldn’t have to dance it” is usually attributed to Isadora Duncan, but has also been attributed to Martha Graham. There is also a story that Louis Armstrong was asked about the meaning of his music, to which Satchmo replied: “Lady, if I could say it, I wouldn’t have to blow it.” Who “really” said it? Bateson might tell us that this is not the significant question: the story is a parable, whose factual basis may be fuzzy or even made up – the truth of a parable is not the particulars of the story but the relations between them. Since, the relations reflect a truth that we all experience, the parable is retold time after time. As Joyce (1941) said, “not a feature alike and yet the face the same.”

“Art and science cannot exist but by naked beauty displayed.” Art and science are both about the revelation of reality. Listen to Bach as he peels back the mathematical
structure of the universe and shows how everything is interconnected. He moves through a network of variations like a mathematical proof winding around and enclosing many dimensions. You can feel and experience the interconnections, as the individual self recedes into the background.

Gregory saw an analogy (Nachmanovitch, 1981) between Bach's Goldberg Variations and the spinal column of an animal or human. Each vertebra is a self-contained piece; each is a unique modulation of a basic pattern which replicates from piece to piece; each transform takes its relational identity from the place it occupies between the piece before and the piece behind. He felt that he could appreciate this music because he also was a segmented, rhythmic object. He was following the train of thought: homology → isomorphism → metaphor → art. This train of thought begins with William Bateson’s fascination with the comparative anatomy of living beings and ends with Gregory’s clearly thought-out form of aesthetics and spirituality. Truth is beauty, beauty truth.

The tools of art become me, the me dissolves to include a cybernetic system which is me plus the tools. Thus, Bateson’s (1970) parable about the blind man and the stick – where does the person end and the stick begin? where does the stick end and the world begin? Where does me end? The violin and the bow, as dynamic extensions of body and mind, bring up that question, but so do all our toys and tools. Similarly, in relationship to my loved ones... where does the me end and the other begin? If I am 100 percent sure of where me or my interests end and she or her interests begin, is it really love?

There was the story of a man who had a tame computer, and he wanted to know whether computers would ever think. So he programmed the computer to solve the problem, “Do you compute that you will ever think like a human being?” The computer thumped and bumped, and finally printed the answer on a piece of paper. The man ran to get the piece of paper, and he read it. On it was printed, “That reminds me of a story.” (Bateson, 1979b).

In Dickens (1843) Christmas Carol, selfish Scrooge has an awakening experience when he is exposed to the point of view of other people and other time frames. He sees the systems of which he is a part, and opens up to a better existence. The ghosts of Christmas Past, Present and Future give Scrooge a little taste the gift that Blake (1804) called “vision” or “prophecy.” Blake said: “I see the Past, Present & Future, existing all at once.” Visionary experience is not a matter of seeing weird personages who are not there, it is a matter of seeing systems and how they interconnect. If we do not see the systems in which we live, we will live in systems anyway, and some of those systems are unlikely to be healthy for the survival of the human species.

Gregory’s most abiding effort as a teacher was to get people to see systems. “And, quite seriously, I suggest to you that we should trust no policy decisions which emanate from persons who do not yet have that habit” (Bateson, 1970). Yet, here is the rub: good luck finding people who can see systems! He argued that our linguistic habits distort how things are, and we can spend dozens or hundreds of years trying to create a language for talking about relations, and still not do a very good job of it. But, there is one technology for talking about relations which exists today and which has always existed: that is the language of story (Bateson, 1979b).
Here is the hero of Blake’s longer epics, the blacksmith-artist-poet Los, working “in pulsations of time & extensions of space,”

With great labour upon his anvils, & in his ladles the Ore
He lifted, pouring it into the clay ground prepar’d with art;
Striving with Systems to deliver Individuals from those Systems;
That whenever any Spectre began to devour the Dead,
He might feel the pain as if a man gnawd his own tender nerves (Blake, 1804).

For Bateson too, the medicine is empathy, feeling what life is like on other paths of the circuit. Art is medicine, art is play, art is the coordination of conscious and unconscious. People with an aesthetic sensibility “would meet the primrose with recognition and empathy. By aesthetic, I mean responsive to the pattern which connects” (Bateson, 1979a).

It is difficult, sometimes impossible, to effectively tell people what we think they should know, or to describe patterns without distorting them. However, we can invite someone to sit in a chair which is positioned so that the data and patterns can be seen for themselves. Microphone positioning creates a point of view, as do camera angles, the lighting of shots, and other artistic devices. There is the art of creating fictional characters, even evil characters, in such a way that we are capable of being positioned inside their experience.

In art, we operate in the playspace of empirical testing so that we can observe the world from many points of view and can experiment freely with form, pattern, feeling, and sensation. Yet, there can also be leakage between the playspace of metaphor and the “real” world. (“So you are the little lady who made this big war,” said Abraham Lincoln to Harriet Beecher Stowe).

Human evolution, including cultural evolution, has produced languages and logics from which have flowed the manifest benefits of technology, but which have also created grave problems in terms of limiting our point of view. The same evolution has produced some correctives to these limitations . . .

The central question is: In what form is information about psychic integration contained or coded in the work of art? (Bateson, 1967).

The idea of the healing effect of the arts, in the West, goes back to Pythagoras and beyond. Is the corrective or medicinal nature of art just a subjective impression we would like to be true, or does it have a basis that we can identify? What is the mechanism? In the Timaeus, Plato talks about the power of drama. Plato, we know, was suspicious of artists and poets, and did not want them in his Republic. Yet, he recognized that there was some great power and significance in artistic expression. In a remarkably cybernetic turn of phrase, he said:

The motions akin to the divine part of us are the thoughts and revolutions of the universe. These every man should follow, 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. (Plato, c. 350 BCE).

The specific derangement of the human circuits that we need to heal is not knowing that they are parts of circuits. Consciousness, as we ordinarily conceive of it, is caught in a model of thinking in straight lines and pairs of opposites – cause-effect,
before-after, subject-object, me-other. Bateson argued that pathology arises from cutting a continuum at an arbitrary point. We consciously scan little bits of reality – our percepts, thoughts, feelings, memories – and take them to be the whole. We take simple goal-seeking actions and are then blindsided when the effects ripple through and come back in some unexpected way to bite us. In our arrogance as a society and our belief in our conscious purposes, we transform the earth and are then surprised when those transformations cycle back in some toxic form. Poetry, music, religion, dream, meditation, and art are among the activities that Bateson repeatedly cited as “correctives” to bring us back into touch with the total circuit. We can perceive the self as dynamic, transient and fluid, rather than a static, permanent entity. We can recover connections to patterns in our environment of which we were heretofore unaware. These are among the royal roads to making the unconscious conscious, re-connecting those circuits, and recovering some sense of our own wholeness.

The most ordinary act of creativity is improvisation, in the form of spontaneous conversation – the art of listening and responding, interacting, taking in the environmental factors unconsciously but with precision, modifying what we do as a result of what we see and hear, a multidimensional feedback. In our daily lives, we create all the time; we do not write down what we are going to say before we say it (Nachmanovitch, 1990). We do not need any extraordinary credentials. There is “nothing special” (Suzuki, 1973) about it, but from that nothing special arises our opportunity to attain some wisdom and compassion about the world in which we live. And so we can take art off of William Bateson’s pedestal and put it where it belongs, in the dynamic center of our lives.

Return to the beginning, where Bateson slapped the crab and the artwork on the table. The bodies of living things, the artworks by Blake and Goya, are secreted from a process, which is life. In the many arts, we attain some completeness through practice, and then express something that bespeaks that completeness.

For I am full of matter, the spirit within me constraineth me.
Behold, my belly is as wine which hath no vent; it is ready to burst like new bottles.
I will speak, that I may be refreshed: I will open my lips and answer.
(Book of Job 32:18-20)

Note
1. Words as little artworks: a search of the Oxford English Dictionary reveals 105 words whose first or definitive usages are by either Gregory or William Bateson.

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Further reading


About the author

Stephen Nachmanovitch is a musician, author, artist and educator. He studied at Harvard and the University of California, where he earned a PhD in the History of Consciousness for an exploration of William Blake. His mentor was the anthropologist and philosopher Gregory Bateson. He has taught and lectured widely in the USA and abroad on creativity and the spiritual underpinnings of art. In the 1970s, he was a pioneer in free improvisation on violin, viola, and electric violin and opened up many techniques now used in electroacoustic music. He has had numerous appearances on radio, television, and at music and theater festivals, and has collaborated with other artists in media including music, dance, theater, and film, and has developed programs melding art, music, literature, and computer technology. He has published articles in a variety of fields since 1966, and is the author of Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art (Penguin-Putnam, 1990). He is currently working on a new book on Bateson, and new musical projects. He lives with his wife and two sons in Virginia. Stephen Nachmanovitch can be contacted at: sn@freeplay.com

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