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## BOOK REVIEW

Bateson, Nora. (2016). *Small Arcs of Larger Circles: Framing Through Other Patterns*. Axminster, England: Triarchy Press.

To share my savoring of Nora Bateson's new book, *Small Arcs of Larger Circles: Framing Through Other Patterns*, I must begin with the contexts of my evolving perceptions regarding her topic. This makes sense if you follow Nora's message that there is a merge between observer and who or what is being observed. During my doctoral studies at Columbia University I continually carried a tattered, profusely underlined and constantly reread copy of Gregory Bateson's *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. It was a tour de force of seeing the world as part-to-whole interrelationships. An awakening experience! Systemic/ecological thinking became my mantra. My dissertation was based on his Double Bind Theory, which ever since has influenced me both personally and professionally. Since then, I have seen and participated in numerous forums to continue the conversation about Gregory's thoughts. However, despite today's widespread use of "Systems Theory" (and the word is surely not the thing), there are vast instances of cultural and language constraints that cause misunderstanding of its true potential.

Nora provides a multifaceted invitation—one that avoids dichotomies—to see the complexity of our world. Because "we are more than one plus one," she expresses that mutual learning is the basis to understand and mitigate the injurious patterns that are in opposition to nature. Her writing makes this very difficult task comprehensible due to her poetic, honest, and empathic style. She also seamlessly blends a three-generational legacy of evolving thoughts on this topic from her grandfather William, Gregory, and her own personal journey. Her many profound and interrelated chapters flow with narratives of her evolving contexts. They bring you through questions that ask: What it is that "holds anything together" within an order that "we are within and that is within us"? She covers interdisciplinary examples and encourages us to be "flexible and alive in relation to one another and the outside world."

An epistemological foundation of "being" systemic is to not only recognize that things are interconnected, but to have the wisdom to understand how they coexist and identify problems resulting from an overemphasis on fragmentation. This is easily observed in our everyday socio-political, environmental, educational, health, and economic news. Nora eloquently, through various examples,

narrates how linear reasoning and action deter our opportunity to see solutions in the present. Trying to change the past only creates blame and adversarial consequences in the form of rigid and seemingly unresolvable paradoxes. Nora states that we need to be in the present as practiced in Aikido (a martial art that promotes peace and harmony that I have practiced for 30 years) to minimize injurious double binds. She poetically describes patterns and behaviors, where mutual communication can be “a precarious cliff,” but it is worth the effort to understand multiple interpretations. Here, for her, agreement and disagreement “are ironically the same, they lead to each other” in a yin/yang manner, which is the goal of mutual learning.

From her grandfather William, and further articulated by Gregory, she holds the belief that we evolve in “context.” Nora creatively adds that seeing things in context simultaneously produces a “transcontextual lens” that offers many productive advantages over viewing things from a “singular model.” We are all interdependent, yet part of many systems at the same time. When seen in this manner we can avoid blame and find common ground. Nora uses poetry and art to view the “order and form” of what makes up our world from multiple perspectives. This provides a means to better understand the aesthetic, which is the human metaphor for nature. This is especially important given that our “culture has a penchant for short sighted actions based on mechanistic thinking.” From this perspective, we can see what it means to make “a difference that makes a difference,” which is based on respecting existing points of view in our environment.

Nora further demonstrates her ecological framework by addressing “The Ecology of Hurt.” She suggests, for example, the use of forgiveness, which is a learned behavior that leads to contextual renovations for one’s self. This occurs through the complexity of our existence, and I might add being in the present without condoning or minimizing past hurts. It is clear throughout the book that she is not offering concrete solutions but rather a vision that sees the simultaneous part-to-whole interplay of wider interconnected contexts. Her goal is to have us inquire about this complexity through mutual learning.

Her description about the history of the origins of systems thinking, cybernetics, and the work of the Macy Conferences during the pre-war 1930s brings us to a present perspective of what is at stake. This is especially true if we continue to allow the injurious patterns of linear-minded behavior, such as ignoring climate change control, to surround us.

Nora creates the concept of “*symmathesy*,” from the Greek “*syn/sym* (together) and *mathesi* (to learn).” It is a word that is more than any specific “thing.” A working definition is: “an entity formed over time by contextual mutual learning through interaction. For example, an ecosystem at any scale, like a body, family, or forest is a *symmathesy*,” and it is also “the process of contextual mutual learning through interaction.” This allows us to see how patterns connect, which means that systems can have the dignity of their complexity and be better understood.

I highly recommend this book to all parents, politicians, educators, therapists, and anyone who is concerned about how nature works and how we may enhance the future of our planet. It will be reread and ever placed on my desk next to my well-loved copy of *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*.

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