

## **Some Personal Reflections**

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When Gregory Bateson was teaching college classes, the student gossip characterized him as someone who knew something, but who wouldn't tell you what it was. Many of us who have spent quality time walking in Bateson's intellectual footsteps believe that his perhaps irritating performance in the classroom had less to do with faults of either teacher or students than with the quality of that which he knew and sought to share. Specifically, what Bateson had to teach wasn't an "it" that could be reduced to a list, a proposition, an equation, or a skill. He excelled at *pointing* at what he knew (through metalogues, stories, examples, etc.) but to learn it, you had to quit looking at the pointer and grasp that to which they pointed...or, better said, to join in the process of inquiring and exploring and become a pointer yourself.

Bateson's example heartens me when I am struck speechless by the apparently straightforward question "what is CMM about?" or unnerved by the invitation to judge whether someone has "got CMM right" in their work.

Some helpful friends have offered to make CMM more "marketable," going so far as to work up proposals for (shudder!) commodifying it for clients or consumers. Without any apparent qualms, some writers of undergraduate textbooks have packaged CMM for easy learning and suitable for multiple choice testing. For example, in some textbooks the CMM notion of a fluid dance of multiple contexts becomes a rigid hierarchy model with five and only five levels in a fixed order. Resisting such simplifications, I think, has been the right choice.

Joyfully affirming the paradox involved, I believe that one has truly learned CMM and is acting in an appropriately CMM-ish way when one looks *through* it rather than at it. After all, the purpose is not to defend or celebrate a theory, but to find in that theory a sufficiently fluid, flexible, and powerful set of tools for understanding ourselves and our social worlds and for acting into those social worlds in ways that make them better.

As I write these words, the world is endangered by the forces unleashed by George Bush and Osama bin Laden, both of whom celebrate their certainty that their view of the world is correct, claim that they are doing God's work, demonize the other, and justify what they do as a response to atrocities performed by the other (see Jenkins, 2004). It is a classic URP (unwanted repetitive pattern; see Cronen, et al., 1979), in which they are making a world that is dangerous for all of us. Of course, these two men did not create the current situation alone; they are equally the products as the producers of social institutions and cultural patterns of thought and action.

In such a world, the fate of this theory or any theory is less important than its ability to help understand and improve the world that we, collectively, are making. But the perilous state of the world, both locally and internationally calls for continued creativity.

Compared to other theories, CMM is not nearly so radical as it was when Vern Cronen and I and a talented group of graduate students developed its central themes in the late 1970s and early 1980s. And yet I believe that some of the distinctive features in CMM deserve continued exploration and development, not only because they remain conceptually at the cutting edge, but also because they have in them resources useful for making better social worlds. Imagine if the affairs of nations, as well as of families and organizations, took on board concepts such as these:

- Multiple contextuality (the hierarchy model): all actions and stories exist in fluid, malleable relationships such that each contextualizes and is contextualized by others, producing, among other things, paradoxes, confusion, illuminating insights, powerful prefigurations, and other textures of our social worlds.
- The inextricable connection but irreducible tension between stories lived (interactions) and stories told (narratives).
- The tensions and opportunities created by the necessity of coordinating our behaviors with others, by the human predilection toward trying to understand each other, and by the inevitability of misunderstanding each other.
- Mystery: is it too much to say that we destroy possible worlds when we perform "this" act rather than all of the others that we might have, or when we interpret an action "this" way rather than in all of the other possible ways? What would happen if we engaged in principled resistance to processes that transform what is truly mysterious into mere puzzles to be solved? How would this affect the power of those whose virtue consists of being "certain" (rather than reflexive) about their course of action?
- Continuing creation: the social worlds in which we live are often perceived as fixed and stable, but are created anew in each new act. In a very real sense, we make our social worlds, and in that process find the resources, if we are sufficiently alert and skillful, to make better social worlds.

It is my hope that you enjoyed this special issue of the journal. But my real purpose in working on it goes considerably beyond that. To the extent that CMM is useful in making better social worlds, I hope that this special issue serves as a stimulus and provocation. The challenges to research with which it begins and to practice with which it ends are not trivial, and the many, varied stories of the use of CMM which comprise the heart of this issue of *Human Systems* are best understood as invitations for others to continue the process of extending and applying CMM.

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### References

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