

An Ecology of Mind: Family Therapy in the face of new emerging conditions

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Introduction

This paper is based on the opening plenary session of the 8th European Family Therapy Association congress in Istanbul, October, 2013 featuring the two authors, and Nora's film, *An Ecology of Mind*. About two years ago some communications with EFTA took place about the role that IMcC might play in the Istanbul Congress. She suggested that the congress open with the showing of Nora Bateson's film which beautifully illustrates her father, Gregory Bateson's thinking. Given the nature of the global and professional crises impacting on our work and the constant demand for more contracted and directed interventions Imelda imagined that a new look at Bateson's legacy would inspire and energise the family therapy field at this time. The EFTA board accepted her proposition and so the congress opened with Nora's film and a conversation between us. This conversation discussed the importance and relevance of Gregory Bateson's for family therapy and complex systemic thinking at this time in our history.

As in the presentation, we want to re-member Gregory's pointings to the importance of looking for patterns that connect across multiple fields, including social systems, political systems, economic systems, environmental systems and so on. Critical to this discussion of patterns is the question of how data is gathered and assimilated into our ways of interacting with, analysing and describing the issues we face today. Double binds or errors of logical typing, as Bateson referred to them, are a particular pattern of inter-relatedness that can form dangerous traps at many levels, (individual, cultural, economic, social and so on). Today, we face global crises that look hauntingly like those double binds and errors? We are surrounded by policies and behaviours at both micro and macro social levels that aim to separate out parts from wholes and break up all manner of relationships with each other, with nature and the environment and within the economic orders. Gregory Bateson offered a lens in his work that presented the world as a complex system or 'sacred unity', uncut by categorical description. We wanted to ask if 45 years later, we can return to his ideas and apply them in our practical day-to-day lives and work? Because three of the Bateson family will be referenced throughout this paper we will use their initials to highlight their individual contributions: Gregory Bateson (GB), Mary Catherine Bateson (MCB) and Nora Bateson (NB) – a pattern over generations and time.

As a family systemic thinker and practitioner over forty years, IMcC has been in constant dialogue with the ideas of Gregory Bateson and indeed it still underpins much of her Fifth Province Approach. (2010) Over the years interest within the family therapy field of GB's ideas has waned somewhat but given the challenges of the times we are now encountering it is suggested that Batesonian ideas *are* useful and necessary to help us navigate the challenges of complex systems both at macro and micro relational levels. In this paper we review some of these separations and

cuts particularly in relation to double binds and the dangers of conscious purpose in our constantly co-evolving complex world.

Setting the context towards An Ecology of Mind

In the film on GB's thinking, 'An Ecology of Mind', seven themes are drawn forth from the background of his life's work. These are: 'Relationship', 'Cybernetics', 'Epistemology', 'Difference', 'Double Bind', 'Changeability' and 'Beauty'. They are diverse but inter-related themes that offer us room to communicate in spectrums of possibilities rather than tightly defined cul-de-sacs (N.B. Film). In his work GB never fostered rigidity so as to avoid being locked in or down into any particularity. It was always the 'pattern that connected' which fascinated him. Relationships were a primary delight even in his walks in nature. Likewise his mind was another ecology to be explored in terms of the patterns and relationships between his thoughts and how those thoughts were connected to the thoughts in the community at large. As Jiddu Krishnamurti stated in many different ways, we think we are thinking our own thoughts but we are really thinking our society's thoughts. (<http://www.jiddu-krishnamurti.net/en/think-on-these-things/1963-00-00-jiddu-krishnamurti-think-on-these-things-chapter-11>)

Thoughts are such beguiling creatures and con artists, they can distract us, they can lead us astray, they can deflate us when they are negative and they can inflate us when we think we are the originator of brilliance. However, we forget as GB has pointed out that we stand on the shoulders of all who have gone before us and we are also socially and relationally constituted for better and worse. So we are made up of each other's ideas from the past and in the present. In our fields of clinical theory and practice this is also pertinent in the context of our work, so we thought it was an apt time to return to some of GB's ideas. Today's challenges call us out of the boxes of habit and comfort and into the cultural, economic and environmental terrains that are new and frequently very stressful. Our so called comfort zones are perilous today as our professional practices become deformed in the tick-boxes of diagnostic categories divorced from relational contexts, the so called 'evidence based practices' and constricted research of parts of systems devoted to pre-ordained outcomes. (also see McNabb & Partridge, 2014)

From Individual to Relationship

These conditioned boxes, which constrain our thinking also conceal the walls which are used to separate us from ourselves and from those we are in relationship with. As complex system's practitioners we purport that we cannot stand outside of any system or relationship that we are observing including our own self-reflections and reflexions. Yet, in these days of so-called managed care and evidence based activities an increasingly linear and dumbed-down practice is being called for. The latter is evidenced in the myriad of week-end courses that are on offer to 'train' professionals in very complex practices. In such conditions and courses, the recursivity of large and small complex relationships are hidden or ignored mostly in the interests of large corporations such as privatized medical services and the pharmaceutical industry. We say this as this is where the money is directed. In our systemic field across the world systemic research is being questioned or ignored, our work is not being reimbursed by third party insurance companies and many of our training programmes have either

had to shut down or are struggling for survival. We have returned to a time of form filling and individualized categorizations based on isolated symptoms. It is time to reclaim our relational and social identities that are also intimately interwoven with and within the environments we live in. (McNabb & Partridge 2014) Our thinking is called once more towards complexity of patterns, which connect across relational forms. Once again we need to transform the way we think.

In the film NB pertinently asks, ‘what does it even mean to change the way we think’? This is no trivial question in our current global context but one, which shakes the foundations of a neo-liberal mindset that reduces everything to the bottom line of money and of isolated parts and categories. It is however, one of the formal questions, which led to the launch of our field back in the 1940’s and 1950’s. At this time our pioneers were challenging the individualistic ideas of psychoanalytically oriented practices. Today it is not psychoanalysis that is the call for transformation but growing, powerful political and economic philosophies which are not in the interest of the poor, the ill, the young, the disabled, the elderly and so on. What we see across Europe, to greater and lesser extents, particularly in the peripheral countries is a severing of social bonds at all levels from mind and body, individual and family, family and community, communities and society, societies and nature, mind and nature! (Stavrakakis, 2013; Chrissopoulos, 2014) The result of such severance is the growing disparities and inequalities between those who have a lot or too much and those who have too little or not enough. In such conditions in the past Fascism and other right wing movements are fed. However, as we know, this inequality not only effects humans it also effects the environment we live in with regards to too much ‘fast’ food coupled with too little nutrition, too much production with too little remuneration for workers and increasing desertification due to excessive overgrazing. We could go on!

Again GB in this regard, has warned that *the major problems in the world are due to the difference between how nature works and how people think*. If we accept this proposition then we are being called to a greater awareness of our thinking, how it constricts us but more importantly how it might call us to jump out of the straightjackets that we are caught in. We cannot do this without turning our attention once more to the issue of *context*. I am sure many readers are now saying but we know all this. We would hope indeed that this is so. However, in professional conversations in diverse situations, one of us (IMcC) is witnessing a decline in contextual awareness and an ability to see the ‘patterns which connect’ and thus often fail make a multi-perspectival inquiry or analysis of the relational systems encountered. While many of the newer perspectives on relational practices have entered our field, they seem to have lost the rigour that was essential to Gregory Bateson’s aesthetics. The beauty of many of the processual orientations proffered by the various social constructionist approaches were welcome additions however, they have led to a decline in a rigorous relational or complex systemic thinking about the patterns that connect us as therapists and clients to the larger social issues of our day. At this juncture in our history, Social Constructionism needs a rigorous systemic ethic, epistemology, analysis and practice. Perhaps it is time to reclaim our cybernetic legacies with their focus on the intricacies of human interaction and complex sequences and how these in turn braid in the social contexts in which they are embedded.

Cybernetics and Epistemology

Just as we need to understand complex systems, cybernetics was developed to describe the processes taking place in those systems. It asks questions such as, *what is happening and how are the different parts of a system connecting to each other?* Complexity steers us away from linear causality as outcomes cannot be predicted or controlled. GB reminds us in the film that the contents and operations of mind are like a network of complicated living, partly struggling, partly cooperating tangle that you would find on the side of any mountain, with trees, plants and various animals that live there – an ecology! NB goes on to elaborate that ideas are constantly adjusting to each other responding to stimuli from outside and infinite other messages.

Mary Catherine Bateson, in the film asked pertinently in this regard, *‘what is it in the way that we see the world that we don’t see the delicate interactions?’* It is as if we untie the link to society and our conditionings and imagine a free-floating construction, which is in fact an occluded instance of social imprisonment and colonisation in many instances. (McCarthy 1991) To free us from this imprisonment, NB urges us to constantly observe our own thinking and asks through the film, *what are the ideas in your head, how are they interacting with each other and what is the context for our ideas in place and time?* So simply stated, cybernetics is the science of complex systems, communications and organization. It attempts an explanation of how complex systems work and importantly *not* what to do. Cybernetics as GB articulated was not a mechanistic science but one, which addressed the complexity of human living and nature. It was also not mechanistic in that it did not propose a way to intervene in these systems, as to do so would unleash a stream of unintended consequences, which could not be foreseen. Rather, a cybernetic sensitivity in the Batesonian sense alerts us to an aesthetic of wholeness. It is more about ‘sacred unity’ and what not to do in the honouring of that. GB constantly reminded that all ‘division’ of things into parts tends to be a device of convenience and that’s ALL. So, when we define something as separate from something else we create limits to our ability to see the interrelationships and dynamics of those interrelationships. NB following her father and her sister also says that we are trained to think in ways we hardly notice through religion, education and culture which all filter and frame our perception as John Burnham has so eloquently reminded us when he talks about the social ‘GRACES’. (Burnham, 2011).

Opening up the frames and asking the kinds of Batesonian questions mentioned above in our work and lives can help offset the worst effects of our linear social trainings. We can ask, *‘how does it work?. What works with it? What are its relationships, how does it interact? How does it learn? How does it think? What is the context in which it operates? How does the context interact with it?* In a second order cybernetics (Brand, 1976; Hoffman, 1985) the questioner is also wrapped into the inquiry when we ask ourselves, what are we bringing forth with our questions? When we do not approach complex systems in terms of their holism we can breach them in only attending to certain characteristics, parts or dimensions. If we only attend to one end of a relationship (such as a role) we lose the sense of the whole. As GB humorously put it in the film, “a role is a half assed relationship”. When we move away too quickly from observation, inquiry and curiosity we run the risk of intervening with what GB calls ‘conscious purpose’. This means to intervene with a pre-judged goal, aim or an end view in mind. In GB’s world conscious purpose

creates disasters both in our clinical worlds and the world at large. We will return to the challenges of conscious purpose later in our paper.

In this way, GB together with Margaret Mead and others also provided our systemic field with a way to navigate in complex systems that did not collapse into states of linearity. They showed that when we encountered tangles or interrelationships in our world our whole thinking had to be restructured and re-oriented towards patterns and relationships. (NB, 2010) Unfortunately, our field has fallen out of love with cybernetics seeing it as too mechanistic. However, that is just one perspective among many and we can see that the art and science of models of practice from the Mental Research Institute, Solution Focused Therapy, the Brief Therapies, The Fifth Province Approach and the Milan Model all had their base on a rigorous understanding of the workings of complex relationships. The hallmark of all these practitioners was a heightened sensibility to context and pattern, inquiry and language. (Palazzoli et al, 1978) This sensibility and approach enabled relationships, which were generative and self-organising. It also fostered conditions for the co-creation of an observing system, which included all participants including the therapists. Relying on the cybernetic principles underlying circular questioning, positive connotation and circular causality (Palazzoli et al, 1980), Boscolo and Cecchin (Boscolo et al, 1987) went on to develop a practice that was multi-perspectival and non-instructive in its leanings. The work of the 'Fifth Province Associates' of which one of the authors (IMcC) was a member also fashioned their work on Batesonian principles in relation to child sexualized abuse and families in poverty. Positioning was loosened by way of dis-positioning. This was a way to include all views around a given dilemma while holding them together without a splitting of the problem into an either/or scenario and participants into actions and inter-actions leading to extreme complementarity or symmetrical escalation. (McCarthy & Byrne, 1988, Byrne & McCarthy 1995))

Difference, Relationship and Pattern

'No problem can be solved from same level of consciousness that created it
'(Einstein)

Einstein's often-quoted dictum above could well address situations where problems arise when the world is seen in linear terms and the responses are more of the same. So a difference of approach needs an appreciation of the complexity of patterns of relationships in which problems can arise. However, as GB has said, to understand patterns we also need to understand the notion of 'difference'. It is this difference that shows us the relationship. GB's famous dictum of, the *difference that makes a difference* was offered to explain and define a part in terms of its relationship to a holistic unity. (GB 1972) Relationship or information was news of difference while recursively difference is news of a relationship. His thinking invites us to consider contrast and context instead of isolating one side of a difference, one side of a relationship. Rather than looking at parts we could think in terms of patterns or similarities and differences.

In this way of thinking and observing we can go to Meta level. It is a pity that this level of observation also fell out of favour in our field when we began to address issues of equality in the therapeutic relationship. This means that we move up a level

from an event to a pattern in order to recognize a similar pattern when you see it in a different context. In this we are offered opportunities of seeing what is holding systems together and how patterns at one level of living can mirror patterns at another level. We seemed to forget that we could also invite our clients to move up to this level also along side of us and so avoid any 'expert' practices. In the clinical work of IMcC this has enabled me to connect the discourses and dilemmas of clients to the larger social issues of the day. (McCarthy, 2001; 2011) Clients become socially situated in patterns of connection across different levels of social living and not as isolated examples of some individualized pathology. Blind to such patterns that connect we are also blinded to the interests of dominant social groupings and interests. (McNabb & Partridge, 2014) Therefore, in our clinical work through GB's question, '*what are the ideas that govern how we think about the world?*' we become linked up again with how we live in the world, what sort of damage we do to it, what sort of therapeutic abuse we might be non-consciously perpetrating, what kind of pollution and exploitation we might be engaging in! (McCarthy, 1991) Could such situations be ones in which we in fact double-bind ourselves?

Double Bind and Changeability

“On the other side through that double twisted what we called a double bind some years ago, there is another stage of wisdom” GB.

A double bind is like a catch 22 – an experience where there appears no solution for escape. In the film, GB gives the illustration of the gnat's story in 'Through the Looking Glass'. Here we have a gnat, a 'breadandbutterfly', whose wings are made of very thin slices of bread and butter and a head that is a lump of sugar. The 'breadandbutterfly' lives on weak tea with cream in it. So it is caught in a double bind in that if it can't find any weak tea it starves and dies and if it does find the tea it also dies as its head dissolves. GB saw this as a formal double bind of simplest kind.

Moving into the social and political domain of our current times, Jerry Brown the current Governor of California elucidated a classical double bind in the film. He discussed how, in the face of growing inequality, the response of government is often to grow the economy faster. However, when we do that it seems to exacerbate the inequality and also has huge impact on global climate and on the environment itself. So, he states that there needs to be a qualitative shift in our thinking and that for this to happen we need extraordinary vision and imagination because doing the opposite and slowing the economy creates immediate unemployment, pain, suffering and political backlash. Growing the economy doesn't work and slowing the economy doesn't work therefore something else is going to have to be improvised – a creative impulse is needed to take it up a level to break free of the bind.

NB asks in the film, can we see a bigger picture? Here again we have the call to bringing our observations up a level and think about the way that we think in a world of circles. In this world change is always occurring, it is us who mistake a frozen instant or set of ideas for 'stasis'. Indeed, in relation to the change that is always present in our worlds, we might do well to think about Margaret Mead's adage that we are continually faced with great opportunities, brilliantly disguised as unsolvable problems. (https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/61107.Margaret_Mead)

Could we then see the double bind elaborated by Jerry Brown as one such conundrum and that it is only a bind if we see the growth/austerity dualism within the existing economic frames of a 'free' market. It is now been shown by Nobel laureates in economics that growth has delivered for a wealthy elite and has not trickled down, so that within this paradigm this elite of industrialists and financiers will continue with the drift of ecological damage and unequal social models. (Stiglitz, 2012; Krugman, 2012; Sen 2009; Piketty, 2014). However, a return to progressive taxation, governance of off-shore wealth secrecy and bottom up governmental aid would enable those in the middle and the bottom to have more disposable income. This in turn they see as the driver for job creation and greater equality. As buying power increases, demands increase which in turn open opportunities for higher employment, a lesser wealth gap where wealth is once more associated with production and output. (Piketty, 2014, Stiglitz et al 2010). This view breaks the trance of the dominant discourse in Europe today, which purports that if we end austerity we will return to the bubble and bust cycle. What this discourse hides is that austerity is not in the interests of the working and middle classes but in the massive interests of the wealthy few who in Thomas Piketty's new work, 'Capital' (2014) are becoming more wealthy than ever before with no trickle down effects to those less well off. This then may be one of these advantages of seeing current challenges, not as unsolvable but as opportunities for more equal societies. (also see www.social-europe.eu). What was interesting is that the two authors were present at a seminar where one member of the audience put forward a plausible statement in relation to the necessity of austerity in terms of halting global warming. This seems to make sense until we actually see what is happening where austerity is cutting the most. In these societies a smaller and smaller number are becoming wealthier and there is a burgeoning demand for luxury goods. Austerity actually places more wealth in the hands of the already wealthy elite (Stiglitz 2012) who are the very ones that are contributing to the conditions of global warming and other ecological crises!

Beauty, Aesthetics and Ethics.

A man walking is never in balance but always correcting for imbalance. No concrete value placed on stability of an opinion. Not allowing change is the perfect formula for becoming obsolete. (NB film)

The thinking outlined in the lines above invites us into a Batesonian world that does not contain any 'thing', only news of difference, reports of change and states of correcting for imbalance. The moment GB saw that 'it' did not refer to an object he realized he was living in a world of ideas, very important ideas. He said, to live in a world of ideas is to be alive, floating in a world of nothing but change. If there isn't any change then there isn't any knowledge that there isn't. Only by creation of change (news of difference) can we perceive something. In this world we float but we talk as if there were a static element in the world e.g. fixed and unsolvable double binds. As NB has said, we live on a ball where systems within systems are interacting all the time. Any attempt to lock down elements of that process is an abstraction and causes imbalance like a tight rope-walker if he were to tie down a limb.

So, could we proffer that beauty is a kind of balance or grace in all that we do, particularly when we look and see not simple linearities but interlacing patterns of

infinite variety, much like Gregory's ecology found on the side of any hillside. Translating this into the profession of systemic family therapy it is a call to see the complexities and context in all before us. Locking down our views to discrete micro movements only whilst appearing and feeling like an aesthetic practice may in fact occlude the wider interactions in a context, which then goes unnoticed as we have said previously. When this happens we forget to ask, what is this, what is it connected to, how might these connections form a pattern within a larger context that may not be in the client's interests or indeed our interests as practitioners.

The relevance of Gregory Bateson's thinking for this time

Throughout our conversation at the EFTA conference we continually looked at the implications for Gregory Bateson's thinking for our current times. We talked of the physical lock downs across Europe in terms of what we called media censorship. As instances of these we gave examples of the closure of the Greek national broadcasting station and the press censorship in Ireland of austerity protests and during the six month long Irish Presidency of the European Parliament in Dublin in early 2013. What was interesting was that during these 'lock-downs' in Ireland many were oblivious to it and assumed the dearth of news meant that there were no austerity protests. As a result many of our citizens were asking together with others across Europe, 'How come the Irish are taking all this without any protest?!' However, our protests, while also on the streets, were to be seen amongst many vocal political independent deputies in our parliament and in the wonderful political cartoons which featured daily in one of our most censored newspapers. The role of the court jester had appeared again in a modern guise!

Therefore, throughout our presentation at EFTA our conversation was laced through with weavings about interconnections between thinking and nature using our poets and artists as co-presenters as it were, seeing patterns which connect and most of all placing all in context, whether it was a tree in a forest, the fish in our oceans or a person in their social milieu of families and society in today's world. The final concept that we introduced was that of GB's concept of 'conscious purpose' in relation to the current colonization of our life and work spaces by a particular kind of 'evidence based practice' and manualisation.

Conscious Purpose

Prior to the conference, we had spent some time reflecting on whether or not to introduce this often mis-understood concept. However, as Nora said, we decided to be 'brave' as this issue is often seen as one of the slippery parts of GB's work. This is because we live in a world where action points, delivery, data and numbers are the things that we end our meetings looking for. These are the purposes we go for in today's bottom line world. This is the conscious evidence that we provide to show that we are making progress, that we have a purpose and that we have a goal that we are working toward. There is an end point to what we are doing and the more concrete and predictable we can make it all the better according to this world-view!

Now the problem with all of that, as we see it, is that you can tell right from the get go that there is a presumption of something linear in this process. We are looking for a solution to a problem and by default that solution is an end point in a linear story.

But, when we are dealing with living things as GB said, thinking in mechanical and logical terms creates complicated secondary consequences or what we might call, unintended consequences on a good day. On a bad day things can whirl exponentially out of control as we see daily in our health services based on this kind of thinking and practice. An example would be that in trying to pin down diagnoses, we have created growing opportunities for so called normal behaviours and responses to be pathologised, resulting in a higher use of medication and therefore costs. So efforts at cost setting have the unintended consequences of showing more illness in our societies, with an increasing need for pharmaceutical remedies, which escalate our health costs. Here we see not only an unintended consequence of such gross interference but also a systemic runaway in operation.

So getting to this idea of causation, solution and purpose is a very tricky but necessary business for us, we would say. On some level what we are talking about is responsibility and it is no joke. We know that for many of us when we are meeting with a family with a child who is cutting themselves or sometimes working with ecologists around their concerns that the Baltic Sea that is dying the stakes are high. The impulse to engage, take action and be part of the solution is a beautiful and important impulse so to throw a twirling paradoxical question out that says, 'watch out for conscious purpose' is an uncomfortable thing to do. It is uncomfortable because we too are on the 'good guy's' side and want to see the good things happen. We want to see the solutions. We want to see the world get saved but at the same time we each have a small window of what it is that we know and what it is that we see. Your window is different than our window and vice versa. If we were to imagine that we had some politicians, some people from the Native American tribes, if we had some otters, if we could talk to the Bonobos* they would all have another piece, another window to give us. What if we could see the world through these different windows, from all these different viewing points and begin to look again for the pattern that connects more synchronistically rather than assuming that a one specific size fits all in terms of preferred solutions.

* Bonobos are the closest extant relative to humans.

As we have said, looking at the world through fragmented pieces has given us the illusion that we can engage in fragmented problem solving, that there is such a thing as action when there is not. There is only inter-action. There is no way to engage with a family or a rainforest or any form of society at any level without being part of the complexity, the larger context. Actually, even if you don't engage that is still an engagement. That is still an inter-action, like the taxes you don't send in, the love letter you don't respond to. They are still messages. So, being aware of the dangers that actions based on 'conscious purpose' and realizing that there is no way you can see what the consequences of your actions are into the future. We could then say that one way of responding is to say, 'well why should I do anything?'. It could bring on a form of paralysis, hopelessness, a giving up or an excuse to do nothing at all and just carry on as we are, purposively involved in change efforts to make things better. In thinking and talking through these issues, we also wondered if conscious purpose might be a problem around the notion of 'sustainability' in terms of our interactions with nature. We wondered if, sustainability arguments and actions may in fact carry the invisible traces of conscious purpose or purposeful interference into nature and natural habitats like ecologies and families. A Batesonian view might actually

proffer a world of connection, inter-relationship, change, synergy and synchronicity rather than sustainability!

So, when we talk of conscious purpose we are not talking about either a paralysis or a laissez-faire approach. That is not where GB was going with this so we thought it was really important, to re-introduce the notion of 'conscious purpose' again at this time for more reflection. We would suggest that we cannot really do complexity thinking or systems thinking without remembering the dangers of 'conscious purpose' no matter how tempting it is to skip over the warning. We would also suggest that in inter-acting in complex systems there is a kind of humility, a kind of uncertainty and a lightness of being that you cannot achieve without an awareness of the seductive pull of conscious purpose.

That acknowledgement of the dangers of our 'conscious purpose', of being able to say, 'I want to save the world' and at the same time being aware of unintended consequences may be vital to saving our worlds more than we realize? As T.S. Elliot said, "lest a good idea should ruin the world" or Blake said, 'the road to hell is paved with good intentions' it may now be more important than ever to acknowledge that we don't know and we are not privy to the narratives that cross epochs of evolution. We do not know what the consequences of our actions are in the much larger, wider circles of life. We cannot know that but that does not render us powerless. It does not render us useless. What it does is that it asks the question, 'where are you going to take a stand?' and it demands that you take a stand every minute of every day. You are always taking that stand in advocacy for those delicate inter-dependencies.

We ended our conversation with similar stories where both of us were in life threatening situations with an 'attacker'. For us, these events in our lives highlighted the power of GB's call away from conscious purpose and yet gave us information about how to engage inter-relationally with our attackers in a way that may have saved our lives. One of us (IMcC) has written about these experiences in the British family therapy magazine, *Context*. (McCarthy 2010) Both of the (separate) situations in which we found ourselves, were ones in which we could not under any circumstances have used conscious purpose. In a way we could do nothing except to do the best in each moment paying acute attention to the nuances of the contexts that we were in. Maybe it was this attention to context and the potential for symmetrical escalation that it more likely that our lives were saved. For us these experiences, using Gregory Bateson's ideas, were an example of the power and practicality of his ideas. Because, sometimes when we talk about conscious purpose we think that it makes things impractical or not worth anything. However in these life threatening situations both of us found that our ways of being in relationship with what was happening moment to moment, carefully working within the particular context and parameters available to us, avoiding any escalation by becoming complementary was perhaps an instance of weaving ourselves into a pattern which connected in saving our lives.

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