

# THE JOY AND WISDOM OF SYSTEMIC THINKING: TEACHING AND UNDERSTANDING THE AESTHETIC

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*Abstract: This article is based on the author's concern for what he perceives as a declining level of systemic practice in family therapy and its consequent connections to wider levels of community. It will review basic key elements in teaching about systemic thinking and provide some applications for reinvigorating and maintaining it. The basis of what is presented is derived from the authors thirty years of involvement with family therapy and his personal memory of Paul Byers, anthropologist, exemplary systemic thinker, educator and researcher. Dr. Byers taught at Columbia University and was a close colleague of Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson. He passed away January 1, 2002 and his archives pertaining to systems theory and communication studies have been recently secured at the Smithsonian Institute.*

## INTRODUCTION

In this article I hope to add my voice in helping to reinvigorate systemic therapies through my remembering of Paul Byers, an exemplary educator of systemic thinking. My experiences relevant to this topic are primarily from being a participant observer for the past thirty years in the context of my teaching, learning, and being a family therapist. What I will describe may seem basic to those who are advocates of systemic therapies, however my concern is not to be presumptuous or to preach to the choir but to challenge those who profess to be systemic, through what Zen Buddhism refers to as using a "Beginners Mind," in maintaining and supporting it in practice. For the purpose of this paper I am defining the terms systemic therapy and family therapy (and will use them interchangeably) as being based on the theoretical model of General Systems Theory, originally advocated by Ludwig von Bertalanffy (1968) who described a living system as having parts that mutually interact and how these relationships allow the system to have an identity that is more than the sum of its parts. This part to whole

relationship framework is the epistemological basis to all systemic therapies and it encourages the focus and inclusion of multiple people to help facilitate change that makes a simultaneous difference for both the individual and the system.

A few years ago, during a Family Therapy planning meeting for a multicultural conference, I mentioned what I perceived as a lack of systemic practice with my students, supervisees and colleagues. A respected family therapist responded that the big secret amongst family therapists is that very few do it systemically. In my work with schools, social institutions and professional associations, I have always been curious about how many therapists encourage meeting with more than one person at a time in a therapeutic context which I believe can facilitate better relationships and possible wider connections with other institutions. Admittedly this is based on my personal inquiries, yet over the years this has resulted in more than a small sampling, with which I have been consistently amazed at the low percentage that does conjoint sessions. “I believe in it, but rarely do it in practice,” is a common response. I can easily believe, when I hear that very few traditional psychotherapy clinicians with little systemic training do conjoint therapy but it is hard to understand that family therapist in large do not.

Recently in an article in the *Psychotherapy Networker* by Peter Fraenkel (2005)) about the possible demise of family therapy, he describes the perceived hardships of family therapists doing private practice within the linear framework of their office, insurance concerns, time limitations, cultural socio-economic constraints and how they have been co-opted into the more traditional one-to-one psychotherapy mode. Fraenkel refers to a recent American Association of Marriage and Family Therapy survey which reports that clinical family therapists do more individual therapy, sixty one percent as contrasted to doing family therapy, fourteen percent. Although I agree with him, and respect those he cited that are doing real family therapy, the real concern, at least for me, is that Family Therapists in general are not fully involved with the infinite possibilities inherent in systemic thinking.

The question I am posing is whether we are truly communicating our legacy without separating mind and nature (or succumbing to eventual paradoxes), which again is the basis of systemic intervention. This can give birth to wider levels and contexts to celebrate the possibilities of breaking the inevitable everyday double binds inherent in human communication which had been the hallmark goal of early family therapists. It is with this in mind that I continue to emphasize not only the importance of understanding our epistemological foundation in my courses and supervision, but to support its practical applications. In doing this, I am forever thankful of my good fortunes to have had Paul Byers as my mentor and friend. What follows is my personal memory of my learning through him about systemic thinking in hope that it may help with new applications to sustain it.

## LEARNING TO THINK SYSTEMICALLY

### The Teaching Of An Exemplary Educator

My journey in learning and adopting a systemic epistemology began in graduate classes taught by Paul Byers. He was from Kansas, lived in Australia, an accomplished pianist, journalist, and photographer and later in life a Ph. D. anthropologist. His close friendship with Margaret Mead resulted, among many other things, in a book about “small conferences,” which they co-authored (Mead and Byers, 1968).

His primer was to demonstrate how systemic thinking allows for examining data, situations or ongoing activities (which are “problematic”), from a different point of view—a point of view which allows for the resolution of the problem, conflict, or impasse. This point of view, variously called a “paradigm shift,” a “Meta-theory,” an “epistemological stance,” or a shift in reality was expressed by Paul for scientific purposes, as “General Systems Theory,” or as “holistic” (versus linear). This was originally presented by von Bertalanffy as mentioned above and further developed at that time through the works of Bateson (1971; 1972), Buckley (1968), and Watzlawik, Beavin and Jackson (1967).

Paul’s specialty at Columbia University was to teach about “Communication and Systems Theory” and how to do research from this perspective. He had a personal part-to-whole interconnected lens that described a multitude of worldly “contexts,” where he believed all sorts of human potential evolved. When he was active as a photographer, he would live with and participate in the dynamics of the families he would photograph (Byers, 1966). Gregory Bateson, who pioneered communication studies, once said to me during a seminar, that if anyone was to explain his work correctly, it would be Paul.

During his classes, he would hook us up with biofeedback machines, slow down films to look at frame by frame movements, and have us use our non-verbal senses in new ways; all of which pointed to his well-documented thesis that “we communicate through shared states.” This state sharing is like being with someone on an escalator, moving at a constant speed. When joining begins, even with a different temperament or energy, a phase locking occurs with our biological rhythms that are so powerful and meaningful (Byers, 1977). When we desire to connect this way, there is a distinct harmony (that is always available), which Paul would describe as “good vibrations.”

In the early systemic research as it should be today, the prevalent cause-effect relationship was challenged by the view to see nature as more complex and as an interacting system. A system which is a collection or set of items or entities (persons, institutions, societies, atoms, etc.) so arranged that a change in the relationship of one part will produce some change in all the

relationships of other parts of that system. Applied to a family (or an institution), if one member is disturbed (i.e. out of appropriate relationship or harmony with the others) a linear approach involves treating the identified patient (or institution). A holistic or systems view requires the treatment involvement of all other members of the family to restore a total balance, health or harmony. Paul's teaching of this included inquiry methods that looked for "correction" through a multitude of ways to

achieve balance. (Example: a metabolic disease such as cancer can be treated by focusing on a metabolic-correcting diet as well as treating the affected organ; a particular school problem can be adjusted by viewing the ethos and its relationship to family and community). However, an awareness of this process was for Paul, a prerequisite for understanding the potential changes and balances.

Another educational tool he would regularly use was a current copy of Marilyn Ferguson's *Brain Mind Bulletin* which was published in the 1970's through the early 1990's and provided current concise reports on brain research, learning development and communication studies from a systemic perspective (Byers, 1985). He would use these new paradigms to assess and relate them to interventions for improving communication or to explain how barriers to optimal relationships develop. I still go into my old tool bag of ecological resources to underscore this point. Old copies of the *Whole Earth Catalogue*, *Co-Evolution Quarterly* or currently published journals like the *Utne Reader*, *Parabola* and other active holistic metaphors such as Yoga and Aikido are useful as are current events and internet resources. Paul would challenge our perceptions using human development research, holograms and perceptual distortions to motivate us and then he would relate the ensuing discussion to a favorite phrase of his that he attributed to Bateson, regarding how all our problems can be traced to the difference between **how nature works and how humans think** (Bateson, 1972). This thought alone applied to current global-socio-economic-political issues is a full academic course.

Despite his clear and concise gift of narration, he had a shyness that covered his sanguine manner. His method of teaching would focus on describing patterns through "context" or "paradigms." A child is, at one time, in context of a family which interacts with and experiences her, but she is at other times in another context i.e. school. In each environment, her experiences and relationships are different (although overlapping). It sometimes happens that something is good in one context or on one level is bad in another. Think of the powerful challenge this perspective brings to educational policy and how little it is emphasized, especially with the prevalent over emphasis on content and teaching to the test modality (Byers, 1992).

Instead of lecturing he would teach through inquiry to get us to speculate about how the living world ("Creatura") cannot be described through the material-physical non-living world ("Pleroma"). By challenging historical influence, such as that of Descartes and Newton who

separated mind from body experience; Paul would point to the dangerous consequences of cause-effect (linear) and non-integrated (polarized) thinking. He would eloquently explore contemporary issues and how they were distorted through presumptions of non-integrated content and linearity, i.e. our current media headlines.

In effect, Paul demonstrated how the “modern” Western way of knowing could rigidly eliminate “naturalistic” processes that allow for error, reversibility and novel opportunity for healing and self-correction: “the difference that makes a difference.” The latter results from an appreciation of how nature works- a respect for the earth being “more than the sum of its parts” – with unlimited potential for adjustment and rearrangement. This is commonly described by the Greek word “Gaia,” which allows for infinite celebrations of possibility (Byers, 1986).

A narrower view, perceives change in a fashion that is reduced to external forces and causation. Consequently, man-made problems permeate political conflict and issues of global pollution, economic inequality and dualisms of right-wrong, success-failure, good-evil, and Viagra-unhappiness resolutions. On the other hand, Paul’s holistic framework of understanding our world was so refreshing because it offered a simple means of resolving problems that is paradoxically difficult to implement. This is so, because cultural and institutional constraints that emerge from self-perpetuating systems disallow mitigating process and “natural” healing. In essence Paul believed and demonstrated that nature was a continuous process of changing, self-corrective relationships (Byers, 1986).

### **The Effects on My Personal Awareness**

My relationship with Paul Byers and my learning of these ideas was an opportunity for “blending” –integrating the many aspects of my self-experience. I could be silent, which with my Italian ethnicity was initially difficult for me, and still communicate without the pressure of “logic,” of which Paul would say “is not always an appropriate reference.” He would remind me many times that communication and learning is over ninety percent non-verbal and then gaze at me for a timeless all-encompassing moment, leaving me feeling totally honest.

I had read and heard the Zen-like epistemological explanations in his classes, and in books- but to be in the “repetitive yet newness of each nuance,” in his presence was another thing. It was like experiencing the landscape from the grain of that moment, a beginner’s mind, that fleeting but distinct second, which allowed me to see how injurious it is to miss the “part-to-whole” connections of our existence. Not seeing it; with friendships, in community, or in self-serving ways produces a separation and imposed hierarchical structure that is in conflict with nature.

He would constantly urge me and his other students to recognize the many different connecting patterns of their life. When asked how that is possible. He would answer, “Widen your lens; view the larger contexts and then feel the inner, natural ideal that shapes your feelings. This will frame solutions to support your direction.” This is what Paul meant by “the aesthetic,” the ideal human game of joy, which is to recognize our interconnected essence; understanding it is the wisdom that sustains the natural flow of our relations (Byers, 1986; 1992; Silvestri, 1981).

This personal teacher-mentor experience has helped me enormously in my work with my students and those who I see in my practice every day, in that **nurturing and support is paramount in helping maintain recognition of the power of thinking systemically**. The possible awareness and problem solving that comes out of this process resonates with every instance of our interactions and it cannot be attained solely through classroom lecturing. It is very difficult to blindly accept linear reasoning after experiencing nature from this perspective as we in our field all know, however the cultural constraints of language, media and corporate climate are forces that do not easily retreat and are always pushing for “old business as usual.”

## WIDENING THE LENS

### Widening Perspective: The Stereoscopic Lens Exercise

In my practice, I regularly use an exercise based on the above and consisting of a metaphorical "Stereoscopic Lens" to point out the value of widening the perspective of the families that I am working with. I offer this as one of many possible applications of the above discussion. The prerequisite for this exercise is the construction of the family's genogram, a trans-generation relationship family tree, with all being present at the same time (McGoldrick et. al, 1999). The genogram in itself is a multi-faceted lens.

I ask families seeking help to imagine that they are seeing their current situation through a presently focused lens, the view that we most often use each day. It's within this framed sense of perspective that we can mistakenly come to depend on content and narrow our sense of what may be happening. We can also, if we choose, begin to use this lens to recognize mistakes, wrongs, and anomalies (the strange, unusual and peculiar symptoms that are the grist for “change”), which can allow for profound insight into one's current life situation, learning style, temperament and family legacy.

I initially suggest to all family members during this presently viewed framework that a few deep diaphragmatic breaths be taken that fill up the stomach, before moving up to the chest. Before exhaling, with a stress releasing exhalation, I ask them, for a second or so, to widen their lens and see things in a “peripheral vision,” as Mary Catherine Bateson (1995) once described,

whether it is the distant corners of the room or the wider perspective of their genogram, physical and emotional environment.

This, in most cases brings up from their subconscious a larger framework or context about how they each originally viewed their problems, of which I ask them to revisit and share with me any revisions that they would like to make of that view. With very few exceptions, this simple exercise results in profound insights regarding the causation and sensations of their presenting problems. I use this exercise progressively in systemic treatment, which leads to more empathy and insight regarding mutual problem solving. It also motivates life style directions over time as each family member articulates their experiences and continues to grow within the family context (Silvestri, 2005).

### **Case Example**

Sally and Jim asked me to see their only child, Kevin who was fourteen years old and they feared was having difficulty in school. They believed he was acting out inappropriately at home by rudely answering them back. There was some resistance to meeting as a family since both the parents and the son felt they needed to explain their side of the story independently. In their first session, after convincing them of the importance of all being present at the same time, Sally, a social worker without any encouragement began narrating her family of origin genogram with descriptions of enmeshment with her mother who “would never leave her out of her sight.” Her Italian ancestry surrounded her “thinking and nervo” temperament. She was an only child and her father became distant during her years of puberty. Her relationship with Kevin was one of “what if...” worry and this created many self-fulfilling prophecies.

Jim initially was reluctant to describe his past. He was of Irish decent, youngest of eight children, and a high school vice principal who continually tried to suppress his choleric temperament and distant relationship with his parents. His relationship with Kevin was strained through accusations that he was too dependent on Sally. Kevin was by all standards a good kid, grades were fine, was busy with sports and his teachers all liked him. His parents felt he could still do better. His acting out was his “defending himself” and trying “to get some space.”

Sally was anxious at Kevin for withdrawing from her and saw this as problematic while Jim felt that he was just defiant. The parents were committed to each other but there was little equity between them since Jim thought that it was his job to make the family decisions. Sally felt resentful at the lack of collaboration.

Their patterns of intimacy and communication pattern was skewed toward blow-ups, little win-win volleys and triangulation with Kevin. Each had their point of view and seemed ignorant of the others reasoning or developmental needs. Over the past few years the parents had met with

teachers and counselors at the school, but seldom was Kevin (and his voice) present and consequently through default all agreed that “he could do better.” Each had been in therapy, but little family work was ever attempted.

During the initial session, all three had the opportunity to describe their view of the problems within the family. Sally tearfully narrated how Kevin was withdrawing from her, Jim admonished Kevin for not doing better at school and being disrespectful. Kevin felt he was being squeezed in the middle of his parents, who argued that neither was being supportive of the other.

I asked them to sit quietly and look at the presenting situation from their present lens. I then had them widen their lens by looking at their situation from the perspective of their nice home, resources and strengths. The lens was further widened, as I had each recall parts of their narratives in their own words, that related to their family genogram. I repeated some profound moments that were mentioned and asked them to focus on how it was to be a teenager. I then had them come back to the present presenting problems. There was a long silence as each contemplated the situation from a new perspective.

During the next session, each was able to describe the others feelings and sense of their background which was confirmed in conversation. Kevin could not believe how lonely his dad was as a child since he had a great relationship with his paternal grandparents and he did not realize how much his mother still worried about what his maternal grandmother thought about her. Jim and Sally know of their respective families of origin but became very emotional and empathic to each other when they described how it was to be fourteen and hearing Kevin’s views of his growing up. Jim wanted direction and attention from his father and Sally wanted independence from her mother.

The consequent family sessions were fruitful in their direction and solutions. Jim and Sally came in for some parenting sessions and I suggested that they have a “family-school” conference with Kevin and his teachers. This turned out to be very productive in that it simply allowed anything that was needed to be said to be done so in front of all involved and led to clear directions and roles regarding Kevin’s schooling. I have always had success working with schools in this manner and have found school personnel ready to cooperate, although they seldom initiate this process (Silvestri et. al., 1996).

The following family sessions had the family genogram on a very visible flip chart and the roles and adjustments in communication were revisited several times with the support of the widening of the lens exercise and perspective. Kevin began to get closer with his mother with little resentment as she felt that she no longer had need to control him and would rather celebrate his growing-up. Jim readily admitted that listening and offering advice was much different than admonishing and articulated profound warmth as he felt his son’s appreciation of his concerns.



Jim and Sally demonstrated a new collaboration and respect of their parenting concerns that eventually brought an obvious shared closeness in their spousal relationship. It was accomplished through some hard relational work and overriding many barriers that were imbedded in their habitual learning patterns.

I once presented a similar case during a roundtable format at a professional conference. My presenting theme was keeping a systemic perspective in the forefront and involving institutions that educate such as the schools in the process. The coordinator, an editor of what was at that time a family therapy journal, remarked, “So what is new, this seems like a good old systemic family therapy case.” My response then was confused silence, now I believe it would be “it is not new but it is needed with this family to connect with the wider levels of community and school especially after realizing and respecting the connections within the family itself.”

## INGREDIENTS, IMPLICATIONS AND OTHER APPLICATIONS

Over the years, my personal journey with the *joy and wisdom of systemic thinking* has developed certain evolving ingredients which I use every day in my practice as a psychotherapist and homeopath, all of which have beginnings from my conversations with Paul Byers, and fruitions through my significant relationships that have challenged and sustained them.

### **Celebrate interpersonal communication**

Although we can synchronize underlying biological rhythms as Paul Byers indicated when we join in communication; this process is usually out of our awareness. ***Focusing on how we “tune” into rather than “doing” things to each other is the celebration of many new possibilities for learning and relationships that fosters harmony.*** The “win-win” volley of this tuning has no place for “win-lose” interactions and conflicts. In practice, this brings new insights of “enactments” and points the way to strengths and resources for maintaining change. Allowing for those to truly recognize their non-verbal “state sharing,” through metaphors or active role playing and sculpting is much like dancing in harmony, a feeling that is healing and motivational. Is this new, not really, but is it used in practice and teaching as it was when the innovators of family therapy recognized its power?

In the above case the shared non-verbal movements within the context of expression and resolution enhanced the new dynamics that helped sustain change and avoid the old patterns of splitting, triangulation and fragmentation. The concern and love of which both parents had for Kevin was now demonstrated in a non-conflicting way. A unified harmony was obvious and

allowed for addressing issues that were previously destructive and non-productive. This may not be a new technique, but the consequent interactions were different and rewarding for this family.

### **Use a systemic lens to see interconnections**

Something that seems good in one context may not be good in a simultaneously connected wider context. As mentioned before, DDT was originally seen as beneficial when it killed predators of certain agricultural crops. However, within a few years, DDT entered the biological food chain where many species of insects and animals either became extinct or were threatened with extinction. ***Recognizing the patterns that join us, allows for an appreciation of fundamental causes that may support or sabotage interconnected relationships.*** The widening of our lens is the process of perspective. It is one thing to recognize this, but it is the wisdom that is attained by practicing it that imparts its systemic essence. Once this is done, refocusing on the present but narrower context will never be the same. There are many ways to widen the lens since our vantage point constantly changes; it takes creativity and active awareness of the many part-to-whole connections, unlike passive listening or directing in a possible hierarchical relationship that results in many one-to-one therapies.

Kevin, Jim and Sally knew of their family stories and history; however, the widening perspective produced new perspective for each of them. They now could articulate an awareness of how they were not recognizing factors in their family legacy and its consequences. Kevin better understood his parents past and how it manifested in their communication styles. Jim and Sally were able to show more empathy for each other and a willingness compromise and listen more attentively to each other. Continuing the widening lens exercise produced even more awareness as the following sessions unfolded. There may have been slippage at times, resorting to old habits, but there was no moving back and accepting them.

### **Respect culture, temperament and diversity**

How one feels, radiates and adapts are cues to their ways of gathering information. The natural movement towards wholeness is what Carl Jung called the “self.” We have an inherent nature that constantly moves toward collaboration. ***Understanding the multitude of possibilities within our species allows for conscious and unconscious dialogue that produces accessibility to symbols and intent that is the “Ah” feeling of our connections.*** Understanding ethnicity, gender, race, class and diversity helps define one’s temperament (behavior and view of the world). Blending and harmonizing is the oneness that Martin Buber (1970) described as the “I-Thou” experience. It is painful to not be aware of this process especially when communicating emotions and fears. Once this is understood, it is much easier to avoid being misled into an “I-It” relationships which creates a divided and fragmented sense of the world.

The above case in its complex simplicity brought out the essence of each other's temperament and communication style. Sally's nervo over dependent on thinking style was in stark contrast to Jim's angry choleric way of communicating. This information which is extremely helpful to the therapist for further coaching was now being internalized in a new manner by the family members as they adjusted and maintained this evolving dance of productive communication. It was an "ah" feeling.

## CONCLUSION

Since systemic therapy purports to be in tune to how nature works; i.e. respect for the system's ecology to heal itself, it follows that our educational mission is to advocate for its' practice within the family, classroom, office, and more importantly in the wider levels of the community from this perspective. Paul Byers framework for teaching and research as described above demonstrates this dynamic approach. This is especially important today, not only because there is a decline in those practicing systemically but also given the current political/corporate and global trends that are trying to reverse much of what was gained during the ecological movement (see "*Not So Fast with the DDT, Rachel Carson's warnings still apply,*" by Reed Karaim in *The American Scholar*, summer, 2005, which describes how corporate and scientific forces are attempting to refute ecological realities through skewed research for profit). It is not dissimilar to concerns about family therapy brought up by Salvador Minuchin when he asked where is the family in "systemic interventions" (1998).

Nature is in fact, an aesthetic experience, with repetitive patterns and systems that move toward disorder and consequent new order. As mentioned above our species with all its fallibility can synchronize and produce harmonious resolutions to systemic problems; however, this can only happen when we work with the multiple individuals who are in need. I am not saying that we cannot treat systemically with an individual, but if the main modality for practicing this way does not allow individuals to appropriately connect then there will be little therapeutic success.

Much of the current family therapy literature confirms effective systemic interventions (Doherty & Simmons, 1996; Piercy & Sprenkle, 1990; Wynne, L. 1988). I believe that we evolve, grow, and learn through our everyday contexts of life by adjusting and balancing our interactions. The art of systemic thinking supports this process through its ecological assessments of presenting contexts and creating a framework for resolution through the interconnected levels within the family, community and culture. The problem is that although there are cultural constraints with the practice of systemic therapy, it is also well within the nature of this modality to achieve ways to sustain it, if desired. We can learn from those like Paul Byers and the successes of those practicing systemically as they demonstrate a continuing desire to utilize new interconnected resources (Caldwell, Winek, & Becvar, 2006; Edwards & Steinglass, 1995; Liddle & Dakof,

1995).

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