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### **Introduction**

I have spent over 30 years contributing to the evolution of our specialty of systemic therapy in Ireland. In more recent years I have been increasingly preoccupied by the emerging ecological crisis and the climate science which describes it. This presentation is an exploration of how those domains intersect and, to the extent that they do, what they might offer to each other and to the training of systemic therapists.

I will make a case to you that the situation requires urgent collaborative action and that we – the systemic thinkers and practitioners – have something important to offer and, perhaps, a special role to play.

The evidence of the UN Conference on Climate Change in Copenhagen last December is that the politicians cannot be counted on to find ways to turn the ship around in the foreseeable future. The ball is back in the court of the ordinary citizens. The politicians lack the sense of urgency and the capacity for systemic formulation at the global level which is required to transcend the dominance of political and economic considerations.

This is where we, the systemic therapists, may have a role.

### **Bateson**

Gregory Bateson speaks of the necessity for both rigour and imagination in all domains of human thought and action. It is an example of what he refers to as a cybernetic or recursive complementarity. Too much rigour and you seize up, too much imagination and you probably get locked up. Both are necessary. It is an example of how he articulated the circularity in all living systems and the balance between variables in an ecosystem.

Bateson highlights that there are optimal values of most variables in a given ecosystem. If those optimal values are exceeded the system cannot survive. Oxygen is a very good example: if the proportion of oxygen in the air we breathe increases by quite a small amount we are poisoned. CO<sup>2</sup> is another. Which brings me to climate change.

## **Climate Change**

We are disturbing the mix of variables which have sustained life on the planet in its present forms for millions of years and allowed the development of civilization over the past 10,000 years. We are doing this both because there are so many of us but primarily because some of us are consuming resources and creating waste to levels never before experienced. The awareness of the full picture is now dawning and the evidence of our collective impact is incontestable.

The collective and conservative scientific consensus as expressed in the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reports is that the increase in global temperature is due to human intervention - anthropogenic global warming (AGW). Much of this is irreversible and of delayed effect so we and our children will live in an increasingly warmer world whatever we do.

There are now many texts detailing the consequences of various possible levels of warming - of increasing levels of disruption to lifestyles, habitats and food production resulting in significant population migration as well an escalating rate of species loss. At the upper levels of 3-6 degrees C of average warming the scenarios are catastrophic for many parts of the world and call into question the continued functioning of civilised society as we know it.

## **Back to Bateson again**

‘The unit of survival is *organism plus environment*’ says Bateson. ‘We are learning by bitter experience that the organism which destroys its environment destroys itself. . .’ (Steps to an Ecology of Mind, p. 483)

He also spoke eloquently and frequently of the ‘pattern which connects’ by which he means the endless tapestry of interweaving ecosystems from the micro to the macro of the planet itself which collectively constitute and sustain life.

The pattern which connects living systems is currently being torn apart - perhaps irreversibly. We are on the brink of an environmental catastrophe of huge proportions with major implications for all life forms on the planet.

Bateson described ‘chopping up the ecology’ as the most serious epistemological error. Most of our professional distinctions are predicated on chopping up the ecology and then shoring up the defenses around our piece of territory.

A young Irish colleague puts it well. He is an environmental lawyer:  
*' . . . if climate change shows one thing, it is that there has never been a greater need to gain understanding of a topic outside our immediate domain. In a world where demarcations between disciplines have been strengthening, a new willingness may be required to break down barriers between disciplines and share knowledge outside our fields.'*

Many of Bateson's ideas are echoed in the work of James Lovelock, a British scientist, who is best known for his theory of the earth as a self-regulating living system. This hypothesis, which he named Gaia after the Greek goddess, has now become one of the foundations of much contemporary climate science.

Lovelock believes we have passed the point where the positive feedback loops can be prevented. They are underway. We are heading for massive changes in the way the Gaia balances her ecosystems and our species will not benefit. He predicts a massive cull of human populations within this century. I don't necessarily share this apocalyptic vision.

In less than the time that the specialty of family therapy has existed this crisis will be upon us.

To be more precise we are beyond the carrying capacity of the planet by a factor of 4 or 5. We have been floating on a sea of oil which is essentially concentrated solar energy distilled over millennia. We are going to consume all of it in two centuries or less. Based on oil we have had a huge explosion of food production which has enabled a similar population explosion. Oil underpins every aspect of our contemporary technological, industrial and commercial world. Without that lubrication we grind to a halt.

We are now effectively cooking ourselves and all other life forms in a stew of greenhouse gases. It is a pressure cooker and the heat is being progressively turned up – by us.

### **The benefits**

To offset the apocalyptic vision I have been painting it must be said that are many creative and resilient responses emerging across all domains of human activity including among the health professionals. There are optimistic signs and initiatives everywhere:

- The WHO has taken a strong stand on declaring that climate change is the outstanding public health issue of our time:

- The Lancet, the BMJ and many other publications in the health field have addressed these issues and begun to demonstrate how carbon-reduction strategies of various kinds from low-emission stoves in developing countries to reducing car use in our cities results in major health dividends:
- The Health and Environment Alliance have demonstrated that if the EU adopted a 30% emissions reduction target it could save billions in public health costs. For the EU as a whole, the anticipated benefits could be as high as €30.5 billion per annum.

### **Systems thinking and practice**

Because of our knowledge of systems and particularly of feedback processes it seems to me that we, the systems thinkers, ought to understand better than most the runaway escalations that are pushing us towards a tipping point. We ought to be well placed to discern, advise, interpret and warn but - as professionals - we are distracted by the pressing concerns of practice and teaching, academic demands and professional issues. And as persons or citizens the scale of the challenge may well overwhelm us.

It is good to remember that the pioneering phase of our field 50+ years ago constituted a revolution in thinking and practice which stretched the prevailing understanding of human interactional behaviour and emotional functioning. It promised new ways of conceptualising multi-person communications and the relational domain. It was a quantum leap.

### **Milan**

More recently the Milan Associates - using Batesonian theory - went a long-way to break the mould of the focus on the single patient. The genius of circular questioning gave us a period of experimentation and opened up the window to reflecting teams and a greater sense of the web of interconnections within which symptoms and problems arise and are sustained. It was a fertile period for our field.

Milan took it as far as to incorporate the referring person and some of the other players in their formulating and intervention design. Fairly quickly the idea of intervening dissolved as they came to the realisation that they were co-creators of the stories in which they found themselves. They also observed that the process of circular questioning itself appeared to release systemic enzymes of change.

However they didn't follow through on the logical implications to expand the frame to include the wider social and political context in which the

families were embedded. They took the Batesonian message but limited its application to human systems only - as if they could be addressed apart from their contexts. Bateson would not have approved.

The systemic therapy revolution of the 60s, 70s and 80s which we are reviewing in this Congress represented the psychological sciences' attempt to understand the wider human systems of which we are a part and to devise means of working therapeutically with those relationship networks. Our pioneers realised that we are born of relationship into networks and contexts of meaning which sustain or harm us and we them. They didn't include the larger ecological context which is the cradle, the source of nutrients and energy and completes the systemic whole.

The effort to widen the lens continued in various forms but has largely succumbed to the constraints of the established order. We have not followed through with the logic of an ecosystemic epistemology. This would require us to expand our frame to include the other living systems with which we share the planet and that of the planet itself.

By revisiting our systemic roots I am suggesting that we can be pathfinders for our professional peers and students. We can activate our many networks. But to do this we must go beyond politics, beyond psychology, beyond economics as presently construed. They are all dedicated to fragmentary territorial views, invested in polarisation, individualism or worship of the market respectively.

The situation is dire – perhaps not as dire as Lovelock proclaims - but certainly urgent. We are in a state of collective denial about the scale of the challenges which confront us which are a) to turn things around or b) to face the consequences if we can't.

### **Nagy and relational ethics**

This brings me to another major influence in my formation as a family therapist - my former professor in Philadelphia - Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy. He is the founder of contextual therapy and he, more than any of the founders of the field, sought to incorporate an ethical dimension into his model of practice.

In the title of this presentation I referred to the idea of the duty of care. What flows from this idea? It suggests to me an ethical responsibility to safeguard the welfare of those in our care, those who turn to us for help, those more vulnerable and those we give life to. How does this apply to contemporary parenting and therapeutic practices?

Currently we expose our children to myths of infinite resources allowing them to enjoy the levels of material comfort that we have known. We give them many contradictory messages about what faces them in the future. Even if we try to live lightly on the earth and apply some restraint on their consuming, the ethos of the shopping mall is all-pervasive suggesting a technical or cosmetic or online fix for every need.

The evidence of climate science and the predictions of Lovelock would suggest the prospects are frighteningly different. Should we withhold this information from them or try to share it? What will they believe and think of us when they realise they are growing into an unlivable world?

Ivan Nagy spoke of relational ethics and of balances of entitlement and indebtedness between the generations. He sees the lack of reciprocity and trustworthiness in primary relationships as a principal source of pathology. His model of contextual therapy has not had widespread popularity.

One of his countrymen and followers, Tamas Kurimay, wrote of him as follows:

*'He believed that human health, evolution, and survival were all dependant on human relationships and on the strength and sincerity of those relationships.'*

*He believed that his theory applied to all relationships: to couples and family relations, as well as to small communities and societies as a whole. As early as in the 1980s Nagy projected some of the unjust processes that would affect our planet. He expressed his deep concern that by polluting the earth, we exhaust our future, meaning that as human beings we are not being conscious of our responsibilities to future generations.'*

Nagy's call for reciprocal fairness between and across the generations as foundational for healthy human functioning seems incontestable. He gave those intergenerational dynamics a greater ethical dimension than any of the other founding figures of the field.

Catherine DuCommun-Nagy has continued to develop contextual therapy and says 'Posterity is the main client of the contextual therapist.' That is an interesting thought. What if we conducted our therapy with posterity in the room?

This is a form of child protection which we could usefully reflect upon. If our practice was now dictated and driven by the primacy of the well-being of the next generation and we factor in the evidence from climate science – what are we to do?

We can see Milan as bringing a Batesonian systemic rigour into clinical practice and applying it with imagination and flair but it lacks the ethical rigour which Nagy adds. Milan was at pains to be seen to be ‘neutral’ and many had problems with that. Nagy was unashamedly propounding an ethic of loyalty, trustworthiness and accountability as the *sine qua non* of resilient, healthy relationships.

I am for reinstating some of the Nagian perspective. It would go some way to counter the delusion that we can carry on as we are and the denial of what we are facing.

But there is a further step that brings together the Batesonian and the Nagian. What if we take Bateson seriously and see the organism plus environment as the indivisible unit of evolution, of life and of survival? Then we would not draw a boundary around the individual, the couple or the family in our clinical enquiries. We would expand our circular questioning to include the context in which the relationship resides. What would we learn if we included the environment as a player in our relationship networks – i.e. asked family members to give their view of how the environment sees their problem, crisis or relational dilemma? What solutions might the environment propose? What does it see that they do not, etc. etc.? Future questions might be particularly illuminating. Bring the wider context (environment) and the future (posterity) into the room.

So I believe we have something distinctive to offer not only to the health sector but also to the many other constituencies we inhabit. We have an ecosystemic tradition to draw on in Bateson which was turned into a clinical model by Milan. When married with the relational ethics of Nagy it provides us with an intergenerational perspective and accountability to the future. These are the necessary ingredients for a form of practice which is fair, inclusive, ecologically sound and wise.