Class 1
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Prologue

Behind the Looking Glass

This book is a journey to a newly discovered kingdom, the world behind the looking glass. For me, the advent of the one-way screen, which clinicians and researchers have used since the 1950s to observe live family interviews, was analogous to the discovery of the telescope. Seeing differently made it possible to think differently. And new ways of thinking have led to an epistemological revolution, one that touches all the sciences and that challenges many traditional concepts, from the belief in linear causality to theories of individual motivation.

Family therapy, although not a behavioral science per se, is in the odd position of being one of the few areas of behavioral research and practice to be influenced by this epistemological shift. It is therefore more than just a novel therapeutic technique; it is based on new assumptions about human behavior and human interaction that have far-reaching implications. To really understand it, we will have to go back several decades and explore the diverse themes and concepts around which the family movement has evolved.

A Bicameral Model

Let us start with the technological invention just described: the screen. The late anthropologist Gregory Bateson speaks in *Mind and Nature* of the advantages of a bicameral format—the jump to a new perspective or emergence of new possibilities that follows the placing together of two eyes, two hands, two chambers of the brain.[1] This format applies also to the one-way screen. The screen turned psychotherapy into a bicameral interaction that offered a similar chance to explore a new dimension. One had two places to sit. One could take a position, and have somebody else take a position commenting on or reviewing that position.

It is not strange, then, that the screen became a stake-out place from which to view the fauna of a realm that had always been before us yet never truly seen. One of the early discoveries made by those who first viewed families with schizophrenics was that what were thought to be mental illnesses belonging to individuals might not be illnesses in the medical sense. In fact, they might not be disorders at all. Rather, they could be seen as orderly manifestations that had meaning in the families or other social settings in which they occurred.

Not only the process of assessment but the process of therapy profited from the two-chamber framework. The use of the two rooms to divide the tasks of therapy—regardless of how this division was described—led to a new and more powerful way of organizing systems change. With this format it became possible to abandon what was becoming for many an outmoded concept: the concept of the therapist as a free-standing agent acting upon a free-standing subject, the client or family.

Why was this concept becoming outmoded? To explain, I will have to enlarge the field of vision and describe a cluster of ideas that has been rocking our Aristotelian universe for a long time. The shift to these ideas is linked very closely, first, to developments in such fields as physics, biology, mathematics, and second, to the cognitive sciences that have emerged from computer technology. The figures who seem to have had the most impact on the family field in its

infancy were, oddly enough, not so much psychotherapists but such scientists as information theorist Claude Shannon, cyberneticist Norbert Wiener, and general systems theorist Ludwig von Bertalanffy. One must add to this list Gregory Bateson, whose synthesizing genius showed how ideas from such divergent sources could be useful to the understanding of communication processes, including those associated with psychopathology. Bateson was also one of the first to introduce the idea that a family might be analogous to a homeostatic or cybernetic system.

Unfortunately, however, for those who like simplicity, the family field did not develop in a straightforward fashion from the ideas of these early thinkers. There are now two distinct generations of thought in family therapy. Building on the cybernetic model, theorists like the late psychiatrist Don Jackson, at the Mental Research Institute in Palo Alto, California, emphasized the equilibrium-maintaining qualities of symptomatic behaviors in families, as if they were literally analogous to homeostatic elements.[2] Recently, theorists like University of Texas psychologist Paul Dell have developed an evolutionary rather than a homeostatic model.[3] Deriving his evolutionary epistemology from the work of a group of scientists who came to prominence during the 1970s, such as physicist Ilya Prigogine, or biologist Humberto Maturana, Dell conceptualizes families, as well as all living systems, as evolving, nonequilibrium entities capable of sudden transformations. Dell applies this evolutionary paradigm to a consideration of family systems, in contrast to the homeostatic paradigm of the earlier family thinkers.

Circular versus Linear Thinking

The central concept of the new epistemology—both the homeostatic and the evolutionary paradigms—is the idea of circularity. In the field of mental health there has been a growing disenchantment with the linear causality of Western thought. Mental illness has traditionally been thought of in linear terms, with historical, causal

explanations for the distress. Efforts to explain symptomatic behavior have usually been based on either a medical or a psychodynamic model. The former compares emotional or mental distress to a biological malfunction or illness. Treatment consists of finding an "etiology" of the so-called illness (a typically linear construct) and then instituting a treatment, such as administering drugs or devising other means of altering or blocking those bodily processes which are considered responsible for the patient's state. The people in charge of this treatment would of course be doctors, and the settings would often be hospitals.

The psychodynamic model is influenced by nineteenth-century discoveries about such forms of energy as electricity and steam. As with the medical model, etiology is conceived of in linear terms. Symptoms are said to arise from a trauma or conflict that originated in the patient's past and that has for a variety of reasons been relegated to the unconscious. Treatment consists of helping the patient to recover the memory of the repressed event, which could also be a fantasy or an unacceptable wish, and to reexperience the emotions that were buried within it. Once the secret material becomes known to the patient and the buried emotions are "worked through" within the safe confines of the therapeutic relationship, the patient will presumably no longer need the symptom.

Thus these two models typically see symptomatic distress as a malfunction arising either from biological or physiological causes, or from a repressed event in the past. In both models the individual is the locus of the malfunction, and the etiology is connected with an imperfection in his genes, biochemistry, or intrapsychic development.

After decades of strict adherence to these models, a new conceptualization began to emerge. Evidence provided by the watchers behind the screen supported the growing disenchantment with the linear, historical view. If one saw a person with a psychiatric affliction in a clinician's office, it would be easy to assume that he or she suffered from an intrapsychic disorder arising from the past. But if one saw the same person with his or her family, in the context of current relationships, one began to see something quite different. One would see communications and behaviors from everybody present, composing many circular causal loops that played back and

forth, with the behavior of the afflicted person only part of a larger, recursive dance.

Of all those writing about the shift to a circular epistemology, it is Gregory Bateson who most persistently tried to capture this elusive beast. In *Mind and Nature,* he makes a distinction between the world of physical objects and the world of living forms.[4] The physical world, the world of Newton, assumes a billiard ball model in which causality is linear and forces act unidirectionally upon things. Bateson objects that the world of living forms is poorly explained by comparing it to a billiard table. In the world of living forms not just force but information and relationship become important.

The classic example of this viewpoint is the difference between kicking a stone and kicking a dog. In the case of the stone, the energy transmitted by the kick will make the stone move a certain distance, which can be predicted by the heaviness of the stone, the force of the kick, and so forth. But if a man kicks a dog, the reaction of the dog does not depend wholly on the energy of the man, because the dog has its own source of energy, and the outcome is unpredictable. What is transmitted is news about a relationship—the relationship between the man and the dog. The dog will respond in one of a number of ways, depending on the relationship and how it interprets the kick. It may cringe, run away, or try to bite the man. But the behavior of the dog in turn becomes news for the man, which may modify his own subsequent behavior. If, for instance, the man is bitten, he may think twice before kicking that particular dog again.

Therefore, Bateson would argue, we need a new grammar, a new descriptive language, to depict what is going on in the living world. What characterizes this grammar? First, as we might expect, it objects to "thing" language, which grows out of linear notions of cause and effect, in preference to a recursive language, in which all elements of a given process move together. "The man used a scythe to mow a field" is thing language and is linear. It suggests that one marked-off segment (a man) took another marked-off segment (a scythe) and used it to chop up another segment (a field). One gets the linear progression: A, using B, acted upon C, to effect D. Here is a recursive, circular description of the same process by Mary Catherine Bateson, the anthropologist's daughter:

A man with a scythe is constrained by the form of the scythe; indeed his own body motion is informed by the curves of his tool, a concrete proposition about the interlocked movement of man and tool through deep growing fields across the generations; as time passes, his own musculature will become a record of the scythe's teaching, first in stiffness, then in emerging grace and skill. We need time to understand this system, to get beyond seeing it as simply instrumental.[5]

In the case of living systems, it is not possible to assign one part a causal influence *vis à vis* another, or to put in any linear markers at all. As Bateson says, a brain does not "think." What "thinks" is a brain inside a man who is part of larger systems residing in balance within their environment. One cannot draw a line indicating one part that thinks and another that is profiting by the thinking. "What thinks is a total circuit."[6]

Similarly, in describing the evolution of the horse, Bateson talks about the relationship between horse and grass in which each reacts back upon the changes of the other. To speak of the horse "evolving" and the brain "thinking" as if they were not part of an ongoing, self-reflexive process that includes other elements would be to ignore the laws of relativity for living forms. Newtonian descriptions classify an item according to inherent attributes and characteristics. Recursive descriptions define an item in terms of its relationship with other items. To quote Bateson again:

I was utterly fascinated, and still am, with the discovery that when you use language rightly to describe a flowering plant you will say that a leaf is a lateral organ on a stem which is characterized by having a bud, namely a baby stem, in its axil. So the definitions became: a stem is that which bears leaves, and a leaf is that which has a stem in its angle; and that which is in the angle of the leaf is a baby stem, and so on.[7]

Ideas like these have extraordinary implications, not least when applied to the field of psychotherapy. The therapist can no longer be seen as "impacting" on the client or family through personality, craft, or technique. The therapist is not an agent and the client is not a subject. Both are part of a larger field in which therapist, family, and any number of other elements act and react upon each other in unpredictable ways, because each action and reaction continually changes the nature of the field in which the elements of this

new therapeutic system reside. A circular epistemology forces the therapist to take account of the fact that he or she is inevitably part of this larger field, an inextricable element of that which he attempts to change.

The Beginning of the Journey

At the time this book was conceived, what we can now call the homeostatic model of the early family therapy researchers was in its infancy, and the evolutionary model based on recent ideas from physics and other scientific fields hardly born. In 1970 I wrote a paper on deviation-amplifying processes, originally entitled "Beyond Homeostasis,"[8] which contained ideas that now seem to me an aftempt to bridge the two positions, or move the first one forward. It was published simultaneously with a similar essay, Albert Speer's "Family Systems: Morphostasis and Morphogenesis," which also broke the confines of the homeostatic model.[9]

This book arose out of a compelling need to build a framework that would explain where the concepts flowing into both models came from and how these models fit together with the many other ideas and models that are still bubbling up out of the family therapy field. (Family therapy was, and still is, a wondrous Tower of Babel; people in it speak many different tongues.) In addition, I have tried to integrate other research in the social and behavioral sciences that can back up the observations of clinicians working with families.

My fascination with social fields and with describing them systematically also played a part in the explorations that resulted in this book. My experience resembles that of those early meteorologists who realized that weather systems could not be understood locally, that one man's downpour could be another man's drought. In studying weather systems one might encounter complex redundancies in the way various elements intersected: wind, vector currents, clouds, moisture, cold and warm fronts, time zones, latitudes and longitudes, the pulls of lunar gravity, or the flares on the sun. Above all, there would have to be some way to account for the

changing *differences* among these variables. To grow and evolve, th science of meteorology had to find a kind of crow's nest from whic it was possible to observe patterns and sequences moving the sam way or differently through time, rather than seeing only particula pieces of weather that happened to occur in this or that place. I short, what had to be discerned were the larger configurations tha make up our modern weather charts. Satellite photographs, taker from literal sky-borne crow's nests, now show the spirals of thes weather systems, graphically portrayed in cloud formations circlin the earth.

The study of human behavior has undergone similar changes. A long as one stood on earth, so to speak, and experienced rain one day and sun the next, one had to invent a demonology that controlled these different manifestations. Similarly with unusual behaviors. A demonology explaining irrational behaviors was invented time and again by human groups to explain the variable weather of the soul. In some periods, powerful spirits were believed to act upon a person from without; at other times, powerful impulses were seen to control the person from within.

Only recently has it been recognized that just as weather can be seen as large, moving systems, so perhaps human behaviors may derive from large relationship configurations moving through time. To say, "This is a schizophrenic," that is, a person with a supposed mental disorder, makes as much sense as to state, "This is a rainy day." The so-called schizophrenic can just as well be described as a manifestation of a larger weather system in human affairs. The next step is to find an imaginary satellite from which to view the patterns and sequences that will give us weather charts for such behaviors, at least within small, reasonably stable groups.

That, of course, is the problem. Behaviors cannot be studied apart from the fields in which they occur, but the fields must be integrated enough to allow study. How much easier it is to understand the movements of ants or the dances of bees. If only large human structures—nations, societies, cultures—were as homogeneous or predictable. The family is one system that transcends the limits of the single person yet is small and clearly bounded enough to serve as a researchable unit. In the family, as in weather, once one leaves the individual and surveys the family as a systemic entity residing

within even larger fields, one begins to see clear redundancies and distinct patterns.

Thus it is not hard to see the powerful lure family research held for one eager to explore social fields from a systemic view. I first stumbled upon family research in Palo Alto in 1963. There, at the Mental Research Institute, I began to see from the studies that had come out of Gregory Bateson's 1952–1962 research project on communication that a change in a family depended very much on the interplay between deviation and the way deviation was kept within bounds.

I was also intrigued by the idea that deviation, or deviance, per se, was not the negative thing it was thought to be, once one abandoned the point of view of those who wanted it corrected. Deviation (including symptomatic and irrational behaviors of all kinds) could be highly important for a group. Although homeostasis was a central concern of the Palo Alto family researchers, when I read their writings I found myself more interested in what worked *against* homeostasis; what introduced variety, strangeness, novelty. It seemed to me paradoxical that families with symptomatic members were thought to be pathogenic since I began to suspect that only when someone or something deviated from the family norms could the family derive new information and evolve new structures. Without some chink through which variety might enter, there seemed no possibility for a system to achieve basic structural change. Most families must reorganize as the generations are born, grow old, and die. If a family could not achieve that kind of change, it would most likely not survive.

Families with symptomatic members thus became illustrious material for study, since in those families the issues of change would be most intensely highlighted. Therefore I began by asking what were the properties of family fields in which new information, and hence change, entered with difficulty if at all. Were there explanations for the stability of these fields? They seemed to remain relatively the same despite the need for periodic reorganizations that every family must face. Was there research in other fields that might throw light on these mysteries? Was there even a language in which to express these concerns, since our old language seemed designed by its very structure to obscure them? These were the kinds of

questions to which I sought, if not answers, at least indications that would tell me where to look.

Organization of the Book

This story unfolds with the detective work of those early family researchers who first gazed into the murky depths of families with schizophrenic members and recorded what they saw. Much early research on schizophrenia and the family, as Dell points out in a recent essay, merely sought to provide a new theory for its cause, whether that was the family, the "schizophrenogenic mother," or some other agent.[10] I will focus on the research that does not primarily offer a new etiology but moves us along the epistemological path I am tracing.

In Chapter 2 I move to the cybernetic model suggested by Bateson's seminal ideas on schismogenesis. This term, though ponderous, nevertheless contains a blueprint for the way social groups cohere or split, stay viable or reorganize. It is also a concept that can be applied to many escalation processes, especially those found in social interaction.

Early clinicians had been fascinated by the tendency they perceived in families to maintain the status quo, and posited that something akin to homeostatic mechanisms were responsible. What interested me was the contrary process whereby antihomeostatic processes might take over. The implications of these processes for systems change is the subject of Chapter 3. Some small deviation could get out of hand and create a "runaway" or positive feedback chain. It was anyone's guess whether the original organization of the system would change, be destroyed, or stay the same. But it seemed to me that in the grand scheme of things, deviation was a source of new information essential to the survival and evolution of social groups, and that the early family theorists had not emphasized this aspect sufficiently.

In Chapters 4 and 5 I begin to investigate in more detail the issue of family typology. At first, family researchers tried to link symp-

tomatology to family types: the schizophrenic family, the alcoholic family, and so on. But this kind of typology is hard to establish, especially since a family may contain persons displaying a number of different symptoms. I also explore other attempts to create typologies: bipolar ones, in which families are ranged along a continuum with each end representing an opposite form of organization; process models, with families organized according to different types of sequences; grid models, representing more than one dimension; and developmental models, showing a continuum from "pathology" toward "normalcy." However the typology is arranged, different categories of families are usually linked to different classes of disorders. At the same time there is the possibility that the whole question of typology may be either premature or a dead end, and that a focus on family "paradigms," or system-wide formulas for processing information and change, may be more useful.

In Chapters 6, 7, and 8, I try to put under the microscope the tissue of one particular kind of family: the family that produces severe psychiatric disorders. Researchers had found in this one type of family, at least, distinct patterns of organization either different from, or more intense than, similar forms in seemingly normal families. The application of coalition theory by members of the Bateson group to the structures typically found in "disturbed" families led me to a broader look at coalition theory and its first cousin, structural balance theory. Of all the areas of social psychology that I explored, the theory of structural balance (though originally intended to explain cognitive, not social, fields) was the only theory that was in any way predictive for the formal interaction sequences one could see operating in families with symptomatic members.

Consequently, in this group of chapters the focus is directly on the characteristics of triangles one can expect to see in "disturbed" families. These triangles obliterate generation lines, confuse appropriate boundaries between family subgroups, and subvert the family hierarchy as prescribed by a given culture. At the same time, we find that they are associated with families so rigidly organized as to make any change in organization problematic, especially changes associated with the growing up of the children. Research, both in families and in organizations, suggests that one possible reason for the persistence of these inappropriate triangles is that the child (or

other third party) presents a problem that keeps covert difficulties or conflicts in important executive pairs from surfacing.

At this point we move from an emphasis on family theory to an emphasis on theory of change. The book becomes far more clinically oriented and process variables rather than structural variables come into view. The idea that living systems often make sudden evolutionary shifts at natural transition points in the family life cycle is the subject of Chapter 9. The appearance of symptoms at these times may indicate that a particular transition is perceived by the family as problematic, even dangerous. Not all families are able to negotiate these transitions on their own. When a symptom develops, it can be seen as a constant reminder, in symbolic form, of the need for change, while at the same time apparently blocking it.

Chapter 10, "The Thing in the Bushes," explores the target most therapists seem to be gunning for in terms of repetitive cycles or sequences. These sequences are presented not as dysfunctional but as having a logic and a meaning at the family-system level, even though they may be experienced as painful or stressful by individual family members. Chapter 11 examines how this type of sequence is broken or disrupted by therapists working in four different models.

Although this book is not intended to be a historical overview, it seems to me that the practice of therapy is a form of live research, a notion I illustrate in the subsequent chapters on family therapy pioneers and major schools. The clinical work of successful pioneering therapists is a prime source of information on families and family therapy. The experienced clinician intuitively recognizes the shape of common symptomatic configurations and knows how to go about changing them. The schools I describe are singled out because they represent consensus positions: a consolidation of practical and theoretical issues following the trails blazed by the first explorers.

I then move to an examination of an important new development: the systemic approach of Mara Selvini Palazzoli and her colleagues in Milan. Originally influenced by the early formulations of the Bateson group, the Milan Associates continue to work more and more closely within a Batesonian framework of circular causality. In both their theory and their therapy they have taken a leap toward an idiosyncratic and original model that is very different from that

of their current Palo Alto colleagues. Chapter 15 describes their present work.

The last two chapters are speculative and raise more questions than they answer. Chapter 16 is a discussion of the therapeutic double bind, and of various theories about why it works. Chapter 17 describes issues that are now coming to the fore and that lead to a consideration in the closing chapter of the implications of the new evolutionary epistemology to which we have been alluding throughout the book.

On a more personal level, this evolutionary epistemology can be applied to my own journey. Looking back on the thought and study that led to this book, as well as to other work in the field, what may seem like blind spots and dead ends also represent stages in a necessary process. The very logic of an evolutionary model prohibits throwing away trials that are unsuccessful. The only prohibition is against continuing to repeat such trials.

With this proviso, let me turn back to the 1960s, when I first became acquainted with the work and writing of the early systems thinkers, clinicians, and other pioneers of the family therapy movement, and try to convey the enormous impact their discoveries made upon my own thinking and writing and upon the development of the family field.