

Reading Beyond the Lines: Bateson and Burke Made Easy

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Thank you to Herb Simons for proposing this panel and keeping the Bateson/Burke flame alive. When preparing these remarks I tried to imagine the audience and could not conjure you up. Five people or fifty? AARP eligible folks only? Curiosity seekers who wonder what the fuss was all about once upon a time regarding our two subjects of interest and admiration? The truth is that we were all touched by the magic of Gregory Bateson and Kenneth Burke many years ago, and, like the talking books at the conclusion of Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, we are always pleased to share that experience with others when the opportunity presents itself. This is one of those increasingly rare moments.

The ascendancy – call it invasion - of French theory and British cultural studies in the 1980s and digital/social media studies in the 1990s and beyond have largely moved both Bateson and Burke to the sidelines, precisely when the conditions of our time seem increasingly in need of their counsel. Or maybe their time has not passed, but is yet to come. I have always felt that way about Bateson in particular – decades ahead of himself.

To give you an idea of the excitement that attended Bateson and Burke back in the day, I turn to Art Bochner's powerful new book *Coming to Narrative* (2014), which is being honored at this conference. Bochner recalls an exchange with Bill Rawlins:

It was late in the afternoon, and I was heading out of the building after class. You came bounding down the stairs, grinning from ear to ear. You stopped me in my tracks on the stairwell, hollering from the floor above. I can still recall the conversation.

You shouted, "Carol Wilder just got the funding to hold a conference at Asilomar in honor of Gregory Bateson!"

"No!" I shrieked as you caught up to me. And you had this look on your face like a parent holding a gift behind his back.

"Guess who else is going to be there?"

"Who?"

"Kenneth Burke!"

"Holy shit!" I couldn't believe it.

“Hell yea!”

We stood there high fiving, hugging and celebrating on the staircase as if we had just won the lottery. People passing on the steps thought we were crazy. They couldn't have known what it meant to us to bring together Bateson and Burke, what a watershed moment it would be. (2014:225)

But that was thirty-five long years ago, almost the span of the careers you see up here before you.

We can take some comfort in the fact that loyal bands of acolytes in enclaves like the Kenneth Burke Society and now the International Bateson Institute in Stockholm headed by Nora Bateson have stubbornly persisted. That said, a 2012 American Society for Cybernetics meeting - also at Asilomar - that focused on Bateson did not show me anything compelling or new after thirty years, except that the well-intentioned participants seemed to be speaking in tongues and mainly to each other. Even Governor Jerry Brown, in attendance, was asking anyone who would listen to identify current effective voices in Bateson's tradition. For a few weeks following the conference in a series of communications with him, I ended up essentially failing the quiz myself. I hope it was just because I have been missing something, maybe something I will learn today.

Regarding Kenneth Burke, I know that the Kenneth Burke Society seems to be going strong with an impressive conference earlier this year. I was delighted to find among my papers the Vol. 1 No. 1 *Newsletter of the Kenneth Burke Society* (1984), with introductory remarks by the man himself under the title: “Logology is our Logo.” I should mention here that I knew Bateson's work well, and knew the man perhaps better than most but only in the last two years of his life. I have stayed in touch with his widow Lois and daughters Nora and Mary Catherine. With Kenneth Burke, I was not very engaged with his work, much of which I found maddeningly difficult. I did write one piece with Burke's invaluable support in the form of arranging for Penn State University to send me a copy of his complete correspondence with Hugh Duncan. These letters formed the basis of my introduction to the 1985 Transaction edition of Hugh Duncan's *Communication and Social Order*. So while I was not what one would call a “Burkean” scholar *per se*, I did become close to K.B. the remarkable human being for the last fifteen years of his life. I spent time at his home in New Jersey, he spent a month with me in Palo Alto, and we met several times in Victoria, British Columbia, where his son Anthony (Butchie) was a physics professor and my friend Janet Beavin Bavelas taught psychology. I met all five Burke children – terms of the pentad, he said – and assume you all know that K.B. married two sisters, making his children both siblings and cousins. No wonder he once remarked to me “I was so goddam happy when that sex thing was over.”

In 2013, I published what could be called a companion piece to today's presentation in the journal *Kybernetes* on “Remembering Gregory Bateson,” an issue that was drawn from the 2012 American Society for Cybernetics conference. The essay is on my web site www.carolwilder.net, and serves as a complementary essay to what I have to say today for those who want more Bateson than I can fit here.

Bateson and Burke were both, as Bochner writes, “aesthetically-informed, deep thinking, profoundly original risk takers,” (2014:225) but they had never met before the 1979 Asilomar conference, and Bateson knew little of Burke beyond his reputation. Kenneth Burke reduced Bateson to giggles with “a little tune” he offered in Bateson's honor that he sang – or rather croaked – at the conference banquet. “Double-boundly

systematized,” it went by several titles – “If Not, Why Not?” and “Towards Doubly Binding.”

*Why not try to be a something
Exactly like a something else.
When it begins to freeze hard, it also melts.
Flying down while it flies up and
goes in while coming out the door.
Outside is as in as inside
and when less it's all the more. (1981:338)*

Burke added, “I have also claimed that, in principle, it’s an ideal formula for how to be a good President of the United States.” I have copied the sheet music as a souvenir for you of this session.

We know more about how Burke viewed Bateson because he told us so in not one, but two chapters in *Rigor and Imagination* (1981). Burke wrote his chapter “The Interactive Bind” and then when I sent him Stephen Toulmin’s piece on Bateson he wrote a second chapter “Addendum on Bateson.” In “The Interactive Bind,” Burke writes:

When trying to figure out just where Bateson and I differ (if we do differ!), I’d propose to start with Horne Tooke’s reference to the fact that language abbreviates. Thus, Bateson “from a system-theoretic point of view” bears down hard on the guy who says “I cut down the tree” and he even believes that there is a delimited agent, the “self,” which performs a delimited “purposive action” action upon a delimited subject. I would agree with him – yet somehow things turn out differently. (1981:333)

In a nutshell, which is hardly the right size to accommodate the ideas of these giants, Burke argues that “my purely physiological nature (in the realm of motion) would embody a “principle of individuation.” “And each different kind of organism would have a correspondingly different kind of environment, as a dog would be a menacing aspect of a rabbit’s environment, but home sweet home for the dog’s fleas.” (1981:334) He holds out for “this grounding in the purely physiological organism. . .I need that one difference: We are the kind of organism that, born as individual speechless bodies, learn language (a collective medium of expression and communication), which in turn assisted the development of technology. . .until we now confront ourselves ‘writ large,’ even possibly. . .self-aggrandized beyond the limits of self control – but in any case with symbol-guided technologically ‘perfected’ Counter-Nature as our (take your choice) ultimate Freedom or Compulsion” (1981:335) K.B., it seems, does not want the “I” to get lost in the “We.”

Burke also complains that in “Bateson’s pages there was no talk at all of ‘dialectic’.” Maybe so, but I would argue that the dialectic is implicit in Bateson’s thinking. Fundamentally, Burke seems to insist (implying a difference) that “I must think of the individual human body as the unit of survival, now caught in a vast complexity of interactions and double binds. . .” (1981:339) Note to graduate students: there is a dissertation to be found in a compare/contrast of Kenneth Burke and Gregory Bateson, though I believe that the comparison may be more constructed than organic.

Along those Bateson/Burke lines, I ran across a 2013 book by Laurence Coupe that could be called *The Greening of Kenneth Burke* – its actual title is *Kenneth Burke*:

From Myth to Ecology, which is a repackaging of its original title – *Kenneth Burke on Myth: An Introduction* (2005). A review by Isabel Galleymore notes that “with no additional material [the book] may not quite live up to its ‘greener’ re-titling and re-packaging; its relevance to ecocriticism only becomes explicit towards the end of the book.” (2014:111) Nonetheless, here we have a strong current of reverence for the natural world running through the work of both Gregory Bateson and Kenneth Burke. More about the two of them later.

II.

1983 was most terrible horrible no good very bad year of my life. Newly single-parenting a teenager and toddler, being reviewed for tenure, a host of other calamities ensued. The bright spot of that year was the month that Kenneth Burke lived with my kids and me in Palo Alto – or as they called him, “ET” – while he was a visiting scholar at San Francisco State. On K.B.’s first day, as I was dashing around to get the kids off and my guest dignitary from Palo Alto to San Francisco, my next door neighbor called with the news that my 16-year-cat had passed away in her garage. I replied in panic – “Millie, can you please just put her in the freezer for a few days?” This gives you some insight into both my mental health and judgment at the time. It was the kick-off of a perfect period to share a home with Kenneth Burke, a teenager and a toddler.

Millie had first called on Tuesday. On Friday she called to remind me “I think it’s time for sweetie-pie to go home.” We agreed that she would bring the cat to the front door first thing Saturday morning. I was up early, trying to intercept K.B. from the door. He saw me pacing, and said “your cat’s out there.” K.B. had gone to the front door for the paper, opening it to be greeted by a box of frozen cat. I was mortified and we never spoke of the incident again until a month later when I was taking him to the airport.

Meanwhile, K.B. became part of our family and one of the dearest souls to ever grace our lives. My kids still talk about him. He padded around the kitchen muttering nonstop. Every pronouncement was prefaced by a raspy “The thing of it is. . .” Whenever the phone rang he’d say “If it’s the Nobel people, tell them I’m busy.” I still have his shopping list:

California Cellar Chablis
Gallo Hearty Burgundy
Gilbey’s Vodka
1 Unsalted Peanut Butter
1 Rat Cheese
1 Whole Wheat Bread
1 Tuna Chicken of the Sea – low salt, vegetable oil
2 Red Onions

Minus the vodka, this is still pretty much my shopping list. K.B. was a fountain of aphorisms.

Immortality is a euphemism for death.
I can’t resist saving money.
I could live on what you waste.

Ouch. It was an unforgettable time, and we became friends for the rest of his life. In addition to meeting at various points on the map over those fifteen years, we exchanged dozens of phone calls and letters, none of which I have previously shared. Today's panel has given me the opportunity to revisit these precious documents. Toward the end of K.B.'s life his caregiver would call me on his behalf and, despite his advanced aphasia, he would have something he wanted to say to me. There was no "yes yessing" him, either. He fought to the end to be understood, and when he lost the words he kept the passion.

III.

No one wrote a letter like Kenneth Burke. His papers and many of his letters are at Penn State University library. I am lucky to have salvaged fifty or so items from our own correspondence, including half a dozen long laments from me. I know I must have thought writing to K.B. was important at the time because I saved – remember these – carbon copies! K.B. sent pictures, essays, poems, puns, and musical compositions, the latter for the performance of my San Francisco State officemate Hank McGuckin, whom K.B. dubbed "De Voce." K.B. was perfectly proper in his professional letters, but a puckish free speller in his personal correspondence, peppering his letters with Burkeisms – or Burkishness – like referring to Hank as "Guckish McHeinrich," and exclaiming things like "holy smokeusarookus," "for Gawsake, Carol, plizz, say SOMETHINKS" or referring to himself as a "litry man." Indeed.

At this point let me share with you a mosaic K.B. correspondence sampler to give you some of the flavor of our exchanges. I am especially drawn to a letter dated August 13, 1981 from K.B. to me. This letter followed a week I spent with my one year old son at the Burke farmhouse in Andover, New Jersey and less than one month after the tragic death of his grandson Harry Chapin.

Dear Carol,

'Twas fun, your being here with No. 1. I got your other letter, and I wanted to tell you that I should have written you a bread-and-butter letter, as I was still banqueting two weeks after you left.

Harry's fatal accident was a big blow to the family, and we're all most grateful for the many condolences. (The ones sent to me I have not yet been able to acknowledge.)

As for your change of plans, I have uttered a reference to "that state of pre-divorce called marriage." Best wishes for the Next Phase.

And do give my regards to Guckish McHeinrich, whose manly range from middle F-sharp to D' still vibrates in my memory.

And any time you're passing down or up Amity Road, do be sure to stop here.

*Avec Universal Liebe,
K.B.*

This letter shines a light on the K.B. that I came to know, a man far more sentimental and accessible than his enormous sometimes baffling literary oeuvre would suggest. He was so playful that he could hardly frame a sentence that did not include a surprising turn of phrase, as when he wrote a promotion letter for me in 1987 that began "Having been informed that my colleague Carol Wilder is 'under review for promotion to full professor,' please, I ask you, let me enroll myself as most zestfully in her favor."

"Let me enroll myself as most zestfully in her favor." Who writes like that? And he did it all the time. Here we have an excerpt from May 5, 1982. . . *"Meanwhile, know: My Final Ambition is to be gratified; namely, to wit, viz.: I'm to get my Ninth Honorary, at Emory. I'll get out from behind that Eight Ball, and can die in peace. (I loathes even numbers). . . I've been wanting again and again to write youenz, but tangles did keep turning up. . ."*

And from June 4 of the same year:

"My innate modesty (why they call me 'Shrinking-Violet Burke') had had the true intuition, but with a winsome twist such that I now and then referred to the Sickly Selph as 'Ignatz de Burp,' which really was 'de Burgo.'" In these last two or three years, when I have been trying to sum things up, every now and then a breakthrough of one sort of another does pop up. But please just act as though this divulging were still confined to De Burgo's Peerage. And if I seem friendly-like, it's not a fake. And that reminds me: I'll go mail this, and pour myself a dwink of mutt vodka. . ."

K.B. was a famous lover of his "medicine," which brings to mind the morning in Palo Alto when I awoke to a note on the kitchen counter:

4:00 A.M.

Carol –

I've been awake for hours.

Now I'm all dressed and ready to go.

So if I don't come down, please let me linger until it's time to go.

I'm taking a slug of vodka in hopes that it may change the rhythm.

Holla!

K.B.

7:00 A.M.

I SAY ITSHAY THE STUFF WAS NEAR KICKLESS.

Hell,

K.B.

In April 1980 when he received the National Medal for Literature, he sent me the *New York Times* article underlining part of the last sentence quoting him: "I write verse a little bit and criticism a lot. Being a language-using animal is what we are all about: bodies that learn language." K.B. wrote in the margin in his tiny script "I thought that I always avoided that expression because it has been used up - but that's what I'll go down in history as saying." On the opposite side of the *New York Times* piece, K.B. writes his letter:

*While levitating
IV/29/81
And/Or, NJ 07821*

Dear Carol,

A nice guy who remembers reading one of my books when he was in college gave me a Copier. And info on t'other side is the first thing I tried out. So I send a copy herewith.

I think the usage "is what we are all about" evolved this way: I could have said somethinx like, "what is to be said about human motivation if our kind of organism is defined as 'bodies that learn language.'" On the surface it looks as though there would be only three loci of motives: as bodies (physiological organisms as per sex, aging, etc.) as language-using ("them slobs don't have compassion; our Ism is better than their Ism"); as learning language (out of infancy, speechlessness, and at the most immature period of life, hence "word magic"); as involved in a self-made realm of Counter-Nature made possible by technology, which in turn has been made possible by the kind of attention and communication made possible by langwitch.

*Avec Universal Liebe,
K.B.*

And more on the copier shortly thereafter:

*Entangled 07821
V/16/81*

Dear Carol. . .

Meanwhile, a nice man gave me a COPIER. 'Tis the only thing that a litry man of my age could reasonable lust after. . .

And K.B. was certainly contemplative about his own legacy, as he wrote:

*154 Amity Groove, etc
XI/17/82*

Dear Carol,

. . . in one way or another I was Under a Cloud for many years. But I've managed to hang on for long enough to see this thing coming clear. Unless my body can't hold up, my Logological presentation of us humans as Bodiesthatlearnlanguage can go on to fulfillment. (It's so godam obvious, after being a maverick for years I fear that I may go down in history, since that's the only way we can do in English, as the world's Greatest Platitudinarian since Aristotle). . .

I will spare you all but one excerpt from the contents of my letters to K.B. Suffice it to say they were probably more appropriate to send to a therapist than to an eighty-something friend. December 7, 1983:

. . . I hope this finds you well – please let me know. I also wish that mean Herb Simons had invited me to participate in his conference in your honor. I'm too mad at him even to write. Anyway, he invited Enrico, so at least I'll have a representative in spirit.

Much love to you, Carol

It may come as no surprise that I somehow ended up at Simons' conference!

IV.

In one of my earliest letters from K.B., dated "XI/19/79" he writes with "*IN TRACKING DOWN THE IMPLICATIONS OF LOGOLOGY*," *I discovered the need to replace Roosevelt's Four Freedoms with but Three, presented thus: 'The Greatness of our Country has been based on Three Freedoms, all three of which, regrettably, are denied us from now on; namely, The Freedom to Pollute, The Freedom to Waste. The Freedom Not to Give a Damn'.*"

Here we have lines that could just as well have been written by Gregory Bateson, the passionate naturalist. Gregory wrote a famous essay on "A Theory of Play and Fantasy," and K.B. acted it out in word art. Both men strained against the limits of language, albeit in different ways. Gregory's prose was, as he once termed it, "astringent," and K.B.'s prose was expansive, never having a thought related to the topic at hand that he couldn't squeeze in somehow. Gregory often wrote in arias; K.B. wrote in jazz. Both men were academic nomads; though both taught briefly at The New School (Bateson in 1946-47; Burke in 1937) and Kenneth Burke taught a long stretch at Bennington (1943 – 1961). They were iconoclasts but not loners; both were married several times and begot sprawling families. Both were encyclopedic minds and contextual thinkers with different but complementary perspectives.

Now, if you look at the title of this talk, I have given you a bit of bait and switch by promising "Bateson and Burke made easy." That is frankly because I wrote the title before the I wrote the paper, but I will offer what little help I can growing out of my own early frustrations reading both men. Read Kenneth Burke to appreciate and enjoy where his mind goes. Read Gregory Bateson to find where *your* mind goes. I suggest this because when I was teaching Bateson, students would often report that they couldn't pay attention to the text – their mind wandered. The question, then, becomes where does your mind go?? It is simplistic to conclude that Burke writes a more closed text and Bateson a more open one, but it is useful shorthand. Kenneth Burke always seemed to say what he could to exhaust any subject; Bateson is more suggestive. While both strain against the limits of language, I would say Bateson moreso. T.S. Eliot's "East Coker" from *Four Quartets* was among his favorite poems. Burke had a lot more fun with language, using it creatively, recursively, to illuminate itself. I think Kenneth Burke had a lot more fun, period, and could roll with just about any punch, including a frozen dead cat. As I dropped K.B. off at San Francisco airport after his epic month with us, I finally managed to sputter "K.B., I just want you to know how very sorry I am about the cat." Without skipping a beat, he replied "Well, if it had been a dog it would have bothered me."



*"By God, for a minute there
it suddenly all made sense!"*

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Postscript – Hugh Duncan to Kenneth Burke, 7 March 1951

I have always felt that you were a lonely voyager and there have been times when I sensed that you felt some sort of cold mist closing in about you as you traversed some of the deepest fens. Sometimes I thought this was the way you had to travel to get on with your work; that you would far rather take the risks in the hope of reaching some light, than give up the glory. When we first met it was the wonderful polyphonic quality of your thinking that enchanted me. It still does but now there is something more; the instrumental value of it for saving us from more monsters who know how to use the magic of symbols.

Kenneth Barber,

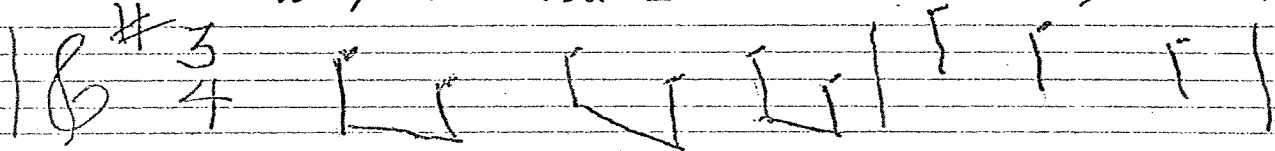
Dear Carol, Copyright 1976, under this title, "If Not, Why Not?"
Change to something like "Towards Doubly Binding"? At one stage I thought
of it as advice on how to be a Good President.

Avec Universal Liebe, 8/1/77

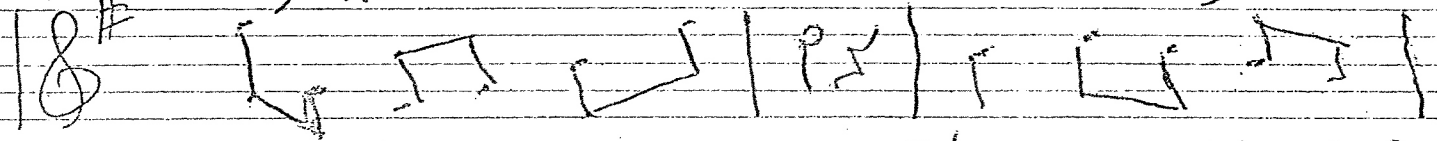
K.B.

If Not, Why Not?

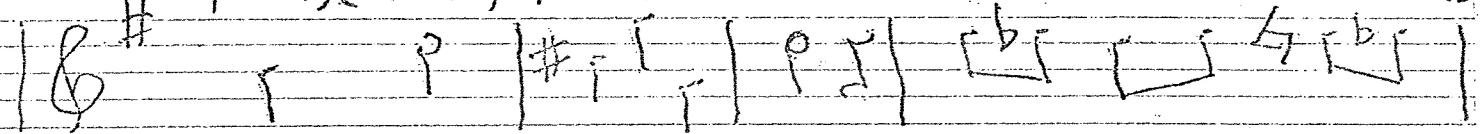
Why not wish to be a something ex-



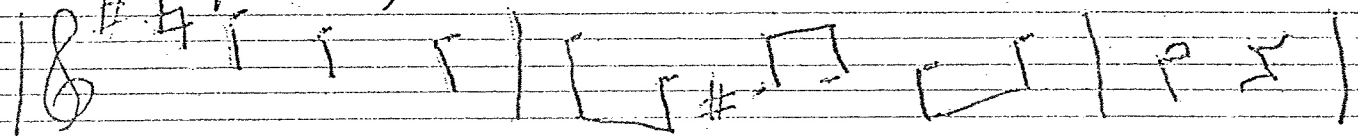
actly like a something else? While it begins to



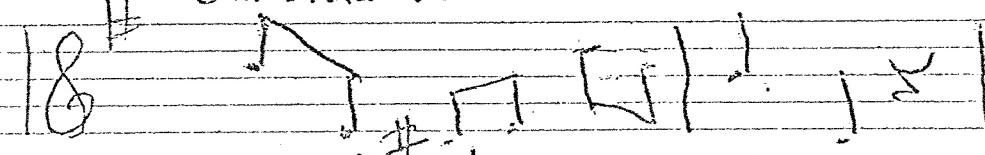
freeze hard, it also melts. Flying down while it flies



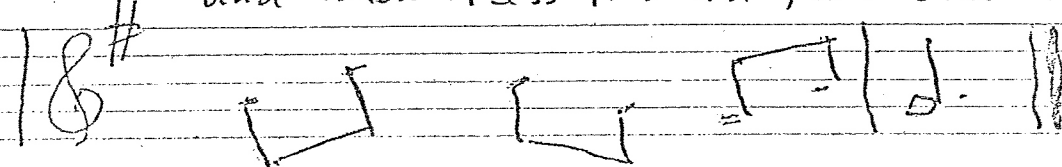
up and goes in while coming out the door



Outside is as in as inside



and when less it's all the more



K.B. 76