Reflections on “Self-Will Run Riot” by Roget Lockard

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I am glad Jon Diamond has asked me to comment on Roget Lockard’s article. It was just 20 years ago that I emigrated from New York City to North Amherst. Early on, Roget sought me out as a supervisor and general intellectual companion. I too remember that amazing conference with the title: “Is the Earth a Living Organism?” The meeting was an idea of two psychologists from California who put an ad in *Science* magazine asking if there might be an audience for a conference of that name. They were overwhelmed with responses, and the event was held in the conference center of the University of Massachusetts. The persons who attended looked so earnestly New Age that I was worried that it would turn out to be the equivalent of four days in church. I had to eat my words when speakers like Catherine Bateson, the daughter of my hero Gregory Bateson, Nobel Prize winner George Wald, and James Lovelock, whose Gaia Hypothesis inspired the conference theme, held forth on the logic of seeing the natural and human worlds as part of a larger being.

Roget, in his own talk, brought in an idea that I had only met once before, in an essay by Gregory Bateson called “The Cybernetics of Self” Bateson applied his ideas on complementary and symmetrical processes in relationships to an issue usually understood very differently: alcoholism. Having previously dismissed AA as a kind of lowly self-help organization, I was surprised when he explained its effectiveness in terms of a cybernetic healing process. Admitting powerlessness, in an ethos which abhors being in the wrong, seems to cut into the symmetrical escalation that frequently ensues from the pride of the alcoholic being challenged, whether by drinking buddies who spur him on, or family who try to stop him. Bateson, speaking of couples whose fights escalate to dangerous levels, noticed that sometimes one partner will fall ill or have an accident. When this happens, the relationship often becomes “complementary,” with the well partner becoming the caretaker of the other, and the fights will diminish. In another example of this insight, AA believes that a posture of humility cuts into the trait of pride that frequently characterizes the drinker, and offers instead a role based on

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caretaking of others in recovery.

Roget was the first person I had met in the field of substance abuse who not only had read Bateson but took his ideas about alcoholism seriously. In his own writings, Roget followed Bateson in generalizing from the addict's obsession with control to larger societal follies like the obsession with taming nature or the wish to bend other nations to our will. Having been brought up in a community where Art and Marxism were the closest thing we had to religious belief, I often felt deprived of a faith of my own. Bateson's concept of "systemic wisdom" suggested a way of thinking that might help me to formulate one, and in Roget's writing, I found similar comfort.

Perhaps the most difficult transition to this form of wisdom involved my own field of work: family therapy. I started out with a version of the alcoholic's belief in power and control. This was the framework bequeathed to the field by such followers of Milton Erickson's hypnotherapy as Jay Haley and the Interactional group at the Mental Research Institute. Coming to the MRI just as this persuasion was starting to flower, I fell in love with the tricks and strategies that Erickson's followers were codifying. Chief among these ideas was the paradoxical intervention. The MRI psychiatrist Richard Fisch once told me that what had started him out on this path was an experience with a woman who was unable to leave her house in the morning for fear she would wet herself. She was on the way to becoming a chronic agoraphobic, and Fisch, despite his psychodynamic training, wasn't helping her at all. Desperate, he decided to try an Ericksonian idea. He told her that every morning before going out she should get dressed and then, with all her clothes on, stand in the bathtub and urinate. She was then to go to work. She only followed this directive once, as her symptom disappeared, never to recur again. Fisch told me he was so astounded by the suddenness of the cure that he became an instant convert to paradox.

I would have followed this path too except for the influence of Virginia Satir. Alone among the MRI researchers, she told me she distrusted Erickson. "I didn't like his eyes," she said. In her work she subscribed to a transparency that was diametrically opposed to the strategic work of Haley and the interactional group, and she operated from a position of warmth and candor that must have seemed naive to them. In fact, one of the group once told me, "Virginia embarrasses us. She acts like a little girl who runs out of the house without her clothes on."

At the time, I don't think I had read the articles that were later published in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. As a result, I just assumed that Bateson and the researchers who had joined his project were all on the same page. It wasn't until I left the MRI that I found out that Bateson had split with Haley on the issue of power in family therapy. Haley based his therapeutic approach on the notion that the therapist must take control, and Bateson not only disagreed but went public with his opinion. Concepts like "power," "crime," or "play" he felt were fatally abstracted from the particular contexts that gave them meaning.

The effect of Bateson's view prompted me to distance myself from the instrumental approaches to family therapy that I had spent so much time learning. It seemed obvious that pressure to change people only produced what psychotherapists called resistance. The interactional school offered a way to avoid this effect by prescribing the symptom, thus cutting the usual power struggle off at the knees. All well and good, but I began to be offended by the idea that the therapist had to remain behind a curtain like the Wizard of Oz, hoping that people would not realize that she had no real magic to offer. Around this time, I became interested in the AA model. In contrast, it took an egalitarian stance and its resources were derived not from "the expert" but from a pool of communal strength.

This horizontal stance appeared also in family therapy when Harry Goolishian and Harlene Anderson adopted what they called a collaborative language-based approach. Not only did they place a new emphasis on partnership but in their concept of "not knowing," they disavowed the status of expert. This move called forth many objections from practitioners who asked them, "How can you teach others if you 'don't know?' How can you accept money for helping people?" Nevertheless, they persisted, and the style of their work changed visibly, from a therapist-driven process to one influenced by their clients.

Another aspect of AA that I admired was the centrality of the social network. The family, per se, was not central—in fact, the family was often seen to be part of the problem. AA offered groups for partners, or for children, but the focus remained on the network of transforming individuals. This emphasis on a non-toxic social network became more and more part of relational therapies too. In following the evolution of Michael White's Narrative therapy or the Open Dialogue teams addressing acute psychosis in Finland, I realized that at the heart of such approaches was an effort to create a benevolent web.

Ideas like these were reinforced by my friendship with Roget, and were responsible for my own work becoming far more personal and heartfelt. In reading the present article, I realized more than ever how much I was indebted to Roget's vision and to the 'AA experience' that he introduced me to. He chose me as his teacher when I first came to Amherst in 1983, but he became my teacher too, for many years thereafter.