
From: John Brockman <[REDACTED]>
Sent: Saturday, December 27, 2014 10:06 PM
To: Epstein Jeffrey
Subject: about the AUM CONFERENCE

<https://edge.org/conversation/gregory-bateson-the-centennial>

(JOHN BROCKMAN:) It is March 1973 in Big Sur, California. A diverse group of thinkers are assembled to spend ten days together exploring the work of British mathematician G. Spencer Brown. Alan Watts and John Lilly, the coorganizers, are billing the event as "The AUM Conference." shorthand for The American University of Masters.

They have gathered together intellectuals, philosophers, psychologists, and scientists. Each has been asked to lecture on his own work in terms of its relationship to Brown's new ideas in mathematics. C. Spencer Brown lectures for two days on his Laws of Form. Alan Watts talks of eastern religious thought. John Lilly discusses maps of reality. Karl Pribram explores new possibilities for thinking about neuroscience. Ram Dass presents a spiritual path. Stewart Brand lectures on whole systems. Psychologists Will Schutz, Claudio Naranjo, and Charles Tart are in attendance. Heinz von Foerster holds forth on cybernetic modeling. My own topic is "Einstein, Gertrude Stein, Wittgenstein, and Frankenstein."

Perhaps, of all the "Masters" present, Gregory Bateson, at sixty-eight, is at once the best known and the least known. Among his assembled peers, his reputation is formidable. At the AUM Conference, stories of his profound effect on postmodern thinking abound. Yet few outside the relatively small circle of avant-garde thinkers know about him or his work.

There is valid reason. Bateson is not very accessible. His major book, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, is just being published. It is a collection of essays he has written over a thirty-five-year period.

Bateson begins lecturing in the conference room. Clearly he is held in awe by his colleagues. Nothing in his imposing presence detracts from his reputation. He is a large man with a deep rich voice imbued with an unmistakable English accent. There is an air of authenticity about him.

Nora Bateson, Gregory Bateson, John Brockman at Aum Conference, 1973

His talk is filled with brilliant insights and vast erudition as he takes us on a tour of subjects that include zoology, psychiatry, anthropology, aesthetics, linguistics, evolution, cybernetics, and epistemology. "The point," he says, "is that the ways of nineteenth-century thinking are becoming rapidly bankrupt, and new ways are growing out of cybernetics, systems theory, ecology, meditation, psychoanalysis, and psychedelic experience."

As he talks I look through a paper he has left for us as we entered the room. "Form, Substance, and Difference" is the nineteenth Korzybski lecture, delivered by Bateson in 1970. In it he points out that he's touched on numerous fields but is an expert in none. He's not a philosopher, nor is anthropology exactly his business. This doesn't help me much. All I know about him is that he has an anthropological background, was once married to Margaret Mead, and was a prime mover behind the important Macy Conferences in Cybernetics in the 1940s.

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Account by Cliff Barney: <http://www.lawsofform.org/aum/prolog.html>

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