

From 'Combining' by Nora Bateson

# ComBining

## ECOLOGY OF COMMUNICATION

Every communication is bringing something into an existing ecology of gestures, tones, codes, expectations. What will you bring? What have I contributed to this ecology? Will it grow into lushness, or have I eroded that possibility? Have I made room for new life or poured salt and bleach on a garden of what might have been mutual learning? How has my communication changed the ecology into which you can respond? How can we communicate about ecology if our communication is not itself ecological?

In fact, the problem of how to transmit our ecological reasoning to those whom we wish to influence in what seems to us to be an ecologically “good” direction is itself an ecological problem. We are not outside the ecology for which we plan—we are always and inevitably a part of it. (G. Bateson, 2000, p. 512)

I grew up in a household in which communication was considered so essential to life itself as to be sacred. To manipulate communication, to justify twisting it, or to violate it was considered a vulgar violence to life itself.

My father learned this lesson the hard way. It nearly killed him. Perhaps the extreme horror he experienced has given me a sense of urgency to attend to intangible processes that steer the domain of communication. In World War II, he was given the job of tampering with radio communications between the Axis countries. He took the job because he was dedicated to the task of stopping fascism, and this was the job the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) gave him. But it came at a price to his soul. The deviousness of the job was its insidious subtlety. He did not blatantly disconnect the communications between the Axis forces; he tweaked their communications just enough to generate distrust and confusion.

He readily said later the duplicity of this task sent him into a bleak despair. By exaggerating the information just a bit, he created a plausible scenario that would make sense to the receiver while generating distrust within enemy ranks. This exercise was distorting communication and destroying the possibilities of communication—the source of interrelational vitality. He was suicidal after doing this work. Even though he was eager to help in the fight against fascism, the way in which his knowledge of pattern and culture was used by the Allies nearly destroyed him.

By the time I was born, thirty years later, this attention to communication had become more than a theory; it was a way of life. In an effort to limit damage, my father spent his days and decades practicing perceiving complex relational processes through anthropology, information science, ecology, psychology, and art. He could do this better than anyone I have ever known. His communication from the breakfast table to the conference keynote was an endless, curious, caring, and passionate artistry of moving the ecology of communication toward a little more possibility of life to make more relations wherever he could.

Although I did not realize it at the time, I was learning from both his way of attending to communication and his regret at having tampered with it. The regret formed a sadness and a warning that was always with him in the undertones of whatever he was doing. His regret revealed his affection for life which was also there in the undertones of whatever he was doing. He loved communication, and he broke it. This pain never went away. So, I learned early in life that remorse for having manipulated communication is a pain that runs deep. I also learned what it looked like to be careful.

There has been keen interest on the part of the so-called “good guys” in making a new Cambridge Analytica that would swerve public interest toward more sustainability or social justice goals. The thinking behind this is that since it is such a potent tool, it could and should be used for changing hearts and minds toward protecting each other and our planet—producing “this” change in epistemology. Why not? Because it is manipulative and inherently violates the ecology of communication and dignity of relationships. You can't lie your way to integrity. The ecology of the communication is wild and must remain open-ended. The best I know to do is ensure my contributions to the brewing future are careful, thoughtful, and warm.

Symbiosis, the central process that creates life, is organisms living in contact with each other. It follows that dividing, separating, isolating that contact is extinction. You and I abide in many ecologies—we ignore them at our peril. We are symbionts within ecologies of people, our bacteria, our socio-cultural ideas, as well as the earth, plants, and animals. Staying viable in this ecology of ecologies is essential; the alternative is isolation, which is death and obsolescence.

I need the ecology of bacteria that live in and on my body to digest my food and to give me an immune system. I need the ecology of my family and the people close to me; human beings are not meant to be alone; we need emotional, physical, intellectual contact. I need the ecology of socio-cultural ideas and institutions for food, medicine, schools, and so on. None of these ecologies is possible without the larger ecology of the plant and animal life of this planet, which gives peace to the soul, as well as air, water, food, and everything else. All of these ecologies are formed and informed through constant communicating.

A dandelion that grows in an urban garden grows lush, tall leaves, and big blooms. Its root system is small by comparison to the same plant grown in the Alps, where the wind and weather are harsh. The alpine dandelion grows its roots deep to hold on to the hillside in times of stress; it keeps its leaves close and small, and its flowers are miniature. Ecology itself is a conversation in context—sometimes

in hidden root systems, sometimes in shameless blossoms. Human beings also learn to keep themselves hidden if the situation is unsafe—we learn to lie and learn not to show affection. We can learn to place our strengths where others won't see them—we learn to stay quiet—be invisible. Or perhaps we learn to catch the attention of others by shining too brightly.

My history includes the odd mismatch where New Age and scientific discourse mixed. In California in the 70s, as a child, I sat at tables with scientists and politicians who spoke of stopping ecological damage and social justice fifty years ago. I was also romping around in self-help retreat centers where my father sometimes gave lectures. These ways of thinking were not in approval of each other. After his death, I spent my teens in the punk rock generation (not the Nazi skinhead sort, but the social justice punk rock.) When 80s rap met punk rock and dub, we thought we had found the mix to break through. Like generations before us, we were ready to change the world. But, like for the generations before us, the world was not ready to change. All of these are responses to a cultural norm which is suffocating communication.

Self-help is rife with shallow methodologies and clichés; punk rock is raw and hopeful that screaming loud enough will rip a hole through oppressive, exploitative systems. Though that was long ago, the rebellion we sought is needed now more than ever. For that matter, the rebellion my father sought is still needed, and the rebellion his father sought is still needed. . . . That is the hillside my dandelion is rooting into.

By contrast, the dark horror of this era is a caustic communicational divisiveness fueled by those same relational needs. Information troll farms, Cambridge Analytica, Aggregate IQ, and others employ people to pit people against each other. They are using context against context, using relationship to break relationship. These entities are a part of daily life now, stirring up culture wars and splitting families. Political polarities are all frothed up by decontextualized information and journalism that sells controversy instead of communion. It is impossible to know what is real, who is trustworthy, and where they got their information.

We are living in a world that is very much like the task my father was given. Communication, which is what holds us together in our ecology of being, has been sabotaged. This water of life that gives communion has been poisoned with fake news about fake news, which was always fake anyway. Thankfully ecologies are not so easy to control, and authoritarian attempts, while tragic and horrifying, do not last. Life gets loose and pops out some new uncanny possibility. Some unintended consequence is always on the way.

The question is, “Will it bring life-giving communication or divide us further?”

Communication has been squeezed into all sorts of contortions since before we know. It did not start with troll farms. The separation of personal life from public behavior has its upside, but the seemingly benign monotone of professionalism has contributed to a whole mess of dehumanized, decontextualized perceptions. Attempts to exclude the irrationality of personal intimacy come at a

cost of important tacit information that is unclear but is there nonetheless. Another attempt is the anxious grasp for objectivity which is signaled through language without warmth or relational context. This language justifies horrific atrocities in the name of efficiency and results.

There is a confusion now; no one knows what to believe. I think this is partly because without relational information—warm data—the information has become so decontextualized it is untethered from the contexts in which it made sense. Who paid for the research? What questions are on the survey? Which measurements were left out? Are we in a courtroom or a classroom? Are we on a conference panel or at a poetry slam?

Each context has limits into which the communication will ping—confirming or altering. There are things that cannot be said because the context disallows it. There is no rule, no law—none is needed. The body knows these limits even if there are no words for them. It is those limitations I am interested in. If the communication were taking place in an ecology with different aesthetics, would it be possible to be in relationship in another way? Would that not be the most significant form of systemic change? This work is warm, full of beauty, and it is careful and curious . . . and disorienting. It is necessary to disorient toward new orienting. Where is the communication located? Is it in me or in the conversation with others?

The experience I am having of our conversation is landing within a lifetime of conversations, each of which has contributed to my idea of what a conversation can be, could be, should be, and should not be. Our conversation is not isolated, but rather it is illustrated by our histories which are informing the vocabularies and tones, metabolizing it into the way it will land for each of us. I may be charmed by you, or I may be irritated. You may remind me of someone. What you say is changed by the context of how I receive it. So, what will I say? If I say nothing, what will my silence convey . . . to you? Other people may feel very differently about the same statement or tone of voice—the context matters, the listener matters.

I remember a situation where a grandmother was scolding her small children when she would come to visit. She thought she was doing her duty to help them become well-adjusted citizens. The kids quickly began to dislike and avoid their grandmother. In other situations, they might have accommodated her sharp tones. But her visits were infrequent and short, so they did not have enough time together. There were not enough other forms of communication to dilute the scolding or to keep it contextualized in a relationship of care. To the kids, it felt like the only things she ever said were critical; they did not have a diverse ecology in their communication to hold her sharp words. The ecology of the communication was too acidic to grow the sweet fruit of intergenerational mutual learning. They all missed something important in those years.

If I say “Thank you” to you in many English-speaking countries, it is expected that you will reply with “You’re welcome.” If you do not say, “You’re welcome,” another communication has taken place. The lack of the coded response comes to express a sentiment that I am “not welcome.” It is an indication that whatever I was thanking you for may have taken place in another parallel story. Perhaps I was rude.

Perhaps there is another history between people we have loyalties to. Perhaps there is another drama going on that I know nothing about. There are many contexts in which someone who says thank you is not welcome. The silence where “you’re welcome” might have been said is not blank. On the contrary, it is filled with communication.

When do we greet? When do we not greet? What are the codes? While it may initially seem that to greet is friendly and to not-greet is rude, there may be multitudes of both. If our distaste for one another is in a context that will not allow the distance we might prefer, the way to greet one another is likely to be vile and dangerous in its saccharine falseness. And if we are very close and I know you are in the kind of pain that needs a witness but not a probing, there are ways to not-greet that offer respect and understanding.

When is language florid and opaque with decoration, and when is it gray concrete?

If you learn the right words to sound empathetic and you follow the script, but the learning has not come up through your bones, it is only a matter of time before a new set of words will be necessary. The right words are no replacement for deeper learning. The worlds will fail, be replaced, be gilded, or be vilified. Their fluidity is necessary while perceptions form. Our fluidity is also necessary while perceptions form.

The way of perceiving is inseparable from the way of describing. The vibe, the atmosphere, and the flavor of the communication create a logic of how to perceive that runs through the context. Architects and interior designers work hard to create spaces with featured metacommunication that tells visitors about who they can be in the building. New perception brings new words. Beyond them both, there is always more going on. The undergrowth of shared cultural signals is always there, monitoring humility, courtesy, oppression, and invitation.

Are you called to speak into this ecology of conversation? And what is brewing that wants to come from your lips? What is the tone? What is the texture of this thing, you will say? If you take a moment and consider the words in their tone and gesture landing in this conversation, what will they bring? What do they do to the alchemy of possibility? If my words land in your ecology of communication, what do they invite? What openings does my communication bring for the conversation? What have I limited? What is closing? What have I nourished, and what have I un-communicated?

It may feel cathartic to “speak your mind” or “say what you want,” but both of those are inevitably informed by other ecologies of connection. That thing said or unsaid is not just that and nothing more. Rather, the context into which it happens ripples with the arrival of communication. There is no way to communicate without contextual response and response to response to response. The effects are more than 1st-order; they reach and reach into generations to come at nth-order. Yet, there is little attention to practicing the art of perceiving context, and much gusto is placed on speaking out recklessly.

Taking a stand in a complex interdependent world requires another approach, one with what I have

come to call symmathesy or transcontextual mutual learning. This is not a method but a life-long honing and stretching toward sensitizing to perceive differently. Speaking out is important, and doing it with care to context is vital.

In metacommunication, the “meta” is not just communication about communication; it is the implied assumptions of what is possible to communicate in the context and the sonar pings of each expressed and non-expressed interaction against the walls of the expected communication. The algebra teacher may be speaking about formulas—and in doing so, she is also saying something about the math room, the blackboard, the desks and chairs, the history of each student’s family, hoping for their child’s success. All of these are transmitted in the math teacher’s tone of voice and gestures. These implied assumptions are invisibly reiterated into other contexts of the students’ lives, like other courses at school, but also family dinners, movies, tech, and window shopping. The implications of the metacommunication in the math class are not measured in how much algebra was learned but are more insidiously submerging into what it is to be in a culture in which algebra is important. The student that tries to succeed is not really succeeding in math but in cultural fitting-in.

Meta is more than self-referential; it is also an evocation of the deeper premises of the context. What is the student learning about learning to be their world? That it is competitive? That it is about pleasing the teacher? That you can fail? It depends on the teacher, the school, the student, the family, the local culture. The meta is there in the way learnings are transformed into a response.

The meta sits in the approach, the attitude, and the complicit understanding of the contexts. It largely is missed in the rush to fix the crises. The communication around solving problems is generally allergic to ecological communication. That is, in the anxiety and urgency to get control and deal with the issues, the familiar strategy perpetuates a habit of flattening, de-vitalizing, and organizing, sorting (even measuring and quantifying)—that which is not to be grasped. The ecology is lost in decontextualized predetermined targets.

I am remembering the Ancient Mariner, who, in a state of total despair, when his crew, the water, the food, and all else was lost—looked over the bow of the ship and saw glowing sea worms in the sea. It is written that he “blessed them unawares.” The meta is, as I see it, not the finding of solutions to our multi-systemic emergencies but the difficulty of having to muster gumption, the possibility of experiencing despair and learning to respond in another language of being, another grammar of being alive.

Complete gibberish is starting to make more sense than a good deal of rational debate. In this moment of crumbling social constructs, there is a dire need to see what we have not seen before, to do what we have not done before. There is the need to say what we have not said before. Make up new words . . . lots of them.

*The ecology of communication is there to be tended to in every single instant of the day. There is no getting it right; there is only practice and affection for life.*

*It is written everywhere. In every shape of every leaf. In the bend of every insect's limbs, in the colors and textures of each tree bark, and between your fingers.*

*It is spoken through every squeak, roar, and word salad. Every crack of thunder and every song of every river and creek is saying it.*

*It is in the rhythm of the waves crashing, the seasons passing, and the birth of the fawns in spring. The heart of each animal keeps the time. The crickets and cicadas hold the night's hum. The wind marks the desert in stripes and ridges. The footsteps of a horse, a family member. A returning hunger.*

*The gestures are wide horizons or jungles teeming with greens. They are flung high into murmuration of birds and down into the filigree of the undergrowth fungi. You shift your eye and blush . . . the cat twitches its tail while a city skyline reaches upward and clutches right angles in eager corners.*

*Tone is key. The swish of breeze high in the birch trees contrasts with the sound of an earthquake growling from the deep. The cheerful din of a meal with friends is paired with the private hell of angry silence between couples. The flattening inflection of authorized media voices tells listeners that credibility is the soundscape of dry paste, wiping clean any slime of uncertainty.*

*There is, within all of this, another realm that is beyond communication. That realm is sacred and unexplained. To force an explanation would be to violate a vital communion. There is the way a piece of music can move us to tears and the way a sudden glimpse of insight arrives.*

***There is love.***