

Living in Cybernetics—Making it Personal

*Mary Catherine Bateson*¹

Dinner speech delivered at the 50th anniversary conference of the American Society for Cybernetics by Mary Catherine Bateson at the George Washington University in Washington, D.C. on the 6th of August 2014.

Good evening! [audience responds: “Good evening!”] You know, usually I have to go further south—Washington DC doesn’t know whether it is the South or not—to get people to respond when I say “good evening” or “good morning,” because in the North they don’t. But in principle, all of us here, because we believe in circularity and in feedback—should respond. Let’s try it again! Good evening! [audience responds energetically: “Good evening!”]. Way to go! Wonderful.

I have been asked to respond to the topic of this meeting “Living in Cybernetics.” So I asked myself, Have I lived in cybernetics? When did cybernetics begin to affect my living? I am going to tell you two stories. Ranulph Glanville, who was very persistent in getting me here, is always reminding me that I once said that the time to learn cybernetics is kindergarten. So I have two slightly post-kindergarten stories that I want to share with you, both about my mother, Margaret Mead, who as you all know was very interested in cybernetics.

Both of these stories go back to when I was eight years old; and both of them have to do with a shift in my way of looking at the world that is still with me. They are examples of the kind of question we should consider in thinking about why and when people should learn about cybernetics. Is cybernetics to be regarded as some fancy postgraduate sophistication? Or is it a way in which common sense needs to be revised?

In 1948, Truman and Dewey were running against each other for President of the United States. Also Wallace. I happened to be in a very lefty school with a lot of red diaper babies, so I knew a good deal about Wallace also. I asked my mother who she was going to vote for and she said she was going to vote for Truman. “Why are you going to vote for Truman?” I said. “He is going to lose! Who wants to be on the side of a loser?” What I want you to notice is that by the age of eight a child has incorporated many of the assumptions of the culture—you want to be on the side of the winners, not the losers! I remember this every time I hear a politician calling some group of American citizens “losers.” So I said “Everybody knows that Dewey is going to win, why would you vote for Truman? Go with the winner!” And my mother said: “Well, you know, I’ve been a Democrat all my life, and I agree on the whole with the policies of the Democratic party. But it would not necessarily be a bad thing if Dewey won.

1. Email: mcatbat@gmail.com