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One of the doors to inquiry can be entered by recognizing differences. In her book, *Peripheral Visions,* Mary Catherine Bateson believes that "it is contrast that makes learning possible." If there were no challenges to our point of view—whether internal or external—there would be no changes within our perception or proof to show our perception is accurate. These challenges are best encountered in allowing ourselves to enter "unfamiliar settings in spite of the discomfort involved"; it is through the "unfamiliar", the unknown, the strange that we learn how to improvise and adapt. This kind of inquiry is best introduced by our everyday experiences. We may not all be ethnographers, trying to sort through whole cultures and ways of life, but we can appreciate differences first by allowing them to thrust us into self reflection, and second by dissecting the discomforts of those differences. Bateson talks about this kind of "learning from strangers" while trekking through the desert in Israel at the age of sixteen. A difficult journey for Bateson that could have easily rendered for her failure, embarrassment and a feeling of being a burden, but instead taught her the responsibilities we have for one another, to support one another, and to see inadequacies not as being irresponsible but as an opportunity for one to be helped (a valuable lesson for all educators). Later in her life, Bateson's encounter with the Tibetan Buddhist monks reemphasized what can be learned from our differences; she afterwards reflects that "the basic challenge we face today . . . is to disconnect the notion of difference from the notion of superiority, to turn the unfamiliar into a resource rather than a threat." It may turn out to be that there are more similarities than have been accounted for just as what was realized between Dr. Nurbakhsh and the abbot in the last sentences of Bateson's book.

To further accentuate what we can learn from our differences, Bateson states "the most alien customs can be comforting once their rationale is understood..." In other words, we may find solace by looking at our differences, just as Bateson discovered concerning the handling of death while living in the Marikina Valley in the Philippines. The intense questioning between Aling Binang and Ana regarding the loss of Ana's son that first angered and embarrassed Bateson, after careful observation and reflection and the loss of her own son, Martin, was recognized as sympathetic and comforting. The Filipino view of death as a part of life also prepared her for future encounters with life and death.

Another strong point Bateson makes from her own learning is that things are very seldom, if ever, what they appear on the surface or at first glance. Everything, if we pay "attention" in the sense that Bateson describes, can be useful for inquiry—even the "toad in a jar" serves as a metaphor about human life. So, "learning along the way," in terms of gaining from our everyday experiences, is to some extent unavoidable if we are living and breathing. Bateson, however, gives new depth to this phrase by emphasizing reflection as a requirement to turning everyday "incidents" into meaningful events that give us the kind of "peripheral vision" she sees as vital to inquiry. When Bateson uses the term "peripheral" she is challenging us to look beyond our "trusted habits of attention and perception [which] may be acting as blinders," and cautioning us against "sacrificing multiplicity to what might be called the rhetoric of merely. . . ." The sacrifice of the sheep offered just such an opportunity for Bateson. The sacrifice itself was an occasion for inquiry, but the diversities surrounding the moment added richness and meaning that otherwise would have been overlooked. Bateson's vision included the Persian garden with its own metaphorical meanings of life and diversity and order, and then the multiplicity of lives occupying the garden, sharing in the same ceremony: different religions, ages, occupations, genders, and developmental stages. Bateson even found within herself dual roles of "learner, an outsider" and "teacher, an authority". This ritual offers proof that much can be learned from a single experience if we take the time to inquire and reflect on it.

However, there are times when our "trusted habits of attention and perception may be acting as. . ." guides. According to Judi Marshall in her article "Self-reflective Inquiry Practices," "Part of inquiry

is making judgments about when to be focused and directed and when to be open and receptive." Though life may be a "zigzag" of experiences, it would serve us well not to, with every turn, embrace new theories, but to allow what we know as truth to be fine tuned. To believe "there are no whole truths," as Alfred North Whitehead stated, is to live without a foundation to build on—nothing will ever hold up. We may react as the Pennsylvania Quakers did by saying "it never would have occurred to me quite that way," for these truths do not leave us closed minded, they instead remind us that all we observe within an imperfect world will be distorted and we must rely upon what is unchangeable if we are to be as Bateson says "enriched by having tasted a different view of the world" as we "learn along the way."

Date: 11/16/2008 7:39:10 PM
From: Steven Weiland
To: Simpson, Tammi Dawn
Subject: RE: 6.11 Unit 6 Writing Assignment

GRADE: 4.0000

This paper opens very effectively with your focus on difference, contrast, and the importance of encountering the unfamiliar. I appreciated too the quotation from Mary Catherine Bateson identifying "discomfort" as an essential feature of the process. So, what about all the talk about learning being "fun"? What do you think—should we say a little more often that learning is hard work and finding a place for what can make us uncomfortable is important? You take that in just the direction Bateson favors with the quotation at the end of the second paragraph in which the "unfamiliar" is named as a "resource rather than a threat." That's good! In a way, our course reflects something of this lesson by insisting on encounters with educational thinkers who make some teachers uncomfortable (like E.D. Hirsch, Jr.). But that's a domestic lesson, shall we say, and with Bateson learning is focused on what is very unfamiliar, or "alien customs." The example you offer is just right, showing Bateson "learning along the way" and then making what she has learned part of her own life. What can be accidental becomes quite intentional. From there you turn to another key feature of her method, although it is closely related to the accidental element in learning and inquiry. By defining the complex term "peripheral" the way that you do you demonstrate just what kind of "depth" (beneath the surface) Bateson is after. As you suggest, there must be receptivity to metaphor (a very important point!) and to the "multiplicity" in any experience. That is how we look around and beneath what is in plain sight. But by taking another step you add real depth to your paper. That comes from what you recognize in the limits of "attention." So, yes we want to take as much as we can from a "single experience" but we also have powers of discrimination in managing inquiry and learning in our cognitive lives. It was good to see you make use of the unit resources on this surprising point to be applied to Bateson (most students miss it, alas). That is, she is not to be taken as an uncritical subject of any and every experience as if she doesn't make choices, or situate herself for learning. After all, she chose to visit the countries she did and to have a part in different kinds of rituals and other experiences. And she brings what she already knows and believes. Thus—and here you make a great point—her "learning along the way" actually requires a kind of cognitive and moral stability to make her encounters with difference matter. In our time we have seen many attacks on the taste for the "unchangeable" (like Hirsch's "Core Knowledge"?) and preference for change and every person's "construction" of what is true. Kudos to you for seeing that such a view is not Bateson's. She can take other cultures seriously because she believes in the depth of cultural experience—including her own. Or at least that is the way I read your fine closing paragraph. This is very serious and thoughtful work—a fine paper taking us the essentials in the unit (as I have come to expect from you).