

Allegory

By Gregory Bateson

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There was once a beautiful lady, whose habit it was to sleep on disused railroad tracks.

In that same country there lived also a brutal surveyor who ran the trains up and down the tracks. He was at heart an explorer and therefore was particularly attracted by those branches of the railroad system where no trains had passed within living memory. These were precisely those tracks where the lady delighted to slumber.

So it happened over and over again that she would be disturbed in her sleep and compelled to retreat hastily while a powerful and smelly engine dashed over the very place she had been happily resting.

Every time this happened there was a falling out between the lady and the gentleman. He maintained that she was an old-fashioned, trivial, and superstitious thing. She, in return, would spit out insults in a quite unladylike manner saying that he was indeed a thing, subhuman, and nothing but a small boy interested only in silly noisy toys.

And so it went on. For about two thousand years she would always be finding new and unexplored parts of the railroad system upon which to sleep and he always choosing those very branches of the tracks for the exercise of his monstrous vehicles.

He asserted that it was his right - and even duty - to map the railroad system and that the *whole* system was entirely his - especially the unexplored parts of it. He argued that the system was a single, entirely logical-causal network of tracks.

She averred that the tracks were designed for the rest and peace of the human soul and cared nothing for his dreams of causality and logic.

He mapped every detail of the tracks along which he ran his engines. She continually found other parts of the system not yet mapped.

One day the engineer carelessly left one of his maps beside the track and the lady found it. Gingerly, holding it only with the tips of her fingers, she picked it up. She handled it as if it had been left there by the devil.

It was curiosity that led her to open the map, unwilling to see what it might contain and therefore not really looking at its details. Looking at this from a distance through half-shut eyes, she was surprised to find that thus half-seen, the document was in itself beautiful.

At the next confrontation between herself and the engineer she said without thinking, ‘And you don’t even know that your own maps are beautiful.’

At this the surveyor was amazed. He gruffly replied that he was not interested in *that*.

She said to herself ‘Ah, then there is something in the universe in which he is not interested. That something belongs to me.’

‘For ever,’ she said.

After they parted, each considered what had been said. The surveyor was forced to agree that indeed the beauty of his maps and correspondingly the beauty of the railroad tracks were not within his province. She, on the other hand, was delighted and hugged to herself the secret knowledge that he would never invade what she most valued - the elegance and symmetry of the total system. Not its details but its foundations.

At their next meeting he asked whether she was still interested in the so-called beauty of the maps. When she rather defensively replied in the affirmative, he said in an offhand manner that he had perhaps something to show her.

He then confessed that while she slept upon the railroad tracks he had come quietly and had made a careful drawing of her body. It was this drawing that he wanted to show her.

He unfolded and placed side by side before her his map of the railroad tracks and his drawing. He said it was ‘scientifically interesting’ that the map and the drawing appeared to resemble each other in many ‘formal’ characteristics. He specially wanted her to see this strange resemblance between the two documents.

She briefly dismissed the matter. She said she had always known *that*. But, saying this, she looked away and smiled.

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