

“Knowing”

In *Peripheral Visions*, anthropologist Mary Catherine Bateson describes her encounters with learning as an adult, particularly through her experiences in Israel, Iran, and the Philippines. One of her many aphorisms includes the following: “You are not what you know but what you are willing to learn.” This quote, which also headlines the top of her blog, comes into play a good deal throughout *Peripheral Visions*. While Bateson rightly places much emphasis on what one is willing to learn, she neglects to give sufficient credence to the inherent value of what one *already* knows, when in fact, these two bases to learning work together to enhance learning through experience.

Having a willingness to learn is an indispensable part for any member of the learning society. Bateson’s readers can acknowledge this trait as they follow her throughout *Peripheral Visions*, for as she experiences new cultures and rituals, her understanding of these peoples is enhanced by her eagerness to glean an authentic representation of each cultural experience she encounters, often in a setting distant from traditional formal learning. She notes this early on in her narrative when she explains that “each person is calibrated by experience, almost like a measuring instrument for difference, so discomfort is informative and offers a starting point for new understanding,” while later suggesting that learning, particularly in an informal setting, is even intrinsic to survival (17, 71). Bateson has hit upon a key factor here, for any learning that is coerced or ambivalently embarked upon will not be as effective. These ideas correlate with Alan Rogers, who has suggested that this type of informal learning, that which is incidental, unstructured, and unpurposeful learning, is the “most extensive and most important part of all the learning that all of us do every day of our lives.” Consequently, the self naturally alters in understanding as this willingness to learn is cultivated.

Although one’s willingness to learn certainly plays a role in developing as an adult learning, Bateson seems to underplay the reality that, to some extent, all individuals *are* actually what they know, for what we know drives our insights, desires, and motivations, all of which are inescapably interrelated with adult learning. At the start of her narrative, she seems to lament the ubiquitous use of labels, noting that “we are ready with culturally constructed labels long before we encounter the realities...”(4). While this is true, these labels (i.e. what we know) give us a point of understanding to *make sense* of our experiences and what we are willing to learn about them. This pattern displays itself throughout *Peripheral Visions*, starting with infants Becky and Shahnaz, who demonstrate that what we know gives us a framework for learning; it continues with the discussion on rituals, which reveal that what we know can “grow in meaning” (35, 114). After all, if the self has as much importance as Bateson indicates, then it reasons that who we are and what we know lay the groundwork for any future learning, a pattern that becomes cyclic in nature (5.5).

In the end, individuals are both – we are what we know *and* what we are willing to learn. The relationship here is symbiotic, much like what is seen in *The Namesake*, where the protagonist Gogol Ganguli knows he is Indian but cannot fully understand the implications of his heritage until he exhibits a willingness to learn through his experiences. Like any adult learner, he exemplifies the zigzag Bateson favors, moving from who he is and what he knows to what he *can* be and what he *can* know. If individuals, then, are to achieve the transformational learning

as discussed by Susan Imel, they would be wise to heed Bateson's call to a willingness to learn without overlooking the significance and worth of what they presently know.