

Chapter 9

The Simple Bind and Discontinuous Change

Evolutionary Feedback

At this mid-point in our discussion we shall shift from a structural taxonomy to a process taxonomy, in line with Bateson's model for mapping phenomena at increasing levels of complexity: the "zigzag ladder of dialectic between form and process."¹ It has been useful to note the early impressionistic descriptions of the flow of interaction in families that produce disturbed persons, and then to try to codify structures from the information provided by this flow. In families with psychotic members, in particular, generalizations about deviant and normative structures are ways of imposing an external order upon flow. One can snatch out of the booming, buzzing confusion of family interaction certain clear redundancies and say, "There it is, and there, and there again!"

The emphasis on structure, however, does not reflect the power of living systems to reorganize in sudden and transcendent ways. A recent paper by Paul Dell and Harold Goolishian examines the concept of "evolutionary feedback," a term developed by the physi-

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cist Prigogine to describe a "basic, nonequilibrium ordering principle that governs the forming and unfolding of systems at all levels."² One can turn to Bateson's *Mind and Nature* and find a similar description in his comparison between epigenesis and evolution:

In contrast with epigenesis and tautology, which constitute the worlds of replication, there is the whole realm of creativity, art, learning and evolution, in which the ongoing processes of change feed on the random. The essence of epigenesis is predictable repetition; the essence of learning and evolution is exploration and change.³

Prigogine's concept of "order through fluctuation," as Dell describes it, emphasizes not stability and homeostasis but the idea of discontinuous change:

... at any point in time, the system functions in a particular way with fluctuations around that point. This particular way of functioning has a range of stability within which fluctuations are damped down and the system remains more or less unchanged. Should a fluctuation become amplified, however, it may exceed the existing range of stability and launch the entire system into a new dynamic range of functioning. An autocatalytic step or surge into positive feedback is needed to obtain such instability.⁴

Dell's point is that the cybernetic analogy based on a mechanical model of closed-system feedback is limited and inaccurate. There is a different cybernetics of living systems which was incompletely explained by the negative feedback view. This point is dramatized by the sudden, step-wise leaps to new integrations characteristic of such systems, which are not only unpredictable but irreversible. The conceptual emphasis is not on processes that tend toward equilibrium, but rather on self-organizing processes that reach toward new evolutionary stages.

What makes this argument so crucial is that families that come for treatment with distress in one or more members seem to be having difficulty with evolving—they are or seem nonevolving, stuck in an outmoded stage. Perhaps it is this being stuck that makes the early version of the homeostatic model so convincing to the therapists working with troubled families. The emphasis in those families is on maintaining equilibrium, too much so. For those families that become more and more like a homeostatically controlled pi-

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of machinery, the task of therapy should be to make available the power inherent in all living systems to transcend the stuckness and move to a different stage.

To recast our cybernetic analogy within an evolutionary framework is certainly in itself an evolutionary step forward in family theory and theory of change. For one thing, it fits the process we are trying to describe far better than the static model of error-activated feedback mechanisms does. For another, it affords a far more satisfying rationale for the success of some of the so-called paradoxical approaches to therapy that produce rapid shifts in families or individuals. These shifts can take place with incredible suddenness, and indeed seem to be self-generated. To go further into this subject, let us turn to the ideas of another physicist who has written about discontinuous change, John Platt.

Hierarchical Growth

One property that families share with other complex systems is that they do not change in a smooth, unbroken line but in discontinuous leaps. Platt, in an imaginative paper, speaks of a process physics in which the emphasis is not on static structure but on what he calls a "flow hierarchy": forms that maintain a steady state while matter, energy, and information continually flow through them.⁵ A bit of thought will convince the reader that families, too, are like waterfalls or cascades, with the many-tiered pattern of the generations persisting as an overall structure, even though individuals pass through it as they are born, grow old, and die.

Platt argues that many natural systems are of this type, and that change in such systems occurs in a startling and sudden way. He cites falling in love, acts of creation, conversions, evolutionary leaps, reformations, and revolutions as examples, and says that when a system is conflicted or dysfunctional this may not necessarily portend disaster but may indicate that pressure toward a new and more complex integration is mounting.

Platt makes a useful distinction between three kinds of change,

each of which depends on the way the entity in question is organized. If the entity is externally designed (a watch, for example), then any change will have to be imposed by an outside agent, the watchmaker, who may take apart and reassemble the watch. If it is internally designed (a plant that contains a genetic blueprint), then "only mutations of the gene pattern" can produce a change.

A third model for change is found in living systems that, unlike plants, have the capacity to evolve to new and unpredictable levels of organization. In such systems, change is not prefixed but takes the form of a transformation, a sudden appearance of more functionally organized patterns that did not exist before. Platt calls this type of change "time emergence." One might think of a kaleidoscope, which keeps the same geometric pattern as the tube is turned until all at once a small particle shifts in response to gravity and the whole pattern changes to an entirely new one. The most interesting feature of a kaleidoscope is that one can never return to an earlier pattern, and this is consonant with the way systems that have what Ashby calls "bimodal feedback mechanisms" operate.⁶ Such systems will remain stable as long as the environment around them does not change, or as long as internal elements within do not change; but if either of these events occurs, the system will break down or else respond by shifting to a new "setting" that will meet the demands of the new field. The change in the setting creates a discontinuity because the range of behaviors, the "grammar" for allowable activities, has changed. Thus a set of completely different patterns, options, and possibilities emerges. The new organization is usually more complex than the previous one, but it too is rule-governed and will not change again until new pressures from the field enforce a new leap. Not to sound too purposive, it must be emphasized that the source of newness most often comes from some random element. As Bateson says: "The ongoing processes of change feed on the random."⁷

The natural history of a leap or transformation is usually this: First, the patterns that have kept the system in a steady state relative to its environment begin to work badly. New conditions arise for which these patterns were not designed. Ad hoc solutions are tried and sometimes work, but usually have to be abandoned. Irritation grows over small but persisting difficulties. The accumulation of

dissonance eventually forces the entire system over an edge, into a state of crisis, as the stabilizing tendency brings on ever-intensifying corrective sweeps that get out of control. The end point of what cybernetic engineers call a runaway is that the system breaks down, or creates a new way to monitor the same homeostasis, or spontaneously leaps to an integration that will deal better with the changed field.

Families are notable examples of entities that change through leaps. The individuals making up a family are growing (at least partly) according to an internal biological design, but the larger groupings within the family, the subsystems and the generations, must endure major shifts in relation to each other. The task of the family is to produce and train new sets of humans to be independent, form new families, and repeat the process, as the old set loses power, declines, and dies. Family life is a multigenerational changing of the guard. And although this process is at times a smooth one, like the transitions of political parties in a democracy, it is more often fraught with danger and disruption. Most families do not leap to new integrations with ease, and the "transformations" Platt refers to are by no means self-assured. This brings us to the research of sociologists and clinicians studying the family life cycle.

Expectable Life Stage Crises

The family life cycle was discovered by a circuitous route. Of major importance was the work of Erik Erikson during the 1940s and 1950s, whose depiction of individual life stages, and of the interplay between these stages and the shaping processes of social institutions, challenged the narrow focus of intrapsychic theories of development.⁸ After World War II, clinicians studying individuals' responses to stress began to question the notion that some people had better coping patterns or better "ego strengths" than others. One of the first pioneers in this area, Erich Lindemann, noticed that the difference between a normal and an abnormal grief reaction had to do with the overall makeup of the family network of the be-

reaved one, not with his coping mechanisms as shown by previous attempts to handle stress. In his classic study of survivors and relatives of victims of the Cocoanut Grove fire, Lindemann notes that

Not infrequently the person who died represented a key person in a social system; his death was followed by disintegration of this social system and by a profound alteration of the living and social conditions for the bereaved.⁹

The intensity of a grief reaction did not have to be tied in with a previous neurotic history, but was linked to the type of loss for the person involved.

Researchers who came after Erikson and Lindemann began to see that in terms of the family life cycle, one man's adolescence might coincide with his mother's change of life, and possibly his grandmother's demise. Rhona Rapaport has singled out as stress events "the critical transition points in the *normal, expectable* development of the family life cycle: getting married, birth of the first child, children going to school, death of a spouse, or children leaving home."¹⁰

Reuben Hill, at the University of Minnesota, has found differences in the way families respond to these stages. He speculates about the factors that predispose a family to treat a normal life stage stress as a crisis.¹¹ For instance, a child going to kindergarten might in some families produce a crisis, as the retirement of the head of the household would in others. A growing number of researchers, such as Michael Solomon, have extended these observations to show that psychiatric and medical symptoms tend to cluster magnetically about those times.¹²

Building on these observations, Thomas Eliot contributes the idea that a crisis in a family often follows a revision of membership. He offers two unusual terms: crisis of dismemberment, meaning when a family loses someone; and crisis of accession, meaning an addition to the group.¹³ Lindemann's work, as the passage just quoted makes clear, falls into the category of dismemberment, or, to use a less grisly word, separation. A crisis of accession is exemplified in studies like that of E. E. LeMasters on "Parenthood as Crisis."¹⁴

Not only a loss, it then appeared, but the acquisition of new family members could trigger an upset. In 1967, a now classic study by T. H. Holmes and R. H. Rahe, who compiled a "Social Readjust-

ment Rating Scale," indicated that there was no correlation between the negative perception of an event and the degree of stress that was attached to it.¹⁵ Out of a list of forty-three life stress events, rated by 394 subjects in terms of intensity and length of time necessary to accommodate to them, ten out of the top fourteen involved gaining or losing a family member. It is fascinating to realize that events with presumably positive meanings, like "marital reconciliation," ranked as more stressful on the scale than some with negative connotations, like "difficulties with sex."¹⁶

If it is true that crises tend to erupt at times when a family is faced with a normal revision of membership, then it is logical to assume that these crises would be most intense in families that have difficulty reorganizing—letting members go or taking in new ones. It is only one step more to the surmise of family researchers like Haley that symptomatic behaviors tend to surface at points in the family life cycle when the process of disengagement of one generation from another is prevented or held up.¹⁷ For instance, members of a family in which a child is one of the possible factors that is mediating a parental conflict may resist or even block the child's departure. A symptom seems to be a compromise between staying and leaving; the child becomes incapacitated to a greater or lesser degree and never really leaves home, or may leave but find it hard to negotiate the transition to marriage and fall back, or else a child of the new marriage may have to serve as mediator in turn. One can often see the truth of the biblical statement: "The fathers have eaten a sour grape, and the children's teeth are set on edge." Sometimes one frail, psychotic child seems to be holding an entire kin network on his shoulders, like the key person in a family high-wire act, displaying incredible strength and impeccable sense of balance.

We may now justifiably ask what the arrangement is that somehow prevents people in a family from making the leap to a new integration? The answer is suggested by the concept of another kind of shift, which occurs when an entity is about to exceed its parameters or break. For this we shall have to turn to Ashby and his idea of step-mechanisms.

The Concept of Step-Mechanisms

In *Design for a Brain*, Ashby described four types of movement by which natural forms or substances pass from one state to another.¹⁸ A "full-function" moves in a progressive fashion without a finite interval of constancy between states, like a barometer. A "step-function" has intervals of constancy separated by discontinuous jumps, like a set of stairs. A "part-function" is like a step-function except that from one state to another the line is progressive, rather than instantaneous. A "null-function" indicates simply an absence of movement or change.

Ashby comments that many step-functions occur in the natural world. His examples include the tendency of an elastic band to break when the proportion of pull versus length reaches a certain point, or of a fuse to blow when the circuit is loaded beyond a certain number of amperes. Looking at more complex entities, such as machines, Ashby notices that some of their variables may exhibit a sudden shift in character whenever they reach a certain value that he calls a "critical state." In fact, he says, it is common for systems to show step-function changes whenever their variables are driven too far from some usual value. He speculates that it would be useful for a system to have at least one such element. For instance, in the electrical wiring of a house, if there is no circuit breaker, the whole system will break down and have to be replaced. But if there is a circuit breaker, only a fuse will blow, and when that is replaced (assuming the overload has been corrected), the system will still be functioning. Ashby calls this type of arrangement a step-mechanism.

One difficulty with Ashby's ideas is that he was not really concerned with living systems at the group level and above but was trying to devise a cybernetic model that would account for the evolution and structure of the brain. Thus most of his examples are drawn from the worlds of biology, chemistry, and physics, and one has to pull his ideas out of context to make them apply to social systems. But without some notion similar to the step mechanism, the sudden shifts in behavior one often sees in families with symptomatic members could never be explained.

In the family, one essential variable is the relationship between members of the executive dyad, who are usually the parents. This relationship probably has particular arrangements regarding the management of such dimensions as closeness/distance and balance of power, which limit the behaviors allowed in this dyad. Let us hypothesize that one of these sets of limits is constantly being overpassed. With an even-Stephen or symmetrical couple, a slight advantage accruing to one person may provoke an escalation that, if not blocked, could end in violence or divorce. With a one-up/one-down or complementary couple, too much inequality may produce depression in the "low" spouse and concomitant anxiety in the "high" one. Whatever the nature of the plateau (and it is usually not a pure example of either of these models), there will be a "critical state" that represents some value beyond which the couple as a system may not go and remain intact.

At this point different things can happen. A couple may have techniques for handling this threat, like a cooling-off period for an angry symmetrical couple or a "good fight" for a distant complementary one. Another technique would be for one of the spouses to develop a severe or chronic symptom, which will also prevent a split, though at a cost. However, it often happens that a third party, very likely a child, becomes drawn into the conflict. Once this happens, the child's discomfort grows while parental tensions lessen. Some minimal cue indicating parental conflict may incite anxiety in the child, who reacts with irritating behavior. At this point one of the parents may start to attack him or her, while the other moves to the child's defense. Caught in the tightening spiral, the child may respond with a physical or emotional symptom. This will cause the parents to stop their covert struggle and unite. A very real issue joins the couple, since the child's well-being is at stake. Their getting together, especially if it is accompanied by supportive behavior, allows the child's anxiety to diminish.

In this example one could say that warning signals are at work whenever a feedback chain reaches a critical state in a set of relationships. These signals forestall events that might endanger relationships important to the group. For instance, the child's symptom is a warning signal that diverts the parents from having a fight.

But what if the child's discomfort proceeds to a level that is

unacceptable, and a positive feedback chain develops that cannot be countered by the usual family responses? Here we move up to the next level, where the interface is not between the child and his parents but between the family and the wider society. Ashby writes:

A common, though despised, property of every machine is that it may "break." . . . In general, when a machine "breaks," the representative point has met some critical state, and the corresponding step-function has changed value. . . . As is well known, almost any machine or physical system will break if its variables are driven far enough from their usual value.¹⁹

It is possible that what is generally called a nervous breakdown is similar in function to what Ashby is talking about. In a family, the individual's "breakdown" operates as a step-mechanism signaling the failure of the family's stabilizing arrangements and often activating interventions from the larger system, the community. Here is where helpers in various guises come in and an attempt is made to repair the broken element, the person.

But to go back to the image of the electric circuit, as long as it continues to be overloaded, it will not do any good to fix or replace the fuse. Sometimes the problem is temporary; the overload has been due to a sudden plugging in of an extra appliance (a mother-in-law visiting, for instance), and once that is taken away, the system will return to normal. But often the change is permanent. Somebody has died, or there is an irreversible shift in family circumstances, or a family member has reached a new maturation level. Then the family must make a shift in its overall organization to meet the new demands. Otherwise the person's symptomatic behavior may continue, or another problematic behavior may replace it. In a family with a troubled member, we may be dealing with a fear on the part of family members that the leap to the next stage may impair some important family member or subsystem, or threaten the survival of the family itself.

It follows that symptomatic displays can be thought of negatively as aborted transformations or positively as negotiations around the possibility of change. In his *Prison Notebooks*, the Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci writes: "The crisis consists precisely in the fact

that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appears."²⁰ A symptomatic redundancy is an arrangement that usually springs up to handle this interregnum between the old and the new. It represents a compromise between pressures for and against change. The symptom is only the most visible aspect of a connected flow of behaviors and acts as a primary irritant that both monitors the options for change, lest too rapid movement imperil someone in the family, and also keeps the necessity for change constantly alive. What results then is a turmoil of behaviors that spiral rather than cycle around the possibility of a leap. Sometimes the leap is taken simply because of some accidental shift brought about by the spiral, which is always moving forward in time. Even a very narrow, bunched-up spiral that chronically circles around some central point is still always shifting and is never without some potential for change. Reiss, in his paper on family paradigms, describes a nice example of this change-by-accident. A teenager in a family fell seriously ill while the family was on a camping trip. The father, who had been seen as nice but boyishly undependable, took over during the emergency, carving out a new and lastingly authoritative role for himself.²¹

The next question is how to help the family to make a leap up, rather than continue in the chronic spiral, and to achieve a transformation to a new stage that will obviate the presence of symptoms or distress.

Paradoxical Injunctions and the "Sweat Box"

Platt, as we saw, was stressing the positive—even extraordinary—capacity of living systems to achieve transformations that go beyond what could previously have been predicted or achieved, thus not only "saving the day" but pointing the way toward a new one. Ashby was looking at a different kind of shift, perhaps equally extraordinary: the ability of one element of a system to "break" if

too much pressure for change has been introduced. In a family or other group, the shift to a symptomatic configuration saves the day, but it does not always point the way to a new one. It may be seen as a nonevolution, or failed leap, since it not only keeps the family from making a new integration but seems to happen at the expense of one family member, who has often sentimentally been thought of as the "scapegoat." On the other hand, it may be valued as the only persistent pressure toward change that is going on in the family.

The question for therapy then becomes: How does one disrupt an arrangement that in some ways promotes family stability (morphostasis) and instead help the family achieve a transformation that will represent a more complex integration (morphogenesis)? Here a discussion of what Richard Rabkin calls "saltology" (from the Latin *saltus*, "to leap"), and that might more prosaically be called "leap theory," is in order. Also important in this connection is some extremely good thinking Rabkin has done in relating transformations or leaps to the appearance of that communicational oddity the "paradoxical injunction."

In a paper called "A Critique of the Clinical Use of the Double Bind," Rabkin has presented a refreshing examination of the original double-bind concept.²² This paper reclassifies most of the examples used by clinician-researchers to illustrate double binds into masked hostility, sarcasm, strategic deceit, and ordinary "damned if-you-do, damned-if-you-don't" dilemmas.

A case can be made for equating at least one of these dilemmas, the paradoxical injunction, with the double bind. A paradoxical injunction is a statement that intrinsically contradicts itself unless teased apart into a "report" level and a "how this report is meant" level, with the second level inclusive of the first. An example, from Sluzki et al.'s article on transactional disqualification, is the following exchange:

SON (to mother): You treat me like a child.

MOTHER: But you are my child.²³

The mother's answer on the "report" level is absolutely true, but in the context of the exchange the mother is doing, some devious

reframing: the son is wrong; the son is unfairly criticizing her; the son should furthermore accept these distortions of his original message *because he is her child*. This would be a fair example of what the researchers in Palo Alto would have thought of as a double bind, whether Sluzki does or not. And the double bind was, as we know, associated with manifestations of irrational behaviors such as schizophrenia.

Nevertheless, there is a terrible simplification here. Rabkin points out that the paradoxical injunction is a form of communication that all parents and all children (all superiors and all subordinates, for that matter) encounter at some time in their lives without going insane. Of course they may get upset—but ideally they shouldn't, Rabkin argues, because the paradoxical injunction is the best our poor language can do to suggest that a systems change is required.

Rabkin takes an example clinicians have used to equate a paradoxical injunction with a double bind. The parent says to the child, at a point when the child is about to pass into the gray area of adolescence: "I insist you go to school because you enjoy the beauties of learning." (The Bateson group in Palo Alto used a similar example, a *New Yorker* cartoon in which an employer is telling an uncomfortable-looking employee, "But, Jones, I don't want you to agree with me because I say so, but because you see it my way.") Rabkin then quotes Arthur Koestler on the process of creation. Before a creative leap can occur, says Koestler, all previous pathways must be blocked. It is only from the accumulated intensity of the stress that pressure to take the leap will occur.²⁴

Seen in this light, the paradoxical injunction appears to be the communicational form most likely to create sufficient pressure for change. The paradoxical injunction of parent to adolescent child says, in effect, "I want you to be independent, but I want you to want that independently of my wanting that." What might be called, for want of a better term, a "simple bind" is set up. The receiver is directed to remain simultaneously in a symmetrical and a complementary relationship with the communicant. This being impossible, a leap must be taken to what Rabkin calls an "achievement," his word for Platt's transformation or new integration.

The impossible situations that the Zen Master sets up for the student are understandable in this light. The Master says to the

student: "Here is a stick. If you say it is real, I will hit you with it. If you say it is not real, I will hit you with it. If you say nothing, I will hit you with it." One response is for the student simply to take away the stick. The whole point is for the student to become "equal" to the Master, but this cannot be done by an order from the Master, or from within the Master-student relationship at all. The student must somehow get the idea "on his own" that this is the course he must take. In line with this thinking, one should reserve the term "paradoxical injunction" or "simple bind" for the confusing directive that often appears as a harbinger of a leap to a new stage, and the term "double bind" for communication sequences that block this leap, or imply unthinkable consequences should it occur.

The introduction of this concept of the simple bind solves many issues that have perplexed researchers and clinicians for years. For one thing, there is no longer the vexing question: If paradoxical communication is operating in art, fantasy, play, and most creative activity, how do we distinguish between forms of paradoxical communication that are associated with schizophrenic communication and forms that are associated with the achievements of the artist or the prophet? For another, we have a way to explain the idea of the therapeutic double bind or counterparadox, which has been likened to homeopathic medicine: The cure resembles the disease. A therapeutic double bind might be rephrased as a reinstatement of the conditions of a simple bind, although this time within a different context: the relationship between the therapist and the client or family. The bind is reimposed, the period of confusion is gone through, the family or client takes the requisite leap, and the new integration is then rewarded, rather than invalidated or dismissed, or is its own reward.

An example of this process is described by Bateson in an essay on "learning to learn."²⁵ Bateson had become interested in porpoises who were trained to show "operant conditioning" to the public by exhibiting special behaviors, hearing a whistle, and then receiving a fish. The porpoises possessed a considerable repertoire of these behaviors. Bateson realized that these animals, since they did not produce the same behavior every time, must have "learned to learn" how to produce a piece of conspicuous behavior. He asked

to watch the process by which a porpoise was taught to do this, and in fact created an experimental situation in which to conduct his observations.

First the trainer was to reward the porpoise for a piece of conspicuous behavior. The animal quickly learned that raising her head would produce a fish, and several repetitions reinforced this impression. However, the next time the porpoise came in and repeated the behavior, no fish. The trainer would wait for the animal to produce a new piece of conspicuous behavior—perhaps an annoyed tail flap—and then would reward that. The behavior was reinforced three times in the session in which it occurred but not in the next. Rewards occurred only when the porpoise again produced a piece of unusual behavior.

This process was evidently so disturbing to both man and beast that the trainer kept breaking the rules to reinforce the creature at times that were not appropriate. The porpoise, in turn, began to act more and more agitated as attempts to gain a previously reinforced reward would prove futile, exhibiting behaviors that, in a human, might be called psychotic.

Before the fifteenth session, however, a remarkable event took place. The porpoise rushed about the tank, appearing intensely excited. When she came on for her performance, she put on an elaborate display of eight behaviors, three of which had never been noticed in this species before. Bateson makes the point that the disruption of habitual patterns of stimuli and response can be intensely upsetting if this disruption constantly puts the creature in the wrong in the context of an important relationship. But he adds that if the disruption and pain do not cause the animal to break down, the experience may produce a creative leap, a fact noted also by Wynne in his essay "On the Anguish and Creative Passions of Not Escaping the Double Bind."²⁶

This example reinforces the notion that a prerequisite for creative leaps in complex systems is a period of confusion accompanied by self-contradictory messages, inconsistencies, and, above all, paradoxical injunctions: I command you to be independent; I want you to spontaneously love me; I order you to be the dominant one. These messages, with their threatening implications that

the relationship between the communicants may be endangered if the change does not take place, can be called the "sweat box." The "sweat box," in mild or severe form, often seems to be necessary before morphogenetic or basic structural changes can take place in a person, in a family, or in larger systems like tribes or nations.

It is important to note that if and when a move in an appropriate direction is taken, there must be immediate confirmation and reward. The essence of the double bind is to disconfirm a leap once taken, to indicate that change is not desired, or to disqualify the whole event. Thus the double bind could be described as a simple bind that is continually imposed and then continually lifted; pressure to change followed by injunctions not to change; a yes-do, no-don't kind of thing that produces the disruption and pain that Bateson argued were untenable for humans and other creatures. Rabkin, carrying this idea further, states that a paradoxical injunction that brings about a systems change followed by a paradoxical injunction to undo that systems change might well result in intense disorganization in the recipient of such messages.

Take the example of a mother caught in a struggle with an adolescent son. She wishes him to display more adult ("symmetrical") behavior. But if she enjoins him to do so, she is defining him as a child (a "complementary" relationship). There is no way out of this difficulty, as every exasperated parent and resentful teenager knows, except through some shift whereby both find that they are relating more pleasantly and more as peers than as parent and child, at least in the area the struggle was about. This shift can take place suddenly, or a long back-and-forth battle may be required. But the necessary condition is that the shift in the rule governing their relationship should happen "spontaneously," since for the mother to enforce it, or for the child to seize it, would merely reaffirm their previous situation.

If the parent giving the original paradoxical messages responds positively to an integration of the relationship at a more equal level, then this is a successful resolution of the dilemma. There has been no double bind, or at least no harmful one. But if at the moment the child and mother do reach that desired state, one of them, or someone else in the family, signals that this is bad or might be

dangerous, then you have the preconditions for a double bind. And then you have the appearance of symptoms embedded in cycles in which the pressure for change builds up, followed by injunctions against change, in endless sequence like a stuck record: the famous "game without end."

The way a simple bind might either become resolved or else turn into a symptom can be illustrated by this hypothetical case. Thirteen-year-old Peter begins to sleep late in the morning and be late for school. His mother becomes tired of pushing him to get up and finally says, "Why do I always have to kick you out of bed to go to school? Act like a grownup. You ought to want to go to school for the sake of your own future. Your father used to get up at six and run a paper route before he even got to school—in zero degree weather," and so on.

This is a bind (simple variety), because if Peter "acts like a grownup" he is demonstrating a symmetrical relationship, but at the same time, if he does go to school, it is in response to his mother's demand, and his relationship to her is thereby defined as complementary. What he does do is become even more reluctant to go to school. His mother oscillates between washing her hands of him and going after him, a process that only escalates the tension between them. The school staff telephones to say that Peter is beginning to cut whole days, thus putting on even more pressure. Father, who can usually sleep later than Peter and hates to get up early, is constantly awakened by the morning fusses. Although he prefers to stay out of his wife's dealings with his son, he begins to protest. "Lay off the boy," he says to his wife, "You're only making things worse." He compares her to his father, who made his own adolescence miserable by insisting that he get up and take the paper route. He says that he can sympathize with the boy. This statement brings out the latent split within most parenting dyads, the split between a permissive stance and an authoritarian stance. The mother, intensifying her position, says, "It's about time you stopped babying the boy." Father says, "It's about time you stopped nagging him." They end up shouting and get into a state of unresolved anger with each other. Peter draws the covers up over his head and succeeds again in not going to school.

This is the normal type of confusion a family faces when children become adolescent. It is usually resolved if the parents can overcome their differences and establish a united front. Perhaps adolescent rebellion not only serves to establish beginning independence for a child, but offers an issue that the parents, who by a natural process will one day be child-free again, can use to test out the nature and strength of the bond between them. It seems not to matter which way the parents go; the situation is solved if the parents can say, "It's your own life, mess it up and take the consequences," or "Get to school and no more nonsense." Somehow, from this microtest of whether the parents (or others in the family who will be affected) will survive their son's eventual departure, he gets sufficient confirmation to really begin to leave, and the school issue drops away. The boy may find that an attractive female schoolmate waits at the same bus stop. Suddenly it is no longer, "Why don't you get up and go to school?" but "Why aren't you ever at home any more?"

Here is the alternative scenario that might establish a symptom. The boy does get up and go to school. He finds the female schoolmate and also regains his interest in studying (an unlikely story, but this remains a hypothetical case). However, the father begins to feel more and more depressed. His work is not going well, and his ulcer begins to act up. It seems that this is the last child at home and the one the father was especially close to, all the more in that he has a rather domineering wife and chooses to remain distant from her rather than fight anything out openly. The father experienced a small feeling of elation when the boy defied his mother over not going to school in a way that was never possible for him when he was growing up. The boy is very important to him. The mother, too, is strangely caught up in the fight she has with her son. It is as though he is able to stand up to her in a way that her husband never can, and although she is angry, she gains a kind of satisfaction from his assertiveness. With her husband, there is only shadow boxing; with her son, someone is really there.

At the same time, perhaps both are unconsciously aware that the boy's growing up means the emergence of many difficulties between them, and the father's ulcer seems to signal that he

will probably turn his feelings about these issues inward, rather than hazard an open conflict with his wife. A sense of ominous possibilities fills the air. The father eats little at night and complains about his ulcer. When he does, the mother seems annoyed rather than sympathetic and says, "I'm sick of your always going on about your ulcer and never going to the doctor about it. I always have to push you to make an appointment. Why can't you take responsibility for your own problems instead of making the whole family miserable?" The father becomes moody and quiet, and the son feels his own stomach tighten. He says, "I don't want any more supper," and starts to leave the table. Mother says, "You sit there till we're all finished." Father says, "Let him go, for God's sake, do you have to run everybody's life like you run mine?" The evening ends with the boy in his room, depressed, the father watching TV in silence, and the mother furiously washing the dishes.

The next day the boy complains that he has an attack of nausea and cannot go to school; in fact, he throws up. The parents fight about whether or not he should be made to go school. In the end, he stays home. This is the beginning of a school phobia. Two months later, having tried everything and on the advice of the school, the parents start looking for a psychotherapist. What the psychotherapist decides falls outside the lines of this story, but a contextual reading of the situation would be to perceive that the boy's appropriate behavior in going to school was not rewarded. Instead, intimations of catastrophe (parental discord, father's illness) erupted. The polarization of views, permissiveness versus punitive action, increased, with the boy's symptom now at the center, maintaining these parental behaviors and being maintained by them in a self-perpetuating loop. The bind quite evidently cannot be resolved by a creative leap, such as the boy's falling in love (an involuntary act that could be seen as an appropriate response to a simple bind: "He" did not decide to go back to school; "falling in love" is what decided it). Indeed, the hints of catastrophe increase when he mentions that he has met a wonderful girl. The leap that should be made is invalidated not by any one villain, but by the *context*, which covertly frames his eventual departure as a betrayal, a harmful thing.

This, then, is an example of the way a quite ordinary problem of growing up could become a symptom. Now let us take a closer look at the larger configurations that seem to accompany most symptomatic displays: the patterns of behavior that reinforce a problem while at the same time attacking it, and that exemplify in systems terms the double-binding sequences said to "drive men mad."