

Paul Watzlawick: A Commemoration

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Paul Watzlawick, a pioneer in family therapy, systems theory, communication theory, brief therapy, and constructivist philosophy, died at his home in Palo Alto, California on March 31, 2007. He was 85 years of age.

Paul Watzlawick was more than a pioneer: He was a philosopher, a systemetizer of complex concepts – particularly about communication and human behavior, a popularizer of constructivist ways of viewing human interaction, and an elegant and engaging communicator – both in writing and in person.

Dr. Watzlawick's influence radiated not only from the 22 books he authored (translated into more than 80 languages), but also from the summer trips he took to Europe for many years, usually having more than 30 speaking engagements each trip. Googling his name on July 16, 2007 produced 40,400 web pages devoted to "Paul Watzlawick" and that was only in English! Googling "Paul Watzlawick Obituary" the same day produced 29,400 English pages. Paul had an early and continuing influence on me and I was gratified to get this sudden evidence of how many others must also have been impacted and impressed by his writing and teaching. My first contact with Paul Watzlawick was during the summer of 1963. I was doing a summer internship at the Menlo Park division of the Palo Alto V.A. Hospital and had arranged to have Wednesdays off so I could be at the Mental Research Institute and get to know the staff at its weekly meetings. Paul invited me to try to quantify the results of a little piece of research he was conducting on what was called "The MRI Structured Family Interview." More specifically, the part that lent itself to quantification was known as the "Blame" part of the Structured Family Interview. Paul had data gathered in the following way: The researcher and the family were seated around a table, and the researcher asked each family member to write on a 3x5 card "the worst fault of the person on your left." These cards were marked so that we knew who was

father, who was mother, who was son one, who was son two, who was daughter, and who was the “Identified Patient” (IP). We also had a seating chart for each family so we knew who was on whose left. The experimenter collected each family member’s card and threw two additional cards of his own into the pile; the experimenter’s two cards read: (1) “This person’s worst fault is that he/she is too good” and (2) “This person’s worst fault is that he/she is too strong.” The cards were then scrambled and read aloud. The family members went around the table, starting to the left of the experimenter, stating their individual guesses as to which family member was referred to by each card. I organized and tallied these data and found that the identified patient was not the least accurate in his or her attributions but, in fact, was the most accurate member of the family in this regard! My interpretation was that the IP, position included being the “truth teller” of the family – a role tolerated because these “truths” could be dismissed because of the IP status of their source. I noticed that this result paralleled a finding by Winter and Ferrera that the IP was the most accurate in guessing which family member had done the coloring on an initially blank tripartite flag each had been given. This experiment, however, carried no hint that the family might be able to disqualify the IP’s perceptions in view of their source. I found it delightful having discussions with Paul that summer and watching him interact with Don Jackson, Virginia Satir, Jay Haley, Richard Fisch, and – a frequent visitor – Gregory Bateson.

Although one of the ways I used my time at MRI in the Summer of 1963 was to read about 50 journal articles that had come from the institute in its first four years, my most vivid experience was in reading and simultaneously listening to Paul Watzlawick’s *An Anthology of Human Communication: Text and Tape*. This two-cassette set is a concise and cogent presentation of communication concepts made real by a collection of outtakes from actual therapy sessions as recreated by actors along with clarifying commentary written by Paul Watzlawick. This brief gem, long out-of-print, tied theoretical conceptualizations to specific illustrative communication segments. Going through this tape was, for me, an emotional and intellectual epiphany! One of its most memorable passages comes not from a therapy session, but

from the book *Mary Poppins* followed by Paul's summarizing comments. It gave me an aesthetic peak experience unlike any other except from listening -- years later -- to the audio book version of The Federalist Papers. It is presented below so that you can experience it firsthand:

Binds of a similar nature occur in many life situations. As long as the paradox created by them can be commented upon and communication thus be kept clear, no great harm is done. But this, unfortunately, is very often not possible. Here is a beautiful illustration, used by Bateson to exemplify the nature of a double bind, which gives an idea of its complexity. It is a passage from *Mary Poppins**, a children's book about an English nanny. Mary Poppins has taken the two children, Jane and Michael, to a little gingerbread shop owned by Mrs. Corry, a tiny old woman with two large, sad daughters, Fannie and Annie.

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"I suppose, my dear" -- she turned to Mary Poppins, whom she appeared to know very well -- "I suppose you've come for some gingerbread?"

"That's right, Mrs. Corry," said Mary Poppins politely.

"Good. Have Fannie and Annie given you any?" She looked at Jane and Michael as she said this.

"No, Mother," said Miss Fannie meekly.

"We were just going to, Mother—" began Miss Annie in a frightened whisper. At that Miss Corry drew herself up to her full height and regarded her gigantic daughters furiously. Then she said in a soft, fierce, terrifying voice:

"Just going to? Oh, *indeed!* That is very interesting. And who, may I ask, Annie, gave you permission to give away my gingerbread--?"

"Nobody, Mother. And I didn't give it away. I only thought —"

"You only thought! That is *very* kind of you. But I will thank you not to think. *I* can do all the thinking that is necessary here!" said Mrs. Corry in her soft, terrible voice. Then she burst into a harsh cackle of laughter. "Look at her! Just look at her! Cowardy-custard! Crybaby!" she shrieked, pointing her knotty finger at her daughter.

Jane and Michael turned and saw a huge tear coursing down Miss Annie's huge, sad face, and they did not like to say anything, for, in spite of her tininess, Mrs. Corry made them feel rather small and frightened . . .

When Mrs. Corry says, "Have Fannie and Annie given you any?" she indicates that this is a context in which to have given gingerbread to the children would be rewarded and not to have given gingerbread might be punished. The daughter Annie tries to alibi for not giving gingerbread and Mrs. Corry promptly punishes her. This is not -- was not -- that sort of context at all, for her next question is, "Who gave you permission to give

away my gingerbread?” But this is by no means all. Mrs. Corry creates an untenable situation not only in the area of her daughters’ right or duty to *act*, but also with regard to their *thinking*. She behaves in a way that is frightening and causes the girls not to think. But at the same time she expects them to be extremely thoughtful and to read her mind, which is impossible because she switches context on them as far as the expected and proper course of action – giving or not giving gingerbread – is concerned. But as soon as Annie tries to defend herself by saying, “I only *thought* . . .,” mother introduces her second switch of context: Annie is now suddenly told that she is not supposed to think, for mother can do all the thinking that is necessary. And finally mother extends the double bind into the area of her daughters’ *emotions*. Mrs. Corry first conveys her cold anger to her daughters and indicates that the matter is dead serious. This implies that they had better realize their guilt and show regret. But after having driven her daughters to tears, Mrs. Corry changes her soft, terrible voice into a shriek and ridicules Annie for letting herself be frightened and calls her a coward and a crybaby. Thus, in this remarkable example, a series of double binds engulfs the whole range of human functioning, i.e., thinking, feeling and acting.

Paul’s many books included: *The Pragmatics of Human Communication* (1967 – with Don Jackson and Janet Beavin), *Change: Principles of Problem Formation and Problem Resolution* (1974 – with John Weakland and Richard Fisch), *How Real is Real* (1976), *The Language of Change* (1977), *Ultrasolutions: How to Fail Most Successfully* (1988), *The Invented Reality* (1990), *Munchhausen's Pigtail, or Psychotherapy & 'Reality'* (1990), and *The Situation is Hopeless but not Serious: The Pursuit of Unhappiness* (1993).

Here are a few of the many Paul Watzlawick quotations on the web:

“It is difficult to imagine how any behavior in the presence of another person can avoid being a communication of one’s own view of the nature of one’s relationship with that person and how it can fail to influence that person.”

“Radical constructivism, thus, is radical because it breaks with convention and develops a theory of knowledge in which knowledge does not reflect an ‘objective’ ontological reality.”

“This is the secret of propaganda: To totally saturate the person, whom the propaganda wants to lay hold of, with the ideas of the propaganda, without him even noticing that he is being saturated.”

"When we no longer use communication to communicate but to communicate about communication, as we inevitably must in communication research, then we use conceptualizations that are not part of but about communication. In analogy to metamathematics, this is called metacommunication. Compared with metamathematics, research in metacommunication is at two significant disadvantages. This first is that in the field of human communication there exists as yet nothing comparable to the formal system of a calculus.... The second difficulty is closely related to the first: while metamathematics possesses two languages (numbers and algebraic symbols to express

mathematics, and natural language for the expressions of metamathematics), we are mainly restricted to natural language as a vehicle for both communications and metacommunications. This problem will arise again and again in the course of our consideration."

"Man never ceases to seek knowledge about the objects of his experiences, to understand their meaning for his existence and to react to them according to his understanding. Finally, out of the sum total of the meanings that he has deduced from his contacts with numerous single objects of his environment there grows a unified view of the world into which he finds himself 'thrown' (to use an existentialist term again) and this view is of the third order."

"If we have dwelled on Gödel's work at some length, is it because we see it in the mathematical analogy of what we would call the ultimate paradox of man's existence. Man is ultimately subject and object of his quest. While the question whether the mind can be considered to be anything like a formalized system, as defined in the preceding paragraph, is probably unanswerable, his quest for an understanding of the meaning of his existence is an attempt at formalization."

"But the solution to the riddle of life and space and time lies outside space and time. For, as it should be abundantly clear by now, nothing inside a frame can state, or even ask, anything about that frame. The solution, then, is not the finding of an answer to the riddle of existence, but the realization that there is no riddle. This is the essence of the beautiful, almost Zen Buddhist closing sentences of the Tractatus: 'For an answer which cannot be expressed the question too cannot be expressed. The riddle does not exist...'"

"We feel that even if all possible scientific questions be answered, the problems of life have still not been touched at all. Of course there is then no question left, and just this is the answer."

"Suffice it to say that an essential part of the self-fulfilling effect of psychiatric diagnoses is based on our unshakable conviction that everything that has a name must therefore actually exist."

"The belief that one's own view of reality is the only reality is the most dangerous of all delusions."

Paul Watzlawick was the recipient of numerous awards and honors, including:

- Prix Psych, Paris, 1971
- Distinguished Achievement Award, American Family Therapy Association, 1981
- Outstanding Teacher Award, Psychiatric Residency Class 1981, Stanford University Medical Center
- Paracelsus Ring, City of Villach (Austria), 1987
- Lifetime Achievement Award, Milton H. Erickson Foundation, 1988
- Distinguished Professor for Contributions to Family Therapy Award, American Association of Marriage & Family Therapy, 1982

- Medal for Meritorious Service, City of Vienna, 1990
- Doctor honoris causa, University of Liege (Belgium), 1992
- Doctor honoris causa, University of Bordeaux_III, 1992
- Honorary Medal, Province of Carinthia (Austria), 1993
- Author's Award (Nonfiction), Donauland Book Association, Vienna, 1993

Georgio Nardone, who had written and made presentations extensively with Paul, included on his website the following gracious tributes to Paul:

. . . the father of constructivism, Hein Von Foerster, loved calling himself *an invention of Paul Watzlawick*, in the sense that, he recognised the fact that without Watzlawick's help, neither his name nor his work would have become so eminent and renowned worldwide. Same goes for Mara Selvini Palazzoli and the Milan School of Systemic Therapy, who own Watzlawick not only for his technical inspiration but also for helping in the wide-reaching divulgation of their work. This applies also to all those who, even though they did not have direct contact with Watzlawick, have been inspired by the overwhelming light emitted by this comet. In fact, it was sufficient to refer to the School of Palo Alto [MRI] to acquire a respectful scientific and professional status.

All this is valid, even in my case. I'm truly aware that without Watzlawick, probably very few would have come to know my work. After, the *Art of Change* written in duet, I immediately found myself in forefront on an international level. His active presence in the foundation of our *Centro di Terapia Strategica* of Arezzo, have turned it into a point of reference in the evolution of brief therapy . . .

Once during a conference at Sorbonne (Paris), a participant verbally attacked him because his theories went against the fundamental concepts of psychiatry and psychoanalysis. Paul with extreme calmness replied, "you are perfectly right . . . from your point of view . . ." and then he continued on accompanied by a great applause and smiles from the public.

Dr. Watzlawick was born in Villach, Austria in 1921, the son of a bank director. He earned his doctoral degree in modern languages and philosophy from the University of Venice in 1949 and enrolled in the C.G. Jung Institute for Analytic Psychology in Zurich in 1950. He entered private practice in 1954, taught at Temple University and at the University of El Salvador, joining the staff at MRI in 1960 and the clinical faculty at Stanford University's Department of Behavioral Sciences in 1967. He was licensed as a psychologist in California from 1969 until 1998, when he stopped seeing patients. He is survived by his wife, Vera; his stepdaughters Yvonne of Morgan Hill, California, and Joanne of Kansas City; his nephew Dr.

Harold Wunsch; and a sister, Maria Wunsch, of Villach, Austria. Dr. Watzlawick donated his body to science. In accordance with his wish, there were no services held.

Paul was fond of saying, “The fame of the Mental Research Institute varies with the square of the distance from Palo Alto.” I believe that the renown of Paul Watzlawick will vary with the time since his life. Paul often exhibited a dry wit, delivered with deadpan seriousness. For example, at one staff meeting when we were planning the date for a special event Paul said, “I’m sorry; I won’t be there. I’ll be attending a funeral that day.” Paul responded to people with unfailing thoughtfulness and consideration. He breathed new life into the concept of being “a gentleman and a scholar.” Those who knew him and many who did not will miss him sorely.

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