

VIEWING THE PERSON IN CONTEXT: A SYSTEMIC MODEL OF CHANGE¹

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Most humanistic theorists subscribe to the view that individuals, at least potentially or by nature, are self-realising autonomous beings. A growth principle or actualising tendency is generally seen in these perspectives as the core propulsive force in development and motivation. As illustration, let me quote my own summing-up, in another place, of Carl Rogers' position in its later form:

A central idea is that an inherent and active directional tendency is present generally in complex organic life forms..., needing only a tolerant environment and essential nutrients for each organism to hasten on its developmental path--pushed by imperatives of its species, guided by its individual code, drawn by its own unique experience and, in the case of humans, moving by the intentionality of evolving consciousness and meaning (Barrett-Lennard, 1991--see also Rogers 1963 and 1978).

This quote states much that I agree with, but makes no reference to the relational-social context of life. The perspective I will advance here significantly qualifies the idea or meaning of personal autonomy. It does hold strongly to the view that personal consciousness and well-being are ultimate *reference points* even when the focus is on collective or social life. When people are at the centre of our interest, when we try to understand ourselves in our worlds, or when we work for self and social change, then the person is the reference point we need to keep coming back to.

In a word, my perspective is both system oriented and person-centred, which I see as two faces of one whole. It seems to me that life is *essentially* relational, that it is lived within our systems of relation. In describing what this view leads to, I will start with a way of thinking about the human and life systems that appear fundamental in our world.

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Relational systems: Structure and spectrum

In visualizing multi-level systems the most inclusive unit traditionally is placed first or at the top with the major constituent subsystems following next, then somewhat smaller sub-units and so on down to the individual member level. Teams, departments, divisions, whole organisations are examples of the more inclusive, "higher" level system units. Team leaders report to department heads and they to division chiefs, etc. The rank and file worker or member is conceived as having least or narrowest responsibility, which then builds rapidly to a different order as one goes "up" the hierarchy.

This traditional way of thinking has a certain utility in its own terms but would not have arisen from a philosophy centred on persons and human experience; an approach, for example, which views "the unique, subjective inner person as the honoured and valued core of human life" (Rogers, 1974, p. 9). This 'person-centred' approach emphasises the very large and often untapped potential of human beings, in the context of an openly egalitarian and democratic ethic (Rogers, 1974, 1977). Such an orientation runs against the grain of any model that stresses vertical positioning of individuals, which views persons as subunits of their immediate groups, or which regards the groups as existing just to serve the larger system.

Traditional models of organisational structure and functioning evolved and came to make use of and be associated with systems thinking, although in service of much the same values as before. Associations of this sort may be part of the reason that systems theory has not been attractive to humanistic and person-centred contributors. They and, for that matter, most psychologists have scarcely drawn on a systems approach to illuminate issues of primary theoretical and/or practical interest. This seems to me a matter for serious concern because of the power of a well-applied systems paradigm to illuminate complex interactive and change processes. The familiar, linear models of relationship and influence are ineffective and unconvincing by comparison. This is especially true in seeking to envision the multiple levels of human association and interplay that constitute so great a part of our living.

My own evolving perspective is a systems-sensitive one in which the individual experiencing person is represented not at the base but *as the apex* of a comprehensive scheme of systems and relations. In this sense, the usual hierarchy is inverted and opened out from different starting points, yielding another kind of illumination to the sphere of person-system relations. Altogether, nine levels of system in which almost all of us have membership are distinguished, as follows:

1. *The individual person--or person/self system.*

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2. *The person's main dyadic systems--or twosome relationships.*
3. *Family relational systems--including actual nuclear family units (of >2 persons) and other familial or intimate mini-systems.*
4. *Small face to face groups--in which everyone is visible to and in some actual contact or communication with each of the others.*
5. *Large groups and organisations--where members, typically, are not all in first-hand contact, although each person has a part in the total system and is affected by this membership.*
6. *Communities of association and belonging.*
7. *States, nations and transnational systems.*
8. *Humankind/the human race system.*
9. *The planetary life system.*

I will briefly comment on each of these system levels, starting with the first listed. In the present context, I mostly treat the person as a unitary whole. As an aside, however, I think it can be illuminating to think of a single person as a system, clearly with sub-systems on many levels. Indeed we are such multi-sided beings that the wonder is that we hold together as one whole. Perhaps this wholeness is over-stated. Are we all that singular or, for example, is it in our nature to have different inner voices, multiple self-systems? Aren't we incorrigible self-communicators, engaged in inner dialogue, debate, argument? These are interesting issues but to one side of my main topic.

From my standpoint, the dyad is not more inclusive than the individual system, but less so. Sentient/reflective consciousness in advanced organisms, particularly humans, plausibly is the highest integrative centre or apex%[% [PrinterError: Operator Call - system. The dyad does not embrace the totality of the individual persons whose relationship and interplay it makes up. (Deviant instances of engulfment of an individual in a relationship may come closest to total containment of person within dyad). However, dyad relations plausibly have greatest direct influence on our personal or psychic well-being as compared with the other systems I will distinguish. Reciprocally, individuals tend to have a larger role in fashioning relationships with one other person, as compared with their direct part in fashioning multi-person systems.

Experience within our family systems, and in other strong personal groupings of nuclear family size, competes with one-to-one relations in the strength of its influence. Families typically include, besides dyads, overlapping and interwoven subsystems of three, four and more members. Family-like relations include close knit and lasting, special friend mini-groups. Particularly close, relationship mini-systems that can form within a much larger membership system may be considered family-like, too. Intense, lasting microgroups of negative valence are also possible,

outside as well as within literal families. (My perspective in the family sphere, blending phenomenological and systems thinking, is much more fully spelled out elsewhere--see Barrett-Lennard, 1984).²

Small groups of a face-to-face nature, become important from the time (if not before) a child enters play school or kindergarten. Such groups have clear boundaries; and are deemed for present purposes to range upwards of 7 persons to 25 or 30. Besides developmental or learning groups of many possible kinds there are, of course, a diversity of groups organised around task and team functions; others that form in response to intrinsic needs and interests of members, and additional broad categories. Accompanying the huge spectrum of composition and function of such groups is enormous variation in their qualitative nature and dynamics.

Organisations play a pervasive, often largely unnoticed, part in our lives. Depending on one's position and responsibilities in an organisation, it may be part of the "taken-for-granted" ground of one's life or a sharply discriminated 'figure' in this ground³. Typically, [PrinterError: Operator Call - toner cartridge low]%¼¼cally, c other relationship entities that are important in their own right to the members involved in them. These smaller systems affect and are affected by qualities of the 'host' organisation.

Organisations of similar dimension and function tend to have much in common, particularly, within the same larger culture. Organisations of dissimilar function, such as universities, public service systems, financial and business organisations, can have disconcertingly similar qualities. It is almost a truism that a person's sense of personal identity and worth is often bound up significantly with

² One element in this further thought is that family systems >2 persons are still dyad-like in the sense of broadly having the form of an A-B relation, one in which A and/or B consist of more than one person. For a particular member, 'A' is taken to represent 'I/me' or 'we/us' within the relationship. 'B' represents the 'you' (singular or plural) side of the relationship system (Barrett-Lennard, 1984).

³ Individuals usually have considerable consciousness of their employing organisation but may only have dim awareness, for example, of service, commercial and regulatory organisations in which they participate as client members or constituents. As consumers, even as medical and other professionals, we are in constant transactional relation with large organisations (drug companies, publishers, banks, insurers, etc.), often with only the vaguest knowledge of their system qualities and wider impact.

membership and role in a work organisation.

Communities obviously are of many kinds: growing, for example, out of tribal or ethnic affiliation, common residence and/or interests, and shared religious or other belief. Of their nature, communities tend to be more diffuse and variable in their working and impact than organisations. Externally, we are more locked into our organisations. Internally, our bonds with communities of association and belonging tend to run deeper (Barrett-Lennard, in press). An organisation, especially a person's work/career setting (a university, say), may have the qualities of a primary community for many of its members. This overlap extends the range of needs served by the system, but at some risk to the individual due to the very large impact of loss or change in membership.

Membership of **nation states** or other big political, ideological or economic groupings has a more subtle, perhaps indirect influence on an individual's sense of identity and other qualities than is the case with literal communities. Its importance and impact on the individual may be more evident when we look carefully from the outside at national societies or regional cultures different from our own. A large part of this influence would be mediated through the component smaller systems in which we have membership. Chains of interactive influence may run from level to level between the person and the nation/international system.

Being members of the **human race** and world community affects us differentially according to our consciousness of this whole as one single fabric of interwoven, interdependent lives, communities and states; a fabric which grows, changes and has life--a life at risk from itself. Much the same thing is true in respect to our more ultimate membership in the **total life system** of our planet. Persons, for instance, with highly developed ecological consciousness would be distinctly engaged with this system level.

Probably most effects of our membership in the total life system are mediated through other systems already mentioned. I say 'most' because often we have particular animal friends, a wider sense of kinship with some other species in the spectrum of life, and a direct sense of connection, enjoyment, even of embrace, in certain natural surroundings. It appears to me that a comprehensive view of sources of interconnection and influence should recognise the life system as a whole. Not to appreciate this level of connection is to put ourselves collectively at risk; to appreciate it positively is to be more respecting and regardful of life, both in its diversity and commonality.

This now completed outline of the levels of human/life system that comprise our contextual world, is also shown in visual summary in **Figure 1**. The small

enclosures and print in the figure illustrate the range of systems potentially encompassed at that particular level. For example, at Level 3 the systems may include the person's original family, their own (next generation) nuclear family, the person and their grandparents, a closely bonded group of three (say) intimate friends of the same sex, and/or a quartet of two couples in long-standing, close relation. At levels 8 and 9, the smaller print simply shows alternative ways of viewing or denoting the same overall system. Let's now look at the basic nature and lines of person-system interconnection somewhat more closely. The person->system nexus

In the perspective advanced here, it is taken as axiomatic that individual consciousness and outer living is interwoven with the consciousness and living of others. This 'interweaving' takes place through our many systems of relation, the interaction at each level involving communication or information exchange in some form. The relation in principle is one of interdependence. The person is both recipient and exerciser of influence in these relations. He/she contributes to the qualities of the membership systems and, equally, is affected by the nature and working of these multi-person systems.

This said, let me at once acknowledge that in practice individuals often have very limited impact, for example, on their mid-range and larger systems. These can be organised in a way that includes no provision and little opportunity for rank and file members to exercise modifying influence. Since many such systems are highly resistant to change, and members may be functionaries serving the system as it is, properties of individual members can change without this translating directly into altered properties of their system. However, the system is not necessarily static in the sense of being at rest. More likely, there are inner tensions and an uneasy balance between forces which would produce change and those which act to inhibit such change.

As already implied, relational systems on various levels can have vital effects not only on how we are but also on our sense of who we are. Human systems nearly all come to have implicit, if not overt, codes of conduct. They contribute fundamentally to the ways in which we are under approving and disapproving judgement, to the general ambience of normative codes and values, to our sense of safety or of being endangered, and to the personal relationships that are open to us.

One way of looking at positive and negative effects is in terms of health, on both personal and system levels. Systems can work in ways that are growthful or health-promoting for individual members, or can stress, distort or damage people in them. Societal and other systems that are organised to promote competition, as

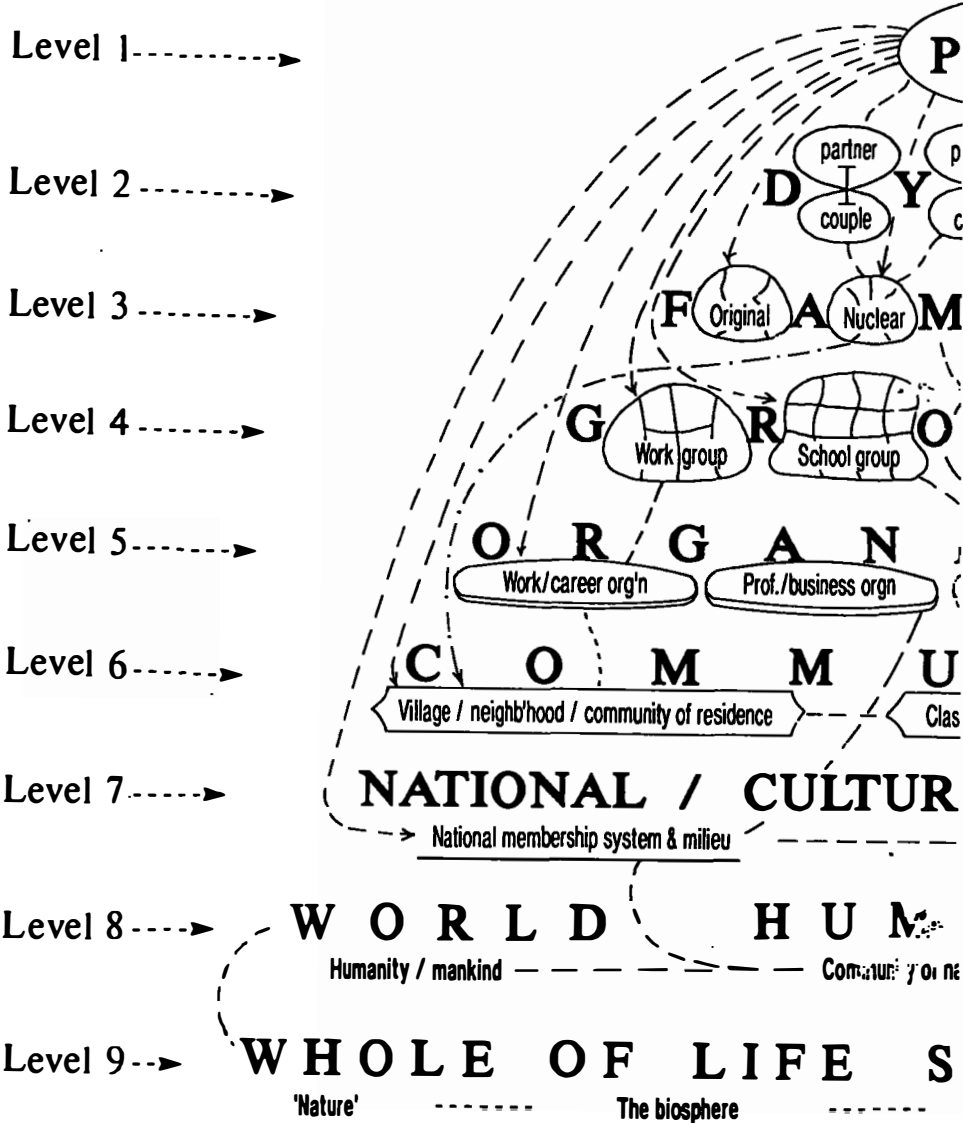
so many are in Western cultures, may have high tolerance for resulting damage to particular individual members and sub-groups. This is not to start suggesting, however, that the influence is entirely one way, as though the system existed independently of its members. The relation is interactive and, in large or limited degree, the well-being or 'health' of members also impacts on the functioning of their system. Systems damaging to their members are likely to suffer from return effects of this damage. Equally, positive system qualities can be impaired by characteristics and actions of members, who are then on the receiving end of this impairment.⁴

A main implication of the perspective presented here is that in order for individual healing to be sustained, the healed person's active life systems, especially their immediate family and other *continuing*, close personal relationships, need to be or to become reasonably healthy. Additionally, any groups that the person is, and remains deeply involved with, need to be well-functioning. Organisations that continue to be a major part of the person's world cannot be distinctly unhealthy without adverse effect on the individual. Communities the person lives and participates in should at least be relatively benign and free of qualities which adversely affect their constituent smaller systems.

National and cross-national systems can have great bearing on the nature and/or health of small relationship systems. Illustrations of sharply varied nature include the Nazi German state, the Catholic Church, UNICEF, and the interwoven national and ethnic communities of Europe and of the former Soviet Union. The tortured conflict in the former Yugoslavia surely reflects a disorder of relations between the peoples involved; a disorder partly fuelled, historically and in the present, by personal attitudes affecting larger membership systems; systems which in turn have been taking shocking toll of family and community systems and individual lives,

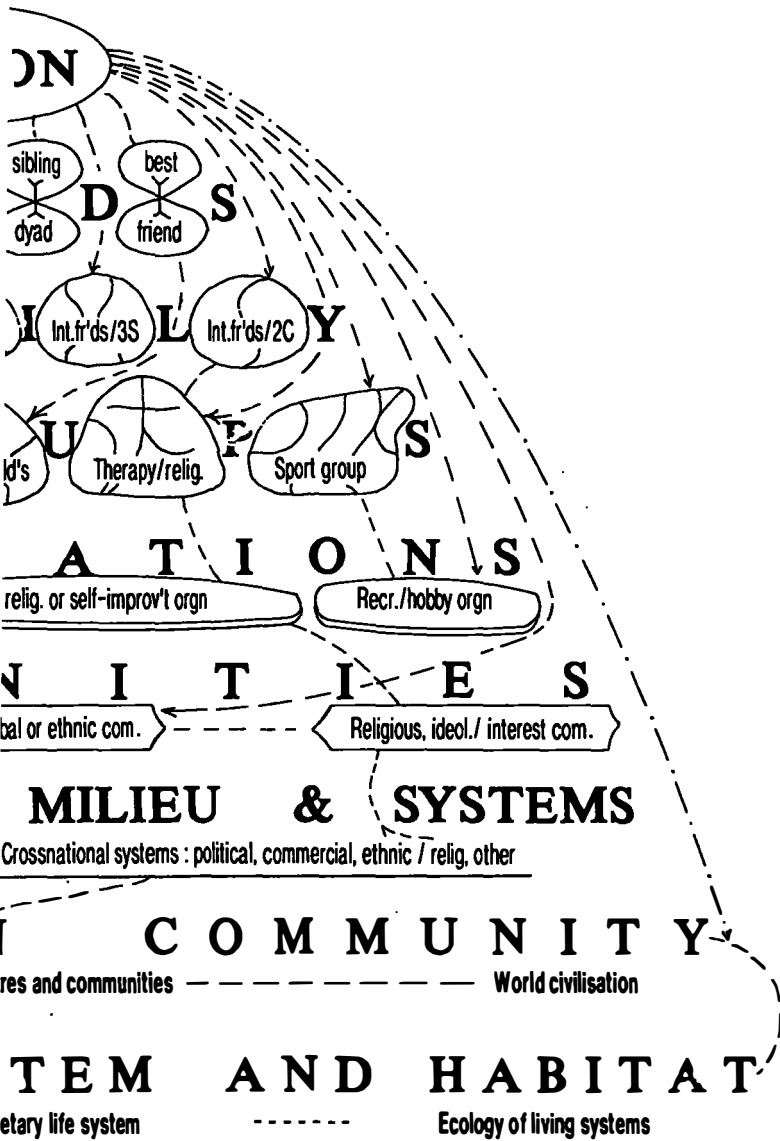
⁴ Sometimes there are constituents who are not active members but external supporters or beneficiaries of a system. Organisations with shareholders or distant owners are a case in point. System health would then have another side, involving the relation of outside owners and beneficiaries to the interior working members of the system. The aspect of quality of information exchange and mutual awareness between the main body of organisational members and the owner-investors then becomes an important further issue in the functional health or otherwise of the system.

Figure 1: The P



Note: Systems shown in small letters (levels 2-7) are illustrat

--System Pyramid



exclusive. Similarly, for the lines denoting connection & influence.

thus also perpetuating the disorder.⁵

As summed up in Figure 1, the overall, dynamic framework advanced consists not only of the various levels of system but, also, the many intersystem linkages. The connections cannot all be visualised in a single diagram but, in principle, the person has, as it were, a direct line to every system level and as well, the relations between levels affect the person indirectly. The relationships generally are interactive, so that influences are reciprocal or work in a recursive chain. Interest can be focused on the way individuals are affected, or on the ways they act upon their systems, or the flow in both directions. Involved altogether are the interactive dynamics of person and system, and of system with (sub)system.

Generally, the impact of person on system is viewed as depending on the latter's size and 'distance' (number of levels away) in the total scheme. Other factors, such as how open or closed the system is, and the person's discrimination of it and of interconnecting channels are, of course, relevant too). Systems in their turn act on the person partly according to their size and distance, their own properties and the individual's discrimination. Self-knowing or health on one level generally has favourable effects on another, which then acts back on the first, or on a third level. Likewise, lack of awareness or 'ill-health' on any level acts adversely on others, which may then reinforce it and mediate its spread to additional levels. To take this view seriously alters one's perspective on personal therapy and most other helping interventions.

Concluding implications

I will end with fairly brief comment on where the perspective advanced is leading in my own work. Its potentially radical implications are yet to have full impact in my practice; and I would be greatly interested to hear from any readers about the implications they perceive.

* I know that I think much more about the kinds of worlds my therapy clients

⁵ The agonising conflict in 'Yugoslavia' began, it seems, with the loss of an intrinsically weak, formally imposed national 'identity', coupled with the much stronger identification of people with their ethnic and religious groupings--systems in this case with a history of conflict, experienced threat or literal danger to each other. The deep-lying disorder of relations between peoples in the region feeds into, and is further inflamed by, the shocking toll of family and community systems and individual lives. As in the mundane case of a microphone receiving its own amplified signal, a self-perpetuating, runaway process has developed, not susceptible to explanation by ordinary principles of (individual) human motivation.

live in, and am more attentive and attuned to what they tell me on this level, than used to be the case. I do not feel any inner demand for them to be literally *self-exploring*, or working out interpersonal issues, all the time. I quite often wish I could be present with them in their families, their work place, or another part of their relational-communal world. On occasion, I have gone to an appointment with a client, or couple, in their own home setting, and would like to find practical ways of seeing clients *in situ* more often. I am more patient than formerly with some clients seeming to advance very unevenly, taking a long time, using the relationship with me as a supportive lifeline as well as a literally therapeutic medium.

* I now appreciate more than I used to why many people in difficulty in their lives do *not* turn to personal therapy. Why should they, if they have the idea that therapy will focus on their own personality and self but they are in agony over their relational or communal life systems. For a person tortured in their systems, or profoundly cut off and alone, it requires enormous confidence in the potential power of individual capacity to see *psychotherapy* as a route to a new quality of life. Thus it seems to me extremely important to maintain and develop modes of therapeutic helping that are strongly attuned to context and systems--with no lessening of sensitivity and concern for the inner person. A further development, touched on next, could be of even wider value.

* I think more about meanings of 'prevention' than I used to. Developing *greater sensitivity to* and concern for the health and well-being of human systems at all levels is in my view basic to any worthwhile approach to reducing conditions conducive to personal and interpersonal disorder. It is difficult to avoid the view, given the scale of human stress, division and conflict, dislocation, addiction and other personal-social problems, that societies in our world are deeply flawed.⁶ One glaring example among many is in the field of crime and corrections. As nations have 'developed' crime rates generally have risen steeply. The 'correctional' systems put in place, in their overall effect, reinforce the patterns that have lead to imprisonment and, in effect, promote crime--especially in the context of a diminished sense of connection in the wider community. Developments desirable in themselves, say, in health, educational and welfare fields tend to be introduced piecemeal, without taking account of interactive effects with the other system

⁶ While writing this end section, I thought again of an older paper with the ambitious title "Prevention, healing and change on personal & system levels: An approach to integration" (Barrett-Lennard, 1977). This earlier, more free-wheeling account in some ways complements the present work. Copies, in manuscript print-out, remain available from me.

influences at work. My own shifting perspective encourages me to think, however, that we could become much wiser in seeing pattern and connections; and inventively applying this growing wisdom to the healing and betterment of encompassing systems in our world.

* While desiring to contribute to the wisdom mentioned, I also want to go on working with individuals, couples and small helping groups, and believe that when personal healing change can and does occur it tends to have repercussions throughout the relational systems in which most of a person's living happens. Note my qualification that this effect results if personal change actually occurs. Looked at in finer grain, an increment in self-integration (say) will be reflected in an interactive life context which might now work in an affirming way or, alternatively, may make the shift very difficult to sustain or harder to follow with similar shifts. Thus, self change may build on itself in association with movement in system qualities, or may not build but bog down in the context of strongly counteractive systems.⁷

* It impresses me that individuals in unhealthy, dissociated, suffering or predatory systems can in practice be powerless to transform their systems into life-enhancing ones. Indeed they may have no belief, or no hope, even no concept of changing themselves, still less their worlds. In such instances, directly addressing their systems, small and large, in some way may be an essential starting point to reaching and aiding individuals. My experience and knowledge of what this can mean in practice is quite limited. I hope to inquire and learn more, reaching outside familiar territory of practice and theory, especially in clinical psychology and psychotherapy.

Implied in what I have said in this paper is the belief that we tend to be less powerless the more deeply we see into the workings of the larger wholes we are part of, the more (to start with) we are conscious of these wholes at all and notice how we function in them, the more we engage with others to facilitate growth in their contextual consciousness, and the more active we become in working in partnership with others toward maintenance and renewal of our interconnected life systems. It appears to me that above all else what we can do pivots on our knowing. I would go further: When a person's consciousness of things actually changes there inevitably are consequences in their actions. Probably this helps to

⁷While choosing to leave an unsatisfactory relationship system or setting is not uncommon, in many cases separation from existing life systems is very difficult or not an option. And where a person does leave, often it appears more a flight from something than an approach to an alternative of different quality.

explain both why we become more knowing (to enable action) and why we also resist doing so (to avoid the weight of acting).

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