

Aesthetics of change



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Bradford Keeney is a cybernetic epistemologist and one of the heirs to the work of Gregory Bateson. Keeney was also a former family systems theorist and therapist who developed both improvisational therapy and resource-focused therapy. In addition, he was an academic who directed one of the premier doctoral training programs.

After studying with some of the originators of cybernetics, Keeney went on to a distinguished career as a theorist and a practitioner of systemic family therapy. As a function of his classic book on therapy, *Aesthetics of Change*, he is considered a notable figure by the same profession that he has chosen to challenge.

Brad doesn't have much use any longer for the kind of stuff that others do in clinical practices. He finds it overly simplistic and utterly ridiculous that therapists believe that anyone can actually change as a result of greater understanding alone.

He sees all the ways that traditional therapists stifle their creativity and imagination. By contrast, he feels in no way limited by a "talking cure" that Freud invented over a hundred years ago and that is surely obsolete. According to Keeney, therapy and, for that matter, all forms of healing must reinvent themselves.

Looking at Brad Keeney, one would never guess that he has had one of the most intellectually diverse and challenging academic backgrounds imaginable. Dressed in his customary sandals, chino pants, and untucked short-sleeve shirt, he looks more like a safari guide than a scholar. With his dimpled smile and long hair constantly falling into his face, he appears

unpretentious and accessible. In fact, he often prefers the company of people who are illiterate.

Yet Keeney's *Aesthetics of Change* includes materials that are among the most challenging in the field. The book is dense and complex, combining the most esoteric nuances of cybernetics and advanced epistemology. Even today, study groups still meet regularly to try to decipher the subtleties of *Aesthetics of Change*, his landmark theoretical work (Carlson, Keeney 2004).

After initial meeting with his new mentor, Keeney went on to become a devoted student of Bateson's work, designated by the master to carry cybernetics into the next generation. Brad decided to go back to school and eventually wrote his doctoral dissertation about how Bateson's ideas could be articulated and applied to the practice of psychotherapy.

This work was to become Keeney's book *Aesthetics of Change*, whose forward was written by another inventor of cybernetics, physicist Heinz von Foerster. He later became a dedicated supporter of Keeney's role in trying to change the academic and therapeutic mind-sets.

In *Aesthetics of Change*, Keeney talked about a cybernetic and systemic view of therapy based on how we construct the world. This was not anything close to what is now called social constructivism but was more similar to radical constructivism.

Instead of proceeding in the usual psychological way, " I must first diagnose the problem in order to treat it," the cybernetic therapist turned things around: " First I must act in order to understand" (Keeney 35).