

# **Evolving to become more fully human- Early contributors to the Satir Model**

Steven Bentheim

2013

Satir International Journal

UVic Libraries ePublishing Services

© 2013 Bentheim. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Original citation:

Bentheim, S. (2013). Evolving to become more fully human- Early contributors to the Satir Model. *Satir Family Therapy and Counselling Journal*, 1, 40–52.  
<https://journals.uvic.ca/index.php/satir/article/view/12062>

---

Downloaded from UVicSpace Research & Learning Repository

[dspace.library.uvic.ca](https://dspace.library.uvic.ca)



**University  
of Victoria**

Libraries

## Evolving to Become More Fully Human- Early Contributors to the Satir Model

Dr. Steven Bentheim, Ph.D.  
Dept. of Educational Psychology, University of Victoria

Revised May 1, 2013

### **Abstract:**

*Virginia Satir benefitted from many predecessors, including Emerson, Mary Baker Eddy, Martin Buber and Gregory Bateson, who advanced experiential spirituality with healthy human relating and communicating. Her focus was similar to the American philosopher Emerson's that one's self-worth is not guaranteed from one's family, church or workplace and thus advocated taking the inner journey to "trust thyself."*

*From her mother's faith in Christian Science, Satir aligns with Mary Baker Eddy's assertion that genders are of equal value, along with the importance of human affection in the home. From the philosopher Martin Buber, Satir opened the client sessions by connecting with the divine in one another. Gregory Bateson, one of Virginia's closest contemporaries, offered a technical understanding of communication processes from exploring South Pacific Islanders and cybernetic research that are just beginning to be understood. These approaches continue to find ways to heal the individual and the family.*

**Key words:** Satir Model, R.W. Emerson, Mary Baker Eddy, Martin Buber, Gregory Bateson

### **FOUNDATIONS OF SATIR'S EXPANSIVE APPROACH**

"When one views human life as sacred, as I do, Family Reconstruction becomes a spiritual as well as a cognitive experience to free human energy from the shackles of the past, thus paving the way for evolvement of being more fully human."

(Satir, V., in Nerin, W., 1986)

While the "mother" of family therapy did not write philosophical treatises as such, Satir offered key references of her world-view through her talks and writings, and particularly in one of her greatest books, *New Peoplemaking* (Satir, V., 1988). Her influences were from her own experiences with the natural world, from her mother's faith in spiritual healing, from the existentialist philosophies of the twentieth century and psychological theory that challenged the dominant deterministic and reductionist views of most treatment, known as scientific "behaviorism." She and her contemporaries in the mental health field began confirming how health is wholly achievable through feelings of self-worth within one's self and through one's healthier relation to one's family. Their hope

was that this process might someday be able to transform the static and dysfunctional medical and social institutions of their day.

### **The Contribution of American Transcendentalism**

Virginia Satir had grown up in the 1910's and 1920's, in the American Midwest, in a mainly conventional, American Protestant culture. Her mother's faith, however, was developed from an American metaphysical movement known as Christian Science, whose beliefs were not too dissimilar from the nineteenth-century Transcendentalists of New England. This unique time of American thought and literature was called the "American Enlightenment" period. Ralph Waldo Emerson's development of Transcendentalism was strongly linked with the metaphysical insights of the Vedas of the Indian Upanishads. Ms. Eddy's teachings, later called Christian Science, offered similar insights but she framed them within a biblical, New Testament context.



Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1803-1882

Ralph Waldo Emerson, a brilliant scholar, essayist and a Harvard College pastor, is often described as the America's first philosopher. The impetus for much of Emerson's viewpoint was his readings of the German Romantic Period, especially the poetry of Goethe. Emerson was taken by this European literary movement, and joined its immersion into East Indian thought. Aside from the Jeffersonian Founding Fathers, who were Freemasons or theists, most Americans held traditional Protestant beliefs.

Emerson, had rejected both conventional religion and the more secular *utilitarianism*, also known as the "work ethic," as contrary to the human spirit. He believed humankind was beyond conventional religious roles or the social roles that denied the uniqueness of each person. This, he warned, is what will produce unfair judgments of others. Instead of a habitual conformity, Emerson points to the significance of receiving divine wisdom, as a way to allow the temporal to dissolve, revealing a truer nature of reality:

"Whenever a mind is simple and receives a divine wisdom, old things pass away - [the] means, teachers, texts, temples fall; it lives now, and absorbs past and future into the present hour. All things are made sacred by relation to it..."

*Steven Bentheim*

time and space are but physiological colors which the eye makes, but the soul is light....”

(Emerson, “Self-Reliance” p. 563)

In his essay, “The American Scholar,” he offers a hope for a new individual, beyond either conformist religious teaching or being a utility of commercial enterprise: “A nation of men will for the first time exist because each believes himself inspired by the Divine Soul which also inspires all men” (Emerson, “American Scholar” p. 532).

He affirmed that wherever we are, we should trust in our own Higher Self, with its unique guidance for each of us: “Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string. Accept the place the divine providence has found for you, the society of your contemporaries, the connection of events...” (Emerson, “Self-Reliance” p. 556).

Emerson guided his listeners to turn away from society’s misleading financial offers for workers to surrender their truer selves for the sake of financial livelihood: “Society is a joint-stock company, in which the members agree, for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater” (Emerson, “Self Reliance”, p. 557). In his essay, “Experience,” Emerson tells the reader not to feel defeated by what the world thinks or does, but to “take heart” and realize there will be a transformation of genius into a practical power here in our very environment:

“Never mind the ridicule, never mind the defeat; up again, old heart! – it seems to say, - there is victory yet for all justice; and the true romance which the world exists to realize, will be the transformation of genius into practical power.”

(Emerson, “Experience,” p.602)

### **Mary Baker Eddy’s Focus on Healing**

Virginia Satir’s mother had followed the teachings of Mary Baker Eddy, the leader of the Christian Science movement. The founder of Christian Science had offered similar principles as Emerson, and began a metaphysical college in Massachusetts. However, Ms. Eddy was found to have a gift for healing, and she started a center for healing people who came with various needs. While he did not attempt to change society’s rules, her “spiritual granddaughter” Virginia would later be a significant change agent in several health care fields, and joined with Ms. Eddy’s principles for gender equality in the family and workplace. While Ms. Eddy’s initial focus had been primarily on healing from physical and psychological disorders, Eddy would also address other areas of human hurt, including the fear of poverty and for better harmony in family relationships.



Mary Baker Eddy 1821-1910

Early in her life, Virginia proclaimed she had received a physical healing from her mother's practice in Christian Science healing [King, L. 1989). A young Virginia believed that she had regained her hearing through this, although when she was older, her father decided that she needed hospitalization for a more debilitating ailment.

Mary Baker Eddy's classic book, *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures* was first published in 1875, and revised several times until 1906. Moving beyond the "solitary" enlightenment experience of Emerson, Ms. Eddy affirmed that our human life first adheres in attachment to the human mother, then separates into its unique individuality, and finally is in cohesion with all life's formations, beyond material sensory limitations: "Truth has no consciousness of error. Love has no sense of hatred. Life has no partnership with death" (Eddy, p. 243).

"Truth," she believed, is available to us as our internal guidance. Much as Emerson had said, she counseled to trust our inner resources above conventionality. "Life" would offer continual challenges not to become "stuck" in negative habits, or to live as less than we can, unconscious of our own potential. Thus, "Life" offers positive activity to perform. Like the fruit that falls from the tree, and then dissolves back into the soil, these spiritual seeds immediately begin a long journey to creating a new fruit tree. Ms. Eddy encouraged her students to accept change in life, to let go of the past, and to trust that one is always growing. She would say that some of life's lessons are more difficult than others, but that people need to grow by being open to the spiritual dimension, not only to guide us, but to act according to the highest sense of right.

Along with "Truth" and "Life, Eddy offers the third dimension of spirituality as "Love." It simply asks us to have acceptance of how we are completely loved by the Infinite within ourselves, thus freeing us by taking us out of our fears and out of any residual hatred of others. Similar to the writings of Emerson, Ms. Eddy calls for:

"One infinite God, good, unifies men and nations; constitutes the brotherhood of man; ends wars; fulfills the Scripture, "Love thy neighbor as

thyselves;” annihilates...whatever is wrong in social, civil, criminal, political and religious codes; equalizes the sexes; annuls the curse on man, and leaves nothing that can sin, suffer, be punished or destroyed.”

(Eddy, p. 340)

In striving to meet her followers’ needs to become a recognized Christian church, Ms. Eddy stepped down as President of the Massachusetts Metaphysical College. Her teachings became increasingly Christian, to the extent that she removed other scriptures from her previous editions to remain solely of the Christian gospels (Riepe, 1967). However, regardless of particular scriptural accreditations, her work has offered much to her followers as it does to this day.

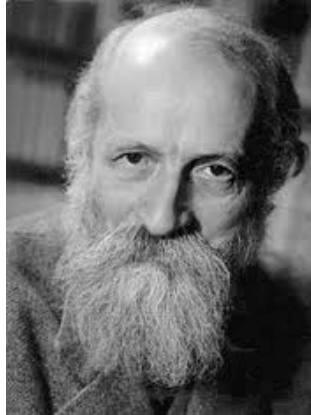
### **Adding the “Affective” Dimension**

Ms. Eddy included another addition to her teaching, that of **human affection**, as an outcome of the spiritual reality that answered human needs. The third chapter of her book, *Science and Health* is titled “Marriage.” In it, she moves the center of devotion away from the temple, as had Emerson, but also away from nature, and turned her followers to improving their home life: “Home is the dearest spot on earth, and it should be the center, though not the boundary, of the affections” (Eddy, p. 58).

She taught that “Marriage should signify a union of hearts” (Eddy, p.64) and she offered that the ingredients of a good marriage are shared interests, shared values and goals: “Kindred tastes, motives, and aspirations are necessary to the formation of a happy and permanent companionship” (Eddy, p. 60). From the marriage to parenting, she promoted the necessity of parental love for children to include “purity and constancy” as immortal virtues (Eddy, p.60).

While aware of the vices and infidelities that seem to have plagued many of her followers, she strives to help them change to preserve marriage if at all possible. Finally, she asks her followers to look beyond their physical gender differences, to value each gender equally, and to see both masculine and feminine aspects within themselves: “Then white robed purity will unite in one person masculine wisdom and feminine love, spiritual understanding and perpetual peace” (Eddy, p. 64). Ms. Eddy called for prayer to resolve family disputes, but this was still done as an individual with their God, rather than a turning to one another. As the broad field of psychology became more recognized in the twentieth century, counseling and family therapy became an avenue for couples to be better heard by each other.

## **Martin Buber and the Sacred Dialogical Relation**



Martin Buber  
1878-1965

The modern philosopher Martin Buber taught in Germany. At the rise of Naziism, he moved to Jerusalem, where he taught at the Hebrew University until his passing in 1965. Buber taught that spiritual experience was shared between the individual and the Divine, and also between the couple in marriage and also within the community.

While teaching in in Germany, he had been placed in the department of sociology, but he did not see that his work could be “objectified” in the context of sociology, rather it would be understood as a psychological experience. In terms of philosophy and religion, he would be described as an early existentialist, and Virginia Satir credits him as an influence on her work (Gomori, M. 2008).

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was not a term for a shared spiritual phenomenon, so Buber coined the term the “Essential We” (Mendes-Flohr, 1989). He believed there can be an existential, spiritual experience with the “Other” – not just with the divine within oneself, but with the divine within another being. He contrasted this phenomenon with solitary mystical phenomenon, which he’d experienced in his youth. In later life, he formulated these realizations: “...the Divine on earth is fulfilled not within humans but between humans... it is consummated only in the life of true community” (Buber, 1967).

Martin Buber drew a circle for healthy human connection similar to what Virginia Satir later referred to as “Self, Other and Context” (Satir, et.al., 1988) Virginia Satir then added psychological process steps for connecting the personal self with the “other” in a sacred, dialogical relation. Virginia Satir was able to eventually actualize many of these initiatives, of both Eddy and Buber, into the fields of psychiatry, social work and mental health counseling.

### **Maslow and The Human Potential Movement**

The “third wave” of modern psychology, referred to as “humanistic psychology,” is distinct from psychoanalysis, with the Freudian emphasis on the adjustment of the individual to society and the need for therapeutic transference in client sessions. Humanistic psychology is also less attracted to scientific behaviorism, in its reduction of human needs to that of surface behaviors, rather than to access the depth of the human spirit for positive change. Two main pioneers of humanistic psychology, Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow, also shared their mutual appreciation of Virginia Satir as their contemporary (Satir, et. al., 1991).



Abraham Maslow, 1908-1970

Carl Rogers began “client-focused” therapy with the client’s own goals to be respected by the therapist. Abraham Maslow created the “hierarchy of needs” pyramid, emphasizing the need for one’s physical needs for survival, safety, love and belonging, and marked the pinnacle of individuating as self-actualization. Toward his later years, Maslow included the spiritual dimension as the highest summit of human experience.

Satir was in accord with both of these main clinicians, and she also emphasized how we are never “stuck” in self-defeating limitations. Her focus on the family was- like her peers- to help the client individuate from feeling trapped and bound by parental obligations which had remained inside the mind of the client for years after leaving home. She then went even further to mark the path toward a more fulfilling family life, based on all members valuing each other and respecting their individual differences.

## **The Contribution of Gregory Bateson's Communication Theory**



Gregory Bateson  
1904-1980

Virginia worked closely with Gregory Bateson, and Drs. Don Jackson, Jay Haley and Robert Spitzer, among others while she was a psychiatric social worker at the Mental Research Institute at Palo Alto, California. Here, she had published her first book, *Conjoint Family Therapy*, written in 1964. The progressive professional team assisted psychiatric patients with symptoms of schizophrenia. Their patients began to heal by including their family members in treatment sessions, rather than the conventional method of isolating them from their family while in hospital. They demonstrated that pain in the family had produced a direct impact on the patient, and indeed on each individual in the "family unit" as well (Satir, 1983).

Gregory Bateson worked as a psychologist, environmentalist, cyberneticist and cultural researcher. He was the leading theorist during their work at the Palo Alto Mental Health Institute in the 1950's. Bateson applied the lessons he learned from advanced communications technology to schizophrenic patients in their care. He advanced the theory for how humans can be helped or impaired by how they give meaning to the messages that they receive from others.

"He was a pioneer in advancing cybernetic and communications theory in social science and psychotherapy.... Bateson made a stream of ideas that were a confluence of holistic, interactive, recursive and, above all, contextual ways of thinking that foreshadow many "postmodern" developments in biology, ecology and philosophy.... Later, he developed holistic and evolutionary models of the self-organizing biosphere."

(Stagoll, 2006).

Bateson saw our individual capacity as deeply inter-related with others, along with all species on the planet. He went further to state our connection with the "inanimate" objects. These had an awareness yet to be defined, but had been experienced and offered through the oral traditions of many cultures. These oral traditions were dismissed by the modern science community because it looked only at what was "provable" to logic and

immediate sensory data. This scientific methodology, which has been dominant since Immanuel Kant, is known as the “positivist” method of knowing.

Our present ecological crises, Bateson contends, is being “caused by human linear consciousness and beliefs that we are somehow separate from the rest of the living world. We are destroying the living systems of earth in a false expectation of a magical future to be brought to us by technology and science” (M.C. Bateson, 1991, p. 3).



People of the Iutmal tribe of New Guinea

Bateson’s interest in cultures outside his home in England came during the 1930’s, when he traveled with the cultural sociologist Margaret Mead to New Guinea. Bateson’s interest was to discover if there were cultures where people did not readily go to war, as they had in Europe and would again in the Second World War, where 50 million lost their lives. Indeed, it was safer to be a soldier than a civilian!

Following their study of these South Pacific islanders, he described the contrast of how a tribal culture can rise in aggressive response to an aggressive act from people of another culture, and escalating to an all-out warfare. This would then lead to greater violence than what was caused by the initial aggressive act. The Iatmul people of New Guinea, by contrast, were guided to lessen the feelings of aggression. If necessary, they could fight, but chose to dance out their aggressive feelings as a way to limit violence. They practiced what Bateson called “Complimentary” change. That is, an unkind act on one side may even be counteracted by a kind act, cancelling out the discordant feelings from both sides. He labeled “Symmetrical” change as an aggressive response to an aggressive act from another, eventually escalating to all-out warfare.

Bateson connected this trait for the de-escalating of violence to what cybernetic scientists called the “negative feedback loop” in industrial devices. For instance, if a train is running too fast, there is a built-in mechanism to reduce the supply of steam, thus

slowing the train to a manageable speed. A “positive feedback loop” would do the opposite – escalating the tension, because basic assumptions are left unchecked with other parts of the system. Another term for this needed “feedback loop” is “recursive” logic, and healthy communicative dialogue. Virginia Satir used these methods in her communication process work with families, with parent and teen conflict and especially for couple issues.

### **Virginia Satir and Clinical Family Therapy**



Virginia Satir 1916-1988

Virginia Satir and her clinical colleagues at the Mental Research Institute at Palo Alto discovered among the many issues of the “identified patient,” and common to each, was the feeling of low self-worth. In addition, the patients had usually taken upon themselves the conflicts that their parent had as a couple. Virginia Satir, as the clinical social worker, worked to actively reduce the conflict among the other family members, and discovered there were then changes to the psychological health of the identified patient. This was groundbreaking, but was not accepted by the medical community at that time, as medical research was mainly restricted to sensory and cognitive testing, and did not include a connection with the affective (emotional) dimension, and insisted on isolating the patient from the family for treatment.

Satir’s contribution to this emergent field of family therapy was also to focus on **healthy communication** between family members. As Satir observed, when family members fear they are being unaccepted, they will ask to be heard in threatening language, or cower in a “pleaser” stance, or respond computer-like, without showing emotion, or distracting from the conversation. She called these four types of incongruent responses “Coping Stances” (Satir, et.al., 1988). To heal this, Satir suggested that we handle individual differences in a better way:

“If he takes the first approach, it indicates that he will handle the differentness of others in terms of *war* and *who is right*. If he takes the second, he

*Steven Bentheim*

will handle different-ness on the basis of *exploration* and *what fits*. The former leads to stalemating, retardation and pathology. The latter leads to growth, individuality and creativity (Satir, 1983 , p. 115).”

### **Human Connection as a Goal of Therapy**

Virginia Satir made a connection from her spiritual core to that of the client, regardless of their age, gender, culture or condition. She describes it thus:

“It was as though I saw through to the inner core of each being, seeing the shining light of the spirit trapped in a thick black cylinder of limitation and self-rejection. My effort was to enable the person to see what I saw: Then, together, we could turn the dark cylinder into a large, lighted screen and build new possibilities.”

(Satir, 1988, pp. 340-341)

Thus, this experiential occurrence of experiencing one’s “Peace Within” is both the place of first connection with the therapist and also the goal of therapy.

Virginia Satir stated how national leaders have the same personal issues as any other individual, and the international dysfunction is not much different than that of families. “There has never yet been a society whose priority and prevailing value was the worth of all human beings. We who are living now are the first to even attempt it” (Satir, 1988, p.373). Satir offers these suggestions for better inter-personal and international harmony:

“To communicate clearly

To cooperate rather than compete

To empower rather than subjugate

To enhance individual uniqueness rather than categorize

To use authority to guide and accomplish “what fits” rather than force compliance through the tyranny of power

To love, value, and respect themselves fully

To be personally and socially responsible

To use problems as challenge and opportunities for creative solutions”

(Satir, 1988, pp.369-70)

### **Applications in Asian Cultures**

Today, those who are leading in advancing Virginia Satir’s contributions in the field of therapy are also pointing to the component of *culture* as playing a very key role in how one connects one’s beliefs with their choice of behaviors. Satir led this “third force” in psychology to consider cultural and gender identity as a part of the collective human identity structure, with “equality of value” to be paramount between the genders and cultures (Satir, 1991, p.14).

Presently, we have a keen interest in Asia on how to apply the Satir Model to assist clients move from culturally limited roles in their family relations to being able to become more openly interdependent. This includes growing research and Satir-based counseling and therapy in the twenty-first century: “From the Satir Model to the I Tao: Reconstructing Family Rules in a Hong Kong Context” (Cheung, G., 2006); “Satir Therapy in the Korean Worldview” (Kim, Y.A. 2007), and “Applying the Satir Model of Counseling in Mainland China: Illustrated with Case Studies” (Yang Li, and Lou, Vivian, Wei-qun 2010).

It will be a long road ahead to create a more healthy world; for individuals, families and societies. These are still beginning steps. But the road ahead is always filled with hope and the answers to any question we may have.

### **Summary**

Virginia Satir chose to write in very understandable language, but her methods were extremely profound. She benefitted from her predecessors that advanced the need for healthier human relating and communicating. What she carried from the American philosopher Emerson was that neither conventional religion nor the secular work-place can guarantee to offer one a high degree of self-worth or sense of freedom for one to become all they can be.

From Mary Baker Eddy, she believed healing was possible at all levels, that we are of divine origin and unique in expression. She carried as well the importance of human affection as a divine gift and that the genders are of equal value.

From the philosopher Martin Buber, Satir emphasized that we can experience one another in our truth, at a soul level of goodness. From Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow, she carried forward the work of one’s individuating from debilitating parental constraints. From Gregory Bateson, Satir carried on the work of communication processes for lessening misunderstandings that often lead to debilitating anger and distancing from others. Virginia Satir’s work was to find ways to heal the self, the family and society.

### **References**

Bateson, M.C. (1991). *Composing a Life*. New York: Grove Press

Charlton, Noel G. (2008). *Understanding Gregory Bateson*; Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press.

Cheung, G. “From the Satir Model to the *I Tao*: Reconstructing Family Rules in a Hong Kong Context.” *Satir Journal*, 2006, 2013.

Eddy, Mary B., (2000). *Science and Health; with Key to the Scriptures*, Boston: The Writings of Mary Baker Eddy Press.

Steven Bentheim

Emerson, R.W., "Self-Reliance" in "Essays." (1841). reprinted in *American Masters*, Volume One, (1965) ed. Charles Anderson; New York: Holt, Reinhart and Winston, Inc. pp. 555-571.

\_\_\_\_\_ "Experience." (1844). reprinted in *American Masters*, Volume One, (1965) ed. Charles Anderson; New York: Holt, Reinhart and Winston, Inc. pp. 587-602

Fromm, H. (2004). "Overcoming the Oversoul: Emerson's Evolutionary Existentialism," *The Hudson Review*, Spring, 2004. Vol. LVII, No. 1

Gomori, M. (2008). *Personal Alchemy; the Art of Satir Family Reconstruction*. Hong Kong; The Hong Kong Center for Human Development Ltd.

Kim, Y.A. "Satir Therapy in the Korean Worldview" *Satir Journal*, 2007, Vol. I, no. 2, pp. 82 -112

King, Laurel (1989). *Women of Power*. Berkeley, Ca.: Celestial Arts, pp. 11-42

Nerin, W. (1986). *Family Reconstruction, Long Day's Journey into Light*. New York: W.W. Norton

Riepe, D. (1967). "The Indian Influence in American Philosophy: Emerson to Moore," *Philosophy East and West* Vol. 17, No.1/4 pp. 125-137, Jan-Oct 1967, University of Hawaii Press. [www.jstor.org/stable/139052](http://www.jstor.org/stable/139052)

Satir, Virginia. (1964). *Conjoint Family Therapy*, Science and Behavior Books Inc., Palo Alto, California

\_\_\_\_\_ (1988). *The New Peoplemaking*, Science and Behavior Books Inc., Mountain View , California

\_\_\_\_\_ (1991). *The Satir Model*, Science and Behavior Books Inc., Palo Alto California

Stagoll, B. (2006). "Gregory Bateson at 100," *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy*, Sept. 2006, Vol. 27, no. 3.

Yang Li, and Lou, Vivian, W.Q. (2010). "Applying the Satir Model of Counseling in Mainland China: Illustrated with Case Studies" in *Satir Journal*, Vol. 4, no. 1, 2010. pp. 24-52.