Sir Geoffrey Vickers

Respected author and Systems Thinker, Sir Geoffrey Vickers was seen to be a man ahead of his time. Born in 1884, he won the Victoria Cross for distinguished service in the First World War. He studied Classics at Oxford, graduating in 1923, and later became a lawyer, where he became involved in international affairs. Vickers is regarded as a systems practitioner rather than an academic He introduced the concept of appreciative systems to describe human activity.. He recognized that appreciation of systems requires the participation of not only the observer, but also that of the subject. He died in 1982.

This video of Sir Geoffrey Vickers was filmed in 1978:

Clip One:

"We can't help I think, thinking chiefly when we think of Systems of the kind of Systems that most concern us, whether they be technological or biological, psychological, ecological, socio -political, cultural or what have you. Now my interest is at the far end of this spectrum, having been a lawyer and an administrator. I'm interested in Systems from the personal up to the very large, human, social systems, I'm also interested in systems of concepts and values through which we see all the others which I call appreciative systems.

So I'm going to talk about the end of the spectrum that interests me, and it is of course of great general interest, because whatever else we do, we all live in this psycho social world.And we all of us I think also suffer from a good deal of semantic pollution, misplaced ideas, many of which have got carried over by illicit extension from the natural sciences. So the end of the spectrum that concerns me I think really concerns us all.

It's hard to plot what I mean and what we all of us understand by "Systems Thinking". If you think what an educated school child of today ought to have as a world view it is very different from what it was when I was a child or even when my children were children. It goes something like this. The world is a complex of systems and sub-systems, a very complicated interaction. Some are arranged hierarchically like the cells and organs of the body and layers of government. Some are involved functionally and laterally like the partners in a business, some in a curious mixture of competition and co-operation which an ecologist finds when he looks under a paving stone or in the Amazon jungle.

These systems, certainly at the human end are almost all extremely unstable.And they're mostly unstable because of the destabilizing effect of this one element in the whole thing, man. And we destabilize them because the monstrous magnifying powers of technology are not balanced and probably cannot be balanced by any corresponding understanding of the effect of what we're doing. So although we have enormous powers of change, we have very very limited powers to change in a predictable way.
We probably can't know even in theory what those limits are. And the one limit we do begin to know is the opposite of what we knew before.
And that is a belief of linear progress of any kind. Because what seems very clear now is that in any system of any sort no one element can change linearly or indefinitely without limiting itself or reversing itself or reducing the entire system to collapse.

Well this is not only an ecological view but it applies also in the personal and the social world.And this imaginary child of ours who is putting together a picture of the world in which it lives would be constantly reminded of the fact that it is itself part of this complex

of systems which it was trying to picture to itself and was indeed itself a complex,a combination of systems and sub-systems as could well be.

CLIP TWO:

Organisations have at last become respectable. It is not always openly admitted but it seems to me an absolutely clear implication of Systems Theory that at every level of organisation new laws appear which were not apparent and could not even in theory have been deduced by the behaviour of the constituents of the system before they were organized.This idea of new levels, new laws breaking in at new levels have always of course always been very repugnant to reductionist science. Fact is I think that it's now quite unavoidable and a good thing too.

Even a few decades ago it was possible for well informed people to argue whether an organization could possibly be more than the sum of its parts. Well everyone knows today or everyone should be that every organization is bound to be both more and less than the sum of its parts. It's less because its parts are constrained by being organized.There are things that they could do if they weren't organized that they can't do now. It's more because organized they can do not only what they couldn't do separately but what they couldn't do together unless they were not only together but also organized.This idea of new laws emerging at different levels of organization without of course defying the laws that are at the level below, but treating them as the boundary conditions within which they operate, this is an idea which I think has really been quite common to the human mind for a long time but is more reluctantly accepted in scientific thinking.

CLIP THREE:

The representations that we make of these systems are themselves human artefacts, and collective human artefacts. And that gives a new and very funny look to the very idea of inter-subjectivity. For a long time now science has distinguished very sharply between the subjective and the objective and has had very little use for the subjective. Yet philosophers of science today find it very hard to find any validity for our views of reality other than that they are inter-subjectively agreed representations - not of what reality is, but what we shall deem it to be.This consensus of what we shall deem it to be is a human artefact, created, maintained, changed ultimately perhaps eliminated by the consensus of human minds. And one of the major criteria of whether it's acceptable, retained, changed or dropped is its systemic relationship to other parts of the field of understanding. I won't say just the cognitive field, because that too I think is a very inadequate way to describe our whole field of appreciation.

CLIP FOUR:

Science for a long time has assumed not only that the observer saw more of the game than the player, but that he saw everything that was worth seeing.The idea that the agent might see and still less might be something that the observer couldn't see and be has been one of those embarrassing notions that have got left out. And yet if we're really going to take seriously the insight that we are ourselves part of most, in theory all, the things that we "observe" and in practice of all the most important ones, the ones that fall into the psycho-social field then you have to accept the fact that we need the experience of an agent just as much as we need the observations of the observer, and that it is

only by marrying the two that we make any sense of what we observe. Some social scientists have got into grotesque contortions it seems to me by trying to be completely objective about their own kind, and thus trying to exclude the direct knowledge they in fact have, ignoring the fact that half their vocabulary only has a meaning because their own personal experience has put it in.