



## Margaret's Elegant Question and #NewMacy in the 21st Century

Keynote speaker: **Paul Pangaro**

Margaret Mead once wrote that she felt compelled to recommend, during an organizational meeting in the 1950s for what became the ISSS, that this nascent society turn the precepts of its field upon itself. She was, in her own words, “slapped down without mercy.” I’m no Margaret Mead but I know an opportunity for Systems and Cybernetics when I see one — wait, make that many more opportunities than just one.

There are many pandemics of today’s world: population and climate, food and water, poverty and healthcare, inequality and racism, disinformation and artificial intelligence. Any pandemic is a systemic calamity; this entanglement of pandemics, so much more so. Responses without cyber-systemic viewpoints and practices will certainly fail. Knowing what **we** know, how can we stand by? If **we** don’t respond, then who will? This is not arrogance; this is responsibility.

Where to begin: we have precepts from the 20th-century origins of Systems and Cybernetics. These are numerous and powerful and ready for use in our current context of 21st-century pandemics. No short list of precepts is adequate but these are the most relevant to my argument today: understanding systems in terms of purpose; prioritizing human intention above techno-efficiency; designing collaborations for variety; seeing our own seeing and the responsibility that entails. |

Now consider contrasts and opportunities from Margaret’s exquisite invitation to apply our precepts to ourselves: her context was a single organization; WOSC is an organization of organizations (an entanglement of organizations?). We must compare and contrast our individual organizational strengths and variety, in order to coordinate our planning effectively. The mission statements of WOSC’s member societies propose activities to purvey the theories and methods of Systems and Cybernetics. But they need revision (and here I risk the same reaction that Margaret received): more than just evolving and purveying our knowledge, we must prioritize action. Of course, conversation is key, as it must precede agreement, which must precede coordinated action (this wrongly implies that all proceeds from talk; in practice, very soon the loops take over). But our conversations must become louder and our collaborations more urgent and more insistent, because pandemics won’t wait. To do less is to neglect our responsibilities.

Beyond just greater attention to our field, **we must prove how our theories and practices lead to action that will bring enduring, positive change.** This requires a transdisciplinary effort with the ambition of the original Macy Meetings, now revived and revised for the 21st-century entanglement of pandemics. With the American Society for Cybernetics as a seeding participant, an initiative to create a #NewMacy Network for transdisciplinary, transglobal, and transgenerational **conversations for action** has begun. You are invited to join.



Even after Margaret was slapped down, she didn't hesitate to return to her elegant question. She posed it again in the 1960s at the first conference of the American Society for Cybernetics: "What in thunder are we founding" if we don't apply our own precepts to what we are doing? I am asking this of all of us here at WOSC in our pandemic world. Slap it down if you like. But Margaret's provocation, and the responsibility we have, won't go away.

Go to <https://tinyurl.com/newmacy-distro-r> for more.