

## **An Interview with Saybrook OS Pioneer Jeffrey Stamps, PhD '80 and his wife, Jessica Lipnack**

by George Aiken, PhD '06, Wendy Thayer, and Dawna Perez, PhD '07

### **Foreword:**

by George Aiken, PhD '06

When Jeff first informed me that he had recently been diagnosed with Stage IV Pancreatic Cancer, I knew that in order to preserve an important piece of Saybrook's history, we should find time to conduct an interview about his critical role in the early development of Organizational Systems at Saybrook. In fact, Jeffrey's dissertation, which he subsequently published, *Holonomy, A Humanistic Systems Theory*, served as Bela Banathy's introduction to and involvement with the Humanistic Psychology Institute (Saybrook).

The opportunity for the proposed interview arose when Jeff and his wife and partner, Jessica Lipnack, agreed to attend an alumni dinner in Cambridge, MA on October 8, 2010, and to join my wife, Wendy Thayer, and me the following day to discuss his OS work at Saybrook, and life in what Jeff refers to as the Terminal Bardo (Bardo is an intermediate, transitional, or liminal state, typically between two lives on earth, as taught in Tibetan Buddhist Sects). The "terminal" bardo for Jeffrey is the period in which he now resides, post diagnosis.

Wendy and I were both honored to share this time with Jeff and Jessica, who are handling what could otherwise be a highly stressful period with grace and depth, far beyond what might be expected of mere mortals—but, they now walk hand-in-hand in the "terminal bardo," and who knows what is possible in such a place.

### **Introduction:**

by Dawna Perez, PhD '07

Jeff and Jessica are an amazing couple. I had the pleasure of meeting them at an alumni dinner in Cambridge recently, arranged to welcome Saybrook's new president, Mark Schulman. Alumni Director and 2006 PhD graduate George Aiken and his wife, Wendy Thayer, had the honor of interviewing Jeff and Jessica the next day, and this article is an edited transcription of that interview.

Jeff's dissertation for Saybrook was published as *Holonomy: A Human Systems Theory* (1980, Intersystems). Prior to Saybrook, Jeff received an M.Litt. from Oxford University and a B.S. from University of New Hampshire (see interview for more on his eclectic, educational background).

Jeff and Jessica have written six books, including *Virtual Teams*, *The Age of the Network*, *The TeamNet Factor* (all from Wiley) and *Networking* (Doubleday). They've also written for Harvard Business Review ("Can Absence Make a Team Grow Stronger?") and for HBR Blogs ("Why BP Crashed and Killed the Gulf"). They lead [NetAge](#), their consulting firm that has allowed them to work with companies, nonprofits, and governments around

the world. They are now facing Jeff's terminal illness together, with a remarkable attitude. As a visionary and a humanistic systems thinker, Jeff shares his past experience and his present thoughts on death and dying.

Jeff and Jessica have been cited as pioneers in electronic communication. They served as faculty for the first online global executive education program sponsored by the Western Behavioral Science Institute, La Jolla, California. In 1993, they helped design, facilitate and launch NetResults, the first electronic cross-agency network for U.S. government employees that came out of the Reinventing Government initiative. In 1994, they launched [www.netage.com](http://www.netage.com), now in its sixteenth year. Jeff has served as the company's Chief Scientist, with overall responsibility for the vision, design, and integrity of the company's products and services. He has thirty years of consulting and writing experience, with a focus on networked organizations. Previously, he served as co-founder and research head of The Networking Institute. Under contract with organizations such as Digital Equipment Corporation, Apple Computer, the U.S. Army, and Royal Dutch Shell, he has designed and developed an extensive array of digital methods and tools. Jessica, formerly the president of The Networking Institute, is the CEO of NetAge. She maintains an active blog, [Endless Knots](#), contributes often to online publications, including [The Industry Standard](#), and writes fiction and personal essays.

**An Interview with Saybrook Alumnus, Jeffrey Stamps, PhD '80, and his wife and professional partner, Jessica Lipnack , October 9, 2010, Cambridge, MA  
by Saybrook Alumnus George Aiken, PhD '06 and his wife, Wendy Thayer**

[The interview starts in mid-conversation. Jeff has just explained his current situation, which is terminal, having been diagnosed with Stage IV pancreatic cancer in May, 2010. This topic arises early, and again, later in the interview, and provides a human context for some of the history and ideas recounted.]

**Jeff:** [Jessica and I] met in 1968. We essentially work together, teach together, parent, and love together. This is the core relationship of my whole lifetime. Even as amazing as it's been, it can be taken to another level, to the degree to which she's willing to do that. And she's been willing. So, it's been quite a journey. For example, last weekend, we were at a conference on "The Art of Dying." It's extremely important to not forget what the situation actually is. That's what makes this period of relatively good health so psychologically difficult in a way. More difficult than right after the diagnosis when I thought I was actually dying and sliding into a fairly imminent death. Now I seemed to have paused for a while. However, no one has suggested that this pause will be anything more than months in duration, but it is a pause, so therefore you live, like everyone, an indefinite life forward. Your regular life is continued and all the ritual patterns that you're already stuck in and have been trying to get out of for centuries are still with you, but now there's this new terminal thing.

This new thing can either really, really get you upset or it's something you can work with to take another step. So that's what I prefer to do with the time – to take another step in my personal and social development... and to leave as much behind as I can because this turns out to be an extraordinarily productive time. People are very willing to help in ways that it's hard to get under ordinary circumstances. So far, it's been a very useful time.

**George:** It brings a fine focus to everything that you do. Each moment is important. I was trekking in the Himalayas; I'd turn a corner on the trail and there'd be another waterfall coming out of the side of the mountain that people in the US would drive for days to see. I realized that I needed to be totally present in that moment, because I might never see that one again. I might never have that chance again.

**Jeff:** Well, this is another beautiful moment in that sense, too. You're exactly right and it's all the things that we kind of know intellectually or practically, or that we've practiced in part, they just turn out to be truer. Gurus say that every day is really precious and that thinking about death and being aware of your own death will make life more precious to you. You will waste less time. You will be more deliberate and determined. You will be better. You will be more compassionate. You will have less conflictive emotions and I have found that to be true.

**George:** Some Buddhist practices are focused on death. One of the meditations is to go out to a graveyard and mediate on the tombs or find a dead body and meditate on it – which in India is more possible – so that you can actually sit in front of a corpse and meditate and look at it: “That’s where I’m headed, what’s that about?” That’s the meditation. In India, another practice is to have death on your left shoulder at all times, because it reminds you that every moment is critical.

**Jeff:** Yeah, I’m not sure that I could have lived my whole life that way. It’s pretty exhausting.

**Jessica:** We haven’t had any trouble contemplating death because we’ve had several deaths around us since Jeff was diagnosed—unexpected deaths. So, it’s been very bizarre. We don’t need to go to a graveyard. Unfortunately, we’ve had to go anyway; we’ve had reason to go. It’s been really strange – we know it’s going to happen with Jeff, but then to have these other ones: A young friend of ours, a 39-year old, killed himself. Our neighbor’s daughter committed suicide. Our dog died; our daughter’s cat was killed. I mean, there have been an unbelievable number of deaths; it’s definitely been on the left shoulder.

**George:** Is this a topic that you’d rather not talk about because there are other things that I’d like to bring to the table?

**Jeff:** Anything. This is a topic that I’m very open about. That seems to be somewhat unusual. For some people, it makes them extremely uncomfortable and for other people, it’s a real gift and they say they get something from it – just the from way I’m approaching the situation. Because we all wonder how we would react to a terminal diagnosis. I would not have predicted myself as the one who would have responded like this.

[Jessica has blogged about Jeff’s illness on a couple of occasions: at the point he was diagnosed, and once after the death and dying conference, but they have not been publically writing about it – yet.]

**George:** Do you feel like you were attached to life in a way that would be difficult to have it suddenly end?

**Jeff:** I guess I just could not have imagined myself having sufficient psychological or spiritual maturity to deal with terminality like this. It’s something you really can’t hide if you have fears about it. There are two kinds of fear involved. There’s one about dying and the death process, itself. What are the circumstances going to be? Is it going to hurt? How much pain am I going to be in? Then there’s one about the question of an afterlife

and any fears about how after death will turn out. How much consciousness am I going to be able to retain for how long? Am I to be judged and sentenced? What could nothingness possibly be? Will I be reborn well or badly?

I don't know how it is in Saybrook's mind/body program. One of the conundrums that all of these programs face is the standard scientific model that says, "Oh, flat line, dead" and that's the end of it. Dust to dust. I guess they've changed the definition from "flat line" to some neurological term.

**George:** The more scientific way of saying it, like "brain dead."

**Jeff:** Yes, it's like having better atoms to tell time. But that model, of course, has absolutely no proof attached to it whatsoever. Nothingness after death is not a fact that is demonstrated anymore than any other story about what happens after you are dead.

**George:** Based on presumptions and assumptions.

**Jeff:** Except that for the vast proportion of human beings for most of history there *is something* after death and the actual number of people who don't believe it, even in this world today, is pretty small. Most people in most of history have believed in some sort of continuity of consciousness – some sort of afterlife, whether it's my soul intact with all of my stuff off in heaven or a cycle of rebirth or some other model.

**George:** The fact is that science has taken an opposing view. Even Stephen Hawking is saying that God is not needed, he may or may not be there—it doesn't matter.

**Jeff:** I'm pretty familiar with the scientific arguments over the years, because in order to get into systems, which is what I did in coming to then-HPI (Humanistic Psychology Institute), you're really into metaphysics and the Oxford that I went to was at its most terrifying opposite of metaphysics. It was into a kind of nihilistic, logical positivism where the only thing that matters is the textual interpretation of words and exact matching with objective reality.

That was a terrible philosophical environment to grow an understanding of the consciousness of systems—large, complex systems and the real need to find better ways to work with human systems. For Oxford, systems were metaphysics. A metaphysics is quite literally about principles that cross domains of science, which, of course, is what system science purports to do. Now I would say that network science is the new integrating paradigm.

System science is quite frankly an industrial age model of what integrative philosophy is. I have some basis for opinion here as I brought systems to the Humanistic Psychology Institute (HPI). I literally brought it in the most direct and specific way—through networking and people.

**George:** You brought Bela Banathy to HPI (Saybrook).

**Jeff:** I brought Bela. I brought the Society for General Systems Research when it came to San Francisco. I organized an HPI session for that conference. The dissertation I wrote and he published became the beginning of Bela's involvement with HPI/Saybrook.

I don't know how these alumni interviews go. Probably, as with most of your students, I'm somewhat of an educational iconoclast. I'm from New Hampshire. I started as a student at Dartmouth. The main reason was that I was an Olympic-caliber skier who was trying out for the Olympics that winter. Dartmouth had the best ski team in all of the elite colleges. So as a New Hampshire person, I just stupidly went along with being pushed into Dartmouth. But long story short, my Olympic career didn't go very far. I have had authority issues all of my life and that one showed up at the Olympic training

camp where the chief Eastern coach was actually a water skier, not a snow skier. He insisted that I run a time trial on a trail that had barely been cut. Vail Colorado had just been opened and I said “no”. He said, “you do it my way or you leave.”

So I left and went out to Berkeley where I had a girlfriend. That was the time of Mario Savio, the Free Speech Movement, Sproul Plaza and all that. The Vietnam War was just kicking up and the water hoses were starting to be let loose in the South. “The 60s” were just getting underway and I was in the middle of it.

By the time I got back to Dartmouth in the spring, I had about as little interest in it as one could imagine. I withdrew the day I arrived for my sophomore year. So, because of the draft—which I didn’t realize at the time that my hearing would simply have excluded me from anyway because I have 60% loss of hearing in both ears from birth—I went to UNH (University of New Hampshire). It was the last place in the world that I thought I’d go, but I had a fantastic education there. It was particularly good in politics and philosophy, which I got from a great professor who became a mentor, Erwin Jaffe. And I did a lot of activist politics at the time around free speech issues and the Vietnam War. I started my protests very early, in 1963 against Edward Teller, “father of the H-bomb.” I started a group called “No Time for Politics,” and later became president of the Memorial Union Student Organization. From UNH, I got a Fulbright. First Fulbright ever for UNH. From the Fulbright pile, I got picked to go to Pembroke College at Oxford University. And Oxford was where we [Jeff and Jessica] met. It was 1968; it was quite a time to be there.

But the theme of my life before college, I would have to say, was in physics and math. I built a computer when I was in high school that propelled me to include computer technology as a theme all of my life. I’m still inventing software. I still have an outstanding invention, OrgScope, that may very well amount to something; we’re not quite sure yet.

In my first fall at Dartmouth, I read Plato. I read the Republic. And for the first time got the idea that you could really think in a big way about how things were organized and what choices people had about how to organize. And what the nature of organization was. And it instantly occurred to me that this is a much harder set of problems to engage than cosmology. It is much more difficult because this is about people, and all of those sorts of things that were never going to be easily reduced to math. How people organize at all scales was something that would take my whole life to do because it’s unlike math and physics, which you do best as an early, young mind, these questions require more life, a more seasoned mind that has a lot more experience.

I consciously made my choice to peak in later life. I am now peaking in my terminal period. Ironic.

At a conference I organized at UNH, I met Kenneth Boulding who was one of the founders of the Society for General Systems Research. Fifteen years later he became the outside reader of my dissertation. At that time, he was president of the AAAS, which was spectacular. *There* is a system scientist. He was an economist who reached the peak of the systems concept – when he was President of AAAS – which is the largest umbrella scientific organization. Boulding was my outside reader and he was the reason why Bela and George Klir, who were the editors of the Systems Inquiry Series, immediately said, “Oh we’ll publish this” - because of such a strong recommendation by him – which I think was also important to accreditation.

**George:** Your dissertation was an example for WASC (Western Association of Schools and Colleges) at the time.

**Jeff:** By the time we're in Oxford, we're in the middle of the Vietnam War. A group of us were running the Vietnam War organization in Oxford. Bill Clinton came the next year. It's really a very intense time and I'm supposed to be working on this dissertation on Thomas Hobbes. I'm taking a completely metaphysical view because I saw him as a systems thinker. Wow, this guy's got psychology, biology, physics, metaphysics. Hobbes' scholars only talked about his politics.

We had overlapping friends with Clinton. His best friend and Oxford roommate, also mine the year before, was Frank Aller, who committed suicide.

**Jess:** There was a cover story in the New York Times Magazine a few weeks after Clinton was elected with a picture of Clinton and a picture of Frank Aller and the headline "[Most likely to succeed.](#)"

**Jeff:** It was a perfect and unfortunate metaphor for how tragic the Vietnam War really was for a whole generation. Clinton, like many, was wishy-washy. I know, I was there. And his friend, Frank, also a Rhodes scholar, took a conscientious objector view which is why he was part of our group and went through all the torment and battles that that represented. Everyone knew a political career could not emerge from such behavior. He moved in with us at 46 Leckford Road. Clinton moved in after I left at the end of 1969. Long story short, Frank ultimately committed suicide in 1971.

**George:** From what you've said so far, I'm beginning to see a picture of where we could go. How did you get to HPI and how did that affect the trajectory of your career, and how that applies to the Alumni Association?

**Jeff:** Good. I'm headed that way. I'm at Oxford; we leave Oxford, we're now in the 1970s. Things are still in an uproar. We form the first of our many businesses together, a consulting company essentially that does projects; we try to do a nonprofit around cable television because we saw that as the beginning of a potential communication revolution, but the Nixon IRS wouldn't give us a nonprofit designation – says you're going to make too much money. We became a not-for-profit, by which I mean a not profitable partnership.

It was during that period in the mid-70s that I began to think about this work again. It was really clear that most of the spokespeople against the Vietnam War were of the view that "Oh, we should take over and we'll do a better job" as opposed to "this is how I'd reorganize the system. The system is really screwed, we need to have it this way."

But most of the conversations I wanted to have and the conversations I've always wanted to have about groups are not really very easy. There's not some natural place to do that because political science isn't a place to do that. So I started at HPI. The project I bring to HPI is a systems project.

I wanted to know what the general principles were that crossed everything, but the principles had to include the context of human systems. There are all kinds of systems theories out there that never bother to engage with humans. Either people weren't very important or they were so minute in the scale of things that there were essentially irrelevant. So I knew that in going to HPI, which would be open enough to take my very strange systems view, would also force me into engagement, not just with people as objects, but as warm, sentient beings. Somehow, the complexity of the systems theory I was looking for had to reflect the complexity of people. The specific draw to HPI was

Gregory Bateson.

Gregory Bateson was at that time one of the Fellows there and he actually became the advisor for Bob McAndrews, who you may know as one of [Saybrook's] adjunct faculty. And that was a really successful encounter because when I had formed my systems proposal, Bateson essentially blessed it – which kind of carried it through the HPI process. It took me a couple of years, but I knew what the sources were. I'd been collecting these books for years and I got Boulding to agree to be my outside reader, which was how it was done then. I don't know if it's still done that way at Saybrook, having an outside reader. Because there was no certification, how else would you tell whether or not the thesis had any validity? So there had to be some kind of outside readers.

But in this context, Boulding was a very prestigious professor. Interestingly, even as I was finishing the thesis, I wrote a paper for HPI about becoming a virtual learning organization and this was in 1980. I actually have it. We were online in 1980. We were among the first people in the world to be online, part of the first digital conversations, some of which HPI sponsored.

We retained that technology thread throughout our entire life. All of our organizational understandings have been in the context of the 21<sup>st</sup> century of the Information Age...transition from the Industrial to the Information Age. Most of the world is still mired in what is in fact Industrial Age thinking even as the reality has far moved into the Information Age. But we imagined that there had to be a new form of organization arising with the new age. From a systems view, it was clear that as each main form of civilization arose, a new form of organization rose with it. We first learned to work in small groups, up to twenty-five or so. Early human beings have always lived in groups of twenty, twenty-five to thirty, except for seasonal gatherings through the years.

**George:** Sort of a nomadic tribe type of....

**Jeff:** Right, exactly. But in terms of bringing organizational capability, that's where we learned how to be in groups, how to do teams. And with agriculture, of course, came hierarchy, with industrialism came bureaucracy. Then we posited back in the late 70s that networks would be the emergent form of organization in the Information Age, the successor to industrialism. And that's what we stuck our reputation on. Here we are in the age of the network.

So, I would say for a decade, almost two decades, we were futurists because we were talking about a time coming. We would write about precursor organizations – things that were happening that weren't full expressions of this new form of network organization but had aspects of it that were really worth pulling out.

Actually, a little side story, which is very relevant to Saybrook. In 1980, HPI didn't pay too much attention to my proposition that they should start investigating becoming a virtual learning organization. However, a faculty member, Richard Farson, thought it was a great idea and he took it south with him to La Jolla, to the Western Behavioral Sciences Institute, which was his thing. He put together the first online (executive training) education program that consisted of two week-long residencies followed by five months where each of the faculty introduced during the residency would teach online. And that was in 1981! I think it was another ten years before Saybrook/HPI got into any real virtual stuff. I don't think Saybrook did it before it actually got on the web which was a good ten or fifteen years later. I think I can find that paper ["Evolution of a Graduate

Network”]. It would be interesting to look at it now compared to thirty years ago when I predicted that this is how education would be done.

**George:** I began work on my MA and PhD at Saybrook in 1998, and there was no real virtual community at that point.

**Jeff:** Well that will come back to the end of the conversation because I am almost there. I was publishing my rewritten dissertation, *Holonomy*, with Boulding doing the Foreword. This was the dissertation that Bela picked up and started that whole development of the systems program here. At the same time Jessica and I were researching networks and in 1982 published *Networking: The First Report and Directory*. This was the first book that named this organizational form—the network. It was all researched in the counter-culture, what we now call civil society, because it was during the sixties and seventies that virtually all of the organizations that are now the mainstream, non-profit organizations got their start. So all the women’s organizations, all the civil rights organizations, environmental groups, health oriented organizations, educational, spiritual... There was this whole explosion of people organizing these interest groups and creating these movements and there was this incredible network form that seemed to describe this new form of organization.

Not only did we write about it, and create a systems model of networks at that point, we also compiled a directory of networks that was organized to be useful in all sorts of ways, We typeset our own book from our Wang 2200 computer. We were the first authors with Doubleday that had ever typeset their own book from electronic copy. So we were pioneers there too.

But that, in many ways, became kind of the split with the Saybrook systems program. While we were researching networks, I was still very intensely involved with Society for General Systems Research, which became the International Society for Systems Science. But you know I wasn’t an academic. I am academic who never held an academic post.

**George:** You’re a member of the community of scholars.

**Jeff:** But I never actually became part of an academic community. We did spend our whole life scrapping to live our own way and continue to develop our own thinking while engaging with some of the most interesting organizations in the world.

**George:** Was that a disappointment? That you didn’t get into the academic community?

**Jeff:** No. I would have to say over the years that I have thanked my lucky stars – many times over that I somehow managed to avoid academic life – I would not have done well.

**George:** Because of the authority kinds of issues...

**Jeff:** Well, the authority issues, the enormous constraints around thought that siloed disciplines and departments impose. Out of the box thinking is becoming ever more rare – particularly as money gets tighter and funding more conservative.

[Some of the first recording was lost, so the interview resumed by phone, October 13]

**Jeff:** I think the story picks up with Farson because he was a faculty member at Saybrook who saw the paper I wrote about how Saybrook should become a pioneer in this area of distance education. Farson actually grabbed the idea and created the first combined online and face-to-face executive education course. It was very, very high level involving generals from the Army, very senior executives from companies all over the world, an astronaut. Several years into the development of the program, he asked us to be faculty. There were face-to-face meetings. For a week every six months in La Jolla all of these very powerful people would gather. Five faculty for that semester would each have

a full day workshop. Then they would have one month in the next five months that would be their period for continuing their workshop online.

And that's where we met several executives from Digital Equipment Corporation when we gave our face-to-face section of our course on networking in July, 1984. At that time, DEC was the leader in the world in computer networking. They almost invented that technology. They immediately saw the connection between what we were doing with people networks and what they were on the cusp of doing with computer networks. So that actually started a long association with Digital that lasted through their highest growth years and then into their crash which came in the very early 90's. What that did was put us -- with our knowledge of people networks and our interest in seeing what this new emerging form of organization in the information age was -- in the middle of one of exactly those new companies and the one that was actually developing networking technology.

At this point, there was great confusion in the use of the word "network." People understood it in the technology sense. When we would give talks to people with technology backgrounds and we would say "networks" to refer to things that related to people, they would say, "No, no, no, that's not possible. Networks only refer to technologies."

Working with Digital really began our career in that nexus between computer networking and people networking, which is at the heart of what's so new about the forms of organization that are emerging now. And that also put us at a place where we were dealing not only at the leading edge of the emerging type of organization, but also the emerging technologies. I think we had eight years -- we were external consultants to Digital -- and we were on some massive projects. Probably the largest was developing the plan for building what would have been the MD-12 (McDonnell Douglas in California), the next-generation wide-body long-haul aircraft. They had the MD-11 and were on a multi-year path to build the MD12. Digital, very unexpectedly, made the down-select [the small group of finalists] for the electronics contract. We were part of the small team that created what became a billion dollar project to help develop one of the most complex projects on the planet. The plane was never built because McDonnell Douglas was subsequently bought by Boeing. But it was a spectacular project to work on.

The collapse of Digital sent us into writing a series of three books very rapidly which kind of outlined the emerging forms of organization at every scale. The first book was *The TeamNet Factor*. The framework we had developed over the decade since our original research in the non-profit grassroots sector was now complemented by this kind of much deeper knowledge of many different kinds of companies and organizations. Digital wasn't by any means the only one we worked with, but it was kind of our most consistent and long-term client where we turned over many projects. Our experience put us into a position of writing a book about networks and teams, pouring all we learned into that included theory and practice, experience and vision. Then we wrote *The Age of the Network*, which was probably made us best-known book as futurists. Next, we wrote the first book on virtual teams, published in 1997; we "virtually" coined the term. That was just before the web really exploded, so we published an enlarged and revised edition in 2000 and that's our latest work -- until today, with the new one that we have in the pipeline.

**George:** ...which is *Thinking Networks*?

**Jeff:** Yes.

**George:** When you say “we” and “us”, you’re talking about you and Jessica?

**Jeff:** I’m talking about Jessica and myself, yes. We started a number of organizations together and sometimes they’ve grown large to include other people. I think NetAge was at one time as large as twenty people.

**Jessica:** In terms of the books, yes, we’ve written all of those books together.

**Jeff:** The books form the core of the work and of the work opportunities. For example, we were coming out with *Virtual Teams* in 1997 and the web was just kind of whispering and the dot-com boom was just lifting off. It took us a few years to get our legs and some financing under us, which was just wonderful because we managed to catch the top of the boom by about three months and then we spent most of our corporate life in the slide thereafter. But the opportunity came because we were the authors, we had this book, we were known, this was a brand new area of virtual teams that was now getting this incredible boost in technology and so a lot of people latched onto us and we were still, after all those years, quite naive about business matters. I mean very skilled business consultants, don’t get me wrong, but somehow knowing about the Shells and Digitals and the like doesn’t necessarily translate all that well into one’s own small business.

**George:** I think you said not-for-profit, but maybe not much profit or something like that.

**Jessica:** I always say we’re more like movie stars. We either have these leading roles and we’re going to exotic places and having incredible experiences or we’re sitting at home waiting for scripts.

**Jeff:** It’s a very zigzag life. You spend some very lean years writing some stuff and then for a while you’re out there promoting. If your insights get stale, then you need to go through the cycle again. Two more anchor points would be useful. One is that the biggest corporate client that we had after Digital and after we started writing the second group of books, particularly *The Age of the Network* and *Virtual Teams* – was Shell. We started working with Shell in 1997 even as *Virtual Teams* was coming out, and then particularly again in 1998 and then from that point on through 2006.

**George:** Shell Oil?

**Jessica:** Well, we were first hired by Shell Oil, which is the American subsidiary that’s based in Houston. Royal Dutch Shell owns Shell Oil, so it’s a technicality but people who know Shell know the difference. Shell Oil just refers to the US entity.

**George:** So you said there was one more link?

**Jeff:** So, Shell was the context in which we did a huge amount of collaboration work of fielding their capacity to run virtual team programs. It’s also the context within which I invented OrgScope, which is a way to peer intently into the actual design of a company’s organizational structure—and that story is ongoing. A second thread in this last decade has been the military, the Army in particular. It’s such a nice contrast to 1968 and our meeting at an anti-war event and the fact that we are still very left-of-center in our views. Nevertheless, we were invited to a weeklong war game in 2003. It was the first Joint Forces/Army war game. It was literally in the week where our troops were on the march into Baghdad or I should say were rushing into Baghdad. The wargame was a seven-day enterprise that was really focused on the next generation of wars that the military would be fighting—one of the most extraordinary weeks of our life.

We were invited because a general – the general who was actually organizing the

conference – had read *The Age of the Network* and part of the great discussion that was going on in the military then was about the networks they were fighting, the network they were becoming, the network they had to become in order to fight a networked enemy.

Anyway, that's the way the whole world was going and the Army had better follow along. So, that really started, I don't know how many projects now – five, six, seven... A lot of projects now that we've undertaken with various parts of the Army, although some with Joint Forces. The engagements have all been around the nature of the organization, how to organize more effectively, the nature of virtual teams, how to protect soldiers. It's always been on something that we felt was more on the peacemaking side of the military, but nevertheless, it is the military. And that's been ongoing. I just finished an OrgScope project with the Natick Research Labs, an Army unit here in Massachusetts – in the two months immediately following my diagnosis.

**George:** Okay, let me say I'm not a systems person. I didn't go through the OS path, and I'm an existential humanistic psychologist and so my questions are more about you and your process.

**Jeff:** Part of what you picked up was why I came to HPI with my systems program in hand. It was to be anchored in the middle of the humanistic view while trying to put my systems ideas together. A transitional figure to talk about with humanistic psychology and one of HPI's founders would be Abraham Maslow. He was a powerful humanistic thinker and somebody who had a structured view, a framework. A lot of systems theory is just good frameworks. His hierarchy of needs is an excellent framework. It remains an excellent framework, representing, if you will, a good dose of systems thinking from someone who's clearly a humanistic psychologist.

Even as I'm writing a dissertation called "Holonomy, a Human Systems Theory," I am finding myself with Jessica in the field looking for this emerging form of organization, seeing networks as self-organizations of people. They were new coalitions, collaborations of people. Networks are people-centered, but we were looking for what's common across all these organizing experiments, across the health and political and spiritual and all the different types of networks.

We would strongly recommend at this point to think "network" rather than "system." The word "network" will in fact work everywhere the word "system" works. Just try it yourself. Moreover, you get a warmer feeling about the word network than you do about the word system.

**George:** More inclusive.

**Jeff:** It's more inclusive, friendlier. It's more accurate. It actually says something about the structure, which is about things or objects or people or whatever the nodes are - and the connections between them – that's what links are. Links are connections, relationships, interactions – all of those sorts of things. Systems—yeah, relationships are in there—but the most important ones are in a black box and you really don't know what's inside. There are no clues in the term. Networks are sitting out there and they're very relationship-full and I think that people get that. And that again is what's so new about what's been happening. Links are the essence of social media and why it is so reflective of the new order of organization that is emerging.

**George:** What are the limits of the virtual network? At what point might it become detrimental?

**Wendy:** We've experienced the yin and yang of the stock market in our lifetime and the

housing market – things really taking off rapidly and then having a big plummet. So since things are really catapulting themselves off into this incredible trajectory using technology – just wondering if it will somehow outpace our humanness.

**George:** An example – some statistics came out in the news yesterday that pretty much 70% of tweets never receive a response. In other words, is there overkill, possibly?

**Jeff:** The long view is helpful here – because we are talking about a very large scale evolutionary process. Just like all of the huge aches and pains and groans of going from the agricultural to the industrial era are now being played out and we are in the middle of that tumult. To give it kind of a biological evolutionary analogy, kind of think of it like the Cambrian period around 500 million years ago – when there was this explosion of multi-cellular life and then you know – like everything happened. The variety of species was phenomenal. And the competition was phenomenal. So you had these great ups and downs in new forms of life before things kind of smoothed out and the forms that we are familiar with are the ones that survived.

People have noted that about the nature of big transformational points. You're going to have these real zigzags and I couldn't agree more that sometimes the technology seems totally out of control and we're children with it. We're children in this process. We're children with these new toys and whether we're going to gain control of them fast enough to really make it part of the evolution of human consciousness or whether it's just going to swamp us in a rising sea of a warming world – who knows.

**George:** How might you see it as part of an evolution of human consciousness? How might you see this actually affecting the way people evolve? Have you danced in that place yet?

**Jeff:** You have to remember that the face-to-face doesn't go away. We're human beings with bodies so we're always *some* place. It may be that we look around and people always have their noses in some gadget and you think that the place doesn't seem to matter much. Not being where you are is, indeed, going to be a kind of a new issue that human beings are going to have to learn to traverse.

But the basics of change are incontrovertible and there's no way to turn the clock back and the fact is that the creation of a virtual universe, which is, from a human point of view, unlimited as opposed to our terrestrial, physical place, which is a limited, always limited. Yet in the virtual reality, there are, in fact, no limits. And there is the potential of basically unlimited growth of consciousness there. Of collective consciousness, of people working together – however mundane or esoteric you might want to express it, that kind of digital reality is inevitably changing the nature of humankind.

**George:** In that you're – as you called it – in the terminal bardo right now – how has this moment-to-moment reality affected or changed the way you are in the world and in relationships?

**Jeff:** It is a both/and. By that I mean that the world as it was did not mysteriously go away, but a whole new world appeared along beside it – or I should say entwined within it. So the terminal bardo is a present awareness of death – carrying this awareness, that affects every minute and choices that you make about how you're going to spend your day. You scan through the newspaper – the sort of things I look at change enormously. My tolerance for wasting time is very low. The things that I find are distractions are interesting, but it's not like washing the dishes is a distraction. Washing the dishes is not a distraction. Watching something stupid on television is a distraction. So you find

yourself reshaping your day and your hours to this new fact about what's important or what's not important.

My choice early on – I don't know to what degree it was a choice, the acceptance which came extremely early in the process – I would have to say has really enabled me to take this period as a time of growth. Everything is super charged and therefore the opportunity for me personally to take a step – whether that's part of an afterlife that I may or may not believe in or not – that's a good thing to do. So, I would say it has had an indisputable effect on my life.

**George:** Because of my own experiences earlier in life, through meditation and through other life situations, I find that I'm not afraid of death any more.

**Jeff:** That's a much easier way to live life. There are ancient wisdoms that say that, of course, but like so many ancient wisdoms until you're actually experiencing it, the full force of the wisdom doesn't really come into play. And it sounds like it has for you.

**Wendy:** I was thinking that if you're writing this book on the terminal bardo it might be incredibly helpful to many other people. Can you revisit the discussion we had on detachment? The question was sort of, your whole life's work was about networking and inclusiveness and now you have to have this situation where you have to unplug and detach from your life partner and the way in which you're approaching it. I think it would be very helpful to other people. You started off by talking about your motorcycle.

**George:** ...and Jessica didn't like that you were comparing your motorcycle to your relationship with her (laughter).

**Jeff:** She discovered me in Oxford riding my classic R69S BMW, and she never got that image out her mind, so I was stuck on the motorcycle for her. I love motorcycles; it's just part of who I am like being a skier or a sail boarder. I just love things that are independent, fast moving, close to the ground, and a motorcycle certainly was that. This is a very typical sort of ego-shaping attachment. And on my way home from the hospital after the terminal diagnosis, I said to Jessica, "Boy, you know, we're going to have think about what that last motorcycle ride is"- already looking ahead to detachment. Within a day, it was clear to me: I'm never going to get Jessica back on that motorcycle. I wouldn't even think of it. I'm so spacey and the motorcycle is so big, I would just never do that. Shortly thereafter, I knew I would never back get on it again. So, I just had it hauled away and sold it. It took a little while to leave as things do, but it was an easy thing to detach from and it had been extremely important to me and now it was simply gone.

Even now when I'm feeling really good and physically could well handle the motorcycle, I'm glad it's not there tempting me. It's really fine. So, that's a very typical worldly detachment and I love the house I'm in. To be there, I don't find physical detachments as much of a struggle – it seems kind of obvious from the situation of dying.

The situation with Jessica and detachment is much different. Even the choices that we make together are much different from the choices she has to make separately. She might want to speak to it. So here's the question: would it be easier for Jessica if we started to detaching now, spending more time independently, going our separate ways a little bit more, thinking down separate streams – because her life is going to be very different from mine which is due to end?

We ended up making the decision of really going for it. It was an opportunity to take our relationship to another level. I don't know the degree to which the connections are in fact

something which have more survivability than the physical knots of the physical life. I'm not throwing out any of the possibilities there, but I am extremely aware of the personal human choice because if Jessica allows herself to love even more does this then make it even harder for her afterwards? Or is there some way in the growth that will be achieved in this period, so we hope, where she will be better able to deal with life post my death? Finally, there is detachment from our kids, Miranda and Eliza, and Jay, our son-in-law. I don't even know how to start thinking about that, and I wouldn't say I've made lots of progress there. It seems even worse with the new grandkids, Lake and Finn, imagining all the time I won't have seeing them grow up, being part of their growing up.

But you are here, Jessica. How is attachment going for you?

**Jessica:** Well, I won't know until I'm on the other side of it, but it wasn't much of a choice for me. It wasn't like I sat around and thought, "Well, maybe I should drop back now". I'm a connection junkie. I am an intense experience junkie. I'm a feeling junkie and this is my life partner. At least my life up until now – and I didn't want to miss a minute of it. This is too awfully wonderful to not want to have it at the highest level of experience. It never was a big decision – sort of like the motorcycle for you. It's just the way I've always been, we've always been.

Whether it's going to be harder afterwards – it's going to be horrible afterwards. There's nothing that says I'm not going to suffer afterwards but I think I'd suffer a lot more if I separated myself and I guess some people do do that because it's too painful. But not people I've been talking to now. They have not done that. I'm sure there are people out there who walk away – we've certainly had friends who've had to walk away, but not the close friends.

**George:** It seems like this is an accelerated spiritual process – because one of the things that I've noticed in a less accelerated process – going over decades on a spiritual path – noticing that things that once gave me a lot of joy don't give me joy anymore. I was into swing dancing in the early 80s. When I go back to it now, it just doesn't have – there's nothing there for me – because it seems a trivial use of my time and energy. It feels like you're both on an accelerated spiritual path right now and I think what that bodes for Jessica is that maybe you will suffer more because of this, but you will also be bigger in your spirit and more able to be present and okay with that.

**Jessica:** I think that's probably true.

**Jeff:** I like that phrase George: "accelerated spiritual development". I think that's quite accurate. And, of course, that's exactly what the Tibetans say about the "betweens", about the bardos – the three bardos between death and rebirth, which is that there are three different phases of super charged states. At many points along the way, you have these many opportunities for enlightenment or for at least improving your karma to get a better rebirth.

I didn't know it at the time when I named the terminal bardo – that just seemed like the right thing to do because it was such a distinct clear period of time. Yes, it is an opportunity for accelerated spiritual development and it's also an opportunity to really screw up. And that's absolutely critical to understand that same thing. At one point, our daughter, Eliza, the artist, pulled out a Camus quote saying "time is at once the most magnificent and . . .

**Jessica:** and most dangerous of experiments."

**Jeff:** "Time is at once the most magnificent and most dangerous of experiments." That's

part of what's happened even with this extended time that I seem to be have been granted here. Yes, you have a chance to grow and you also have the chance to really collapse. There are many opportunities for fear, anger, anxiety, for depression, for really having some really bad outcomes in the here and now – to say nothing of potentially bad outcomes in the afterlife.

**George:** The more spiritually we are developed, the more every small instance takes on more power, including our mistakes. They're magnified – you don't get away with much. Sounds like you're in an accelerated phase of that – of not getting away with much. You know immediately whether what you just said or did was the right thing to say or do for your own evolutionary process.

**Jeff:** I would say that you have a very impressive grasp of this part of the path. You're very fortunate to be living it with some degree of consciousness as early as you are.

**Wendy:** As futurists, what comes after the Information Age? Do you have any sense of that? It's so huge and it's take the long view – it's so broad and its part of an evolutionary leap that maybe it's even hard to see what that is. Any thoughts?

**Jessica:** We get asked that question a lot.

**Jeff:** I would have to say that my answer has certainly changed. I used to try to give answers – you know you talk a bit about biotech or nano or other sorts of potential game-changer technologies – things that could really make a difference in the future. But I think right now I am much more centered on the fact that this particular transformation of civilization is fundamentally one of consciousness. Which is the basic point of this last book, *Thinking Networks*.

What we have learned is that all organizations are networks. And human networks are conscious. Networks that include human beings and are more complicated than people alone *because* they include human beings – who are themselves conscious. We don't recognize that meta-consciousness because we're sitting in it. We can recognize it even as it shows up right at the end of our nose. As we begin to recognize the consciousness of our collectivities all the way from our coupledoms – you probably have some sense of the George and Wendy consciousness – just like we have some sense of “J&J mind.” It's not a merged mind, but there's a lot of consciousness in the “betweenness” between us. There is a you, a me and an us that is palpable. I think that's true at all scales of human organization.

The next level of transformation really is digitally-enabled, conscious organizations. I don't think that the next level of human beings is some sort of robotic half-cyborg or the “singularity” Ray Kurzweil and others are prognosticating – to be able to download our consciousness into a computer and effectively become immortal. These things to me seem kind of silly and beside the point to what is really happening right under our nose that is a far grander and important scale, True thinking together is all the more essential to the solving of our global *problematique* which we can only solve together. Humankind has got existential choices that are coming down – I would say not just in my lifetime but in next lifetime as well, but not too many more lifetimes are going to be able to roll through before we more or less settle this part of the human experiment.

**George:** Something I mentioned before that supports what the two of you are doing – as Jessica said, you really had no choice about how you're going about this period. -- The story of Jung's secretary – she had a dream where she was sinking in quick sand and Jung was standing on the dry shore. She was reaching up and asking for his help to get out of

the quicksand, and he was pushing her down into the quicksand, saying, “through, not out, through, not out.” You’re both taking the path of “through.”

**Jeff:** We can wrap our lifetime work around networks all the way back around Saybrook. How might the network view and the network mindset apply to the Alumni Association? We suggested to Mark that Saybrook as a whole be regarded as a network. Clearly the college structure now within the university is essentially a network structure and the more you understand networks, the more valuable and useful that can become rather than trying to shoehorn it into the hierarchy-bureaucracy model, which is what people are typically trying to do. So, you might find it useful not only as a way to think about Saybrook University, the Alumni Association or Alumni network and also the very concept of organizational systems, organizational networks. The humanistic side of networks is far stronger, everything from a very solid mathematics at one end to a clear application to the human domain at the other—makes it a potential area of opportunity for Saybrook.