

HELEN STEVENSON*

REMEMBERING IRVING J. LEE

EARLY IN 1937 I saw a notice on the bulletin board in my high school. It described a high school institute to be held at Northwestern University School of Speech during the coming summer. A scholarship of seventy-five dollars was offered to qualifying students who would need to come up with a matching seventy-five dollars. The School of Speech wanted high school juniors who were interested in public speaking or drama. Juniors would then go back to their high schools and apply their new experiences and knowledge. So, for six weeks, at a cost of seventy-five dollars, I could go to college, study public speaking, live in a dorm, and eat college food! I wanted to go! I applied as soon as my parents agreed to come up with the money and let me go. By May I was accepted. I would be seventeen that summer.

I met Irving Lee the first week of the summer institute. The public speaking portion of the group of fifty students had assembled to have a discussion. I disliked group discussions in school because they tended to end in chaos or shouting matches. Lee had come into our classroom to lead the group. A wide range of subjects was suggested and

* Helen Stevenson graduated from Northwestern School of Speech in 1942. In 1957 she entered San Francisco State College where she received her teacher's credentials. She taught school in Marin County (California) for seventeen years. After retirement she received her M.A. in counseling and is now a licensed marriage, family, and child counselor. She has two adult children and two grandchildren.

somehow we agreed on one. The youthful Lee (twenty-eight) moved all about the room and back to a blackboard where he began to outline our topic. What excited me most were the occasions when a student passionately expressed an opinion and other students loudly agreed or disagreed. Lee strode to the outline and asked the student where his or her idea fit in. Together they analyzed the statement until they decided to set it aside for another discussion, to reword the statement, or to reject it as irrelevant. Looking back, I believe Lee was drawing out statements-of-fact for the outline. He was teaching us to distinguish between statements-of-fact and higher abstractions. After an hour or more of enthusiastic work, we had achieved some degree of agreement. We had actually reached a conclusion! I never forgot that day. Never before had I witnessed such skill in group leadership or been introduced to such enlightening ideas. I decided I wanted to come to Northwestern School of Speech for my college work — something the sly NU had in mind for all of us when they set up the program. Unfortunately, I had a sister only one year older than I was, and she wanted to go to college too. Since Northwestern was expensive, I went first to my community college. But before that happened, I came back to my high school and won a place on the debating team. Our team went to the state finals, too.

So in three years, in September 1940, I returned to the School of Speech at Northwestern. Each semester I had a class with Lee who now had his Ph.D. I took Junior Group Discussion led by Lee each semester that year. The second semester I took the basic class in general semantics which Lee taught — "Language and Thought." In the summer session of 1941 Lee offered a class "Speech and Social Control," so I stayed on for summer school. In 1941-42 I took Lee's Senior Group Discussion each semester. Our classes were not large then. (Word reached me later about the increasing size of Lee's future classes.) And our discussion groups were small — close to twelve, maybe.

Lee, the teacher, was a model for me when I later became a teacher. He held everyone's interest throughout the class period. He never used irrelevant showmanship or drama as I thought some of the popular professors on campus did —

Bergen Evans, for example. Lee applied his knowledge of research in public speaking, which had shown that unless fifty percent of a speech had examples or anecdotes, listeners lost interest. Lee frankly asked his students to help him collect examples from literature to illustrate his lectures and the book he was writing — *Language Habits in Human Affairs*.

To me, the most outstanding aspect of his teaching was his total commitment to scholarship: to research, to preparation, to accuracy in representation, to listening to feedback, to sticking to the subject at hand, and to developing each idea step by step. The affection he felt for his students was expressed in intense interest in us and our ideas. His formal manner somewhat masked his caring. He held his students to a strict scholastic standard, combining discipline with patience and help.

Lee presented himself as a student of Korzybski. He embellished his lectures with anecdotes about him or used Korzybski quotes to deepen our understanding of general semantics. Being a "disciple" did not bother Lee. Education, he said, consisted of thoroughly understanding the writings and speeches of the teacher, writer, or leader. Only after such discipline of learning could a student justifiably agree, disagree, or create variations of the leader's ideas. One aspect of Lee's philosophy of scholarship was his version of "How to Read a Book." (See Note)

Lee thought there was too much emphasis on speed reading and trying to digest vast amounts of literature. More important, he believed, was choosing a few outstanding books and reading them with extraordinary intensity. He had read five books using his method. Though we pestered him to tell us which five books, he refused to name them, except to admit one was by Korzybski. Lee felt the choice of books should be personal. Lee's method of "How to Read a Book" was as follows:

Step 1. Read the chosen book through quickly, noting the divisions the author had made — chapters, sections, paragraphs, etc.

Step 2. Reread the book. For each of the author's divisions formulate a question which that division seems to be answering. Write the question for each section.

Step 3. Reread the book. Write the author's answers to the questions you wrote in Step 2.

Step 4. Reread the book. Write down terms the author uses, especially new words or abstractions.

Step 5. Reread the book and from the *context of the writing* define the terms you listed in Step 4. Use the author's implications and, in some cases, make a close guess at his meaning. The author may not have a clear meaning.

All of the above five readings could take place over a long period of time naturally. These intense readings could be mixed with lighter reading of other literature.

Until December 7, 1941, when the United States was drawn into World War II, the Middle West was in the grip of isolationism, anti-Semitism, and pacifism. From Detroit Father Coughlin preached on the radio his own brand of intolerance. Stories of persecution of Jews would leak into the press only to be denied by an "expert" the next day. What a jungle of distortion and what an opportunity to use general semantics! Lee made use of the news, focusing on the lies and the propaganda to help us sort out statements-of-fact, differences and similarities. He did his own research, tirelessly tracking down the sources of reports from Germany. I entered his classes a pacifist and shortly became an "interventionist." Those categories were not so important as learning methods of tracking rumors. I later came to disagree with Lee regarding the internment of the Japanese-Americans. Lee had talked to the officials who were involved in the internment decision. They told him their main concern was the safety of the Japanese. They had based their decision of internment on the persecution of the German-Americans in World War I. I'm proud to remember that my class loudly derided Lee in his defense of Washington in this regard. But Lee could take disagreement. The test of any system or formulation was to apply it back on itself, he said. "The exception proves the rule" meant "The exception tests the rule." If the exception didn't fit the rule, then the rule had to be modified or

discarded. Also, propaganda, Lee insisted, was not a bad thing in itself. The question was, did the propaganda lie? Was it honest propaganda promoting good health, tolerance, or learning? Was it true?

When I studied with Lee, he had begun working with the police and with dental students on the Chicago campus of NU. Many of his stories came from contact with the police and dentists.

Korzybski and Lee, I inferred, believed that general semantics could be used in a therapeutic way with an "emotionally disturbed" or "mentally ill" person. Did they believe general semantics could deal with post-traumatic stress, phobias, depression? Lee never made such claims explicitly. But for many years I felt general semantics was a new tool in mental health. Many other students of the system felt so too. Albert Ellis formulated Rational Emotive Therapy after studying general semantics. How I wished I had discussed the relationship between general semantics and psychotherapy with Lee! When later in my life I became a counselor, I saw how his work contributed to precision in counseling, to making more precise delineations between "inside the skin"/"outside the skin" studies and between left brain/right brain approaches in therapy.

Such thoughts bring me to the grief over Lee's death at age forty-six from lung cancer. He was a heavy smoker when I knew him (ages twenty-eight to thirty-three.) He didn't smoke in class, but he always smoked in our discussion groups, which were held in the student union building. It seemed to me a rare fault (though a deadly one) in his, to me, nearly ideal character.

NOTE

At this time Mortimer Adler was speaking and writing at the University of Chicago. He had written *How To Read A Book* but his method differed greatly from Lee's.