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REMEMBERING DON HAYAKAWA

WHAT DOES your father do?" "He's a general semanticist." Try saying that when you're in nursery school.

By the time the kids got big enough to say "What's that?" I had a new answer ready. "It's the study of how not to make a damn fool of yourself."

All my life people have asked about my father. Almost every week I meet someone who asks, "Hayakawa — say, are you related to S. I. Hayakawa? I remember so clearly..." Most made his acquaintance through *Language in Thought and Action*, through *ETC.*, or through his teaching and lecturing. Others saw him in news coverage of the San Francisco State College strike of 1968-69. Still others remember him as a United States Senator or as the proponent of an official role for the English language. A few even remember him as a jazz critic and lecturer on the history of the blues. To my

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brother and sister and me, he was, before all those things, just Don.

The whole family called him that. As a graduate assistant in the English department at the University of Wisconsin, he had a professorial air and a (Canadian) British accent, so students took to calling him a "don." My mother, who met him when she was an undergraduate, always called him that, and so my sister and brother and I did too.

I remember him puttering around the apartment in Chicago, fixing things or assembling gadgets out of a collection of nuts, bolts, saved string and wire, and pieces of wood. I remember him playing catch with me and pitching while my friends and I took turns hitting. I remember playing as a toddler on the black marble-pattern linoleum floor of his study while he and my mother and other grown-ups read galley proofs for *ETC*. I must have soaked up some of their conversations, because for years afterward he proudly quoted me as saying, "All crows are black, at least all those I've seen."

Looking back, I think Don's study of general semantics deeply permeated his personality. He was the most open person I have known and the least prone to signal reactions. He seldom responded before questioning or reflecting. Once, when I was doing high-school homework to the accompaniment of top-40 radio, he came into my room and asked, "Can you study with that racket?" When I said it didn't seem to be a problem, he mentioned a college roommate who had always studied with the radio on. He said the roommate became a newspaper reporter, for whom the ability to concentrate amid bedlam had come in handy. Now that I am a father too, I realize that, rather than simply tell me what he thought was right for me, Don first asked a real question. Then he listened to what I had to say and let that affect his response.

My view of the San Francisco State strike is limited. I see Don distantly, as through the wrong end of a telescope, not only because I was on another campus in another state, but also because I was a young adult and he was a father in a time that was difficult for many parents and children. Yet our relationship was less difficult than that of many of my peers with their parents, and the natural friction that

surrounds a child's growing up, leaving home, and establishing an independent identity was a far more important factor than politics. We disagreed about Vietnam, for example, but he listened to my opinions and reasoned persuasively from facts.

It fascinates me how people's impressions of him differ depending on whether they knew him as writer, teacher, strike-breaking administrator, or senator. The student strike forever changed the way people saw Don, and many found the change puzzling. Indeed, a minor pastime in the general semantics community developed around "Hayakawa watching," the collecting and comparing of quotes and anecdotes.

Perhaps as students of general semantics we all should have understood that "Hayakawa¹⁹⁴¹ is not Hayakawa¹⁹⁶⁸ is not Hayakawa¹⁹⁷⁶." Although general semantics teaches us to be aware of the assumption that any person or thing is never exactly the same from moment to moment or year to year or situation to situation, many people were truly surprised at his tough line toward the student strike. Wasn't he supposed to be the great listener, the communication expert? Wasn't the task of communication to find common ground? If the underlying ethical premise of general semantics is that cooperation is preferable to conflict, why did he rip the wires out of that sound truck? I have puzzled with this question for a long time, and I think I have part of an answer. The question is really about Don's basic nature, about what central principles motivated him.

First, Don was very much committed to the idea of a university as a place where men and women can freely pursue ideas, wherever their study might lead them. For example, in his own work, dating back to his studies with Korzybski and the writing of *Language in Action* as an antidote to Nazi propaganda, he was interested in understanding and defusing the symbolic strategies used to manipulate and control human thought. Through the several editions of that book, the focus shifts from the Nazis to the communists to advertising to television.

In the student strike Don saw a withdrawal of cooperation that no communication skills could overcome. Indeed, he saw his predecessors' attempts at finding common ground

meet with reduced cooperation and increased demands. Although he was committed to cooperation over confrontation, he did not believe that confrontation was always to be avoided at all costs. I hold that as a valuable lesson.

The other unifying thread of Don's life was his love for the English language. As a graduate student, he told me, he worked on a dictionary of Middle English. After defining many rare and technical terms, which because of their specialized use were relatively simple to define, he was thrilled when he was asked to define a richly layered word such as "little." Then, he said, he felt he was making a real contribution to the project.

That love of the language was probably shaped in part by Don's father, Ichiro Hayakawa, who left Japan for the United States early in this century with the goal of becoming a writer in English. Although Grandfather never became a writer, he read English literature all his life and, because of his fluency, once had a small speaking role in a Hollywood movie. Don's mother had very limited English, so Don was bilingual until he was about five years old. He often described his own writing style as an attempt to put things in a way his mother could understand. I remember visiting my grandfather in Japan on his eighty-eighth birthday and hearing Don, then sixty-five and a university president, but not yet a United States Senator, telling his father what he had achieved in his life. I could sense Don's desire for his father's approval.

When Don was elected to the Senate in 1976, I was working as a city reporter at *The Oregonian*. Late in 1979 or early in 1980, I accompanied him on a trip to southern California. I remember him telling a group of Orange County Republicans that, with any luck, the GOP would gain a Senate majority in the 1980 election and that his influence and California's would thus be greatly enhanced. Yet as a senator he never engaged in the kind of image-building at which other politicians work so hard and which, in his earlier life, he had labored to understand and decode. As a result, he was defined in the public eye as much by his offhand witticisms — on the Panama Canal, "We should keep it; we stole it fair and square," and on gasoline shortages, "The poor don't need gas" — as by his legislative work. Still, during his time

in the Senate, he developed one of his most famous and controversial ideas, the proposed English language amendment to the Constitution.

Early in 1981, when Don asked me to work for his reelection campaign, the amendment had recently been drafted at Don's request, and his Senate office staff was trying to decide how best to promote it. Leave aside for a moment the pros and cons and see the amendment from the point of view of a freshman senator seeking reelection. That is what I was charged with doing, and I regarded it with equal parts fascination and horror. On the one hand, it offered the ideal fundraising, identity-building issue, perfect for national direct mail campaigns appealing to voters' fears about losing control of their country. On the other hand, it was a virtual certainty that the amendment would be interpreted by many people as divisive and exclusive.

Rather than make the proposed amendment a centerpiece of a reelection campaign, and thus thrust the idea into the most heated of political contexts, Don ultimately decided not to run. Other factors in his decision included his age and his frustration, not so much with the Senate but with the process of raising campaign funds and the brokering of power within his own party. Instead he searched for people who would support his idea without turning it into a vehicle for anti-immigrant agitation, and toward this end he spent the last years of his life.

The underlying idea of the amendment, I believe, sheds light on Don's basic belief: that to cooperate and to survive, we have to be able to talk to each other, that having a common language — or languages — can join us together.

Not every father and son have the chance to work closely together as adults. Don and I had that opportunity again about six years later, when I helped him prepare the fifth edition of *Language in Thought and Action*. Just as he wrote to explain things to his mother, I often write to say things as he might have said them. So working on his book was a strange and wonderful opportunity to explore his mind, rethink his thoughts with him, and try on his style. Perhaps nothing could have better prepared me for the world without him.