

On time-binding as an instrument of peace

By Nan Bialek

Near the end of the movie *The World According to Garp*, based on John Irving's novel, wrestling coach and author Garp and his wife sit in his car, parked in his driveway, watching his children playing through warmly illuminated windows. Garp talks about his favorite pastime – thinking about how he has come to this point in his life:

*It's really nice, you know, to look back and see the arc of your life.
And it's all connected – how you got from there to here – see the
line, you know? It really has been an adventure.*

General Semanticists might say that Garp appears to be engaging in *intrapersonal* time-binding. He looks back through the complexity of memory, beliefs, knowledge, symbols and his interpretation of his experiences, and, through the process of abstracting, perhaps finds some meaning to his existence. If Garp were conscious of the extensional device of dating, he might have seen himself at 'time1,' 'time2,' 'time 3,' etc. finally arriving at this particular moment in, let's say, 'time36.'

Alfred Korzybski, in his lecture *Time-binding and human potentialities*, discusses time-binding as the essential quality that uniquely defines us as human beings:

"...that we can transmit the achievements of a fellow or the achievements of a generation to the next fellow or the next generation. I call that time-binding. Plants and animals don't do it."

Milton Dawes, in his article "On time-binding," points to the potential implications of time-binding:

"This transmission of representational structures from an individual to him/herself, to others and across generations provides us with tremendous opportunities to learn from ourselves and others."

Whether we are studying *intrapersonal* time-binding (experienced by the individual) or *interpersonal* time-binding (experienced with and by others), Korzybski employs a mathematical equation, $\frac{PRt}{t}$, as a structure to describe time-binding in human culture. In this equation, P stands for progress; R stands for the ratio between the advance of that generation and the one before (or, in the case of the individual, perhaps we could say the ratio between the advance of that individual compared to a particular, earlier point in his/her life); and t is the variable exponent which stands for the 'time' over which this process is going on. Korzybski points to the importance of $\frac{PRt}{t}$ as an *exponential* (or chain reaction), *not an additive*, equation: "We are dealing with exponential function which means endless growth, of whatever kind."

The $\frac{PRt}{t}$ equation is one way to illustrate how we learn from those who have preceded us, and to use a mathematical structure to visualize how we learn from our own experiences. Garp does not appear to be looking at his life as a *straight* line connecting a beginning to his inevitable end. He sees his life as the exquisite mathematical structure of an arc.

To me, the idea of time-binding as an arc is extraordinarily resonant. A "time-binding arc" is a recurring theme (although not specifically articulated as such) in my studies at Alverno College.

I would propose that we consider the idea of time-within the structure of an arc. To do so would incorporate the idea that human beings not only have the ability to evaluate their actions and experiences individually and collectively -- an arc also illustrates the idea that human beings have the potential to *change course* through time-binding.

At first glance, Korzybski's formula would appear to have one obvious outcome for the human race – building on the knowledge and experiences of generations going back to the beginning of time, human beings would have “progressed” in every way. It would be difficult to argue that humans have not improved in at least some areas with each generation. We have, for example, emerged from the caves; invented the wheel; reinvented the wheel (at least those of us exposed to corporate culture might think so); created great works of art, literature, music, architecture; humans have even walked on the moon. None of this would be possible, Korzybski might say, without effective time-binding.

Bruce I. Kodish, in his article “Ethics: A General Semantics Perspective,” asserts that time-binding has an important ethical perspective. Since we time-bind by using “language and other symbols to transmit information across time,” Kodish writes, we can both form and study cultures. Each person, he notes, can benefit from his or her own experiences and those of others, and “each generation can start where the last generation left off.” Therefore, Kodish points out, seeing ourselves as time-binders can give us a sense of responsibility for our actions during this moment in time. Effective time-binders would likely understand that their actions will have implications, intended and unintended, for generations to come.

Considering Korzybski's *exponential* time-binding structure, tremendous “progress” could be made with each generation, and relatively speaking, extensive “progress” could be realized in shorter periods of time with each generation. (As an example, one need not look beyond the incredibly rapid development of computer technology during the last half of the 20th Century.) This, of course, assumes that “progress” would be the ultimate result of time-binding. A student of General Semantics, however, might wonder if “progress” has been the primary outcome to date.

During an Alverno course titled “Ecology and Spirituality,” taught by Sr. Margaret Earley, my classmates and I considered the results of time-binding in terms of our spiritual relationships to the cosmos. We learned that many faiths, including Islam, Hinduism, and Chinese religions, as well as the spirituality of indigenous “primitive” peoples, teach that human beings are intimately, irrevocably connected to the natural world. Ideally, this connection requires human beings to live in harmony with the entire universe, acting with an attitude of gratitude and respect toward nature. The reciprocal relationship between human beings and the universe is acknowledged and honored.

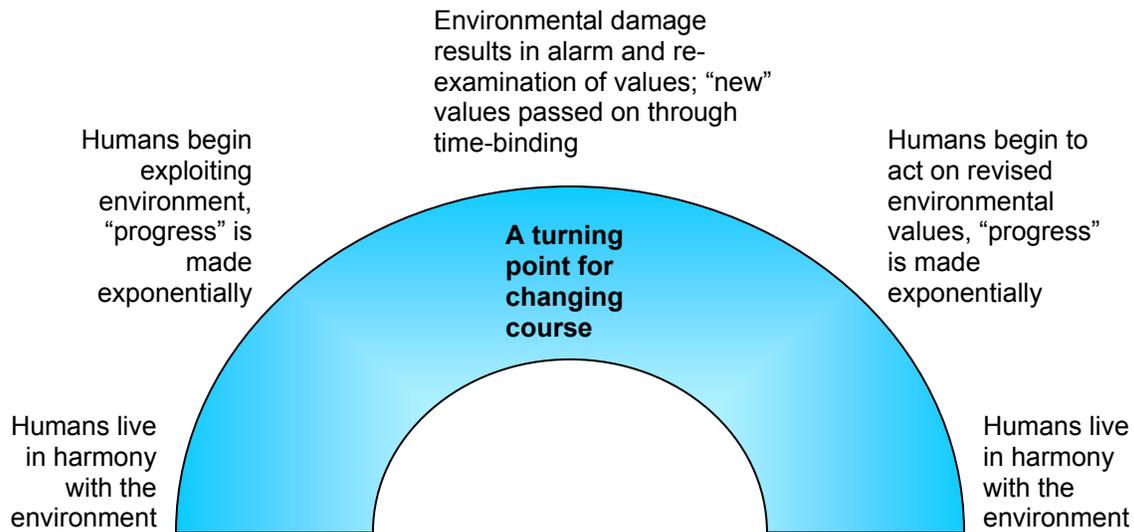
In contrast, Western Christianity has traditionally viewed humanity not only as separate from nature, but as having *dominion* over the natural world. The traditional Christian theology, on which Western culture is based, holds that the natural world was created primarily for the benefit of human beings. This belief has been passed down through generations and cultures, directly through language and indirectly through our actions. Perhaps we can see some of the results of this type of thinking: the clear-cutting of rain forests, the pollution and over-harvesting of vast oceans, the exploitation of resources to extinction.

We can apply Korzybski's exponential time-binding formula to this situation. "Progress," has been made, and made exponentially. It did not take thousands of years for human beings to destroy vast areas of the tropical rain forest or to exploit entire species of ocean life until those animals and plants have been nearly eliminated from the planet. It only required a few generations of exponential technological progress, outpacing our ability or willingness to consider the ethics of applying the technology.

As Steve Stockdale of the Institute of General Semantics points out, Korzybski "saw the problem of destruction as **a gap** between the exponential increase in the physical sciences/technology ... and the linear increase in the social sciences/ethics, etc." As scientists and inventors were time-binding exponentially, our modes of thinking about the consequences of applying technology, and our ethics, were not keeping pace with the rapid increase in technological capabilities.

Is this the legacy of "progress" our subsequent generations will inherit, and, if Korzybski's PRt equation is employed, perpetuate exponentially? If so, the future may be bleak, at best. However, if we look carefully, we may be able to see an arc pattern in our relationships with the natural world. As more people become alarmed at the exploitation of resources, environmental activism begins to grow. The beliefs of indigenous peoples and other cultures are now beginning to gain awareness among people of Western Christian cultures. Native American spiritual beliefs, based on reciprocity and respect for nature, are re-emerging, for example. If the idea of environmental responsibility and resulting practices are passed down to new generations through time-binding, perhaps a healthier relationship between human beings and the environment can be restored. (See Chart 1.)

Time-binding “arc” applied to environmental issues



The idea of a time-binding arc might also be applied to the field of history. During the Alverno course “Gender and History,” taught by James Roth, it became clear to me that history can be viewed from multiple perspectives. Traditional historical scholars, for generations, had not looked at political and social events in terms of their impact on women. Because historians build on the work of prior historical scholars, the history of women went largely ignored, except for the history of those women who had emulated and achieved the status of white men (i.e., Joan d’Arc, female monarchs, and Madame Curie, for example.) At the top of the women’s history time-binding arc, we might find feminist historian Gerda Lerner, who, in the 1960s, began looking at history from what Roth calls “a new angle of vision.” Lerner recognized that women experienced important cultural paradigm shifts quite differently from men. She and her colleagues began studying documents and artifacts from a new angle of vision and “discovered” a more inclusive human story. From essentially “nothing” in the early 1960s, we now see a thriving academic discipline – women’s history.

Perhaps, through time-binding, women of future generations will not be bound by the limitations of socially-imposed gender “norms” which had been reinforced by traditional historical thought. They now have the potential to learn from the generations of women who have come before and

have, perhaps, faced similar challenges. During a course lecture, for example, I learned that most men and women in Colonial America were viewed as equally capable of practicing medicine and running businesses. Through intrapersonal and interpersonal time-binding based on a more inclusive perspective, many women and men are now re-examining and re-defining their roles in society.

In Alverno's "Advanced Media Studies" class, led by instructor Tracy Stockwell, students practiced applying communication theory to messages transmitted through the media. During the time we were studying media theory, Secretary of State Colin Powell outlined America's "case for war" to the United Nations. Columnist Maureen Dowd, writing in the February 5, 2003 edition of the *New York Times*, pointed out that a tapestry reproduction of Picasso's painting "Guernica," which hangs at the U.N., was covered so that it would not be backdrop for Powell's subsequent press conference. "Guernica" is widely regarded as one of modern art's most powerful antiwar statements.

"Mr. Powell can't very well seduce the world into bombing Iraq surrounded on camera by shrieking and mutilated women, men, children, bulls and horses," Dowd wrote.

Applied to the structure of a time-binding arc, we might imagine the decision to cover the tapestry as a turning point at the crest of the arc. Through time-binding, many (probably most) people across the globe are aware of the human suffering that appears to be the inevitable result of war. At the time of Powell's presentation, however, someone apparently attempted to subjugate that awareness and set those who might object to military action on an altered course. Television viewers were exposed to Powell's "case against Iraq" without the pesky reminder of the civilian lives that might be lost. In media communication theory, this is an example of "framing" the message—choosing only images that support a particular perspective.

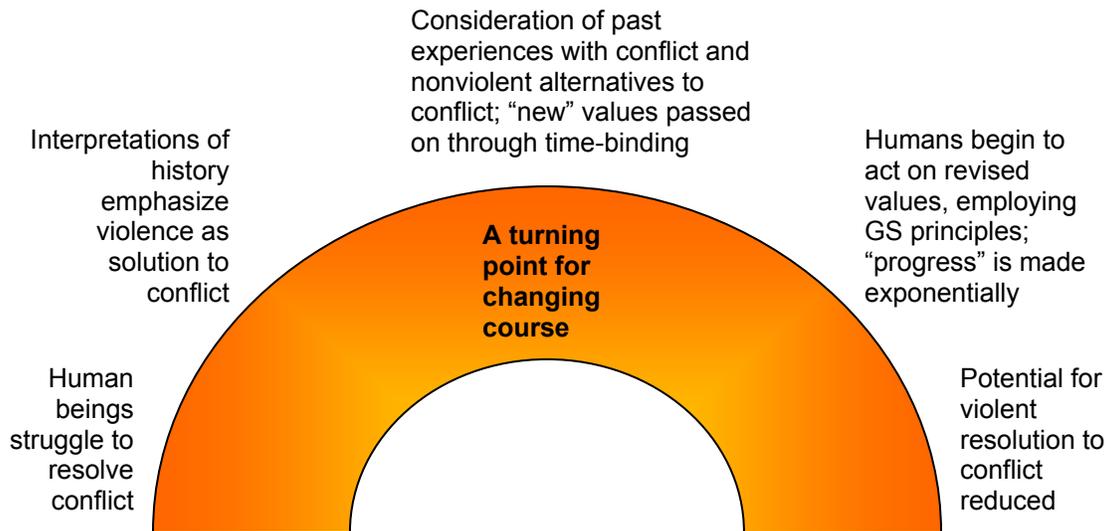
As a student of General Semantics, I also view it as one attempt to persuade doubters of U.S. policy to repress any anti-war sentiments they may have learned through time-binding and change the course of their thinking by bringing to the fore the "good reasons" to wage war. These "good reasons," of course, could also be reinforced through time-binding by focusing on a "good guys versus bad guys" justification for military action: Just as the Allies defeated Hitler in World War II, for instance, America and its "Coalition of the Willing" would defeat Saddam Hussein.

The course "Bridging the Cultural Gap," taught by Daniel Leister, offered an opportunity to consider time-binding as a practical tool in working *toward* peace. The class material focused primarily on transformations that can occur when differing worldviews meet in the lives of both individuals and nations. This, I believe, is where Korzybski's PRt structure has some of its most profound implications, because of its exponential element.

For me, the question is whether individuals can achieve some level of progress toward personal peace when dealing with their own conflicting values. It is also a question of whether cultures can progress toward peaceful co-existence in the face of apparently conflicting worldviews. Again, I would ask that we consider looking at these questions within the framework of a time-binding arc.

Let's assume that the crest of the arc is where we are, as an American culture, in this particular point in time. The left portion of the arc represents our maps of what we perceive to be the "progress" that we, and preceding generations, have made toward peace over a particular period of time. For example, we might ask ourselves what we have learned from prior conflicts: the Revolutionary War, the Civil War, World War I, etc. We might also ask ourselves what we have learned about attempting peaceful resolutions to conflict, such as non-violent approaches advocated by Gandhi, Dr. Martin Luther King and the Dalai Lama. The right portion of the arc represents the future—where we might be headed if our goal is create and preserve peace. (See diagram 2.)

Time-binding "arc" applied to the issue of peace



It might appear logical to look at the arc and give up all hope of a peaceful future. After all, our American history seems to be deeply rooted in conflicts between ethnic groups, generations, clashes with other countries, etc. But Korzybski shows us that time-binding offers us a way to emerge from that interpretation of historical events and into a “saner” future. In his lecture, “Time-binding and human potentialities,” Korzybski talks about “breaking with the old.” He says:

“So here is our hope: the realization that the solution cannot come in the old way, that we have to revise our approach to problems through the revision not of language but structure of language, borrowing our wisdom about human potentialities from human reactions at their best, not worst. Then there are solutions to our human problems.”

If we adopt this view, that we speak about human *potentialities* based on what we have “learned” from the past, our point of power is right now, at the crest of a time-binding arc. And we can employ the principles of General Semantics to work toward “solutions to our human problems.” By changing our orientations from intensional to extensional, for example, we can broaden our perspectives on the world. We can become more inclusive and less exclusive.

By using extensional devices such as indexing, we are more acutely aware that “leader1” is not the same as “leader2.” At a minimum, we can attempt to revise and re-revise our maps to more closely depict the territory, and acknowledge, through non-allness, that our maps will never be 100 percent accurate.

We can do the same, as individuals, if what we seek is peace within ourselves. Like Garp, we can look back at the arc of our lives and consider how our experiences, and what we tell ourselves and others about our maps of those experiences, have brought us to this point. This self-reflexiveness then allows us to consciously change course, if need be.

Most importantly, as time-binders, we need to help subsequent generations to consider how the structure of language can enhance, or inhibit, human potentialities. If Korzybski is correct, a change of course would happen relatively quickly, and perhaps we could dare to anticipate a future of exponential progress toward personal and political peace. If we see an increasing awareness of the functionality of time-binding, I am convinced this can be more than just a dream.

In his 1949 essay, “What I Believe,” Korzybski quoted this passage from the preface of his third edition of *Science and Sanity*:

“We *need not* blind ourselves with the old dogma that “human nature cannot be changed”, for we find that it *can be changed* [if we know how]. We must begin to realize our potentialities as humans, then we may approach the future with some hope.”

(Author’s note: I submit the idea of a “time-binding arc” as a stimulus for discussion, not as an idea that has been scientifically tested.)

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