

56th Alfred Korzybski Memorial Lecture

Playing the Future: Towards a Creative Society

Douglas Rushkoff

Thanks, it's an honor. The honor is beyond words, so I won't even try to express that. What I will try to express is that this is a really interesting group of people and an interesting mix. The half over here in the front, you came because you're members of the Institute of General Semantics, and you pay dues and participate, you receive newsletters. The other half of you—on chairs in the back who were just let in after the dinner—you probably got a Facebook message from Jeff Newelt who's a friend of mine. The word buzzed through the networks and you came.

That's two very different paths to the same event. And, of course, the second group wouldn't be able to come were it not for the generosity of the first group. Right, you guys, by paying your dues and paying the ninety or a hundred bucks it was to come to this dinner, you made this possible for the others. So instead of seeing your contribution as the privilege to get this thing, this talk, you decided your contribution was more about the privilege to *share* this thing—which is very different. I mean I've spoken in synagogues and churches where they won't let anybody in if they're not members because they haven't paid their dues, and their members have to think that they're *getting* something for being members. But what you guys understood—you guys and gals—what you guys and gals understood, was that by sharing your event, you don't lose anything, you *gain* something. You gain value by sharing this thing.

You actually increase your value by sharing, and increase the greater reputation of your organization. And that's what I want to talk about tonight. Not just as the father of a three-year-old, who is now teaching the virtue of sharing. But as someone witnessing a society wobble on the brink of what could very well be total collapse, all for its inability to understand this very basic truth. And as I see it, this is a problem of programming. Not a problem of circumstance. I think we are suffering not because of any intrinsic scarcity, but thanks to a manufactured scarcity that we have now come to accept as given circumstances because we do not have the programmatic, linguistic, spiritual, and intellectual tools to disassemble this illusion. I believe that the people that created this illusion have long since left the building. And those who are operating the machinery that they set in motion do not themselves know that this machinery is arbitrarily concocted to promote agendas of which we are no longer cognizant. And this relates to general semantics because it speaks to our need to seize the technologies—mechanical, mental, and psychological—that we need to reorient ourselves to the world as co-creators rather than simply heirs.

So where I'd start is where I best understand this phenomenon would be the experience of a gamer. Consider how kids approach a video game: the first way they play this game is straight out of the box, as it was given to them. They play the video game, they shoot the dragons and the aliens, and they go through all these levels and they do whatever they can to play the game the way the game was given to them. And then eventually they'll get stuck somewhere in that game.

And what does a kid do when he gets stuck in the game? He goes online, he finds out the cheat codes for the game, and now he comes back and plays that game with infinite ammunition, with special shields, with the ability to walk through walls, or go up an extra level. Is he still playing the game? Yes, he is still playing the game, but he is playing the game from outside the frame of the original game. He is playing the game now as a cheater. As someone who's aware of the rules and understands that he no longer has to follow the rules of the game. He can play the game *his* way—as an individual, because it's more interesting to him to get to the next level and explore than to figure out how to get through a particular trap.

So now he plays the game with infinite ammunition and all this stuff, and now he can get all the way to the end of the game and win, whatever that means—rescue the princess, kill the last beast, he's done. Which in some sense is the saddest part, right? The game is over. But, what does he do then if he is really into this game, if he really likes it? He goes back online, gets the programming tools for this game, the modification set, and makes his own “mod” of the game—his own version of this game. So now, instead of running around in the dungeons of doom, he can turn those corridors into the corridors of his high school, and turn other characters into his friends and teachers and

shoot them up there. Or he can even get stranger with the game and decide, “Well, instead of shooting people, what if we have magic wands and turn people into other beings?” He can now make his own mod, his own modification of the game.

Now why does he do that? Does he do that just because he wants to play his own version of the game? No, he’s going to take his mod, his version of the game that he has programmed, he’s going to put it up online in the hopes that other people will download it. Because now he wants to share what he has done. Yes, he wants to gain status. It’s going to create reputation and social value, and maybe someday the game company is going to say, “Oh yeah, look at the great mod this kid made. Let’s hire him to be a professional gamer or a game designer.” Who knows? But the impulse when he’s finished this game...for him, true mastery means being able to create a mod of this game and share it with other people, who are going to like it. Get it up, and get ten-, twenty-, fifty-thousand downloads. That’s his new definition of winning.

So he’s moved from being a player who accepted the rules as they were written, as just gospel truth, to a cheater, who understands the initial rule-set is for certain people who might want to follow those rules, but not for him, to an author of sorts, who is now using this game to create other kinds of experiences for other people. He’s become a sharer of his perspective, of his way of working with this game.

And of course, that’s not even the last level he can get to. The last level would be to learn the code through which a game is made and actually design his own game from the bottom up—to create his own game—to become a real game designer. As a mod writer, he is a sort of author, but he is using the game engine tools as we might use Microsoft Word or Excel. But what if I make the toolset itself? What if I make the game that other people mod? What am I? I’m a game master. I’m a world creator. I’m a rule maker.

I believe that our civilization moved through these same stages. My bias as a media theorist leads me to see how new media have been responsible for each of our shifts, for each of our evolutions, each of our gamer stages. I’m sure there are other ways to see the same shifts, but in the context of media, you’d have to start before text. So before the invention of text (or the discovery of text, depending on your perspective) people lived in a world with rules that just were. Time was circular. You sacrificed your animals and occasionally your children to the gods. You just did whatever you could to appease the gods and hope they’d keep the rains coming next year, your wife fertile, and the soil producing crop. It either worked or it didn’t. You didn’t really have any impact, any influence over the way the world worked. You could show some respect, but the world just worked the way it did. That guy Pharaoh over there, he’s God. That’s just it. You didn’t consider things like class mobility, you didn’t even think about that. I mean, this was just the way things were. You didn’t make an agreement. You were born into a world that had preexisting conditions that just were. They were immutable.

With the invention of text we got the entire Judeo-Christian tradition. With the invention of text, all of a sudden our relationship to those immutable rules changed. Consider Genesis, where God speaks to Abraham, saying “You will be a nation of priests.” If you think about it, what does that really mean? Who were priests in Abraham’s day? Priests were people who could read and write. That’s why they called writing “hieroglyphics.” Hieroglyphics literally means “priestly writing” (*hieroglyphics*). “You will be a nation of priests” means you are going to be a nation of people who can read and write. Now why would God in the story talk about writing at this point? Because the religion that came out of writing, Judaism, originated in the Torah, which was in the form of a contract—a contract that, given the intention and signers, became a covenant. What is a contract? A contract is an agreement to follow the rules. Not a precondition of existence, but an intentional agreement.

This invention of a contract marked the shift from player to cheater. The rest of the Biblical narrative follows from there. Moses goes into the desert with his brother-in-law Jethro and they write down the rules. “Well, we’ll have a judge, and a head judge, and here’s how it’s going to work. Here’s how we’re going to meet our part of the bargain.” People are going to write the rules through which they are going to organize society. And they write it as a covenant with the original rule maker, with the original game designer. You’re supposed to follow the rules, but you don’t *have* too. Bad things might happen if you don’t, but that’s your choice. It even says it all over Torah, “If you don’t do this I’m gonna make your fields get bad, I’m going to do this.” You have a perfect

right in Torah not to follow the rules. You're just going to be damned for it, right? God's going to hate you. It you can't hear, whatever! But you're at that stage now where as a human being you can consciously follow these rules. And ideally, from a media empowerment perspective, if you are a rabbi you can participate in the writing. You develop the interpretations of the rules and what constitutes their violation.

Now the next big big media invention was the printing press. With the printing press now, everybody has their own copy of these rules, the Gutenberg Bible. Instead of sitting in the town square listening to the rabbi read the covenant to you all, going "uh-huh, uh-huh." Now you got your own copy. So the gentleman sits in his study reading his Bible going, "Oh, well I think this rule actually means something different. I think this rule no longer applies. Or I think I like this one." This is how we got Protestantism: people actually developing own individual perspectives. Their own mods, if you will, on the rules. What applies, what doesn't? Jews would say, "what is halakhik", meaning "what of the law do we still have to follow?" Do we still have to stone a priestess to death if we find out she has used a Ouija board? Can we adapt the law? Change the law? If I'm still a good Jew, but I haven't stoned the sorceress, what does that mean? It means I've made a mod, right? I've modified the rule set—not with the intention to cheat, but to update and improve the game for myself and others.

And then finally, we get the computer and the networks—which now allows us to build something else—which now allows us (at least virtually for now) to beget ourselves. We can create worlds. Whether they're second life, or simulations, or game environments, we are like gods. Or what was that great God game called? Black and White? That was a great one. It was a God game where you are actually God. And you have these little tribes people making fires and praying to you. They took it really literally, but you see my point.

The problem is, I feel like we don't actually seize the capability of the media that is being offered to us. Or only a few of us do and then we don't share it. So for example, with the invention of text we moved from being obeyers of the law to *hearers* of the law. We became people who went to the town square and heard the rules that we were agreeing to live by. But even though we got the invention of *text*, nobody learned to *read*. People learned to *hear*. Only rabbis knew how to read. They weren't even really allowed to add to it. There were Sofers, sure, but they were just scribes obligated to rewrite the text exactly as it had always appeared. So we get the invention of text, and we don't learn how to read or write, we learn how to hear.

Then we get the printing press, and what happens? Do we get a civilization of writers? No, we get an elite of writers, who have access to the printing press, and a civilization of readers. We get the printing press and we stay one step behind the capability that the technology is offering us. And then finally we get, and God bless I love them of course, computers and our internets. And what capability have we gained as a people? Are you programmers? No, we are writers. At best we are writers. We are free to blog to our heart's content.

I can blog in the window that Google-owned Blogger gives me to write in. I do not know how to program. I mean I used to, kinda, basic, Fortran, and some of the old, ancient languages. But I, like everyone else of this great computer revolution, have not seized the capability of programming. We've seized the capability of writing. So we now all have the capability that we were actually granted by our media technology of four hundred years ago. While we are busy writing, we are outsourcing real programming to India and China, or wherever people actually know how to do code anymore. And, for the most part, we don't even consider the biases of the interfaces that we're using. We just want to get the new iPhone. Only if you're a member of Slashdot or some esoteric programming culture do you think about these biases. What does it mean when you have an iPhone that you have to buy a piece of software through the Apple store, and that you're not allowed to trade software directly from person to person. Most of us don't really go there. Instead we maintain childlike confidence that some elite who knows the technology will take care of us. And who is this elite that we're trusting? And how are they biased? I'm not talking about media bias, as in FoxNews vs. MSNBC, or left vs. right. I mean the bias of the media conglomerates and the tools they are making. These are entities who actually know how to use this stuff, to really coerce us—to persuade us to regress to a lower level—to have us regress as opposed to actually gaining the newer capability.

The thing that excited me about the computer revolution, about the internet, about early rave culture, and even the psychedelic revival—the thing that got me reading books by other general

semantics lecturers from Bucky Fuller through Robert Anton Wilson—was the idea that the world we live in is open for discussion—that our natural world is characterized by both preexisting conditions and many, many mutable ones. And that I feel like we are living in society that confuses the two. In other words, we are mistaking a hell of a lot of software for hardware. There's a lot of stuff that we think is written in stone, which has merely been *written by somebody in stone*. Big deal!

And as I read the miniscule portion of the general semantics literature that I've read, and worse, as I look at the way general semantics ideas have trickled down to my culture as neural linguistic programming (NLP) and Tony Robbins and *The Secret*, I worry. I am troubled by this notion that understanding programming means understanding how to reprogram the *self*. And maybe it's just because I'm getting older, but I'm not interested in reprogramming *myself* anymore. I'm interested in reprogramming the *world*—and not personally, as some kind of dictator, but with other people, with everyone. I'm sick of this notion that—and I guess Anne Freud was the best at expressing it until maybe Werner Erhard—this notion that the way to change your experience of life, is to change your *experience* of life. As if my subjective perspective is the problem here. I'll accept that it's part of the problem here. But my subjective perspective is also the result of living within a system of rules, within a system of agreements to which most of us have not agreed. They are simply here as a matter of course. We don't like it, we don't know how they got here, but they seem unchangeable, so let me just work on my little piece of that experience and hang on and hope for the best.

Some people get maybe one notch beyond this self-help fixation and think “Oh, I'm going to learn to *use* NLP. I'm not going to program myself any more; I'm going to program someone *else*.” That's how you get kind of stuck in that “I'm okay, you're okay” conundrum. You conclude “he's not okay, I'm okay”. Or, more commonly, “Well, if it's not me, it's *her*.” Still, I think we have to ask, “What if it's *neither* of us?” What if it's not me or her, but the system of rules that we've agreed are just there as a matter of fact? What if it's the given circumstances? And what if the given circumstances are not given at all? Or were simply given to us by someone else who thought they were given circumstances?

What I'm interested in is how do we achieve the agency to change the world? How do we gain access to the tools and language through which we can begin the conversation and reengineer our world? And I believe that the reason why we don't have access, it goes back pretty directly to the Renaissance.

I spent a lot of time studying the Renaissance, and now that I've studied it, it looks really different to me than it did when I was taught it. I was taught that the Renaissance was this great time, the Golden Age. Everything was worked out: we got cities, and nation, and perspective painting, and we started using advanced currencies, and two column ledgers. And we wouldn't have had the Industrial Age or the Enlightenment or even the individual, or voting rights or personal rights or all that great stuff without the Renaissance. But what really happened during the Renaissance? And why?

What really happened during the Renaissance was a massive centralization of power, of value creation, and of idea creation. And it's funny, the thing that we are going through today—this financial crash that seems to have just happened. This isn't something that just happened—not at all. This didn't just happen. Stuff doesn't just happen. Well, some stuff may just happen, but *this* didn't just happen. This is a direct result of programs that were set in place, I would argue, during the Renaissance, sold to us through the Industrial Age, and now accelerated by computers but obeyed blindly by a civilization that has forgotten all this and how artificially—or at least intentionally—it came to be.

If you look back at what really happened during the Renaissance, what we got was a disconnection from terra firma. We got a disconnection from the real world.

To point to just one specific example, think about “place”—the notion of place. In the Renaissance, what we thought of as place became this other thing known as property. That's a big flip. Place became property. That's a big one and it really did happen then. Another thing we got in the Renaissance was the corporation. The corporation is a really interesting entity. What is the corporation? It's a covenant, it's a charter. People used to do business. There is no problem with business and commerce. That's what you do. I make stuff, I give it to you, it has value for you, you do something for me, you do for something for him, and we make a currency so we don't

have to just trade back and forth, but with a third party and a fourth. That's all cool. What was the corporation? Was it really invented so, "Oh, now we can do more business and do business better?"

No, the corporation was established because in the Renaissance the aristocracy, the monarchy, was losing power and money. They were losing it to a rising merchant class. The people Bucky Fuller used to call "the great pirates." He described them so well in his book *Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth*. They were just the most successful and threatening members of a merchant class that was making more money than the aristocracy. They were getting richer, for all sorts of reasons. But most significant among them was the fact that the royalty was landlocked. They were stuck with whatever their dads had, and the merchant class was out there now, shipping, getting resources, and doing all sorts of stuff to create wealth.

Now the problem that the merchant class had was that they were living in a true free market. Your family business might last a voyage or two before pirates got you, or a fire, then your business goes down and someone else takes over that industry. So the rich merchant class had a problem too: they wanted to know how to lock in their gains. Capital preservation, as your Smith-Barney broker would call it. They were looking for how to lock in their wealth and stature. And that's where the kings and the aristocracy has something they could offer. They could offer a charter.

The corporate charter was not really about growing businesses. The corporate charter was about locking down finances where they were. I am the king, and you are my friend who is really successful right now in the gold mining business out in Africa. Now you're getting richer than me, you are getting more powerful than me. How am I going to get you to respect me even when you are richer than me? How am I going to get you to respect my throne? I'm going to charter your company. I'm going to give you an officially mandated monopoly over your industry. How about that!? Now you don't have to worry about competition anymore. Why? No one else is allowed to dig for gold! You're it! And what are you going to give me? Give me some shares in the company. And as an added bonus, I'm going to mandate limited liability for anything bad that happens. We investors are only liable for the amount of our investment. Okay, that's it. It's going to be in the rules. Don't worry about it.

Now what are we doing? We are not even running a company anymore. We're investors in a company and we're pretty safe. We can hire other people to do all the stuff. What happened in the Renaissance as craftspeople grew into businesspeople? What did they really do? They stopped doing the things they do. If you are a shoemaker and you made great shoes, what was your next step? To become a manager of other shoemakers. And what kind of other shoemakers do you want? This is where the Renaissance logic comes in. Do you want really good, highly skilled trained shoemakers? No. You want shoemakers who can follow your simplest steps as cheaply as possible. You want Home Depot parking lot, illegal immigrant shoemakers you can pick up in the morning, get them to make your shoes, and if one of them gets sick or dies, or gets angry or doesn't listen to you, he's gone and he's replaceable within the hour.

When you do business in the Renaissance fashion, what you want is to separate yourself from the doing of the thing as much as possible. Get as high above it as possible. So rather than running a bunch of people in a shoe shop, I wanna run twenty shoe shops. Rather than running forty shoe shops, let me do twenty dress shops, too, and twenty of something else. You want to move up and up. As you move up, you move further and further away from the actual doing of the thing. Further above it. And the people doing the thing move further and further down the chain of competency. So they're less and less skilled. Then you can eventually have an Industrial Age and replace them as much as possible with machines. Rather than getting machines to work at the pace of people, you can get people to work at the pace of the machines. How fast are you going? You're supposed to go this fast, because the machine is moving the assembly line at this pace.

So what we get is an alienation from work — from experience. An alienation from the real. And instead of valuing the work, or the quality, or the service, or the industry, we get allegiance to a rule system. A rule system that says "I am the King, he is my chartered corporation, it's his job to exact value from my colonies, and to bring it back. And it's your job as the colonist to get screwed. I'm allowed to extract your stuff." By the way, this is what led to the American Revolution. Colonists got to grow the cotton and then were forced, by law, to give it all to the corporation. They weren't allowed to make clothes out of their cotton. Why not? "Because you ship back the cotton to the home country, we make the clothes, sell them back to you, and you have to buy them from us and

no one else.” And that’s the law. Why is that the law? Because if a colonist makes clothes, then he has created value. The equation is for the corporation to extract value, not for you to create value. Any value that he creates is value that the corporation didn’t get. So the worker or colonist has to be as unskilled as possible. We just want your stuff. And once slavery was illegal, then we used the steam engine to dig down there and get that stuff instead. Thanks anyways.

Now among the other great inventions of the Renaissance were centralized currencies. And that’s become a real interesting one for us today. Most of us think of money as real. And even those of us who don’t think of money as real, we still think of money as money. And as your founder Korzybski might say, “Once you say money is money, you know money is not money.” Right? Money is not money. Money is a money. It’s a *kind* of money. It’s one of many monies.

Back before the Renaissance was the late Middle Ages — the much maligned late Middle Ages, when people were so healthy and worked so little and ate so much that women were taller in England in the late Middle Ages than in any time in history until the 1980s. Why is that? Because they had a really good economy. Why is that? Because they didn’t use only centralized currency. They didn’t really use it at all. What people used in the last Middle Ages was something we could call local currency. Local currency worked very differently from the money we use today. I would grow a bunch of grain and stick it in a bag and bring it to the grain store. The grain store would weigh it, and say “Oh, that’s fifty pounds of grain. Here’s a receipt for fifty pounds of grain.” Now I would take this receipt and buy stuff with it. And you’d accept it from me because you know what it’s worth. And even if you know you don’t need the grain, you know this is fifty pounds of grain worth of money.

Now the interesting thing about these local currencies is that they actually lost value over time. Why? The grain store needed to be paid; there were rats, spoilage and mold destroying some portion of the grain, too. So every few months my fifty pounds of grain might become forty pounds of grain or thirty pounds of grain because there was actually less of it. And every year the grain store accounts for this loss. My receipt for grain, my money, is worth less over time. So what does that do to the bias of this money? Makes you want to spend it as fast as possible. You know it’s going to reduce from fifty to forty, so what are you going to do? Buy something else while it’s still worth fifty. So that keeps this money circulating. Circulating really fast, moving around, everybody is spending. So, what does that mean? Everybody is producing, everyone has work. You’re spending on anything, babysitting, whatever, “I’ve got to spend this stuff.” That’s why we got cathedrals in late Middle Ages. Those late Middle Age cathedrals? They didn’t come about because the Vatican wrote a check to Chartres saying, “Here, go build a nice one, Louis.” No, it was towns that had so much excess currency—that had created so much excess value—that they wanted to store it for tomorrow—for their grandchildren. How did they store it for their grandchildren? By building monuments that future pilgrims would come and visit. They were reinvesting in infrastructure, windmills. They did something called preventive maintenance which I know business doesn’t understand today, but they actually maintained equipment so it wouldn’t break down rather than waiting until it broke. Because they had the money and needed to spend it—to keep it moving.

Now, what’s the problem with that? All these towns were rich! Everyone is doing well! Why is that a problem for the king? Because the only way I know how to make money is by extracting it from you guys. So what kings did—and France in particular is the best example of this trend — they made local currency illegal. No more! You’re not allowed to use it. You have to use this other stuff called coin of the realm. And it’s my coin that I produce. And how does coin of the realm work? How does it work today? A central bank creates this money. How? By lending it into existence. That’s how money happens. The kind of money that you have in your pocket is not even money, it’s debt! (Holds up bill) This is debt! How is it brought into existence? Is it earned? No. It is lent.

Let’s say you want to start a business, now you are in modern times, you’re no longer a friend of the king or even friend of the banker. You want to start a business? Money must be lent into existence. The central bank lends to a regional Fed, who lends to another bank, to another bank, to another bank — each getting interest on the money — until it gets to your bank. They’ll lend you a hundred thousand dollars. But what you have to do is in ten years you have to pay back three hundred thousand dollars instead. Okay? Because that’s the way interest works. We’ll give you the money you need to start a business, but the way we’re going to make money off this is by being the people who get to make the money. It’s the very same system that the Renaissance kings initiated. They make money, by making money. Right?

So you can borrow our money, our hundred thousand dollars but you're going to have to give us an extra two hundred thousand dollars when you pay us back. Where are you going to get that other two hundred thousand dollars? From some other poor sucker who borrowed a hundred thousand dollars. From two of them—those two have to go out of business for you to pay me back the money.

And thus competition was born. Now business is a competitive landscape, a scarce landscape, rather than an abundant landscape. Money is not something that grows into existence with the grain. It no longer grows on trees. Money is something that I divvy out and has to be paid back. Money is a scarce resource now, rather than a public utility. That's a very different bias. The only way for those other two people to not go out of business is for them to find other people who borrow more money, get their money, and so on, and so on. Which is why the business has to keep growing. That's why the market has to get bigger. That's why you're not allowed to have sustainable business in a centrally banked economy. There's no such thing as a sustainable business. It has to grow. Because there's more and more to pay back.

And as money grows, and more of our activity and awareness are occupied with servicing the debt it generated, the less time and energy and motivation we have to think or care about anything else. We live in a world where the need for money to grow is an accepted pre-condition of the universe. We don't question it, we don't even know it's a rule. It just is. And it's a more respected preexisting condition than the need of people to have good time, to engage with each other, to eat, or live a sustainable life. We think and build in a way biased towards the needs of money. Which is really just an artifact of Renaissance-era chartered corporations. This stuff. To keep money growing. That's why we got mass production. To keep money growing. Because we gotta make more stuff in less time so people can buy more things. It's got to grow or we're not going to pay back the loans. The debt clock is getting bigger.

The Industrial Age then further arrested our ability to break the illusion of money's pre-existing value. Now the problem with mass production is what? I'm no longer buying oats from Tom. I used to buy my oats from Tom; I like Tom, he lives in my town. I go to him and I buy his oats. If his oats are not good, I go to Tom, "Tom, your oats are bad, I got sick!" And he's got more than just an irate customer as his problem. Because I am the pharmacist in Tom's town, I mix Tom's wife's medication. And if I'm dying with a stomachache from his bad oats or am bloated and cranky, I'm not mixing this medication right and he's in trouble. Because, we are co-dependent. And co-dependency should have never been a bad word in a twelve-step program. Co-dependency is a good thing, not a bad thing. We are co-dependent. He's not Wal-Mart, threatened only by the prospect of losing my business. He is someone in my town who is going to lose my skill, my ability to participate productively—my ability to add value to his life. Likewise, I'm not going to mix bad drugs for him or my oats might be bad.

Once we are mass producing our oats, I stop buying from Tom, whom I know, whom I have a relationship with, whom I go to PTA meetings with. Now it's a big box, a cardboard box of oats put in front of me. I've got no relationship with that box or those oats. This is where branding came about.

Branding came about to recreate and simulate the relationship I had with Tom. They put a Quaker on that box of oats. We all like Quakers, right? They don't believe in anything too objectionable. They're just nice. They talk, they're conversational. It's a sweet group. And the Quaker has a wart on him, a mole or something. He's not perfect, but he is friendly and we trust him. "Sorry Tom, I have a new relationship with this character." The character is the brand. So, how did they get me to have a relationship with their cardboard box? Mass marketing. They made this character. This Quaker. This brand.

Now how do you get that image to me? How do you create a relationship, so I have a relationship with that Quaker before the oats even get here? Mass media. Mass production leads to mass marketing lead to mass media. Mass media did not happen because Lucille Ball was sitting in her cabaña saying, "I want to reach the world with my comedy." Mass media happened because mass produced national brands needed to communicate their mythologies to us so we would buy cardboard boxes instead of from Tom.

But on each step along the way, we are also further alienated from one another. Further isolated. We are dehumanized by mass production, working at our machines. We are alienated by mass marketing relating to a Quaker picture instead of Tom. And we are ultimately isolated by our

technologies. By our media technologies. When my family got its first TV, we had one TV in the living room. For years. But by the time I grew up, we had televisions in every single room with our own narrow-casted cable channel marketing to each one of us. Why? Television does not want a group audience. Television wants you alone, and vulnerable, and sad. Why? What's the message of TV? Buy this product and you will have friends. Buy these jeans and you will get sex. Find any blue jeans commercial, what does it say? Buy these jeans and you will get sex. Now what if you are sitting on the couch watching that commercial with your girlfriend? Are you the appropriate target audience for this commercial? No. I wear these other jeans and I already have sex! No, they need me to be alone and feeling like I wear the wrong jeans. The bias of the media is towards isolating me, because the bias of the medium is the bias of its original purpose which is to market, to isolate—to replace human relationships with relationships to brands.

And out of this culture, today's marketing-driven highly alienated culture that we get our wonderful rebirth of GS, general semantics. And it all happens in the guise of a self-improvement movement. So we can go to Esalen where Maslow himself spoke decades ago about how to move up the hierarchy of needs to self-actualization. I'm going to self actualize, okay? I'll talk to you all later, I'm going to go over here and self actualize.

When was the self born? In the Renaissance, of course. That's when we got the self, that's when we got Dr. Faustus, the first individual in literature with real will and perspective. That was really the turning point in literature—when we started to think of the individual. It's beautiful we got the individual, don't get me wrong. Perspective painting was invented because now we understood a person could have an individual perspective on something. That's what we got. The Vitruvian Man: it's the individual. Michelangelo's individual guy, you remember him? And the invention of the individual led to wonderful things: we got the Enlightenment, we got one man one vote, we got property rights. But eventually the individual devolved into the consumer, which then devolved even further into the shareholder. And all that individuality and self-interest got mixed in with some bad Rand Corporation poker theory which finally led us to believe that each human being behaves in a perfectly self-interested way to maximize value for himself. That's why so many theories of economics are based on the idea of utility maximization, performed by an individual in his own self-interest. But of course if you work at any credit card company and go into their behavioral finance department, you'll find out that the way they construct their ads and pitches is based on their knowledge that none of us is a rational economic actor. We behave completely emotionally and with no regard to our long term economic interests.

And the fact that we are currently, I would argue, still wasting our best mind and culture technologies on the self, is to miss the clarion call of this age, which is that the self does not exist. There is no self. Just as selfish doesn't really work, neither does the self. The self is manufactured conceit. The self is a conceit manufactured during the Renaissance to promote a civilization of competition. Because if we are all competing for resources that we believe are scarce, then the people who have set themselves as those who can dole out those resources will maintain their power. And the banking system that we are living with today, the speculative economy, which has now grown much, much bigger than the real economy, still dominates our perspective on what is economic health. Are we doing better? I don't know. Check CNBC to see what the Dow Jones Industrial average is at.

And as this crash transpires, I find myself and my friends engaging in a bizarre, almost Y2K-style survivalist wish fulfillment. Almost wanting the thing to crash, because deep down we know we've grown addicted, dependent in a sick way on something which isn't real, which is more a yoke, a leash than it is a liberator. We know deep down that it isn't real. We understand that those who speculate on the economy are no longer investing in businesses; they are betting on business. They are a drag on the system. They're not putting money into production; they are extracting money and resources *from* production. And that way, the way out, is not to join another great top-down movement. I like Obama as much as anyone, but it's not a movement that gets us out. It's not to sign on to a new Aristotelian narrative of struggle, conquest, and victory.

It's going to happen—bottom-up through a people-driven network. Maybe something as simple as Facebook or some other social network. It's adopting an ethos of if you have value, share it. And if you want value, come take it. What's happening right here between the group in the front of the room and the group in the back.

It's to actually begin to reconnect to other people, to terra firma, to the activities that you do, to the competencies in your own skill set. Rather than chasing this bizarre fake "carrot" of working in order to not have to work anymore—of having a career in order to get to retire. Retirement is the new afterlife, and the 401-K plan has become the substitute for Christian salvation at the end of the line.

And the way to transcend this silly model and start sharing is to adopt an open source perspective on the world we live in—a programmers' perspective on the world. Not to just write about what bothers us, but to, as Ross Perot use to say, "Pop the hood and fix it." Does everyone have to know how to be a computer programmer? No. But everyone has to at least know that the computer has been programmed. When I used to take computer class in junior high school they taught us how to work a computer, how to program the computer. Now when you take computer in junior high-school or high-school you learn Microsoft Office. You learn the applications that have been created by corporate America for you to get a job in corporate America as it exists now. We should be teaching ourselves how to create the tools to rebuild an economy, to rebuild a society in the image that you want. It's all programmable. We can code this as we want to rather than accepting the existing code as an immutable operating system.

And when we do get that glimpse, that moment, of "Oh, I get it, it is all open source," we tend to fail. We fall back on the illusion of our individuality. We think "How am I going to improve myself, and my experience? How am I going to make me better?" And that's not the object of the game anymore. The object of the game is to find the other people that have seen that secret little dashboard and collaborate with them on reprogramming this whole darn thing—or to go back to Bucky Fuller on re-engineering the world. He always looked at the problems of the world as design problems, not fundamental problems. Redesign.

So, on closing, let me reassure you: I'm a fan of general semantics. Don't get me wrong. I'm a fan of GS, I think it is cool stuff, I think these are great technologies. But they can be applied in any of our number of ways. And I think that we are finally at a stage as a civilization, where we can understand how to apply them collectively towards our mutual problems, towards changing the landscape instead of just the people in it. So I would argue, don't change the self. Don't change the self. The self does not exist. Change the world instead.

Douglas Rushkoff is an author, teacher, and documentarian. His ten best-selling books on new media and popular culture have been translated to over thirty languages. They include *Cyberia*, *Media Virus*, *Coercion*, and *Screenagers*. Rushkoff also wrote the acclaimed novels, *Ecstasy Club* and *Exit Strategy*, the graphic novel *Club Zero-G*, and the monthly Vertigo comic book *Testament*. He has written and hosted two award-winning Frontline documentaries, *The Merchants of Cool* and *The Persuaders*, and is Advisor to the United Nations Commission on World Culture, on the Board of Directors of the Media Ecology Association, The Center for Cognitive Liberty and Ethics, and was a founding member of Technorealism. Rushkoff has been awarded Senior Fellowships by the Markle Foundation, the Center for Global Communications, and the International University of Japan.