

HARRY L. WEINBERG, PhD

1913 - 1968



Harry Weinberg was born in Philadelphia and he died in his home at the outskirts of Philadelphia. I do not know how far he travelled geographically; he travelled far scientifically, philosophically, psychologically. In a letter from Blanche, his wife, written a few days after his death on July 8, she said, 'One student wrote that "his was the ability to gently motivate greatly." Another told me that he was one of the best prepared teachers she had had. "Why not?" say I. He liked best to read and teach. He spent most of his life indulging his brain. When he asked me to marry him, I was amazed. I believe that was my steady state for 31 years. His interests, abilities, facets seemed too many for just one.'

Harry received his BS degree from the College of the City of New York in 1933, and his MS from the University of Pennsylvania the following year in chemistry. He worked for some years as an industrial research chemist in the fields of paint, plastics and printing inks.

In 1940 he came to Chicago for a seminar with Korzybski. Then there were three years of war work, including an assignment with the Merchant Marine, with a copy of Science and Sanity in his duffel bag.

His interest in general semantics grew, and he attended a second seminar in 1946. By 1947 he decided to change his life work and go to Northwestern University for graduate work under Irving J. Lee. He was awarded his MA there in 1948 and his PhD in 1953 in the field of speech.

In April 1947 Alfred Korzybski wrote a letter of recommendation for Harry which read, in part: 'TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN: . . . In 1946 he completed a paper on General Semantics under the title, "Some Functional Patterns on the Non-Verbal Level," [published in ETC., Vol. IV, No. 3] in which he actually made some original contributions to my work. At the December 1946 seminar he delivered a lecture to my class, elaborating further on this paper, and drew general attention to his presentation and skill as a lecturer and teacher.

'I consider Harry L. Weinberg one of the most gifted students I have had, with exceptional creative capacities and tireless energy, besides outstanding potentialities as a high-grade teacher, and a pleasing personality. I can recommend him highly as an expounder of General Semantics and scientific method.'

He began to teach at Temple University in 1948 as an Instructor in Speech and General Semantics, and continued his teaching there as a Professor until his death. His classes in General Semantics on introductory and advanced levels were popular and he became well known as an outstanding teacher. He continued to write and contributed papers to General Semantics conferences. Perhaps his greatest contribution, and the most far-reaching, was his book, Levels of Knowing and Existence: Studies in General Semantics (Harpers, 1959). He showed that general semantics can be used to analyze and better understand almost every area of human life, including religion, Zen Buddhism, cybernetics, decision-making, and psychotherapy, to name but a few. The range is wide. He led us to see unexplored relationships, and we have been deeply enriched.

— Charlotte Read

A REMEMBRANCE

I met Harry Weinberg for the first time in the spring of 1964. I had enrolled in his course in general semantics, because I had been told by faculty and students alike that this was a course not to be missed, that Levels of Knowing and Existence was a beautiful book, and that its author was a "brilliant man," a "genuine person," and an "excellent teacher."

I took this course because I wanted to find out for myself. On the first day of class he entered the room, looked around at the faces before him (about fifty people), sat down at his desk, took a few folders from his briefcase, placed them on the desk, folded his hands, looked up from his notes and said, "Well, what do you want to know?" During the fifteen-week semester he answered the question for us, as he cited newspaper article after article, and example upon example of the ways in which we humans confuse the levels of abstraction.

He discussed almost every field of human endeavor: anthropology, art, biology, chemistry, economics, mathematics, politics, religion. He spoke about the relationship between general semantics and each of these areas (as well as others) and offered the broad scope and integrative aspects of general semantics as a solution to the problem of man's search for reliable knowledge.

I had the pleasure of taking two additional courses with Dr. Weinberg: Communication Processes and Applied Communication Processes, in which we considered the more recent contributions of Cybernetics and Information Theory and their implications for general semantics.

As I listened to Dr. Weinberg lecture, I was deeply moved by his genuinely sincere and intense feeling for people as individual persons, each with his own set of human strengths and weaknesses, each capable of doing some things better than others, each capable of abstracting differently, and each subject to the verbal ghosts that haunt the sensing, feeling, non-verbal self.

He made such an impression upon me with his teaching that I decided to make general semantics my life's work. As a member of my doctoral committee, he was always willing to take time to answer a question or inquire about the status of my work.

While there are many things that Harry Weinberg was, there are many things he was not. For example, he was not obtrusive and conspicuous, but quiet, pensive, and unimposing. He would sit at his desk in his office and silently think his way through an idea. He would ponder something he had read or heard, or think about the way man "reverses the natural order of things," but if someone would enter the room he would smile and tell you what was on his mind. He was fond of sharing a new idea or an example that supported an old one. His illustrations were chosen from life, from newspaper articles, from cartoons (Charles Schultz's "Peanuts" seemed to be his favorite), from letters of former students, who "just last week" finally understood what general semantics 'is all about.'

Much of what Harry Weinberg was to me goes beyond words. Shall I say that I respected him? Yes, and more. Shall I say that I try to pass on his ideas to my own students? Yes, I do. Shall I tell you what I have told others: that his writings are easily grasped, instantaneously clear, and beautifully composed? Yes, I shall. But there is still much more to be said, and infinitely much more that I feel, that can never be passed on, even though one could use the most enchanting superlatives.

Perhaps my remembrances seem awkwardly simple, devoid of any effort to describe Dr. Weinberg as a dynamically complex human being. Yet simplicity was his most outstanding feature. He was able to explain processes like entropy and homeostasis in relatively uncomplicated terms, so that even the least scientifically-oriented student could appreciate the elegance of his organism-in-an-environment. He saw no need to be unnecessarily complex, nor did he fear complexity. But he did not seek to fight complexity

with more complexity. It was his belief that very often the most viable solutions to problems of all types were ignored simply because they were too obvious to be noticed.

I would like to conclude with the closing words from Levels of Knowing and Existence:

And so we come to the end of our journey.
We have spoken of many and diverse things.
But through all their differences ran one
unifying thread, one invariant under
transformation, the structure of the language
used to describe and define them. Now our
portion of the tapestry is woven. I hope the
design is clear, the pattern appealing, and
I hope this weaving is not the end.

— Philip J. Sabatelli

IN MEMORIAM

"When we try to imagine ourselves dead, we can only do so in terms of being alive." Levels of Knowing and Existence, p. 199.

The first generation of major 'popular' explications of general semantics (those published before Korzybski's death in 1950) may be said to start with Chase's (Tyranny of Words, 1938) and end with Johnson's (People in Quandaries, 1946). The second generation, reflecting what seems to me an accretion of sophistication and signs of development, is dominated by the names of Bois, Swanson and Weinberg. The third generation has not yet emerged, but we know of several people in their thirties who are working on various written projects that encourage us to look with excitement to the coming years. When this third generation comes into its own, building as time-binders inevitably do on past achievement, one of the sturdiest pairs of shoulders they will stand on will be those of Harry Weinberg.

After Korzybski himself, I react to Harry Weinberg's writing, by which I mean Levels of Knowing and Existence, as being among the most rigorous and stimulating presentations of general semantics in book form. As Severen Schaeffer observed in a recent conversation, "I recommend Weinberg to my students because he takes them right back to Korzybski." I don't repeat this to suggest that consistency with 'the Master' is Weinberg's chief virtue. I mention it because it economically points up one of Weinberg's many strengths: his serious concern for rigor (since he claimed to be talking about general semantics) wedded to his sometimes startling ability to simply-clarify epistemological complexities that have been torturing over-verbalized Westerners for twenty-five hundred years.

67

I did not know Harry Weinberg personally, having only seen him introduced at the 1967 Alfred Korzybski Memorial Lecture given by Jacob Bronowski at the Harvard Club in New York. When introduced, he stood and responded to the warm applause with the boxer's sign of triumph, hands clasped, raised high above his head. I did have an opportunity to chat with his charming wife Blanche at a social gathering some months later. We may learn something of a man through what we abstract from what his wife has abstracted over the years. And through this conversation I felt that I could glimpse a suggestion of the friendly brilliance that characterizes his published work.

It is to this work that I must return to try to understand the mingled dismay and hope that the news of Harry Weinberg's death stirred in me. Levels of Knowing and Existence constitutes what will long survive as the most important recording of what happened in a nervous system known to us as Harry Weinberg. For many people still living, the more immediate record will be the impressions he made directly in their electro-colloidal arrangements: his many grateful students, his friends, his wife. For the rest of us, Harry Weinberg lives in that dynamic transaction the poles of which are his book and ourselves.

And this is the source of the mixed response that I and, I suspect, most of his readers felt on hearing of his death. Having contributed much to his chosen field (nothing less than the amelioration of the ills of mankind), we looked to him for still more. This we cannot have. But, by virtue of his and our time-binding function, we need not lose what he did achieve. Rather, we fully expect that his achievement will grow as it continues to live, reverberate and combine in the many 'enchanted Looms' that he has so profoundly affected.

— Robert Pula