

A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

Charlotte Schuchardt Read

My title is non-committal, and I realize it would apply to any one of the speakers, since all that we can do is speak from our personal perspectives.

I will begin with a few statistics. 1979, as you all know, marks the passing of 100 years since Alfred Korzybski was born. It is 58 years since Manhood of Humanity was published, 46 years since the publication of Science and Sanity. And 29 years--nearly 30 years--have passed since Korzybski died. Are we ready now to comprehend the significance of what he did?

In the rush of daily events, the deeper issues of living may tend to be glossed over or pushed aside. But today is a time when we can take a little while to reflect on this question.

Last night Don Fabun led us to the year 2001 and thereafter, and gave us much to think about. Today we will hear from Robert Pula, Harry Holtzman and Allen Read about the cultural environment, the attitudes and intellectual questionings out of which Korzybski's work emerged, and which had profound influences on his thinking.

We will hear from Dr. Douglas Gordon Campbell, through whose efforts the Institute of General Semantics was established in 1938--41 years ago. Dr. William Horsley Gantt, whose work Korzybski considered very important, will bring us up to date with regard to the work of Pavlov, with whom he worked in Russia in the 1920's. I hardly know of any work more central to Korzybski's concern than that of Pavlov's and Dr. Gantt's on conditional reactions. As I understand general semantics, it has to do with the conditionality, or the flexibility, of our reactions; we are aiming to become less rigid, more fully conditional. So what Dr. Gantt is working on is of the utmost importance, and it is a special privilege for us that he has been able to come here today from Baltimore for this occasion.

Tomorrow we will hear from Stuart Mayper about Korzybski's theoretical relationships with Einstein's and Popper's work. Dr. Hilgartner will tell us about his own linguistic and formulational developments, and we will look ahead then at general semantics in a possible future world. So we will embrace a wide span of years and look in many directions, and perhaps we will come closer to the question of the significance of Korzybski's work.

We are celebrating the life and achievements of one man, to whom we feel indebted and on whose shoulders we are standing. As the theme of this conference is "time-binding, inheriting and innovating," I would like now, in the spirit of constructive time-binding, to take this opportunity to call attention, with great appreciation, to a few persons

without whose efforts, without whose active participation in Korzybski's dream, in all probability you and I would not be here today.

Korzybski was particularly fortunate in having the dedicated involvement of two women. The first of these was his wife, Mira Edgerly, an American who trained herself to become a highly successful portrait painter on ivory. She was well established professionally at the time they met in 1918, and she continued to paint socially prominent people for the next approximately 25 years. In addition to her professional work, she gave unreservedly of her time and effort to help her husband. I feel quite secure in making the statement that without her enthusiastic challenging, her inspiring continuous interest, her relentlessly driving energy in assisting Korzybski in every way she could, neither Manhood of Humanity nor Science and Sanity would have been written. A brilliant, self-educated woman, she was also very humanitarian, and Korzybski's work represented the fulfillment of her own life dream.

The second woman to whom we are all immeasurably indebted is Marjorie Kendig Gates, best known to us as M. Kendig. One of the founding trustees of the Institute of General Semantics when it was established in Chicago in 1938, her great ability as an administrator to organize, to plan, to budget, to assist in innumerable ways in launching it as the Educational Director, made it possible for Korzybski to carry out his work as lecturer and writer. He was able to give many seminars throughout the year at this new center for his work, and also wrote quite prolifically. Miss Kendig's efforts and know-how were crucial in establishing and developing the program of the Institute, and even more crucial in carrying it on after Korzybski's death in 1950. Her understanding of the theory, her high intellectual standards, her dedicated energy, her ability to write, to edit and guide, her sharp business abilities, were responsible for keeping the ongoing Institute and the standards for general semantics at a high level of quality, despite continuing financial uncertainties.

Korzybski was also fortunate in influencing many splendid writers and teachers--and I want to pay special tribute here to those who are no longer living, whose writings were and still are so important a contribution to the understanding and development of the original formulations. I refer particularly to Irving J. Lee, Francis Chisholm, Douglas Kelley, Wendell Johnson, Marjorie Swanson, Harry Weinberg, and Sam Bois. These names are familiar to those who know the literature; we continue to read their books and learn from them.

The literature of general semantics has been extensive and is known by most of us here in the form of books, monographs and articles, with two lively journals: ETC. since 1942 and the GENERAL SEMANTICS BULLETIN since 1950. I may mention here that Korzybski wrote much more than two books. The books are what we usually hear about. But the Collected Writings to be published contains 57 items. It is a great disappointment to me not to be able to have a copy of the Collected Writings on hand today. I had intended to. As soon as I am able to get a few weeks free of other responsibilities, I am most eager to finish what Miss Kendig has nearly completed, and is not able to finish now.

So we have a great deal that we have inherited, and important contributions to the original. This constitutes a part of where we are today. . . . Where are we today? In spite of the by now long list of publications in this work, it seems that a great deal of confusion and misinformation exists in the public. We find lack of understanding, or superficial understanding, premature dismissals, distorted interpretations, etc.

The influence of Korzybski's work is difficult to assess for a number of reasons. Although many of the outlooks for which he fought are now a part of our culture--and I may add, many are not yet--he himself is not known to many as one who methodologically synthesized the trends fifty years ago and formulated them into a system. There have been a good many others whose work runs parallel to Korzybski's non-aristotelian direction, helping to change the cultural climate--to bring about the new paradigm of which many people speak today. So that some of the main principles can now be said to be 'in the air'. As Korzybski put it in 1941, "The separate issues involved are not entirely new; their methodological formulation as a system which is workable, teachable and so elementary that it can be applied by children, is entirely new."

Although the formulations, or aspects of them, are a part of many courses in schools and universities throughout the country, and in many places abroad, it is still difficult to teach a course called general semantics, and most often the principles are taught under another name. The source, the basis, of the work often remains undisclosed, a hindrance to the time-binding process, since one is not led to the original for one's own interpretation.

The name general semantics has been an obstacle, a situation with which most of us here have long been familiar, as we have to explain what 'general semantics' is not.

I am not going to belabor these hindrances, which most of you have known for years. I would rather say how encouraged I feel at the present time.

I have no doubts about the vast influence that Korzybski's work has had, which I continue to learn about. It has taken many and varied forms. For instance, to name just two I heard of recently, in a letter received the other day from Dr. Karl Menninger of the Menninger Clinic, he wrote: "I am glad that the Alfred Korzybski Memorial Lecture is going to occur. I remember him well from when he was here some years ago. He influenced the life and thought of many of us."

In Pisa, Italy, an unexpected development is taking place. Professor Lia Griselli, who teaches English at the University of Pisa and translated Manhood of Humanity into Italian, offers her bilingual book as a contribution to this occasion. She recently wrote me: "On the basis of Chapter III of Manhood of Humanity some teachers of French and German here have been persuaded to cooperate in editing a new volume whose title is Prospettive nuove per la 'Grammatica' (New perspectives - or outlooks - for 'Grammar'). And this, however strange it may sound, has received a partial aid from the Italian Ministry of Education."

I am feeling encouraged because there are signs of a new surge forward in the development of general semantics. We are actively working toward delineating more formally the standards for writing about and teaching the work--something that the Institute and other serious workers have dealt with in an informal way so far. The problems of carrying out research are being tackled, and I believe will be worked out more effectively soon. There is much to be done to meet the needs--and the needs are many. To name a few:

1. To explicate, clarify and develop the theory,
2. To show theoretical relationships with other current theories and trends,
3. To correct errors and misunderstandings which have developed over the years,
4. To apply the work to our own lives and professions,
5. To teach and train others,
6. To set standards for the teaching and writing of the work,
7. To establish the certification of future teachers,
8. To carry out research in developing the theory, and in assessing its effectiveness in experimental situations.

This is a partial list. We are moving ahead on these needs. It would be hard to evaluate which seems most important, as in fact they overlap. In a way, we have hardly begun to develop the potentials of what Korzybski laid down in a system which he considered far from complete. At the same time we have to ask ourselves whether we are open enough to what is being learned in other disciplines to be able to assess them intelligently and perhaps incorporate their methods and new knowledge. There is a great deal going on in other areas. Korzybski's non-aristotelian methodology grew out of a context rooted in the early 20th-century developments, at the forefront of the THEN-NEW. I remember one of the first things Korzybski said to me, back in the 1930's: "You are on the new side, but not the newer-new." I did not know much about the 'newer-new', which to him meant breakthroughs that were happening in physics and quantum mechanics, and so on. So perhaps that 'newer-new' we would call just 'new' in 1979, and something else 'newer-new' now.

I see it as a continuing challenge to us, if we are to carry out the time-binding function, to relate the work to present day contexts, to the new breakthroughs, the new trends. I can think of no better tribute to Korzybski than to take his work seriously and build on it, bringing to life that dreamed-of exponential function of advancement--advancement in the sense of the heightened awareness of a more mature society.

This would include what Don Fabun spoke of as 'wisdom', rather than just knowledge or knowledge about something. If we can learn to become more wise and more mature, I believe that this would be much closer to

the dream that Korzybski was aiming toward in the 'manhood'--or 'adulthood' we would say in 1979--of humanity.

Toward the end of his life, viewing his life as a whole, Korzybski returned in his thinking to his original 1921 theme of time-binding. He had become involved with writing Science and Sanity, with teaching and carrying on the Institute, and hardly ever spoke about his first book for some years, until he began to summarize his work. Without the awareness of time-binding, feeling ourselves to be a part of the human experience of inheriting, and changing, and giving, with the ethics and sense of responsibility that this involves, without this foundation for his formulations, the realization of Korzybski's intentions would remain incomplete. Through it, we can each find and develop our unique place in the whole of life on this planet.

BIOGRAPHY

Charlotte Schuchardt Read, vibrantly alive and happily well, has already achieved the status of an historical figure. With M. Kendig, she completes the roll call of the people who have done most to carry on the Institute of General Semantics and maintain the integrity of general semantics as an open-ended but rigorous discipline.

Following her special interests, Mrs. Read taught the "semantic relaxation" in Korzybski's seminars. An experimenter in her own right, her work later evolved to the present wide range of non-verbal sensing, listening, and organismic awareness training that she conducts at the Institute's annual summer seminar-workshops. The current work, based largely on the teaching of Charlotte Selver, aids in ". . . learning to come to more inner quiet, and to allow a more natural functioning," and in bringing some of Korzybski's principles to the experiential level.

Charlotte Read was born in Illinois, received her B.A. from the University of Wisconsin (zoology, physical education and dance) and her M.A. (science education) from the University of Chicago. She studied dance with Margaret H'Doubler in Wisconsin, and with Marian Van Tuyl (the wife of Dr. Douglas Gordon Campbell, whose interview appears in this Bulletin) and Anne Rudolph in Chicago.

Having heard of the work of Korzybski, Charlotte attended a seminar in 1936 given by him, during which she approached him and admitted that she didn't understand everything he said, especially about the new physics. Korzybski replied, in his not uncertain manner, "Why don't you do some reading sometime!" She read a book (Science and Sanity) and, in 1939, joined the Institute's staff as Korzybski's editorial secretary.

Since then she has read many other books while working in various capacities at the Institute, eventually becoming Editor of the General Semantics Bulletin and Director of the Institute. She is also Literary Executor of the Alfred Korzybski Estate.

In her role as editorial consultant she has importantly assisted in the development of many major general semantics writings, including the later papers of Korzybski after 1939. She has contributed to the literature significant articles of her own, first as Charlotte Schuchardt, then since her marriage to Professor Allen Walker Read in 1953, as Charlotte Schuchardt Read. Even a partial listing should include:

"Alfred Habdank Skarbek Korzybski: A Biographical Sketch," General Semantics Bulletin (GSB) No. 3, 1950; "Some Aspects of Behavior: Comments on Several Physiological Approaches," GSB Nos. 8 & 9, 1952; "Communication As Contact," GSB Nos. 30 & 31, 1963/64; "Exploring Relations Between Organismic Patterns and Korzybskian Formulations," GSB 32 & 33, 1965/66; "Alfred Korzybski: His Contributions and Their Historical Development," The Polish Review, Vol. XIII, No. 2, Spring, 1968 (reprinted in GSB No. 35, 1969); "Toward a Sense of Unity," in Lee Thayer (ed.) Communication: A General Semantics Perspective, Spartan/Macmillan, 1970; A major article, "General Semantics," in the Encyclopedia of Library and Information Science, Vol. 9, 1973; "Basic Korzybskian Orientations in the Organizing of Experience," in Washburn and Smith (eds.), Coping With Increasing Complexity, Gordon and Breach Science Publishers, 1974; "Some Criteria for Humanizing," ETC.: A Review of General Semantics, Vol. 33, No. 4, December, 1976.

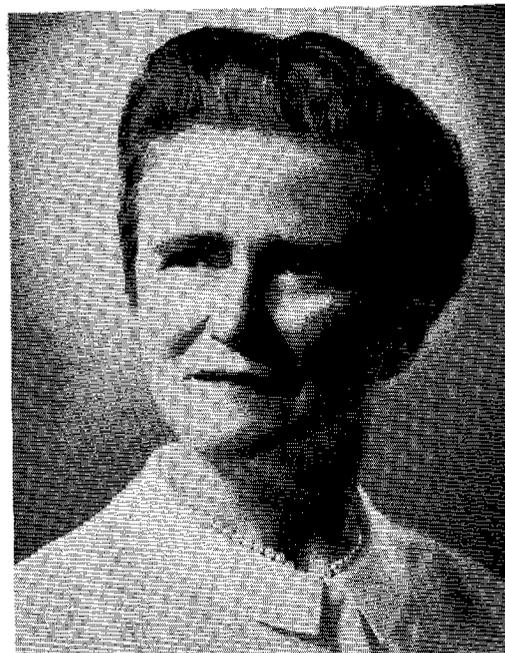
Under her imaginative and vigorous leadership, the Institute program continues to be innovative and, despite the usual tight finances, expanding.



Charlotte Schuchardt Read, 1979



Mira Edgerly Korzybska
(Korzybski's wife)



M. Kendig, 1961