

## BACKING UP INTO THE FUTURE

Harry Holtzman

This is a public meeting and before I begin on the business that you're particularly interested in, I can't help but think, when I arise and when I go to sleep, about Cambodia and I'd like to urge every one of you to telegraph your congressman to do something about it. I feel that this country is largely responsible for what has been happening in that part of the world and I feel very dirty about it as an American. I feel we should, every one of us, think of the Holocaust--it's the proper word for that now--that's taking place there now. I hope you won't mind my introducing this. I feel compelled to.

I would also like to say that when I think of my relationship with the Institute of General Semantics, I can't help but think of Kendig. About two years ago, when I visited her with my children, she repeated something to me that she had said the year before. She just wanted to live to see this Centennial, and she has made it and it's fantastic, because if you saw her and if you had known her years ago and you haven't seen her, you wouldn't believe what's left. But the spirit is all there. And so, I want to think of Kendig --Korzybski is being thought of and we'll go on with this today.

I don't know whether it was Bill Exton or Korzybski or both of them that suggested when I came to conduct the workshop in '47 for the first time, that I was sent to them--sent to the Institute from heaven--as a punishment. [LAUGHTER] But (laughing) in any case, my experience with Korzybski seemed to be very much unlike the sad, sad piece written by that brilliant man, Anatol Rapoport, not long ago in Etc., about his meeting with Korzybski. It was certainly true that Korzybski had an absolutely unassailable ego. There's no question of that, and it was very true that when you met and you asked him a question that you sat and listened for a long, long time. That was Anatol's experience, which sort of stunned him. But I had another kind of experience with Korzybski. We'd had some relationships during the year before and I was quite pleased and surprised to be invited to be on the Institute staff and to have the opportunity of working with this incredible cross-section of people from different countries.

We had Robin Skynner, who was still in his RAF uniform, one of the boys who saved Britain, a flier. We had Surindar Suri who is a very interesting and a very articulate man from North India. There were others. I can't remember how many countries were represented there, but there were many and diverse, very diverse orientations.

There was a large cluster of mathematical-physical people at that first seminar, too, and Army and Navy people and business people, and so it went. To me it was a very elegant opportunity to attempt to see how functional the formulations projected by Korzybski could be, and to what extent.

Even before that time I had a point of view toward the categories that we have been using since the late Bronze Age in defining the differentiated aspects of culture or knowledge or information or whatever you want to call it. We were backing up into the future and, linguistically, even those terms which we were accepting categorically could become obstacles. So I was dealing in that group particularly with people who had no orientation about or least expected anything having to do with ART; and you know, if you take a serious view toward the notion of reification or misplaced concreteness, then there's no such thing as 'art' or 'science'. Long live 'art', long live 'science', but there ain't no such unicorn. What we're dealing with are systems of symbolization by which man codifies his sensations into communicable intra and inter-organismic modes, and there is a difference.

Now, therefore, when I arrived I didn't want people to surface all their inhibitions and all their prejudices against the 'self' by which they were prevented from experiencing themselves; so I said that this is to be a workshop for the application of the methodology and what we're dealing with is non-verbal abstracting in the visual field.

Now to me it was a very elegant opportunity and evidently it was very successful, in spite of Anatol Rapoport's rather negative experience and my own personal experience with Korzybski.

Korzybski and I clashed. He had a lot of ego and so do I (laughing). I was not looking for heroes. For me, the formidable contribution of Korzybski, whose book I had read thoroughly--I had a lot of trouble and couldn't really complete the last part, the mathematical equations, because I'm an uneducated person--but the bulk of that book I carefully read and noted. I took a whole month all by myself in the summer place in the Berkshires; I was alone, and I could really absorb it.

So when I came in '47 to the Indian Mountain School, there were a couple of trivial and non-trivial incidents. I even objected strenuously to the implications of one or two of his statements and I went to Kendig and I said, "Either it's clarified or I leave."

(Laughing) And it was clarified somewhat, but I was sure to oppose it in my own workshop in no uncertain terms, so that it was clear from my point of view. I wanted to disassociate myself from some of the implications. That's really trivial, but what I'm trying to tell you is that the relationship with Alfred was clash, clash, and at one point I said, "You know, in that big tome of yours, you have written--how many hundred pages, 700?, 600?--and you're talking about all of human behavior and there's not a thing there about art, and what you say about music (laughing)--," you know, he condemned jazz, you see (laughing).

"Well," he said, "to tell you the truth, I didn't know anything about it." [LAUGHTER]

So then I said, "Yep." [LAUGHTER]

Well, the second seminar--we were still at the clash level and I was delighted. It was Kendig who felt that what I was doing was very important to them and it was she who asked me back the second time.

Now you know Korzybski would interview a student privately and individually, but to do that you were expected to write a kind of autobiographical sketch to give him some clues as to what made you tick. At the first seminar Charlotte asked me if I'd like a meeting with Alfred and I said, "Yes." And then she said, "Well, have you done your autobiography?" And I said, "Has he done his?" [LAUGHTER]

You know (laughing), I was sent to them from heaven. [LAUGHTER]

This was 1947 and I was much better at being worse. [LAUGHTER]

So the second seminar Charlotte came again and said, "Would you like a meeting with Alfred?" And I said, "Sure." Well, she set up a meeting and there was no discussion of an autobiography; when I came into his room he told Charlotte to bring us a drink each and told her to go away. So she left (laughing)--and then he said, "Tell me; the students come here and tell me you do fantastic things with them. What is it you're doing?" [LAUGHTER]

And I want you to know that he sat for two hours and listened to me and didn't interrupt me once (laughing). So Anatol Rapoport, whom I respect, had the opposite kind of experience (laughing). Now this is a kind of ego trip, but it's one of my sweetest reminiscences.

Another reminiscence I love is, we used to have Saturday night parties and sometimes those seminars in the beginning used to last more than three weeks. At the last party I suggested a non-Aristotelian costume party and I always came as an Aristotelian devil. [LAUGHTER]

But if you have an image of Alfred, you would know that he was totally shaved and had a big head and big rimless glasses, and I always wanted to put a big "8" on top of his head. [LAUGHTER]

Now one of the things that I have never been able to understand is, why is there so much problem in observing the extraordinary usefulness of what this man did, in his Science and Sanity especially. He had learned about human behavior and he observed that we knew most of our human behavior from the study of pathology. Suppose, he suggested, we codify human behavior at its best. Now how anyone could fail to be interested in this is impossible for me to understand. How many people have tried this? How few efforts, so directly put, have been made? I know of very few.

I'll never forget Dave Levine, a young mathematician, who came dashing in one morning and started hollering, "General semantics, general semantics, is driving me sane!" [LAUGHTER]

Well, I want to say that my excited interest in the Institute came as a kind of culminating point to a series of experiences I'd been cultivating at the level of adult education. At the time I was linking with the Institute, I was chairman of a school of cultural studies, the Katherine Dunham School of Dance and Theatre, and I had worked in other areas with adults on the assumption that "What one fool can do, so can another." And that if a person hasn't had his brains completely mashed, he should be capable of grasping fundamentally many essential issues in any form of communication. It turns out for all of us, as we observe, as Korzybski used to suggest--"You want to be a

genius? Follow one around." It turns out that the genius is a person who does things the easiest way, and that what stops us are all those prejudices and stupid-stitions and by-roads and bypasses and dead ends that we follow which persuade us that we're incapable of being human in being. Now to be human in being means that you're a symbol manipulator. There's no way--as George Kingsley Zipf suggested, there's no way of not observing the paradise myth usefully. I mean, the apples that they ate in Eden--the apples of consciousness--and as Zipf suggested, all we can do is eat one after the other of Eve's delicious apples.

You take a point of view whether you like it or not. You cannot fail to take a point of view, and the question becomes whether the point of view you're taking is an anachronism. Is it 19th century, 18th century, or 17th century, or the 20th century? Is it now? So there is a responsibility that we have for ourselves.

He used to like to quote Housman: "I a stranger and afraid in a world I never made." Well, he never put it this way, but once you reach the age of consent, you're a stranger and afraid in a world you're making, you see. Every one of us is responsible and no one is free from a point of view. There's one way of being free of having a point of view: turn blue and drop dead, or coagulate as Korzybski liked to say. Like it or not, you take a point of view, and that involves every facet of one's being.

So at the Institute I developed, very excitedly, a 'message'. About three years later I was invited to come to my college [Brooklyn], because of work that I had done elsewhere, not at the Institute but related to what I was doing then. Word gets around and I also had some status as an artist in the community. At my college I had the most extraordinary experience, which I attribute a great deal to the strengthening and compelling clarity that I felt that I received from Korzybski's contribution.

When I came to my college, I came as a substitute for someone for one year. I stayed for twenty-five. Nearly every department has something they call a "shit course," and there was one in my department with a rather well known, established artist, and they hated it. It was an elective course for elementary school teachers, a basic workshop. There was one section. They had one at the graduate level, too, but they couldn't fill a section, so they had to put half a dozen people in with art majors. They used to sit on opposite sides of this long studio and never speak to each other because they were lepers to each other.

I was asked if I would take this course and I said, "Yes." Would I mind? I said, "I mind, I want it." I saw it as an opportunity, the same kind of thing that I was doing at the Institute, and the work that came out of the students at the Institute, although it had no such intention, was sometimes reproduced; once, even, on the cover of one of the Bulletins,\* and it was very far, very advanced even from what was happening in the art world. Some of the people who were quite mature even became professionally oriented in consequence, because doors were opened to them that they didn't expect ever to see through.

---

\*General Semantics Bulletin, Nos. 10-11, 1953. Ed.

And so at Brooklyn College, which was then considered the General Motors of education, the largest in the world, there was a marvelous man, Carlton Washburn, an education protégé and friend of John Dewey, a man who looked like Gilbert Stuart's portrait of George Washington, and a really interesting person. He was willing to experiment.

Now this was an elective course and inside of two years this one section bulged into eight sections from the work I was doing, and I had to begin to train other faculty members in my department. By then the word was getting through to the administration and Washburn got very much interested and met with me a couple of times. Then he decided that it had to become a required course. It went to thirty sections. And then--it went to hell. [LAUGHTER]

When it became required, it became something else; and, besides, it was being taught by so many people who were not properly oriented. I retired about four or five years ago from Brooklyn College and everything has gone down. The course was taken away, I've heard, as a required course, and I think it was a good idea the way it was being taught.

Anyway, that's fate, but the point is there ain't no substitute for experience. The education students got a lot of theory and I said, "Here you're going to use yourself as your own guinea pig for your best ideas of education." I knew their jargon and they were up to here with theory, theory, theory. And the work they began doing and always did was superior to that produced in the basic workshops of the majors, and this caused a lot of interest.

Anyway, that was my delight and my ego trip, which gave me a lot of conviction that what was going on here and Korzybski's contributions were far from arguable.

I'd like to conclude with an extraordinary reminiscence of an extraordinary meeting I once attended at the New School for Social Research more than 30 years ago, a conference on methods of philosophy and the sciences it was, and Dirac, one of the great quantum brains, was holding forth on his theory on the blackboard and expounding and explaining it as he went. Most of the audience were young physicists, I think. There were others. At one point he reached into his equation--reached a parenthesis in his equation--turned around and said, "In order for us to proceed, I have to disregard this remainder," and there was a gasp, a polite restraint, and then he went on. And, of course, when he stopped they said, "How can you do that?" And he said, "Well, this is the best language we have now. The problem is to find a better language."

Korzybski in his last seminar said something that really made me love him. "Oh," he said, "this is 1950--I give GS fifteen years, maybe twenty-five years." Now he didn't say what he thought would displace it, but he certainly felt that there would be a displacing approach. If one comes along, we won't have to regret it because nothing that's moving and significant is ever lost I believe. Everyone who has found importance in this work knows how deeply they've been touched by it. I think we all have.

## BIOGRAPHY

Associated with Korzybski's work since the mid-forties, Harry Holtzman brings a special (Holtzmanesque) quality to the summer seminar-workshops. With such admonitions as "You have to differentiate before you can integrate," he rubs participants' noses in the non-verbal. His participating lecture-demonstrations (non-verbal abstracting in the visual field) are designed to help students of general semantics see with a minimum of deflecting, internal chatter. Seminar participants consistently evaluate his sessions as a highlight of the two-week workshops.

Currently enjoying retirement from Brooklyn College, Harry Holtzman was born in New York City in 1912 and, he says, decided he would be an artist before he entered first grade. From 1928 to 1932 he studied at the Art Students League in New York. This was followed by a stint as instructor at the Hans Hofman School (1932-33), conducting its summer session in 1935. Those tough yet exciting times for the arts in America found him working as administrative assistant in the mural division of the Federal Art Project, 1936-37. He was also the organizer of American Abstract Artists in 1936. In 1940 Harry designed the exhibit "Introduction to Basic Conditions of Form and Space" for the New York World's Fair.

During the forties Harry Holtzman held many appointments: guest artist at Stephens College, Columbia, Missouri (1942-43); adult education

program, Riverside Church (1945-47); Baptist Educational Center (1947); and, also in New York, the Katherine Dunham School of Dance and Theater (1946-49). His formal association with the Institute's seminars began in 1947 and has continued, with some interruptions, to the present.

Not limiting himself to the non-verbal or the pictorial, Harry has written for the General Semantics Bulletin and many art and education journals. He founded and, from 1950 to 1953, edited the review Transformation. Very adventurous and influential in its time, its issues have become collector's items. At least one Institute Trustee (Bob Redpath) has called for their reprinting.

Besides Korzybski, the man most influential in Harry Holtzman's life-as-artist is the great Dutch modernist Piet Mondrian. Holtzman was responsible for bringing Mondrian to America from England where Mondrian had sought refuge from the German conquest of Europe. Harry has edited Mondrian's writings, has written about his friend (who was more friend than 'master') and organized many exhibits of his work.

Since becoming Mondrian's heir and retiring from active teaching, Holtzman has become a world traveler (often taking his triplets with him), organizing exhibits, researching un-or-little-known art around the globe, and, with a steely twinkle in both eyes, watching the growing interest in the painter Harry Holtzman.

