

A

Brief History of General Semantics,**1950 – 2000**

By

Charlotte Schuchardt Read

This account was presented at the Colloquium sponsored by the Institute of General Semantics entitled “The Legacy of Alfred Korzybski After Fifty Years” on November 4, 2000. For an historical record of the Institute of General Semantics, on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary (1988) of the founding of the Institute (1938), see “The Institute of General Semantics: A Brief Historical Survey”, by Charlotte S. Read, *General Semantics Bulletin*, Number 54, p. 62.

In March 1950, we who were closely connected with the Institute wondered how we were going to meet the challenges ahead without Korzybski. The answer came from Miss Kendig, then associate director, who later became director. I can do no better than to quote from her own words in *General Semantics Bulletin* No. 3 in her editorial, “As We Go Forward”:

I have not lightly taken up the duty of acting as director of the Institute during this transition period. Rather I have a sense of our heavy responsibilities to the living and the dead. These responsibilities seem well-nigh overwhelming when I contemplate our task of preserving the integrity and so the potentialities of the discipline for scientific and social usefulness; when I face along with this the practical problems of maintaining our center as a dynamic institution. To go forward as so very many have expressed the wish for us to do, we shall urgently need the work, the semantic and the

financial support of all who have experienced the human values of general semantics-in-action, and are like-minded about our mutual time-binding responsibilities.

So what has happened during these 50 years?

There has been so much activity, worldwide, that here I can only touch on some of it in broad sketches, leaving out much of the ups and downs, the struggles, disappointments, the excitement and hopes, achievements and satisfactions, the feelings, frustrations and rewards.

In 1950, the Institute office was located in a large house in the country in the northwest corner of Connecticut, four miles from New York State, and ten miles from Massachusetts, in the foothills of the Berkshire Mountains, in Lime Rock near Lakeville. We had moved there four years earlier from Chicago.

Science and Sanity, Korzybski’s book in which he set forth his new theory and called it general semantics, was popular, as well as con-

troversial, in intellectual circles. Enrollment in our Institute seminars was strong, publications about the work were growing, and groups were forming to study.

The International Society for General Semantics was still in Chicago; it moved to San Francisco in the early 1950s. S. I. Hayakawa, together with other leaders such as Irving Lee, Anatol Rapoport, Russell Meyers, and Wendell Johnson, were developing their programs, lecturing, teaching, writing. The Society had begun publishing its quarterly journal, *Etc., A Review of General Semantics*, in 1943. The Institute began its annual *General Semantics Bulletin* in 1950. These journals have continued throughout the years. The Society has kept its publishing schedule splendidly; the Institute continually struggles to keep up to date and usually falls behind. The Society has developed its publishing of books focusing on general semantics, its theory and practice, as well as books in related fields. The Institute has limited its publishing to those books and monographs directly concerned with Korzybski's work.

Many times over the years, the leaders of both organizations have sought to merge our offices and our programs. We have met and discussed the various possibilities hour after hour at length. Finally we concluded that due to geographical separations and differences in orientation and purpose, it seemed most efficient for each organization to develop what it excelled in. The Institute was strongly concerned with teaching and training, and with maintaining scholarly rigor; the Society brought the work to the people mainly through publishing and had a more popular point of view. We are now cooperating in many ways by sharing membership lists, sharing participation in most conferences, and sometimes sharing in publishing.

The educational program of the Institute continued to flourish as we experimented with new approaches and new ways to study and apply the work. Who would convey the theory of general semantics, we wondered, as the time

for our summer seminar planning approached in 1950. That summer, at an elaborate old "castle" in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, Sam Bois led the first summer seminar, three or perhaps four weeks in length. The National Training Laboratory was developing its programs at that time, centered in Maine, and our seminar participants were forming groups to study their behavior in a group. This practice, called "group dynamics", was thereafter developed in our own way as a procedure at every seminar-workshop. Some of you remember we called them "D-groups".

As our programs evolved, Ray Bontrager became the main theoretical lecturer, and Harry Holtzman directed the approach with drawing that he called "Visual Abstracting". Hours were scheduled when participants could sit out of doors with pen or paintbrush, and learn much about their attitudes and ability to express their feelings on paper.

We continued our emphasis on a relaxation technique, for Korzybski felt that undue tensions were connected with misevaluations. Later this work was supplanted by the work of Charlotte Selver, which she called "Sensory Awareness", and was regularly taught by Charlotte Read.

Our seminar-workshops were usually about three weeks long, but gradually over the years, they became shorter as the pace of living increased in our culture. The length of seminars shrank to twelve days, then eight, and at the present time, they occupy only weekends. We hope to return to the longer schedules soon, to give time for the essential training we consider very important.

Meantime, our seminar schedule has tightened, become more efficient, and more inclusive of the general-semantics principles in an organized way. We believe it is carried out effectively, given the constraints of time. We continually revise to meet the new challenges.

Since the days of seminar leaders such as Ray Bontrager, Harry Holtzman, Russell Meyers,

and Marjorie Swanson (what an inspiring team!), new leaders have developed. In the 1960s Robert Pula emerged, with Milton Dawes, James Broadus, Elton Carter, Allen Flagg, Kenneth Johnson, Elwood Murray, Thomas Nelson, and others. Some taught classes elsewhere, such as Harry Maynard at Cooper Union in New York and Robert Holston and Jane Heyburn in the business world. Severen Schaeffer was conducting seminars in Paris, and stirred the beginnings of interest in France. Still closer to the present, leadership has included Stuart Mayper, Irene Ross Mayper, Susan and Bruce Kodish, Homer Moore, Steve Stockdale, Jeffrey Mordkowitz, and others. And, recently, Bob Pula has been lecturing on general semantics in Poland.

In November 1988, we had a fine conference in New York to honor 21 leaders who had passed away as of that date. Now, sadly in November, 2000, we must add others, whom many of you will recall: S. I. Hayakawa, Stuart Mayper, Mary Morain, Russell Joyner, Helen Hafner, Penelope Russianoff, and more recently, D. David Bourland, Jr. We are pleased that David's son, Ruskin, is here to take his father's place on our panel this afternoon.

Many fine international conferences have been held during the last 50 years, usually together with the International Society. There have also been a number of excellent special conferences concerned with particular issues: education, or applications of the work to law, for example.

Also, beginning in the 1940s, and flourishing for many years thereafter, groups formed in various places to study general semantics. Some became chapters of the Society, some remained independent. These were in Montreal, New York, Baltimore, St. Louis, Chicago, Ann Arbor, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Australia, Paris, and Japan. Some are still functioning today.

A series of annual Alfred Korzybski Memorial lectures was begun in 1952 to honor Korzybski by

choosing an outstanding speaker who is contributing significantly to a non-Aristotelian reorientation. Last night was the 49th such special occasion.

We were fortunate to have three outstanding leaders who did not publish much in relation to general semantics, but whose dedicated service to our work was extremely valuable: William Exton, Jr., Robert U. Redpath, Jr., and Robert K. Straus. All three of these served as president of the Institute and also carried out other important administrative responsibilities over the years.

Where has this work led some of our other leaders? Many teachers have taught general semantics directly under that name; many have combined it with other subjects or approaches. Some of these are here today.

Rachel Lauer has made some fruitful formulations which she teaches at Pace College in New York, where she founded and directs the Straus Thinking and Learning Center. We will hear more directly from her later today.

David Bourland developed the use of E-Prime (English without any form of the verb "to be"). He also formulated new theoretical work based on Korzybski's theory, which he called "ΣEOS".

Andy Hilgartner has made some quite radical new theoretical formulations, working on the development of a general theory of biology.

Sam Bois elaborated upon Bachelard's epistemological profile and formulated what he termed "Epistemics", working mainly through Ethel Longstreet's organization, Viewpoints Institute.

Ed MacNeal has developed "Mathsemantics", connecting mathematics and general semantics in a unique, practical way. Unfortunately, he cannot be with us today, but we can read his books and articles to learn more.

Tom Nelson made important contributions linking general semantics with the work of Adelbert Ames in vision. He, too, unfortunately cannot be here today.

I myself have been among those combining the principles of general semantics with another

approach, called Sensory Awareness. This gave opportunity to experience the principles on non-verbal levels, an important part of our training.

Each of us has made the principles of general semantics come alive in our actions in our own way. Here, today, we will assess some of those ways together. What has this work meant for you in your life?

As this is a cultural as well as personal challenge, where in your unique view is more to be done, more to be more deeply understood, more to be utilized, applied and developed for the fulfillment of our constructive time-binding capacities?

I hope we will all have a stimulating and rewarding time together.



Misconceptions of Personality. Before discussing this subject it will be well to call attention to certain outmoded conceptions concerning personality that are still held by poorly informed, or even uninformed people. One of these ideas is that the personality is confined to the individual; that it is "within his skin," so to speak, and that it can be understood through the study of the individual alone without reference to his surroundings. The falsity of this view is almost self-evident. Nothing exists in isolation. In a unified world we find everywhere interrelations. The qualities of all things are the result, at least in part, of their interrelations and interactions with other things. Human personality develops in the course of experience; the richer and broader the experience, the richer and more varied the personality.

The key to the understanding of personality is to be found, therefore, in the study of the interrelations between the individual and his surroundings.

A second widespread misconception concerning personality is the belief that human nature does not change. Nothing could be far-

ther from the truth. Personality, like all other things in nature, undergoes continual change, rapidly or slowly, either in the form of evolutionary development or retrogression. To be sure, some human characteristics, such as the need for food and the desire for companionship (man is a social animal), are found in practically all people in all ages; and as a rule, these characteristics abide through the entire life of the individual. But even these traits usually vary somewhat from day to day; nay, sometimes even from minute to minute. Otherwise, life would be insufferably monotonous. "Variety is the spice of life."

Indeed, ability to adjust to rapidly changing conditions is one of man's most desirable characteristics.

Our surroundings, by their impact upon the individual, enrich the personality. This enrichment takes the form of new ideas and new emotional experiences, which leave behind them results in the form of alterations in personality traits. Personality changes bring about changes in environment, enriching civilization, which in turn again enriches the personality, and so on, indefinitely. For example, the invention of the internal combustion engine, based upon previously acquired knowledge of the operation of external forces, has made possible much more frequent communication between people, who otherwise may never even have met, with resultant interchange of ideas, leading to all their consequence.

—*Handbook of Biolinguistics, Part Two, General Semantics*, by Clarence L. Meader, Ph.D., and John H. Muyskens, Sc.D., L.H.D., 1959, p. 43 [out of print].

Danny Devito in the movies: "Everybody needs money; that's why it's called *money*."

No, Danny—dinero, *dinero*.