

“The Semantic Man”

An address by Irving J. Lee, delivered at the first conference on General Semantics, Chicago, Ill., June 22, 1951.

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I have been enjoying the writings of a young woman, named Louise Baker, I don't know whether you know of her. When she was a very young lady (when she was twelve, as a matter of fact), she lost her right leg and had a very difficult time getting around without it. But she grew to womanhood and did some fine writing, and I invariably enjoy reading her stuff.

About three years ago, she wrote a book called, *Out On a Limb*, and in it she tells the story of sharing a cabin with a lady on an Atlantic crossing, who thought she needed special mothering. Miss Baker had a fine time on shipboard and invariably retired very late. After several evenings of this, the lady turned to her and said: “Will you tell me what a young lady on crutches does on shipboard until one o'clock in the morning?” “Well,” asked Miss Baker, “what do you think young ladies without crutches do?” The lady responded, “Mercy, goodness! You don't do THAT, do you?”

I hope your reactions to what I have to say will not be equally bizarre.

I want to speak very briefly to you. There is one small notion that I should like to talk about rather briefly. It was in 1946, I remember almost the time of year. I had just taken off that Air Force uniform and had managed to persuade Alfred Korzybski to let me pose some questions to him. I had a number of things that bothered me. I had read that “blue peril” and there were paragraphs in it that made no sense even after the fifteenth reading, and I wanted the opportunity to confront him with these paragraphs. I wanted to say: “Now, Alfred, what did you mean when you said this?” And he very kindly agreed to submit to some such questioning, over a period of several afternoons, and I think Miss Kendig may remember some of them.

And at one of these sessions, I said, “Now, Alfred, you have been thinking about this stuff for a very long time. Can you tell me, in a nutshell, what are you trying to do? What is the objective of all this reading and studying and talking and sweating that you go through day after day, year after year? What are you after?”

And, you know, I never could call on him in those sessions without being forced to take notes. If I came without a pencil and paper, he invariably found a pad and pencil, and “take some notes” was the continuous refrain. Well, I have gone over those notes many times and in answer to

that question, this is almost a verbatim account of what he said when I asked him, "Alfred, what are you trying to do, in a nutshell?"

I did manage, I think, to pick up these four sentences which were right in a row, and I would like to read them. He said, "Irving, we are trying to produce a new sort of man." I wish I could do it with the accent that he gave to that "new sort of man". "We are trying to produce a new sort of man. A man who will have no new virtues, but we will know how to describe him and, maybe, we will know how to create him." And, as I recall the rest of that discussion, Alfred went on to say that he thought that in the discipline that he had helped to fashion, plainly there was a way to describe a "new sort of man". He then said, "It will be very easy to describe him. I did it in *Science and Sanity*, and you will be able very quickly after you read that to know exactly what kind of man it is." I was very much taken at the time with this point of view and someday, perhaps in 1960 or 1965, I am going to write a book with a number of chapters which will describe this kind of man. And, I have been trying to provide, or create, or draw for myself a profile, a profile of the characteristics of a man who in his behavior would embody the stuff that is in that blue book.

What would he be like? What would a semantic man resemble? How would we know him if we came on him? What would be the peculiar earmarks of such a person?

And that book that someday I am going to write, will have a chapter devoted to every one of the perhaps profile-like characteristics. I thought in preparation for that I would read some other people, and I have been collecting a file of some of these characteristics from all sorts of people. For example, Alfred North Whitehead in "Process and Reality" says: "In the past, the time span of important change was considerably longer than that of a single human life; thus, mankind was trained to adapt itself to fixed conditions. Today, the time span is considerably shorter than that of a human life and, accordingly, our training must prepare individuals to face a novelty of conditions." And, I suppose that would be one of the characteristics in the profile of this man.

Then I read something in Ortega E. Gasset's, "Mission of the University". He attributes, in this quote, much of the confusion of our times to a failure by universities all over the world to fulfill a very real historic role. He said: "Caught in the net of modern specialization, universities have lost sight of the fact that their primary purpose is to equip succeeding generations with a system of ideas which will enable them to live at the height of their times." I do not quite know what he means by "living at the height of their times", but I suspect that if one were able to spell that out, that would be in the profile.

There would be a host of others. John Ruskind's note would be there. He said: "The object of education is not to teach men to know what they do not know, but to BEHAVE as they do not behave." And I like what Gilbert Reyl said in that last book of his: "A soldier does not become a shrewd general merely by endorsing the strategic principles of Clausewitz; he must also be competent to apply them."

And I will assume that the summary of the man I am talking about, this man of the future, this "new sort of man", will be a man who will be competent, not merely in knowledge of Korzybski's principles, but in their application.

So, I have been drawing up this profile, as I think, in a very few minutes. Now, let e just list what the chapters would be about. Perhaps some of you could fill in the contents of these; perhaps some of you think that maybe these ought not to be part of that profile. But the idea, I think, is a pretty good one, the discovery of a rounded picture of what would a thoroughly extensionalized, properly evaluating man be like. Well, I offer this as something to think about.

1. In the first place, this man of ours (or woman), would have a tremendous reservoir of curiosity about the world and the people around him. I think he would see and listen with tremendous depth and continuity. He would be inquiring and querying. He would never be afraid to ask. He would never be ashamed of venturing into an understanding. He would never be scared to admit that he would like to know a little more. That is, he would never lose the sense of enchantment at the vastness of what there is to be learned. That is, this man would be curious, not in the Walter Winchell sort of way, but curious in the larger efforts to discover, "what does HE mean", "what do I mean", "what are they trying to do?", in the deepest, most profound sense. I think that would be one of his characteristics.
2. I think he would have a good memory. This man of ours would be able to remember enormous amounts. But, I think, also, that he would have an astonishing capacity to forget the unpleasant, the traumatic hurts and insults that we tend to carry into new situations. I think this man of ours would be able to shake off the urge for self-pity. You know, when you have had a bad time of it, how easy it is to carry that hurt and insult all over the day with yourself. I think this new man of ours would be able to forget. He would be able to forget the things, the petty disaffections, that he is exposed to. He would be able to forget the kinds of annoyances and the irritations, the things that keep bothering us. And as a matter of fact, somewhere along the line, we ought to create an institute which would teach people in the

art of forgetting the nasty and the petty and the childish. I think that would be one of the characteristics.

3. I think this man of ours would have a tremendously highly-developed sense not only of the similarities among things but also of the differences among them. He would acutely sensitive to the nuances, and the subtleties, and the variations, and the gradations. I think he would have a continuously enriched sensitivity to the shadings and the varieties no matter where he went and under all the things he came to. That is, when things were new, I think he would act new; when things were different, I think he'd find ways of re-organizing differences in his responses. I think this man would never suffer from the blindness that obliterates uniqueness. How he would do that I think is a question I should leave to a later date.
4. I think this man's behavior would be a remarkable manifestation of this thing called non-elementalism. He would know how to contemplate and act. I think he would integrate knowing and doing. If this man of ours knew that inequities, and inequalities, and injustices exist, I think he would realize that talking about them is not enough. He would be a diagnostician but, I think, he would do something. I think he would feel the impulse to participate, to perform. I think he wouldn't be satisfied to say that there is greed, and difficulty, and diffidence. I think he would proceed to act in terms of their elimination. I think that he would realize that knowing alone is barren, but that acting without knowing is barbarism. I think he would be a man who would take calculated risks almost at the drop of a hat. I think he would be a man who would perform, who would be functioning rather than merely talking about the world.
5. I think this man of ours would fight against the sterilization of his appreciation of what is both beautiful and ugly. I think this man of ours would know how to love, and how to hate, and to be angry, and indignant. I think he would know how to provide stores of affection for people around him. That is, I think he would be capable of tremendous indignation, and I think, he would be free of the irritations and annoyances that are so small, and that bother so many of us.

I ran into letter that a lady wrote to the editor of the Cleveland, Ohio, Press. I think our man would never be afflicted with the kind of problem that she was afflicted with. She wrote a letter to the editor in these words, and I am reading it: "Dear Sir: It is about time somebody put his foot down on dirty newspapers that print indecent language in their

columns which go into the homes of respectable men and women with children they would like to shield from the language of the gutter. I will not make matters worse by repeating the word which appeared in bold, black print in your issue of November 12 on page 33 in relation to a dog show. I will only say that it was a harsh, short synonym for a girl dog. This is not the first time I have seen that nasty word in your paper, and if I see it once more I am going to get good and mad.”

I think our man would not be upset by things like that. I think it would take a great deal more. And, I think, furthermore, our man will be very much like that bright little girl who appears in the parable, in the book, _____. They say to those in despair of man’s civilization, they tell the story about a little girl, a lawn, a rabbit hutch, and a much loved rabbit hopping about free in the sun. Its owner, a little girl, has heard a noise that fills her with dismay. She rushes out to find that the terrier from next door has escaped into her garden. Loud barking, a horrifying scuffle, the inevitable is happening. She flings herself to the ground, for she cannot see that dreadful end of the rabbit. Minutes pass – blackness – abysmal horror – when faintly a voice reaches her. “It’s all right, Jennifer, the rabbit is safe.” The child uncovers her face, slowly she approaches the hutch, no cry of joy. She turns away in contemplation. Five minutes later she is heard saying to herself, “I must remember always, have a good look BEFORE you cry.” I have a feeling our man would be a little like that. Our man would be willing to have a good look BEFORE, not after, he has roared and wept at the world.

6. I think this man of ours would have a reservoir of faith, and convictions, and deep beliefs, and all sorts of things. But, withal, he would be continuously aware of that *etc.* That is, this is the way to protect him from becoming the bigot and fanatic. He would be a man with great beliefs, he would have convictions about all sorts of things. But, always, there would be that consciousness that there is something more, which would keep him from letting go and from becoming the kind of fanatical demagogue that it is so easy to become when one has a message.
7. I think this man of ours would have great reserves of patience. I think he would be a little less hurried, a little less impetuous, and over-quick in his actions. This does not mean that he dallies and dawdles. This means that when occasions require it he will be able to move quickly, but there will be a sense of continuous awareness, there will be testing of what goes on. I think he will be very much unlike that character in the story that Loritz Melchior, the

Met star, told. Melchior tells the story ... once he was in *The Walkure*. As the curtain falls, you may remember, the heroine is sleeping on a hillside surrounded by a wall of fire. Nowadays the fire is simulated by steam and red light, but in those days it was the real thing, made with a slow burning powder that was sprinkled in a trough. Now Melchior then tells the story, “In a small opera house in Germany many years ago, I stood off stage watching this impressive final scene. Beside me sat an old fireman with two emergency buckets of water beside him. No lover of opera, he had dozed off. Just as the fire blazed at its highest, he was awakened by the smell of smoke. He sprang to his feet, shouting “FIRE, FIRE!” and shot on to the stage. He had emptied the two pails of water on both the fire and the heroine before the rest of the cast could stop him.” Melchior said the opera ended right there. Despite the interruption, the performance was highly applauded. “The heroine and I took seven curtain calls, the fireman took ten.” Well, I think our man would not take that many curtain calls. I think there would be a little less of impulsive blowing off, the kind that you become sorry for later.

8. I think this man of ours would be a man of great sociality and friendliness. I think he would be able to engage fully in small talk as well as in serious talk. I think he would have the poise to be able to talk with people at a dozen strata in the community. I think he would be free of the kind of bashfulness that keeps us from talking to people who don't speak the immediate patois that we have learned.
9. I think this man will know how to achieve precision and specificity in his talking, if he has to. And, he will avoid the traps of over-simplification, and distortion, and eschewing when the occasion calls for care and accuracy. I don't think our man will parade that ability. I don't think he will require that everybody talks with great precision during the day, but, if it becomes necessary, he will know how to do it, and he will know, perhaps, how to help others to do it, too.
10. This man of ours is not likely to succumb to defeat and despair and give himself up to failure and resignation. I think this man of ours will know the meaning of defeat but he will know that you have to date defeat, too. He will know that you get licked; that doesn't mean that you have to stay licked. He will know that there are moments when it doesn't seem worthwhile, but he will also know that you have to put a date on you, or whoever is involved there.

11. I think this man of ours will be as ruthlessly realistic as it is possible to be. That is, he will know when he is responding to his feelings inside, and when he is responding to things and people outside. He will know when he is responding to things, and when he is responding to the verbal associations about things. I just read a summary of a paper that was published in the *Journal of Psychology* in '48, “Minor Studies of Aggression”, and I think that this summary describes a most interesting evidence of the thing in reverse. Thirty-one young men in a camp (this was just before the outbreak of World War Two) were asked to rate Japanese and Mexicans. Immediately after the rating, on a sheet of paper, the men were exposed to a frustrating experience. They were not allowed to go to the camp theater as they had expected, but were told they would be required to work in the camp instead. And they were made to work there. Then after the work was finished, they were given the rating sheets, and the results showed a marked diminution in the number of favorable traits and an increase in the number of unfavorable traits ascribed to the Japanese and the Mexicans. I think our man would know when his aggression is to be directed and when it is to be misplaced. I think he will know what his response is to.
12. This man of ours, I think, will neither be the rugged individualist nor the completely altruistic cooperating man. He will be both. He will know the virtues of time-binding. He will know how much we owe to the past and he will know how necessary it is to move uniquely. He will be a man who is willing to express inventiveness, and initiative, and the arts and devices of cooperation, etc.
13. And lastly, I think this man of ours will be alert to the possibilities and potentialities of the human being. I think he will rarely be satisfied with his performance as he knows it. He will realize that we haven't the faintest notion how much a man can know – how much a man can learn – how much a man can do. And, this man of ours, I think, will recognize that the limits of learning are awfully hard to define; that in this vast, tremendously big world of ours, the possibilities of human growth and human development, perhaps, have not yet been readily defined. At the same time, he will also have control of his expectations of himself and others. He will know with Goethe that “Limitation of aims is the mother of wisdom and the secret of achievement.” I think he will know with Santayana that “Knowledge of the possible is the beginning of happiness.”

And, having known these things, I am not entirely sure how it would be to live with a man like that. Nor am I entirely sure about how one would go about getting this. I suppose that belongs to the

future part of this discipline. The first part is Korzybski’s objective, I think we now recognize. We know how to describe him. How do you create him? I hope that the meeting ten years from now will begin to give us answers that are far more effective than any I shall give you. Let me be content then and conclude with what another –ski said in answer to this question – Stanislavski. I was reading his book called *Building a Character*, and in the final pages there is a quotation which I shall content myself with this evening. Some of you may remember that Kostya, the diary-keeping student, speaks and says: “Oh, but how hard it all is! How are we ever going to achieve that? I groaned. How can we ever take it all in?”

This is what Tortsov said. “Those are the doubting reactions of impetuous youth. Today you learn something. Tomorrow you think you can already be letter perfect in technique. But the system is not a hand-me-down suit that you can put on and walk off in, or a cook book where all you need is to find the page and there is your recipe. No, it is a whole way of life, you have to grow up into it, educate yourself in it for years. You cannot cram it into yourselves; you can assimilate it, take it into your blood and flesh, until it becomes second nature, becomes so organic a part of your being that you are transformed by it for all time. It is a system that must be studied in parts and then merged into a whole so that it can be understood in all its fundamentals. When you can spread it all out before you like a fan you will obtain a true grasp of it. You cannot hope to do this all at once. It is like going to war. You must conquer territory bit by bit, consolidate your gains, keep in contact with your rear communications, expand, and then make further gains before you can speak of ‘final conquest’.