

## ***“THE WORLD IN QUANDARIES” SYMPOSIUM***

BEN HAUCK\*

ON SEPTEMBER 8, 2006, the New York Society for General Semantics hosted a symposium titled “The World in Quandaries: Coping with Controversial Communication in the Global Village — Personal, Social, National, Cultural.” The event at Fordham University in Manhattan marked three significant anniversaries.

In his opening remarks, Lance Strate, Graduate Director of the Department of Communication and Media Studies at Fordham and President of the Media Ecology Association, observed that Fordham University was “adept at celebrating anniversaries.” Besides marking the 60th anniversary of the founding of the New York Society for General Semantics and of the publication of Wendell Johnson’s classic text *People in Quandaries: The Semantics of Personal Adjustment*, the event coincided with the eighth anniversary of the Media Ecology Association, founded at Fordham University in 1998.

Cosponsors for the event included the Media Ecology Association, the Department of Communication and Media Studies at Fordham University, and the Institute of General Semantics. The symposium featured keynote speaker Nicholas Johnson, professor at the University of Iowa College of Law, former FCC Commissioner, and son of the noted speech pathologist and general semantics teacher whose book the event celebrated. The daylong schedule included eleven other speakers.

\*Ben Hauck sits on the board of directors for the New York Society for General Semantics. He holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in Acting from Otterbein College. He also performs comedic improvisation with his improv group Devil’s Dancebelt and dedicates much of his time to writing a book on improvisation from a game theory perspective. Hauck lives in New York City. Visit his website at <http://www.benhauck.com>.

Following opening remarks by Strate and NYSGS President Allen Flagg, NYSGS Vice President Martin Levinson presented his paper “*People in Quandaries: Sixty Years Later*,” (published 2006 in *ETC*). (1) Levinson summarized Wendell Johnson’s important formulations, including IFD Disease (“from idealism to frustration to demoralization” (2)), the problems associated with formulating vague questions, the process view of reality attributed to Heraclitus, the dangers of ignoring the observations of general semantics just because they seem obvious, the three kinds of rigidity (content, formal, and evaluating rigidity), the negative consequences bred by the use of aggression in solving problems, and the importance of behaving in a mature manner. Levinson described his own experience with IFD Disease in the 1970s while working as a child counselor: he overcame it by setting more realistic, less idealistic goals.

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Lloyd Gilden, President of the Lifwynn Foundation for Social Research, presented Don Beck’s model of the evolution of human values in his PowerPoint presentation, “Cultural Evolution toward Greater Sanity.” Gilden defined the term “meme” (“a unit of cultural transmission”) and characterized memes as “the human capacity for time-binding.” According to Gilden, memes serve as organizing principles as well as adaptive forms of intelligence. Gilden outlined Beck’s formulation of Spiral Dynamics (“how cultures evolve from one stage to another”), and projected a colorful, tornado-like model to represent the “unfolding process” of human culture. He suggested that human values 100,000 years ago mainly focused on biological needs, instinctive urges, and survival; over time other human values transcended these values but did not forego them. Gilden portrayed human culture as moving from the base and selfish, to more authoritarian and orderly, to more scientific and familial, culminating in something more cooperative and holistic.

Janet Sternberg, Executive Secretary of the Media Ecology Association and Associate Chair for undergraduate studies at Fordham University’s Department of Communication and Media Studies, reprised a talk she gave at an NYSGS meeting in December, 2005, entitled “Neil Postman’s Advice on How to Live the Rest of Your Life.” The talk also appeared in *ETC* earlier this year. (3) Sternberg’s dry delivery accentuated the surprising humor of Postman’s comic but serious advice. His instructions ranged from the outright silly (“Do not go

to live in California” and “Do not become a jogger”), to the plainly constructive (“Establish as many regular routines as possible” and “Avoid multiple and simultaneous changes in your personal life”), to the alarmingly restrictive (“Do not watch TV news shows or read any tabloid newspapers” and “Do not trust any group larger than a squad ...”). Postman said following this advice would allow one to survive until the revival of social institutions, which were to him undergoing a process of decomposition at the hands of technology.

Lance Strate’s “Quandaries, Quarrels, Quagmires, and Questions,” characterized the goal of general semantics as “to encourage ecological thinking.” Strate explained that the kingdom of Troy was lost because of an intensional orientation — seeing the Trojan Horse as an icon rather than for what it was — and how an extensional orientation would have distinguished the horse’s “false front.” Strate offered numerous examples of how a failure to think ecologically had put people in quandaries.

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Thom Gencarelli, Treasurer of the Media Ecology Association and Deputy Chair of the Department of Broadcasting at Montclair State University, followed with his talk on “Jean Piaget, Cognitive Development, and Language Acquisition.” Gencarelli offered a communication-based spin on Piaget’s notion of stages of cognitive development. According to Gencarelli’s informal polls of his students, people’s earliest memories usually date back to no earlier than age 3, and sometimes they only date back to age 4 or 5. He noted that it seemed the ability to remember happens at a certain stage correlated with language ability.

Milton Dawes, Trustee of the Institute of General Semantics and its Ambassador at Large, titled his talk “General Semantics as Generalized Science.” He noted that science systematizes the way humans do things, that “experimenting” involves trying to see how something works, and that one can’t fail when experimenting. Dawes included several exercises to help the audience personally experience several scientific principles, including a powerful lesson on inertia when he directed each audience member to push a neighbor, then push a chair, then note the difference in experiences. Noting that the pushed person was inclined to push *back*, he asked the audience to imagine pushing 20 million people and then having them push back. “You’re not going to change 20 million

people easily,” Dawes remarked.

Raymond Gozzi, Jr., spoke on “Media Ecology and the Quandaries of Right Now.” He recounted his reaction to an article he had read earlier in the year that suggested that the Bush Administration was planning to drop nuclear weapons on Iran in 2007 — an image that made him “physically sick” — and expressed deep concern about this “war that’s somehow unstoppable” and the rising rate of related deaths, two overall messages he sees everywhere in the media. Gozzi said he doesn’t know what he can do about such news, but he did encourage the audience to work on a congressional campaign for a candidate who is for peace.

Author of *Us and Them: Understanding Your Tribal Mind*, David Berreby followed with his PowerPoint presentation, “‘Then Again, Not’: Irony as a Mode of Communication.” Berreby defined “irony” as an utterance understood by the speaker and at least some listener as distinct from the typical meaning of the actual words. He then made the case against irony, as well as a case *for* irony, noting that comprehending irony requires more cognition. Irony thus places a “premium on intelligence.” Berreby showed that understanding irony makes one an “insider” and requires “immense amounts of shared knowledge” in order to process it. But he also noted that irony has its limitations, especially when its target is indifferent to it, when it divides an audience, or when it falls victim to fashion. While speaking positively about irony overall, Berreby concluded his talk by saying that the risk of irony is that only those who “have it” will “get it.”

Tom de Zengotita followed with his talk, “Some Consequences of the Blending of Map and Territory.” De Zengotita teaches at the Draper Program at New York University and last year published the book *Mediated: How the Media Shapes Your World and the Way You Live in It*. In the most philosophical talk of the day, de Zengotita suggested that the distinction between map and territory, as succinctly drawn by Korzybski, is dissolving. He characterized the period from 1870 to 1921 as the time when the distinction was sharpest because of innovations in photography and moving pictures. Since then, a whole new range of “realities” has emerged. De Zengotita outlined an extensive list of different “reals”: “real real,” “observed real,” “in-between real,” “edited real real,” “edited observed real,” “staged real,” “unreal real,” “real unreal,” and so on. This proliferation of “reals” makes it hard to draw sharp lines between map and territory. He proposed that we no longer contrast “real” with “artificial” but to rather speak in terms of “real” and “optional,” or “real” and “a choice.” He

pointed out that when a person says “The reality is . . .,” he tends to mean that one has no choice over the situation.

Paul Levinson, Chair of the Department of Communication and Media Studies at Fordham University, spoke next, on “How New Media are Making the Quandary Better and Worse.” Specifically, Levinson addressed “gate-keeping,” the function of editors in the transmission of news to consumer. The popular video website YouTube (4) excited Levinson because of its largely unmediated content, and tools that allow eyewitnesses to upload video to the site for global transmission without first having to go through a news editor. He contrasted YouTube with corporate newspapers and news services like CNN and CBS, where content can be restricted and “gate-kept” to a large extent. While mostly welcoming the decrease of gate-keeping, Levinson noted that the drawbacks of having less could be quite detrimental. Without editors (who to Levinson for the most part do a fine job), people lose confidence in the truth of the news they get

Following Paul Levinson’s talk, Martin Levinson presented NYSGS President Allen Flagg with the Michael Ruberto Award for Distinguished Service to the New York Society for General Semantics in honor of his work and commitment to the Society. Flagg followed the presentation of his award with his talk, “Paradoxes of Self-Reflexive Time-Binding.” Flagg pointed out that Korzybski originally dedicated his text *Science & Sanity* to 55 different people from a wide spectrum of disciplines, later adding another 62 dedications to more contemporary people from a wider range of disciplines. These citations showed that the formulation of general semantics was truly multidisciplinary. Reminding the audience of Lloyd Gilden’s earlier talk on cultural evolution, Flagg noted that time-binding does not just involve reading past writings, but it even has a “paleobiological” and “phylobiological” bent.

Milton Dawes followed Flagg’s talk with “A Musical Celebration,” during which many attendees played rhythm instruments he supplied.

After introductory remarks by Martin Levinson, Lance Strate, Paul Levinson, Everett Parker of the United Church of Christ, and Allen Flagg on behalf of the Institute of General Semantics, Nicholas Johnson delivered the keynote address entitled “General Semantics, Terrorism and War.” Johnson characterized general semantics as a “child of war,” “a verbal peace movement,” and “a response to the dangers of propaganda.” According to Johnson, our problems are not so much with the scientific method but with *a prescientific way of living* in a scientific world.

Johnson suggested that President Lyndon Johnson considered him more

fit to serve as an FCC Commissioner after a particular “scientific” report he had offered the President as US Maritime Administrator. The President asked Johnson to investigate the viability of staging a war in Vietnam. After completing his analysis, Johnson told the President bluntly, “You can’t play basketball in a football field.” Among the problems the nation would face there, Johnson told the President:

- the U.S. would be perceived as “invaders”;
- there exists a language barrier;
- the U.S. had no knowledge of their culture, their maps, *or* their territory;
- U.S. soldiers would be easily identified, especially in uniforms;
- allies and enemies would look identical;
- since there would be no frontlines, territory would be lost, then gained, then lost again, and so on;
- U.S. soldiers would be faced with the impossible choice of killing large numbers of innocents or being killed by innocent-looking civilians;
- etc.

Turning his attention to the Iraq War, Johnson noted that while *war*<sub>1</sub> “is not” *war*<sub>2</sub>, predictable similarities exist between the Vietnam War and the present war. Ignoring the territory in favor of the maps led directly to a predictable (negative) outcome three years later. Johnson called the Powell Doctrine an effort to make leaders, as Johnson put it, “focus on the territory rather than on maps when considering making war.” The doctrine includes questions like: Are the goals specific? What will military operations contribute? How will we know if we’re successful? etc. Johnson referred to a guest opinion he wrote for the *Daily Iowan* before the Iraq War, titled “Ten Questions for Bush Before War.” These frank questions needed answering before taking drastic actions leading to war, and it foreshadowed the outcomes of those actions with eerie precision. (5)

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Johnson concluded by noting that general semantics retained both the capacity and the responsibility to prevent people from leading us into World War III. [See the text of his address following this review-Ed.]

An estimated 75 people from New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Iowa, Wisconsin, and Quebec attended the symposium. Attendees appreciated the way it linked general semantics with current events, and demonstrated how application of GS principles to individual,

social, national, and cultural events can significantly reduce confusion and even eliminate some quandaries from our lives.

### REFERENCES

1. Levinson, Martin H. “*People in Quandaries: Sixty Years Later.*” *ETC: A Review of General Semantics*, July 2006, pp.290-298.
2. Johnson, Wendell. *People in Quandaries: The Semantics of Personal Adjustment*. New York: Harper & Row, 1946. p.14.
3. Sternberg, Janet. “Neil Postman’s Advice on How to Live the Rest of Your Life.” *ETC: A Review of General Semantics*, April 2006, pp.152-160.
4. <http://www.youtube.com>
5. Johnson, Nicholas. “Ten Questions for Bush Before War.” <http://www.uiowa.edu/~cyberlaw/writing/di030204.html>.