

From a lecture delivered to the New York Society for General Semantics on December 8, 2005.

NEIL POSTMAN'S ADVICE ON HOW TO LIVE THE REST OF YOUR LIFE

JANET STERNBERG*

GOOD EVENING, ladies and gentlemen. When I first met Neil Postman in 1988, we both realized almost immediately that we shared a profound interest in the study of language. Before meeting Postman, during my graduate training in linguistics, I had learned about scholars who emphasized the important role language plays in shaping human affairs, scholars such as Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf. But I have Postman to thank for introducing me to the work of great scholars such as Alfred Korzybski, Wendell Johnson, and S.I. Hayakawa, in short, for introducing me to general semantics. So I am particularly pleased to address a gathering sponsored by the New York Society for General Semantics, and I would like to express my appreciation to Allen Flagg and his colleagues for inviting me to speak here tonight.

* Born in New York, Janet Sternberg, PhD, grew up in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, becoming bilingual in English and Portuguese at an early age. After completing a BA in French and Spanish at Kirkland College (now Hamilton College), Sternberg received a Fulbright grant for research in Brazil, while pursuing an MA in linguistics at Cornell University. In addition to her work with Postman at New York University, Sternberg has published articles and given presentations on subjects as diverse as Portuguese grammar, linguistic theory, the history of technology, and communication and media studies. Sternberg counts herself among the Media Ecology Association's most active members, serving as one of its Directors as well as its Executive Secretary. Currently, Sternberg enjoys teaching and advising in her position as assistant professor and associate chair of the Department of Communication and Media Studies at Fordham University. Copyright © 2006 by Janet Sternberg.

To address a gathering like this would be an honor for me on any occasion, but tonight I consider myself especially privileged because, as you know, I will share with you Neil Postman's advice on how to live the rest of your life. Although Postman's advice does not refer directly to general semantics, my presentation tonight does illustrate one of the fundamental notions of general semantics, a notion referred to as time-binding. Time-binding involves the capability humans have to build on the knowledge of prior generations, and we do this by means of language. Language is what binds us to those no longer with us, and to those who will follow, as well as to those around us in the present. This spirit of time-binding infuses my efforts tonight, as I propose to act as a conduit for bringing Postman's words to you.

A prolific writer, Postman authored numerous books, essays, articles, and speeches. Yet he never formalized in writing certain material that he presented in classes he taught at New York University in the Media Ecology Program. Almost every year, Postman ritually delivered several lectures, among them an enduring favorite which became known as his lecture on "How to Live the Rest of Your Life." In his own personal notes, Postman titled this material simply his "Final Lecture," describing it as "a lecture based on the supposition that American culture is in the process of decomposition. Technology has attacked all social institutions and although we may yet revive the culture, the problem to be solved is, how to survive until that happens."

You may wonder, perhaps, what authority I have to present Postman's advice on such an important topic as how to live the rest of your life. For one thing, as some of you know, I was lucky to earn my doctorate under Postman's guidance at NYU, and I was also lucky to teach and work with him there for over a decade. But in addition, from 1990 to 1993, I served as Postman's personal assistant, and in this capacity, became the first, I believe, to systematically use a word-processing computer on his behalf. You might say that I was Postman's first electronic scribe, an opportunity that gave me the incomparable privilege of typing literally dozens of Postman's speeches, and two of his books. So I'm no stranger to writing down what Postman had to say.

An additional source of authority for my undertaking comes from the notes I took as a student, hearing Postman deliver the "How to Live the Rest of Your Life" lecture on several occasions. And last but not least, I have a copy of Postman's own personal notes for this lecture, rather sketchy and a bit messy, originally from May 1989, with several revisions marked when he delivered the lecture again in April 1993. Those who have ever seen Postman's handwriting will appreciate the fact that these lecture notes of his were produced with the writing tools that he loved best: a felt-tipped pen on sheets of paper from a

yellow legal pad. What I have done, then, is to compare these sets of notes in order to compile Postman's wisdom on this subject.

Postman's lecture about how to survive in a culture that is disintegrating, his collection of ideas about what to do until things improve, included 22 rules, laws, maxims, and sayings plus an additional five pearls of wisdom. These additional comments are referred to as "Nystrom's Nuggets," after their author, Christine Nystrom, one of Postman's closest colleagues and collaborators at NYU.

In offering you my reconstruction of this advice about how to live the rest of your life, I follow as faithfully as possible Postman's own words (and Nystrom's words, in the case of the Nuggets), attempting to preserve their original flavor and tone. For authenticity's sake, I have maintained the same order of presentation and the same examples, and although some of the rules, laws, maxims, sayings, and Nuggets are accompanied by more commentary than others, I have not added anything beyond what appears in the handwritten notes. I hope you will find, as I do, that most of the reflections contained in this lecture seem as fresh and applicable today as when Postman used to deliver the lecture himself. So now, without further ado, let me proceed with my reconstruction, or transcription, if you prefer, of Postman's advice on how to live the rest of your life. The points raised by Postman go like this:

1. Do not go to live in California.

As the playwright Neil Simon and others have discovered, California is a culture of sun-bathers who have left their families and have obliterated their origins in return for the pleasure of playing tennis all year round. Thus, they are a people who are at their best only when the going is good. Furthermore, you may think of California as a metaphor of the communication revolution in America, because they both stress a love of novelty and experimentation, while rejecting tradition, continuity, history, family, and culture itself.

2. Do not watch TV news shows or read any tabloid newspapers.

Life, as it is, is terrifying enough. Only a fool would expose himself or herself to an exaggeration of the danger. Besides, all news is about sin: lust, envy, greed, sloth, gluttony. In addition, you may think of a tabloid like the *New York Post* as a metaphor of urban decay.

3. Do not read any books by people who think of themselves as “futurists,” such as Alvin Toffler.

Always leave the room when someone starts to talk about “fiber optics” or “silicon chips.” While people like Toffler know a great deal about modern technology, they know nothing about human beings and, therefore, their predictions are always wrong. Think of Toffler as a metaphor of total commitment to technological progress.

4. Do not become a jogger. If you are one, stop immediately.

You cannot run your way to happiness. It is impossible to keep both your mind and your body in good repair. You must choose one or the other. The Greeks were wrong: Plato, the wrestler, was also the first fascist philosopher. Forget trying to beat gravity. Develop your mind, and let your body go.

5. If you are married, stay married.

Our culture has inflated all expectations to extravagant levels, and the chances are small that a new wife or husband will be better than your present one.

6. If you are a man, get married as soon as possible. If you are a woman, you need not be in a hurry.

Men are practically useless until they are married. Their natural grossness and stupidity are rarely overcome except by the civilizing force of marriage. Women, being by nature more civilized and intelligent, do not require marriage so desperately. Think of marriage as solving the great social problem of how to civilize single males.

7. Establish as many regular routines as possible.

In order to position yourself well to cope with constant change, you should establish as many predictable structures and routines as possible. The point is *to reduce the number of decisions* you have to make about trivial matters. Save your energy for major questions that arise in our technological society. Regularize the trivial to cope with the significant.

8. Avoid multiple and simultaneous changes in your personal life.

Try not to take on a new job, a new spouse, a new apartment, new clothes, etc., at the same time. Change is tremendously stressful, so control the amount of newness you must face. Old things, like clothing or cars, act as living museums that help us to remember. Old things give a sense of continuity and history, which is of great value in today's culture.

9. Remember: It is more likely than not that as you get older you will get dumber.

You cannot beat the Second Law of Thermodynamics, that is, the Law of Entropy, which suggests that everything in the universe tends to get disorganized, losing energy and structure, gradually becoming inert and useless.

10. Keep your opinions to a minimum.

It is not necessary for you to have an opinion on every public issue. Although you may be *entitled* to have an opinion, you probably are not *qualified* to have an opinion on most matters. Although middle-class America seems to require an opinion on everything, you will find it liberating to say the phrase "I don't know enough about it to form an opinion."

11. Carefully limit the information input you will allow.

Too little information is dangerous, but so is too much. As a general rule, do not take in any more information after seven or eight o'clock at night. You need protection from the relentless flow of information in modern American culture. This principle, by the way, explains the popularity of watching TV reruns, which provide amusement without new information.

12. Seek significance in your work, friends, and family, where potency and output are still possible.

Work, friends, and family are the areas where what you think and do matters. Avoid *thinking* too much about matters you cannot *do* anything about. It may help to remember that information used to be a survival necessity, not a commodity. Information used to be an agent or instrument for action, but nowadays, information is often inert — you cannot act on it. Thinking too much about things you cannot affect makes you feel impotent and trivia-centered. Try to dump useless information from your head.

Next, the first of Nystrom's Nuggets of Wisdom.

Nystrom's Nugget #1

Reserve the word "friend" for someone who knew you when you still wore braces on your teeth, who has on at least one occasion spent the night with you in a hospital emergency room or police station, and who will without hesitation commit perjury for you in a court of law. Other people may rightly be called "acquaintances."

13. Read's Law: Do not trust any group larger than a squad, that is, about a dozen.

All bureaucracies are alike, their principal characteristic being their wish to satisfy the rules of the system. Bureaucracies are by nature hostile to individual differences. Although we pretend institutions care, institutions do not have loyalty, compassion, or feelings, which are human traits.

14. With exceptions to be noted further ahead, avoid whenever possible reading anything written after 1900.

Except for science, most scholarship and especially literature written in the 20th century is rubbish — disordered and without a moral center. Whenever tempted to read 20th century books, read instead De Tocqueville, Mark Twain, Keats, Samuel Johnson, Thomas Jefferson, Tolstoy, Flaubert, the King James Bible, or Shakespeare's plays and sonnets. I recommend, for example, from Shakespeare's *Richard II*, the speech by John of Gaunt that includes the line "This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England." Or from the Bible, the passage from Ecclesiastes chapter 3 that says "To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven." Or a poem by Vachel Lindsay. So much rich literature exists from which to get inspiration, literature that carries a sense of moral order in the universe, an orientation we especially need in today's technological circus.

15. Confine yourself, wherever possible, to music written prior to 1850.

This will be a calming and ordering influence in your life, and give you a sense that the world is fundamentally comprehensible. Permissible exceptions include masters of American popular music like Cole Porter, Richard Rodgers, Yip Harburg, Irving Berlin, Larry Hart, and Oscar Hammerstein.

Nystrom's Nugget #2

Think regularly and deeply about your inevitable end. As Samuel Johnson reminds us, the prospect of one's death wonderfully concentrates the mind.

Nystrom's Nugget #3

When you arise each morning, remind yourself that today you do not have to go to a gas oven with your sisters, brothers, children, and friends. This thought may help you to deal more courageously with the fact that it is raining and your paper is late.

16. Weingartner's Law: 95% of everything is nonsense.

Do not allow yourself to become grim about anything. Above all, do not become an *ist*: a *socialist*, a *feminist*, a *capitalist*, etc. This will help you avoid hardenings of the categories and help you keep your sense of humor.

17. Truman's Law: Under no circumstances ever vote for a Republican.

Unless you're very rich. Period.

Nystrom's Nugget #4

Cherish your parents, your aging relatives, and all the elderly, wherever you meet them. They may not be smarter than you, but they have suffered longer than you, and you may learn from that.

18. Take religion more seriously than you have.

Religion is one of the few social institutions that have continuity. Moreover, religion addresses the most interesting issues available to an intelligent human mind. For instance, science asks how, but religion asks why. And if you are Jewish, do not attend bar mitzvahs where they serve chopped liver molded in the form of a duck.

19. Divest yourself of your belief in the magical powers of numbers.

Quantification has a very limited effectiveness. Any attempt to apply quantification to human affairs represents pure superstition of a medieval kind. Never-

theless, modern America is based on counting. We try to redefine non-quantifiable concepts into objective quantities: for example, take the numerical scores given for intelligence tests or for contestants in beauty pageants. This passion for numbers and quantification must be discarded.

20. Once a year, read a book by authors like George Orwell, E.B. White, or Bertrand Russell.

This will help teach you how to write plain, clean, lucid English. Authors such as these are exceptions to the “nothing after 1900” principle mentioned earlier. You should distrust writers that English professors favor, such as Henry James, T.S. Eliot, and Ezra Pound. Instead, read good writers despised by English professors, like Somerset Maugham, William Saroyan, and James Farrell. Or try something by Abraham Lincoln, like the last paragraph of his first inaugural address. Others worth reading include Russell Baker, H.L. Mencken, and Pete Hamill, but you can skip William Buckley and Murray Kempton. Avoid French writers, and once a month, memorize a good poem.

Nystrom's Nugget #5

Do not place too high a value on honesty and plain speaking. You are not wise enough to know what is the truth, and what seems plain to you may only bring pain to others.

Postman's Addendum to Nugget #5: Of all the virtues, the most overrated is honesty. Honesty is the first refuge of the scoundrel. According to Irish writer Oliver Goldsmith, the main use of language is to conceal your thoughts, not to reveal them. In some sense, by suggesting that speaking your mind can be upsetting, Nugget #5 offers an anti-ventilation theory.

21. Santha Rama Rau's Law: Patriotism is a squalid emotion.

Loving your nation-state is degrading and anti-family. Human beings are at their most tender when devoted to the tribe. There is a progression from love of tribe to love of god to love of country to love of self. In order to challenge the automatic notion that patriotism is good, it may help to think of the nation-state as an economic concept, not a cultural concept.

And last but not least,

22. Josephson's Law: New is rotten.

Postman's Addendum to Josephson's Law: big is rotten, and fast is rotten.

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And so, ladies and gentlemen, we come to the end of my version of Postman's advice on how to live the rest of your life. Let me add that personally, I did not agree with all of this advice when first I heard it, back in 1989. But in the years since then, I have come to take most, if not all, of Postman's advice to heart, and I can assure you that the quality of my life has improved dramatically. Granted, some people may quibble that a few of Postman's points or examples seem a tad dated, but only if you insist on interpreting his advice 100% literally. Instead, if you interpret Postman's specific guidelines on a figurative level as well as a literal level, you can derive abstract general principles that continue to be applicable to everyday living in useful ways. To put the matter in general semantics terms, if you boost Postman's ideas up the abstraction ladder so that the ideas apply more broadly than just to the particular situations Postman himself described, I think you will discover, as I have, that Postman offered us wise advice indeed. In conclusion, to lead a more balanced, productive, and pleasant existence, I suggest that you follow Postman's advice on how to live the rest of your life: in a word, *meaningfully*. Thank you.