

ALFRED KORZYBSKI MEMORIAL LECTURE 1992

STEVE ALLEN SPEAKS!

[At the Harvard Club of New York City, November 13, 1992]

Introduction by Kenneth Johnson:

I first met Steve Allen in 1961 when he came to a seminar-workshop at Santa Barbara. I happened to discover last night, going through my records, a couple of other people who were at that seminar; guess who, Charlotte Read and Mary Morain. I would like you to think for a minute of the position I'm in. This man has undoubtedly been in your living room, possibly in your bedroom, late at night and now I'm supposed to introduce him.

I had about decided that Steve was one who truly needs no introduction, when a young graduate student asked me why did I have an entertainer write the preface to *Thinking Creatively*. I suddenly realized that Steve's sterling credentials as an entertainer may have overshadowed his many other accomplishments. Another factor here was that it was a fairly young graduate student. So, I won't mention that he created and hosted the Tonight Show, that he has written over 4,000 songs, and scores for several musicals. I won't remind you that he has made some 40 record albums or that he has starred on Broadway and in motion pictures and of course in the critically acclaimed Steve Allen Comedy Hour.

But I would like to call attention to the fact that he created, wrote, produced and hosted the Emmy award series, "Meeting of Minds", which I hope you all saw on PBS. Among his remarkable guests were Cleopatra, Karl Marx, Charles Darwin, Marie Antoinette, and Attila the Hun. That kind of creative casting alone should have won him an Emmy. And possibly it did; he won three Emmys for the pilot presentation and PBS renewed him for his second, third and fourth seasons. As I read some of those scripts I realized that it took an enormous amount of research and a remarkable depth of understanding. After all, Steve had to think like Charles Darwin, Cleopatra, Karl Marx, Attila the Hun and the other panelists. Think what a semester college assignment that could be, get to know four historical characters so well that you can write a Steve-type script in which they expressed their views of the world. In a science class make them scientists; in a poetry class make them poets. Steve also recorded an album "How to Think" and created an educational game – I haven't seen this yet, I'd like to – called "Strange Bedfellows". I was fortunate enough to see his play-of-the-week by the Irish Theater Group in Milwaukee. As I remember, he described it as a tragedy with belly laughs.

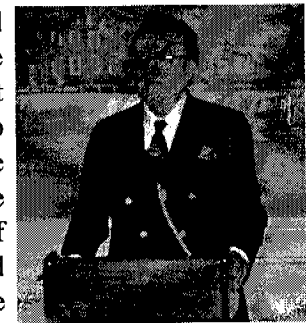
You may not know that he is the author of 38 published books, including *Explaining China*, *The Ground is Our Table* (which is a scholarly treatise on migratory farm labor), *Letter to a Conservative*, *Rip off, Dumbth*, and *Princess Snip Snip and the Puppy Kittens*. He has had a number of articles in humanistic journals. A friend of mine from Arizona State had to brag that Steve has an honorary degree from there. He said he thinks he has a few others; I asked Steve, but he doesn't know how many. At least it's either that or he is too bashful to tell me. Andy Williams once said: "Steve Allen does so many things he is the only man I know who's listed in every one of the yellow pages." And tonight, I was

reminded that Wendell Johnson once said that the way to be a genius is to find a genius and follow him around, do what the genius does and there you are. In this case you would be a very busy genius indeed.

I would like to present: Steve Allen.

Steve Allen:

Thank you. It may seem a little brusque, when you are so kind to applaud warmly, that I put up my hand and try to discourage your applause, but there is a reason for that. It's not modesty; it's just that I don't plan to be that great. And, I discover that if you let an audience continue to applaud, whoop and scream, they build up a lot of expectations and it makes it tougher for the speakers and the entertainers. Thank you for those kind words, I appreciate them. And I thank Mr. Maynard for his very convincing impression of George Bush, and the entire evening, the cocktail party, and the dinner and all of it has just been lovely. For this organization to go to the compassionate extreme just to make me feel at home, of arranging for the Harvard Club to have this lifelike rendering of our lovely home in California, I really appreciate that kind of gesture, it's great. I try to make sense of everything, but it's not possible of course, but one still persists in such attempts, and most of the time it does work out. I will go to my grave wondering why that man earlier screamed "Late for dinner". I just wanted him to know that it didn't escape my attention.



Anyway, to be more conventional, good evening ladies and gentlemen. That is of course a rhetorical cliché – By the way, can all of you hear in there? [A back room of the dining hall.] "Not too well". Well, the hell with you then. There is, seriously, there is room for about seven more chairs right down here if you want to avail yourself. Some of them are up and about. I want you to know you're welcome if you want to infiltrate this room. – It's a rhetorical cliché, as I was saying, to address audiences as "Ladies and Gentlemen". For some centuries it probably was not brought into question, but it now can be by no means any longer assumed that audiences do, at least in this culture, in this society, consist literally of ladies and gentlemen. That's why I'm very relieved to observe that tonight here it does make sense; all of you appear to be ladies or gentlemen. But I do a lot of entertaining at comedy clubs, and jazz clubs, radio and TV, and so I usually in those contexts just say: "Hi, folks", because the last time I saw an actual lady in one of those audiences was about eight years ago, and I try to be careful of my speech.

I met a number of you as individuals here tonight, and some of us know each other for many years. And as individuals you appear to be the salt of the earth. But to the extent that I could evaluate you as a group on the basis of some of these cards you brought, as a group you would appear to be a little on the flaky side. Anyway, I'm going to try to answer some of your questions now. [The questions had been submitted on cards.] I cannot always make out handwriting and correctly pronounce names but I will do my best.

Either Lower or Laver of New York City says: "Have you found the secret of immortality yet?" Yes, believe it or not I have. But, I have no intention of sharing it with you, because there are too many damned people on earth as it is. If that got around it would greatly worsen our predicament.

John Sganga of Ramsey, NJ: “Since you are now the most intelligent person we know of” – If I am, John, you’re hanging around with the wrong people. He continues, “can you explain the theory of evolution? Are we descendants of one mother, the Eve theory, or was there a simultaneous evolution?” Oddly enough, the next question is a similar sort from a Milton Dawes of Jamaica, and he says: “Where does the Universe end? What is over the border?” So, dealing with these questions as a pair, politicians always say “I’ll have to get back to you on that.” But I’m not running for anything, so I’ll tackle it right now. Hegel, close to Schopenhauer’s chosen field in the philosophy of history, made his famous distinction, as this audience would of course be intimately well aware, between the finite volitions of men (and inferentially women; you could use the word “men” then with impunity. By the way, you can still use it with impunity as long as what you’re saying about humanity is unflattering.) Nevertheless, he drew the distinction, I repeat, between the finite empirical will of men on the one hand and the astute essence of the idea on the other, which, while working its way through men, and again women, nevertheless often leads to ends that had not been properly anticipated, nor even absolutely correctly perceived after they had occurred. – I’m sorry, this is a speech I’m doing tomorrow night to the American Philosophical Society. But, that will teach you: “Why ask wisecrack questions?”

Okay. Oleg Pocheptsov, of Kiev, Ukraine, says: “What would the late Korzybski say about the recent presidential campaign and its results?” I think he would say, “Oy...” Actually, it’s easy to put down politicians. We all love Will Rogers because that is most of what he did for a living, so it is safe to do, at least in our kind of society it’s safe, and thank God for that. But, elections are obviously about getting elected, they have nothing much to do with governing. And for that matter, not even governments in this nation govern. They preside, and not always too successfully at that. So it’s too early to tell what Mr. Clinton will do. He has thrown out a few clues, but he could not be as specific as his inner heart might have wished him to be, because if you get too specific you start chipping away 3% here, and 2½% there, and pretty soon you don’t get elected. So, that’s the way the American game has to be played, and it’s that way not only in the USA. So, we should await new evidence now; I have an idea some of it will be coming through shortly. I hope I’m not speaking at the time.

Susan Kodish: “What about general semantics do you find relevant to your work, and how do you apply these aspects?” There are ways, Susan, and I’ll be happy to enumerate them: 1, 2, ... I just want to see if you are paying attention; I didn’t say I’d list them, I did say I’d enumerate. You see, pay attention to the words and you’ll beat me to the punch lines every time.

A somewhat similar question comes from Bruce Kodish, of Baltimore. “How did you first get interested in general-semantics?” I’ll be glad to get into that for you. I honestly was a general-semantacist apparently, of a sort, before I knew it. Because, going back into the late 50’s at which time I was writing and talking on television, I began to get letters from people who approved of one thing or another I had said, and in a dozen or so of these letters, they said something such as: “And it’s wonderful to note that you’re also a general-semantacist”. I had no idea what a general-semantacist was, but I thought maybe I’m one and I don’t know it. So, I began to look up what general-semantics was and it turned out they had correctly perceived some of the things I was doing and saying in writing as consistent with Korzybski’s basic premises.

One thing specifically that had fooled some of them was that in one of my early books, on a certain page I said: “Let me give you here, (addressing the reader) let me give you a couple of instances of what is obviously blatant communist propaganda.” You, of course, in your professional capacity as general-semantacists will have realized that I just loaded the dice for the reader. I colored his perception before

I even let him know what he was to perceive. So, I did indeed then indent and quote two statements that sounded very much as if they came from a Marxist source; they were very hard hitting, critical of the capitalist economy and critical of what had come to be the American conventional wisdom as of the 1950's. After which I revealed that the author of the first statement was Pope Pius XII, and the author of the second statement was Abraham Lincoln. And then I asked the people to go back and reread those statements now with this knowledge, and of course they saw them through a different filter.

So, as I said, I was already doing things of that sort and therefore once I began to read general-semantics and attend seminars, classes, and lectures – I remember a truly thrilling evening: there was this convention, I think the particular meeting which I'm speaking of took place in Los Angeles rather than Santa Barbara, but I attended events in both communities. And to me, the most exciting thing of the night was a demonstration by a group of children, boys and girls, I recall, all about the age of twelve. Mary, do you remember the specific – well, that's all right, I'll tell you about them. Anyway, this group of little ones sat around a table about that size with the audience all around them in a larger circle, and each child stood up and read. One read an ad for Kellogg's Corn Flakes, the other read an advertisement for tooth paste, an automobile or whatever. And they really picked it apart. It was absolutely brilliant. Nothing they said was extraordinary, but everything they said was right to the point. They separated hot air from content and it turned out that most of the stuff was hot air. I would have been impressed if a bunch of 57-year-old adults did that. But 10 and 11 and 12-year-olds doing it, because they had been provided with the general-semantics mind set, was something so thrilling that I have literally never forgotten it.

Somewhere around that time, roughly the early 60's, I met a gentleman who was already distinguished in at least academic and educational circles, because of his having developed a number of thinking games, the best known or best selling of which was a game called "W'ff & Proof". It talks about logic, and I was doing a nightly talk and comedy show at the time so I invited the fellow, Robert Allen, no relation, to our studio, and one of the demonstrations of several that he gave our viewers around the country, again involved a bunch of his students, who were about 11 or 12 years old. He would pose a particular kind of question on the blackboard – I don't mean what's the tonnage of grain in the Ukraine last year or something of that sort, which is just a matter of either you know it or you don't, nothing about intelligence there, just a fact ... – But it was a kind of a problem that I have never been able to keep track of, much less solve; a problem that has many factors. It goes like this: "If in Kansas it rains only on Monday, Wednesday and Friday, and Farmer Brown raises exclusively wheat in his fields and Farmer Jones raises rye in his fields" – I'm already lost, I don't know what the hell we're talking about. I'm not exaggerating, I literally lose track of what's the question, and the question always comes at the end of about nine such factors – "what then does it cost per bushel for cough syrup?" or whatever it is. If they said "we will either kill you or you solve that problem" I would say "Don't waste time, kill me now." I don't even understand the problem; how could I solve it?

But these little 11-year-olds would jump up and solve it in about 17 seconds by the use of symbolic logic. And that was only one of I think a dozen in all, of general-semantics demonstrations. Some of them I would handle myself, some are classic. You describe or have a pictorial representation of a particular scene, let's say an intersection here, a drug store here, supermarket over here and so forth, and then you let somebody stare at it for about 30 seconds and then they have to draw their version of it, and explain it to somebody else. By the time we get down to the eighth person who is on the stage without having been there to see the original drawing, it has nothing to do with the original. Truth has been totally lost and it's all imagination and error and nonsense mixed. So that not only made for great

television entertainment, or at least absorbing entertainment, it also was instructive and helped to spread the gospel, so to speak, of general-semantics.

At about that time Bob Allen and I created this game which Dr. Johnson was kind enough to mention, "Strange Bedfellows", and he based it on this gimmick I told you earlier about Abraham Lincoln and Pope Pius the XII. It was a simple table game with a little arrow that you spun with your finger. And on the left side of a playing card were a dozen or so statements, quotations, and on the other side a list of important figures from history: famous statesmen, philosophers, whatever. And you were supposed to match the two. The game of course was programmed so that it wasn't the easiest thing in the world. So, anyway, that's what "Strange Bedfellows" was and still is, although I don't think that there are too many stores today where you can find copies.

Then, you also were nice enough to mention an album that I did for children around 1962 called "How to Think", that is fortunately still being marketed. For years it was distributed by the Gifted Children Newsletter and just the other day in Los Angeles, of course, I attended a convention; most of those in attendance were either teachers or parents or administrators specifically concerned with the problems of gifted children. At first, when you hear the phrase "Problems of Gifted Children", you think it doesn't seem to make sense. It actually does, but the seeming is important. People often say: "Well, if they're so gifted, why do they need help? Let's work with the people who are handicapped or have trouble in other ways." But as this audience will probably be well aware, gifted children have their own special needs. If, for example, the gifts are overlooked, in later years that in itself can lead to all kinds of trouble. If you check into the mind sets of the little guys who are running the drug rings on the sidewalk in tough neighborhoods, the drug people, the professionals, the adults when they come in these neighborhoods never look for the stupidest kid on the block to have him handle that. They look for the brightest kid on the block that can keep track of arithmetic, and who they meet on Wednesday at 4:00 and on what street corner and so forth. That's one example of many that might be cited where a waste of intelligence, a misapplication of intelligence, can come simply from the fact that parents, schools, teachers do not recognize the child, boy or girl, as unusually intelligent.

Another third activity grew out of my interest in general-semantics, since the earlier question was what did I do about it. There was the book which was mentioned called *Dumbth, and 81 Ways to Make Americans Smarter*. That book is still being distributed by the publisher called Prometheus. And I hope it always will be; I make most of my money as an entertainer, but that book can do a lot of good, and I have gotten some wonderful mail making clear that it has done good in the lives of many who have read it. It's got a lot of humor in it, and in the first section the stories, the funny stories, now perceived as funny, were not funny when they occurred. They were usually tragic or serious or at least on the emotionally neutral scale. But because there was so much of this going on – the general collapse of American efficiency, which was once world famous, and certainly is not anymore – I coined the word "Dumbth" to cover it. "Dumbth" is a combination of ignorance and poor thinking and some other spice that got sprinkled in there (but I'm not sure yet what it is), so I thought it required a new word. It's a legitimately constructed word; it is rooted in *dumb* and it is as legitimate a word as *width*, related to *wide*, or *length* or *breadth* or other such words.

And, as an example of a collapse of efficiency, I explained in the early sections of the book that I'm a pretty useful dipstick, so to speak, because I travel a great deal and meet many kinds of people in many different professional contexts. So, I began to notice, about 25 years ago, that limousine service pretty much went right off the cliff. When I was younger, somebody said the limousine will be there

at two o'clock and it was. Now most of the time it isn't; either it doesn't show up at all or it's 19 minutes late, or it goes to the hotel I was in last week, something goes wrong. Very often too, when I get into the limousine, even though arrangements were made seven weeks in advance, the driver turns to me and says: "Where to?" And if I'm in Pittsburgh I say: "It beats the hell out of me, I don't live here." Anyway there was a lot of that going on.

Another way that American efficiency was collapsing was so prosaic a thing as room service. My mother and father were in vaudeville and so I spent part of my childhood in hotels, and children always love room service, so I still do. Even when I was seven years old I had no trouble calling downstairs and telling them what I wanted, and they always brought it up. Hardly ever happens to me anymore, even in good hotels. I like soup, who does not? and most menus say: "soup of the day", so for years I would inquire and they would tell me and I would either order it or not, as my mood of the moment dictated. But about fifteen or so years back, the conversation began to go something like this: "What is your soup of the day?" They would say: "The what?" I'd say: "The soup of the day", and they would say: "I don't know." I would say: "Well, your hotel is advertising it, it's on page 3 of your luncheon menu. Could you look at the menu, because I'm looking at it, so we could agree that it does say soup of the day." They would say: "Okay", and they would say: "Yep, here it is alright, soup of the day." I'd say: "Okay, we've made some progress, and what is it?" Then they'd say: "Bill, what is the soup of the day?" I could blow 20 minutes on this little subject matter, but my favorite soup of the day story, which is in that book, this is true, I'm not joking. There was a lovely hotel, so fancy in fact, that the menu was in French. There were also little English sub-titles, but basically a French menu; fine food in a hotel in a southern city, so I said to the woman on the phone – it said in the thing "soup du jour" – I said: "What is your soup du jour?" She said: "The what?" I said: "the soup du jour; it's on page three just where the pink merges into the lavender, under the salads." And she said: "I don't rightly know, Mr. Allen, could I ask you to wait for just a moment?" I said: "Certainly." So there was a moment of silence. I heard her speaking to somebody around the kitchen area. And she came back and said: "Mr. Allen, the soup du jour –" I said: "Yes, ma'am, what is it?" She said: "That, sir, is the soup of the day".

As I say, these are funny stories in hindsight, but they're just annoying when they occur. So, I began to think of ways we could stop that. Or, at least diminish it, or discourage it. My actual title at the time I was writing the book was: "100 Ways to Make Americans Smarter", but by the time I got up to 81 the publisher said: "I can't wait any longer, change the title." So, the book has this kind of dumb title itself, come to think of it, called *Dumbth, and 81 Ways to Make Americans Smarter*. And one of the ways is to check into general-semantics, because you have to be more intelligent, if you really soak up that, then you were before you did so. So, it's another connection with the movement.

Number four on this list of reactions to involvement with general-semantics is the program with which apparently a number of you are familiar, the "Meeting of Minds" series that Jayne and I did for four years for the Public Broadcasting System television network. It still has quite a vigorous afterlife, so to speak. We did twenty-four one-hour shows at the rate of six a year. For those of you who might not know what we are talking about, I will quickly explain that "Meeting of Minds" was just one more television talk show, but all of the guests were important figures from history, for better or for worse; not all of them were admirable people.

I was in Clare Boothe's apartment here in town once some years ago when she was still alive, and it turned out that she was a great fan of the shows. She said: "If you're going to do more shows this

year –” I said yes; she said “May I recommend that you book the Marquis de Sade as a guest?” I did what a couple of you did, I thought she was joking. She said: “Oh no, I’m very serious.” She said he was one of the most evil men who ever lived, one of the most depraved, but his views, his attitudes are unfortunately influential in today’s society. This she said twenty years ago. Now, he could have his own series.

So, we opposed him – since the show consisted not so much of interviews but of arguments and debates, but with civilized dialogue – we opposed him with a gentleman who all by himself was responsible for stopping the practice of judicial torture in Europe, Cesare Beccaria; you lawyers will be familiar with his work.

It’s depressing and sobering to recall or to learn in the first place that, while there has always been torture and there always will be unfortunately – sometimes it’s a result of political or religious fanaticism, sometimes just the vicious evil in some human hearts and perhaps potentially in all human hearts – nevertheless it was far worse than that during centuries of development in what we would like to think of as a civilized Europe; in other words, the famous nations that most of us came from in one sense or another, Italy, France, England, Scotland and so forth. In those days when you got arrested there was none of the English or American tradition of a trial and all that; they just beat the hell out of you until you confessed. And you can immediately see not only the cruelty of that, but the stupidity of it. I don’t know about you but as soon as they’d hit me over the head I’d confess to anything. If I have an alternative I’ll jump out the window, I’ll lie for a few minutes, if they keep hitting me I’ll tell them anything. I’ll tell them stuff I never even knew, but if it stopped the hitting it’s that simple. So everybody confessed to everything and then the next morning they would say “I’m sorry, I confessed only because you hurt me”, then they would hit them again and he would confess again. So, it was one of the most stupid and depraved and cruel things. And it was not just cruel jailers who were getting away with this; the state and the church insisted on that. It was formalized, it was authorized at the highest level of state and church. So, one man named Beccaria stopped that, and we opposed him to Sade and it was exciting stuff.

If you missed that and want to catch up with it it’s available. Video cassettes can be ordered from my office. But it is quite easy now to get the audio cassettes, a very enterprising company called “Dove Books on Tape” is distributing all 24 of them. They can be ordered anywhere you would buy cassettes on how to exercise or whatever you might buy audio cassettes for. Also, our friend Paul Kurtz of Prometheus has brought out a four-volume set of the scripts, which a number of people have told me are even more interesting to read than to hear, because when you read something and you don’t quite get it, you think of something in response to it, you can stop and look out the window or read 12 pages over again. You can’t do that obviously when you are watching a show or a play or something of that sort. So, the show has that on-going life, and again there is an influence of general-semantics in the entire production. Then also, for those of you who are involved with video games – notice I did not say “into video games”, because I hate clichés – anyway, a company in Boston that does video software is just now bringing out a video game called “Meeting of Minds”, but it’s not simply another version of the original shows. They are creating games with the characters we used and you can interact with that at your terminal.

Sometimes this kind of knowledge, this kind of thinking can be turned to comic effect. Just, was it today – I think it was today, I’ve done so much this week I’ve forgotten – I was out in the garment district around 37th and 38th street, wandering around with a microphone and a video camera and two

operators, talking to people. Nothing whatever was planned and some of the people still probably don't even know that they were on television. Most of them were very young; they had no idea who I was, although they had a great respect for a camera and a microphone. I put one question to about 10 people, and the question went like this: I said, "As you know, we just got through a very harrowing election, and we are taking a moment to get away from it, but let me return you to that context with this simple question: If you had firmly committed your support for a given candidate for the Presidency of the United States and you really felt very enthusiastic about helping him out by voting for him, for one thing, but at the last minute it came to your attention that the man was an admitted heterosexual, would you continue to support him?" The audience was about equally divided, but in a very specific way. Half of them said: "Oh, well no, we don't want that in the White House. I mean, what a guy does on his own time is none of my business, but I'm not going to vote for that." That was half the answer. The others would take a moment to think it over and they said: "Well, what the hell, it's a guy's own business and if he is a good man on foreign policy and economics, yeah I wouldn't hold it against him." And I said: "You wouldn't mind if he was a heterosexual?" They said "Not at all." We didn't run into anybody who gave me an intelligent answer. So there is a use for everything in this world, even ignorance. Since I do television comedy, sometimes the two are not mutually exclusive.



One of the things that I have tried to impress upon anybody who will read me or listen to me is that – I don't think Korzybski ever put it in these terms, I'm sure he put it much more succinctly and more wisely, but – that the human memory is some sort of a dumb joke played on us by blind evolution. It is a very faulty mechanism, and therefore, the ancient virtue of humility should be called into the social drama and exercised daily. Everybody's memory is lousy. There might be some exceptions in those vaudeville entertainers who have freak memories and can look at a phone book and tell you what's on page 49 and so forth; whether that's partly fakery or legit I don't know. If it's legit, then hurray for them, but the rest of us have lousy memories. I'm not just saying about "Where are my car keys"; we all do that all day long. I'm talking about being able to report five minutes later what happened. Almost everybody, as this audience is aware, is awful at that.

I first learned about that before I had ever heard of Korzybski. I learned it from a scholar named Hugo Munsterburg, a great legal scholar, in a piece in one of my college English textbooks called "Memory of the Witness". I had occasion recently to have one of our people locate that and make Xerox copies because I send it around to people I think need it. Although I'll run out of copies long before I run out of people who need it. But, as you know, people have been executed because of the testimony of people who meant to be the most reliable witnesses in the world. But, it turned out that only twelve years later, they were wrong. It was a short Armenian guy that did it (or whatever the other real switch was) but, in the meantime, the taller Polish fellow was killed, and we can't bring him back. So, that is consistent and tucks in neatly with Korzybski's lessons, as you know.

In a fifth instance, one of my recent books was: *How to Make a Speech*, just as the title suggests, about the ability and techniques in speech-making, and the importance of coherent communication of course was stressed. In the sixth instance, another of my recent books which Prometheus published was a study of Scripture, an analysis of sacred scripture based on about 20 years of study, my study, and of course thousands of years of study by qualified Bible scholars. I'm simply a student of scripture, not a scholar; I have no academic qualifications for that task at all. Therefore, I did the obvious thing, I

depended on the work of literally hundreds of scholars, all of whom I refer to in the book's bibliography. My title for it was *The Mystery of the Bible*, because the Bible is a profoundly mysterious work. It's not the clear document that was suggested to us when we were in Sunday school classes. The book tries to apply simple common sense to scripture which is quite a subversive thing to do. And, I have learned happily, simply by reading reviews and mail, that everybody seems to love it, except a few – statistically few, they number in the millions, statistically they are small – of fundamentalists, literalists who believe that every word, not just most, not that the word of God is in there, it well may be, but that every single word of the Bible is to be interpreted literally if it purports to relate some actual event: Jonah and the Whale, Joshua and his trumpets, whatever. The great preponderance of Christian and Jewish scholarship is flatly opposed to the literalist approach. This shows that the churches can evolve, to their great credit, and the Bible scholarship of 1992 is vastly superior to that of even 30 or 40 years ago. But again, the reason I mention this is because it represented, I should say, an attempt on my part to apply even basically simple elements of common sense to some of the knowledge that Korzybski stressed in regard, for example, to the difficulty of communication. (I might get back to that but I didn't prepare any of this, so we are just popping around here.)

Let me deal with some more of your cards. Someone from Dix Hills, N.J. asked: "When did you write the song 'Orange Colored Sky'?" The answer is never. That question and that answer are not particularly important in themselves, but they are of profound importance in terms of what they represent. What they represent is a massive obfuscation of the public record. Until I became a public figure I didn't know this. And I think we can safely exclude the possibility that I'm the only public figure whose views, whose doings, are so dreadfully inadequately reported. I must be like everybody else in this connection, because the contrary would be two Twilight Zone interview series I entertained. In my current, latest book that came out a few weeks ago called: *Hi-Ho Steverino* – it covers 50 years in TV and Radio – I start out by printing about two pages of things which are very well established about me, because they have appeared in the public record. Then at the bottom of that page I explain the most interesting thing about all these assertions, some of which are highly complimentary. It's a great compliment to be told you wrote "Orange Colored Sky." That's a good song and I wish I could claim it. But, what all those public items have in common is that there is **not a word of truth to any of them**. And I gave about 25 or 30 of them. I have hundreds in my files, but who would want to read that much stuff? So that is a very important lesson that that teaches: we already know that we have lousy memories, and secondly we know that because some of us who have lousy memories are also journalists there is a lot of error out there. And Korzybski, or just your grandmother, could help you to try to separate fact from fiction.

Okay, let me see here, Bruce, oh the Kodishes are back again. "Will you please describe your ideal school?" That would take about three hours, Bruce, but I could throw out a couple of quick thoughts before getting to the next card. It would incorporate a fourth "R" into the curriculum: reading, 'riting, 'rithmetic, and **reasoning** would be the fourth. There are already courses in logical thinking, some technical philosophy courses that deal with this, but generally at the University level. I think that's about fifteen years too late. I recommend that we have to build it into the kindergarten and first grade curriculum. First of all, the average five-year-old doesn't know he has a brain. He may hear the word in connection with the Wizard of Oz or whatever, but he doesn't know that it is the most important part of him. So that was to establish that point, not only its necessity, but even its simplicity, that I created the afore-mentioned "How to Think" Album, which is aimed at children from about the age of six or seven. It has little jokes, little songs, little cutie-wootsie subjects, but has some very profoundly important points. One of them for example is called "Look for the Evidence". A little song, the first

four lines of it go “Look for the evidence, look for the proof, or else you’re acting like an awful goof”. I know 50-year-old men that can use that advice. If they hear something consistent especially with their negative biases or prejudices, they snap it up like sharks grabbing a piece of meat. If it goes counter to what they believe, they will swim around it for awhile and maybe swim away from it.

Another thing that would be part of my ideal school, Bruce, would be the use of celebrities as teachers. I wish our society were not celebrity nuts, but unfortunately our society is made up of those dangerous dumb creatures called: “Human Beings”, and here we’re arguing with God, of course. I didn’t make human beings what they are, I’m trying to change them. But what they are is basically “screw ups” as they used to say in the army. One of the manifestations of their poor thinking is that they are very uninterested in talent. They think they are but most of them don’t even know what it is. What they are morbidly fascinated by is success, fame, celebrity. You could be the greatest violinist in the country and you wouldn’t mean a damn to most Americans until you win a gold record or some prize in Moscow one day or something, then they will kiss the hem of your garment. But when you say to them, “The man has been playing brilliant violin for 20 years” they wouldn’t look at him. Then they’re stuck, they have no answer. They missed 20 years of good music. But it’s not his talent, even then, that impresses them, it’s his fame, celebrity. So, given that we’re stuck with that, I would use celebrities as teachers. I don’t mean you’re going to get Michael Jackson to come in to a school to be the arithmetic teacher, but he could make a video, a film, and I guarantee you right or wrong – you don’t have to be guaranteed, you know it – that a child of 6 or 7 who is thrilled just to know that Michael Jackson is on the same planet with him or her, will listen more to what he says than some poor professional teacher trying to teach exactly the same subject matter. I’m not saying get rid of the teachers, they have to be available to put the video tape in the machine. And, also to assign the homework, and give the kids a kiss and a lot of other wonderful stuff. I’m saying don’t fire a single teacher, but get help from Mickey Mouse or Michael Jackson or whoever.

Richard Bernstein, MD, from Mamaroneck says: “What is the capitol of Minnesota?” The capitol of Minnesota, Doctor, is \$137 billion dollars. I know these answers aren’t great, but the questions aren’t too thrilling either. Bob Pula, Baltimore: “Did your knowledge of general-semantics help you with writing your 1980 book on China, if so, how?” Yes, it helped with the writing, it obviously doesn’t make you know more about China, or any specific subject matter, but it enables you to deal with any subject matter on a more reasonable basis. And, it also helps to sort of build a, to speak in terms of software, it sticks an automatic editor into your brain that wasn’t there before. So, in that sense it helps with all writing. For the technology part, the tactical part, I had to go to China three times and read about 100 books.

Bruce Kodish – look at this, we have two Bruce Kodishes, strangely enough. “Mr. Allen, will you list the ten authors that have had the most influence on you?” No, I will not ... it’s an answer. Stuart Mayper, of Ridgefield, CT.: “You created the program ‘Meeting of Minds’; which of these great people of the past would you say reacted most like general-semanticists and why?” No **one** name occurs to me, Stuart, but I guess the various rightly esteemed philosophers would be near the top of that list. Among our guests were Plato, Socrates, Aristotle, Francis Bacon, Aquinas, all of whom reasoned very well. They were also guilty of error; everyone of them is now seen to have been in error at one point or another. But their reasoning was great. Superior intelligence. You’ll notice I’m not making this speech about general-semantics, as many of you know a lot more than I do about it; I’m just telling you, in response to the questions, how I applied it.

“When you write your music, do you actually put it on paper or do you tape it?” The latter, sir, I’ll get back to that in a moment. The word “latter” reminded me, ever since the book *Dumbth* came out people are constantly sending me examples they have heard, because I may do another book or article or speech. And I add to my own supply of instances and this is true, sad but true. I was on a plane coming east a few days ago, and a young man, in this instance, was serving lunch on the other side of the aisle; anyway, he offered me the roll basket, and said: “Would you care, Mr. Allen, for the sourdough or the seven grain?”, and I said: “The latter.” He said: “The what?” He had no idea what I was talking about. And, I thought he just didn’t hear me, so I said: “The latter” and he said: “I’m sorry sir”, so I said: “The seven grain.” Another great instance: a woman who was dressing my hair the other day – don’t ever quote this outside because I wouldn’t want to hurt her personal feelings, she is a great hairdresser – she was talking about the fact that she and her husband had some suspicions about a clergyman at her church, who she thought was up to no good. In all seriousness she said: “Ernie and I really suspected there was something rotten in Denver”.

Now, back to George Hammerbacker about music. George, I am a musical illiterate. That simply means that I cannot read music; therefore, it follows that I cannot put it on paper. Sometimes, if I don’t have access to tape equipment, I will write out the letters of the alphabet and figure where it would play if I had a piano; if it were in E flat, let’s say I would write down C, E, and so forth. Nobody else can read that because they don’t know which of the many C’s on the piano it would apply to. But, I therefore put all my new music on tape and then we wait until I get a tape with about 30 new melodies on it and we send it out to a copyist, who cannot compose a note but can write down whatever he hears, so that’s how that works.

Robert Peterson, Westport, CT. (I used to live there). “In your opinion Mr. Allen, is Bill Clinton a semanticist?” I honestly don’t know. He is, was, a Rhodes scholar, which may mean he knows all the roads in Arkansas, I’m not sure. R. Morron, Greenwich, CT: “ ‘Night and Day’, the song, has achieved notoriety, and the song you wrote called ‘Day and Night’ deserves the same”. One of the problems, Mr. Morron, with writing thousands of songs is most of them are not in the forefront of my consciousness, although we have them on paper and I can listen to them on tape. But, that was probably a comedy switch; obviously if he had written “Night and Day”, to write “Day and Night” and give it a funny melody would be done for comedy purposes. I remember once I performed in a concert at Carnegie Hall and I was talking about my great admiration for Cole Porter, who could take any idea and because of his harmonic sense and his melodic richness make you accept lyrics that not always made sense. For example, “Begin the Beguine”: the “Beguine”?, have you ever seen anyone dancing the “Beguine”?. You never will. “What about Fred Astaire and Eleanor Powell?” The reason they didn’t dance the “Beguine” is there is no such dance. Cole Porter sold you a bill of goods. So, anyway after covering that ground at Carnegie Hall, I introduced a new song of mine called: “When They Stop the Stopoon”.

Gregg Hoffmann, Whitefish Bay, WI: “Do you feel general-semantics has helped you in being as diverse in your talents as you are?” No, I have obviously enormous respect for general-semantics but I don’t think it has any direct or necessary connection with whatever the word **talent** means. I think the primary and perhaps essentially the sole explanation for talent, (and I believe this to be true, otherwise I would never have been born) is genetic, biological. That first sounds like an interesting verification; it isn’t, it quite deepens the mystery. How the hell can a little speck of stuff that you would think was a smear of tapioca pudding account for what Shakespeare could do, what Einstein could do, what Leonardo could do? It’s even scarier when you’re talking about actual geniuses; I’m not a genius,

I'm just versatile. But that's what is the case; some little tiny little thing is where that talent comes from. And boy, that's way into the Twilight Zone. Of course, so is the whole universe, but at such moments we appreciate that overall truth.

Bruce Kodish: Meaning no disrespect, Bruce, this guy just won't go away. "How would you relate your theory of 'Dumbth' to the recent Presidential election?" I'll try, Bruce, to deal with that in a straightforward way. I recommend to all of you, that you read this week's or last week's *Newsweek*, in which the story of the weeks and months leading up to the election night is told. I think it's well worth preserving, keep it as part of your permanent library. My own reaction to reading it was a feeling of uneasiness. All three horses in that race were stumbling around the track and didn't know what the hell they were doing. It's a little bit like wars. I was in one war once briefly, I didn't play any great part of it, but I remember while going through basic training thinking of the idea that, excepting clear-cut cases where Rome is attacking some small town and the verdict is a foregone conclusion, the winners of wars are usually those who make the least mistakes. Doesn't necessarily require great superiority or luck or whatever; both sides are screwing up, and whoever does it the least probably will win the war. And that seems to have been what happened in this case.

There was a point where, if we could turn the whole universe back several weeks, I think we could have made Mr. Perot our President, because he was the beneficiary of the wide-spread dissatisfaction with conventional candidates. And, he immediately got millions of people just by saying: "I think I'll be available". Millions of people signed up like that. They didn't even know anything about him yet, and he could have turned out to be the greatest guy in the world. I'm not putting him up or down, but I'm saying there was deep dissatisfaction with politics-as-usual, to use a conventional phrase, and if he hadn't quit in the first case and then turned a little flaky the last few days, he could well have been number one instead of number three. But please do read that, and underline it, talk it over with your friends, save it and read it again a year from now.

It is really pretty scary; we now have Mr. Clinton, I voted for him, I did not come here tonight to put him down. But, he's the leader of the free world, as we say, and he has really been walking around and not too sure what he was talking about. Some suicidal moments; Mr. Bush was very depressed at certain moments and wanted to give it up, Bill Clinton wanted to give it up, nobody knows what Ross wanted because he is on his own planet. But it is a very sobering thing to read. Thirty years from now they may make a movie and everyone will seem heroic and purposeful, but apparently that's not the way politics is run.

Mary Morain: "What do you think of the term 'The American People'; all insist on talking about the American People." Yes, you're quite right in what I assume to be your point, Mary, in that it does not conform with any recognizable reality. It might have usefulness in a broad statistical sense, but even then you say "87% of the American People" or "it is often the case with the American People..." I was making this point just the other day in connection with another of my recent books: *How To Be Funny*. Someone was asking me is there any definition of humor that really covers it all and I said: "No". Nevertheless there have been many definitions of humor offered, some by the world's leading philosophers, Aristotle, Plato... They've all dealt with this question and most of them are wrong in their first sentence, because they start out by saying: "Humor is", and they're wrong already. I don't care what the third word is, they're wrong already. What they should say "It is often the case", "One might be forgiven for assuming", "Most humor is", "Half the time you will find", and so forth. Soon as they say "Humor" – and when they start with "All", then they are wrong even faster; they're wrong after the

first word. The reason for that is that you cannot make scientific statements about something so ephemeral as humor. It is like Shakespeare's "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder". If they think Mickey Mouse is funny and you don't, you're both right because funniness is your judgment; you can't have a pound of funniness. You can't say it weighs a pound, or it's not in the bag at all, or whatever. You're talking about opinion. It's very tough to be scientific about that but we should be more careful with language, as this audience knows in its bones.

Well, I think I'll stop after one more question here. Sandra Hollander, NYC: "Were you considered a gifted child?" I still am actually. No, seriously, there were one or two teachers, I don't think the word "gifted" ever occurred to them, they found out I could write and they were English teachers, so they noticed that. I don't think there was ever talk about gifted children in that day. There were of course gifted children; whether I was one of them is a separate question. I was thrilled a couple of years ago to spend a few days in a home that had been inhabited earlier by the great inventor and pioneer of the automobile industry, Charles Kettering. He was a gifted child but his gifts could easily have been overlooked. He was a country boy from a very poor family. Tremendously poor, no water in the house and that kind of a background, in a country town. And he might have ended up just an unknown farmer, lumberjack, or whatever had it not been that he had the good fortune to go to a slightly larger school down the road a few miles, and there were two young men that ran the school and they noticed that he was an unusual child. And of course today his name is famous all over the world. He had, I think, more important American inventions than anyone except Thomas Edison. But, he came from that modest background, his parents were not distinguished in any way, so, fortunately, we are better off today that he was discovered by chance and treated well, because he gave it all back to the world. But I'm sure at this moment there are thousands of gifted children in the world who are falling through the net.

Well, it was a delight to be here tonight, with so many old and new friends, and I thank you for helping me to ramble by means of responding to your questions. There being no further testimony forthcoming in this case, the jury will now retire to render a verdict.

Thank you very much!

Steve Allen

