Foreword to Thinking Creatically: Thinking Creatively, Thinking Critically
by Steve Allen

About 1960, I began receiving letters congratulating me on being a general semanticist. Since I had no idea what a general semanticist was, I began some casual reading in the field by consulting the works of Alfred Korzybski, S.I. Hayakawa, and others.

Ken Johnson recently reminded me that in 1961, at a general semantics seminar, I observed that although I was a newcomer to such company I had an odd sense of being at home in it. The reason was that, without ever having consciously thought the matter through, I had accidentally stumbled over a few modest sand-grains of the sort that constitute the great edifice of general semantics thought.

To be specific, at quite a early age it occurred to me that no two things on earth were identical. Possibly this insight flowed out of having been told that no two snowflakes were ever the same. In any event it was clear to the senses that no two physical objects I had ever encountered were truly identical. Even those objects formally modified by the adjective identical - such as identical twins or identical machine parts - were, if inspected closely, not really so.

Also some experience, much of it frustrating, with members of my mother's family, among whom I was reared, had dramatized the sharp contrast between even half-way clear thinking on the one hand and emotion-laden, disorganized, biased and narrow-minded thought on the other.

None of this is remarkable or perceptive enough to have shaken the foundations of the reputations of Aristotle, Aquinas, or Santayana but it was nevertheless such modest first steps that turned out to harmonize smoothly with the more formalized arguments constructed by Alfred Korzybski and his followers.

Another aspect of personal experience which forced me to perceive certain aspects of inadequate thinking, at least on the part of others, came about simply because I know more about myself than other people do and consequently recognize errors in certain of their observations about me, even in instances where such comments were highly complimentary.

A good part of this involved nothing more than identifying the good old Unwarranted Assumption. To construct an example to illustrate the point, consider a sentence that starts, "As a Catholic, Allen naturally feels that...."

Although I was a member of the Catholic church for the first three decades of life, I was automatically excommunicated at the moment of my second marriage. Any such inference about my conduct or beliefs after that date, therefore, would stand a good chance of incorporating error.
Mistakes in reporting both my activities and views have been so common over the years, even in articles written by fervent admirers, that I have accumulated an enormous number of them. While this is only a secondary rather than primary application to general semantics, it is nevertheless important to be aware that unless I am the only public figure about whom so much error is transmitted, we must always maintain a degree of skepticism about supposedly factual reporting on any personage, institution or event.

Over the years I collected hundreds of experiences, personal testimonials, clippings of news stories, reports of polls and statistical studies that convinced me that American people are suffering from a new and perhaps unprecedented form of mental incapacitation for which I have coined the word *dumbth*.

I certainly was not the first to notice the disastrous state of intelligence in America. But my frustration with incompetence and inefficiency and my concern about the growing problem of ignorance and stupidity led me to write *"Dumbth" And 81 Ways to Make Americans Smarter* (Prometheus Books, Buffalo, NY, 1989). More than I realized at the time, general semantic principles were woven into several of my "Rules" for improving the thinking process. (Rule 81, incidentally, suggests "Become familiar with the general semantics movement.")

Part of the problem is that we think very poorly. But how could it be otherwise when few of us have given any instruction in that difficult task? Do schools teach us *how* to think? Very rarely. They teach us *what* to think.

It's odd that at a time when 'consciousness raising' is at least relatively popular, thinking itself has relatively few defenders, even though it is one of the chief means of raising one's consciousness.

When people use that now-common phrase, they usually refer to consciousness about specific issues - abortion, civil rights, women's rights, environmental pollution, and so on. But simply to learn seventeen new facts about these important social questions is hardly an adequate method of achieving the desired end. It is necessary to *think* about such issues, intelligently speculate about them, reason about them, communicate articulately about them.

What we desperately need now - as individuals and as a society - is instruction in *how to think*.

I shall never forget the literal thrill I felt some years ago at witnessing a demonstration by a group of children aged 12 or 13 all of whom had benefited by instruction in general semantics by Catherine Minteer. Each child first read aloud a newspaper article or advertisement, then analyzed it for the audience. The insight, the clarity, the brilliance with which those children separated hot air from factual, reasonable statements was tremendously exciting. God, if a generation of young Americans could be taught similar lessons, it is difficult to envision the benefits to society that could result.

It is important to realize that general semantics is not simply something of interest to scholars or university graduates. Teachers can and should introduce it at all levels since thinking skills are useful at every level and in every subject in the curriculum. In one regard general semantics is even superior to the classic disciplines in that in the process of improving communication it encourages more fair and rational behavior toward others.
In this book twenty-four teachers will show you how to think creatively and critically. The authors weave a tapestry of observations, suggestions, theories, reflections and teaching methods based on general semantics. They will lead you to other books on general semantics and related approaches to creative and critical thinking. You may want to attend lectures and seminars or subscribe to *Et cetera magazine* (International Society for General Semantics, 965 Mission Street, Suite 330, San Francisco, CA 94103) or the *General Semantics Bulletin* (Institute of General Semantics, 163 Engle Street, Englewood, NJ 07631).

Though Steve Allen is best known for his creative work as a television comedian and host of the 'Tonight Show' and the "Steve Allen Show," he has written more than thirty-two books ranging from poetry through short stories, humor, autobiography and politics. His scholarly treatise on migratory farm labor titled *The Ground is Our Table* sold over 25,000 copies. Then there's the musical Allen - composer, lyricist, conductor, singer, recording artist and pianist. Steve has some forty record albums to his credit and has written over 4,000 songs.

Prestigious awards from within and outside the industry have honored his unique PBS television series "Meeting of Minds" which brought back important personages of the past to discuss social and philosophical issues.

His strong social conscience led him to become deeply involved in philosophy, religion, politics and the problems of the underprivileged. He has an almost obsessional hunger for education. "It was suddenly clear to me" he has said, "that as an individual's knowledge increased he becomes more aware that what he knows and all that he can know is a grain of sand compared to the Sahara that can potentially be known." He was disturbed that people could buy a bottle of liquor which would last a few days, but would not buy a book which would last a lifetime. "I buy books," he admitted, "as if they were jelly beans."