Perhaps we knew about fire before we even knew we were human. We were using fire to drive and trap animals and to roast meat 500,000 years ago, during the Pleistocene Era. However, exactly when or how Homo Erectus discovered fire is unknown, although there are theories: A woman may have been chipping flakes from a piece of flint, and the sparks that flew from the blows ignited nearby leaves and twigs; then again, there may have been a lightning strike and a forest fire, and our man Grog took a burning branch home to light and warm the cave.

Of course, the generations of humans that came after the great discovery, started out life with the knowledge of fire, a knowledge passed to them in childhood by their parents. Because it is in the nature of human beings to pass information from one generation to the next—to build on the achievements of past generations over time—there was no turning back to pre-fire days. Each generation added to the storehouse of knowledge about fire, until by the Neolithic Era, humans could produce fire at will, with such tools as the fire plow, the fire drill, and the bow drill.

In 1669, phosphorus, a volatile, deadly poison, and the starter ingredient of modern matches, was discovered. John Walker, an Englishman, built on that discovery and produced the first practical friction match in 1827. In 1855, the safety match appeared; it could only be lighted when struck against a strip of red phosphorus. Finally, the Diamond Match Co. created a safe, non-poisonous phosphorus formula in 1911 from a French patent, and the modern match came into being.

It may seem strange, but even such a simple task as striking a match is not an independent act; it is the result of the efforts of countless generations over time.

Ten years after the appearance of the Diamond match, Alfred Korzybski formulated a new theory of human existence based on the interdependence of

*James French has written on a number of subjects including the relationship of general semantics to formal logic; and he has written material for national comedians.

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the generations. He saw, as we have seen in the history of fire, the links between the generations that are integral to the development of human culture. In the words of Abraham Lincoln:

Fishes, birds, beasts, and creeping things are not miners, but feeders and lodgers merely. Beavers build houses; but they build them in no wise differently or better now than they did five thousand years ago. Ants and honey bees provide food for winter; but just in the same way they did when Solomon referred the sluggard to them as patterns of prudence. Man is not the only animal who labors; but he is the only one who improves his workmanship. (1)

Korzybski, an immigrant to America, called his theory "time-binding." Because time-binding is fully compatible with the great religions and science, it can be the foundation of a new American ethic.

Korzybski said that there are three primary classes of life: plants, animals, and human beings; and each of these classes can be distinguished according to its function.

Plants take in energy from the sun and the atmosphere and convert it into chemical elements and compounds through the process of photosynthesis. The chemicals are released back to the atmosphere or stored and later converted into growth and plant tissue; and thus plants may be called the chemical-binding class of life.

Animals take in stored energy from plants and other animals, and from the atmosphere, and use it for mobility. Animals are the space-binding class of life, because unlike plants, they can voluntarily move about in terrestrial space—they can roam about over the land or in the sea in search of food (energy).

Human beings use stored chemical energy and the ability to move over the land to discover and develop knowledge and information. Human knowledge is stored in the minds of individuals and in books and other media, and is passed with the aid of language to the next generation. This process creates new sources of energy: for example, the applied knowledge of plant cultivation produces more food energy than would otherwise be available. By storing knowledge and information, the achievements of each generation are passed to the next generation, which in turn adds its own achievements and passes them on to its descendants, and so on, as in the case of fire. Thus, as a species, we have a degree of interdependence that is greater by far than that of any animal. Consider the millions of human beings who would not be alive today were it not for the medical knowledge (of such procedures as vaccination, for example) discovered and passed on by bygone generations. Not only do we depend on those now living, we also depend on the countless individuals of the past; and future generations depend on us. Because we have this special ability, this unique capacity to advance through time, we are the time-binding class of life.

Humans, as time-binders, do not differ in kind from animals, but in dimension, just as a square and a cube are the same kind of figure but different in
dimension. Through our special ability to utilize the time dimension, we have achieved a level of existence unknown to that of the beasts. Of course, it is possible that animals may also have a limited capacity to bind time; but if so, then it must be at a negligible rate. It is our unique, unmatched rate that sets us apart. If all that we have gained in the course of time—art, industry, language, philosophy, religion, and science—were to be suddenly taken away from us, it would be impossible for an outside observer to distinguish between our behavior and that of the beasts. In large measure, time-binding is what makes human beings human.

It seems evident that Korzybski’s theory has important social implications. Consider the ethical question of whether egoism comes before altruism. Egoism seems to come first for animals because, as Herbert Spencer said, “A creature must live before it can act”; but does it come first for the time-binding class of life? Korzybski said no. Human beings, because of our time-binding capacity, are not finders but creators of food and shelter, which is why we are able to live in such vast numbers. Thus we must act first (by utilizing our time-binding ability) in order to be able to live. Otherwise, said Korzybski, if we were to live in complete accord with the animalistic view of humankind, time-binding production would cease and ninety percent of humankind would perish by starvation. For the human race, it’s not inevitably a “dog eat dog world”; we have the capacity and opportunity to act otherwise.

For the society that adopts it, Korzybski’s theory could provide a secure, rational foundation for ethical behavior, an ethics based on the verifiable fact of human interdependence in time and space. If taught well in the schools, the theory could transform the whole outlook of our culture. As the mathematician Cassius J. Keyser said, the future depends in large part both upon what we human beings are and in equal or greater measure upon what we think we are.

We are the time-binding class of life.

NOTES AND REFERENCES