TRACKING HOW WE CHANGE: 
Joseph Conrad’s Insights on “Dating” Ourselves

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As time passes, we change. If we deny or ignore change, we create problems for ourselves. The general semantics technique of dating reminds us that we change.

Recently, I re-read Joseph Conrad’s evocative, wistful short story “Youth,” a work I first studied at the age of 20 in an English literature class. Now, at 60, having taught English composition and literature for over 37 years, I realize that I have, like Conrad’s characters, dramatically changed my perspectives, in what seems the blinking of an eye. In “Youth,” we see the viewpoints of the young 20-year-old second mate Marlow (who, along with his cronies, nostalgically recalls his experiences from a vantage point of 22 years later) and of the tired and weary skipper of the hapless vessel Judea, Captain Beard, described by Conrad’s narrator Marlow as 60 years “old,” “twisted and bowed” with “hollow eyes and sunken cheeks.”

As time-binders, we general semantics practitioners realize the practicality of dating ourselves, using the Korzybskian extensional device to take stock of

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our capabilities and limitations. For example, I might say of myself that David$_{1995}$ is not David$_{2005}$. Susan and Bruce Kodish in *Drive Yourself Sane: Using the Uncommon Sense of General Semantics* refer to the uncommon sense of George Bernard Shaw’s tailor who realized that ‘things’ change over time:

Not only does each customer differ from each other, but each customer differs from himself or herself over time. The customer who in 1981, weighed 190 pounds and had a 38 inch waist may, in 1991, weigh 220 pounds and have a 44 inch waist. A good tailor will take into account such changes over time and measure as necessary each time the customer calls. (p.138)

The Kodishes suggest that not only our tailors, but each of us individually need to date ourselves on regular intervals:

Dating helps us differentiate a particular individual at a given date from that individual at another date. It helps us to realize that no particular individual ‘is’ exactly the ‘same’ from moment to moment. You today are not you 10 years ago. In what ways have you changed? Some individuals, like the tailor, seem ‘naturally’ more extensional and seem more likely to take the time factor into account. Most of us need the reminding that dating our terms and statements gives us. (p.138)

Dr. Sanford I. Berman also reminds us, “If you don’t think you are changing, take a look at a picture of yourself twenty years ago.” He points out that Korzybski recommended that we date our evaluations. We must date ourselves, events, and other people. We recognize that our language has static, non-changing implications. (*Audio Cassette “What is General Semantics?”*)

Joseph DeVito, in his audio lesson *Static Evaluation*, says,

All statements referring to reality should be dated since the reality to which they refer is always changing. John Smith$_{1968}$ is certainly not John Smith$_{today}$. Our parents ten years ago are not the same as our parents today. They have changed and perhaps they haven’t changed as much as we would want them to; they nevertheless have changed and our attitudes toward them should likewise change.” (*General Semantics: Guide and Workbook*)

Dating ourselves can help us to see the subtle changes in our sensory organs, for example the gradual deterioration in visual, auditory, gustatory, and tactile sensations. We become aware of these changes as our optometrist gradually changes our vision prescription, or our audiologist fits us for hearing aids,
or we require glucosamine supplements, along with a cane or walking stick, to help us continue those long arduous hikes we could once take effortlessly. Perhaps we find that we need more seasoning to bring out the robust flavor that the taste buds can no longer detect. Perhaps our family complains to us when we crank up the TV volume. Most of all, the excitement and anticipation that characterizes youth gradually becomes replaced with caution and a desire to rest from our labors. Thus we move from age 20 to 40 to 60 to 70 to 80 to 90 to etc., and periodically reflect upon changes that have occurred within the equipment of our nervous systems.

In Conrad’s story, the narrator Marlow, now at the age of 42 (having moved 22 years closer to the age of the weary ‘old’ Captain Beard), proceeds to take stock of changes in his perspective, poignantly realizing that the evanescent, explosive, flamboyant chemistry of youth is finite rather than infinite. The Korzybskian extensional device of *dating* helps us to evaluate life as an unfolding changing process, as we go through countless thinking, feeling, and sensing
changes as we move from birth to death. At the conclusion of the story, Conrad and his middle-aged to elderly seafaring cronies reflect on Marlow’s account of his first harrowing seafaring experience and lament the passing of their youth-ful vigor and energy:

And we all nodded at him: the man of finance, the man of accounts, the man of law, we all nodded at him over the polished table that like a still sheet of brown water reflected our faces, lined, wrinkled; our faces marked by toil, by deceptions, by success, by love; our weary eyes looking still, looking always, looking anxiously for something out of life, that while it is expected is already gone — has passed unseen, in a sigh, in a flash — together with the youth, with the strength, with the romance of illusions. (p.154)

Similarly, Robert Frost, in his poem “Nothing Gold Can Stay,” suggests a parallel theme of the fleeting transience of youth or innocence:

Nature’s first green is gold,
Her hardest hue to hold.
Her early leaf’s a flower;
But only so an hour.
Then leaf subsides to leaf.
So Eden sank to grief,
So dawn goes down to day.
Nothing gold can stay.


At the outset of Marlow’s narrative, he provides the reader with the insight that the voyage of the *Judea*, fraught with setbacks, disappointments, detours, frustration futility, and eventual destruction by fire and sinking, serves as a kind of metaphor for the inevitable passages we must all take through life:

… there are those voyages that seem ordered for the illustration of life, that might stand for a symbol of existence. You fight, work, sweat, nearly kill yourself, sometimes do kill yourself, trying to accomplish something — and you can’t. (“Youth,” p.116)

From the perspective of youth, the unfolding experience becomes colored with enthusiasm, intrigue, and a sense of adventure (my emphasis added):

I joined to-morrow. It was twenty-two years ago; and I was just twenty. How time passes! *It was one of the happiest days of my life. Fancy! Second mate*
for the first time — a really responsible officer! I wouldn’t have thrown up my new billet for a fortune. (p.116)

Marlow’s initial appraisal of the Judea takes into account the apparent decrepitude of the vessel, but his youthful exuberance romantically embraces this otherwise dreary, un-seaworthy object, with its cocky motto “do or die,” and transforms it into an encapsulation of youthful adventure:

You can imagine her state. She was all rust, dust, grime — soot aloft, dirt on deck. To me it was like coming out of a palace into a ruined cottage. She was about 400 tons, had a primitive windlass, wooden latches to the doors, not a bit of brass about her, and a big square stern. There was on it, below her name in big letters, a lot of scroll work, with the gilt off, and some sort of a coat of arms, with the motto “Do or Die” underneath. I remember it took my fancy
immensely. There was a touch of romance in it, something that made me love the old thing — something that appealed to my youth! (p.117)

Marlow has, from the vantage point of 22 years later, recollected his youthful exuberance with a realization that this invincible feeling had now disappeared. He remembers how the ‘old’ skipper and his wife had appeared then — as beings who had obviously aged, but had tenaciously held on to a portion of their youth. After he describes the 60-year-old skipper, Captain Beard, as having a straight back with “bowed shoulders and one leg more bandy than the other,” Marlow also makes the complimentary observation that the captain “had blue eyes in that old face of his, which were amazingly like a boy’s, with that candid expression some quite common men preserve to the end of their days by a rare internal gift of simplicity of heart and rectitude of soul.” (p.116) Mrs. Beard, who seemed to play the role of a surrogate mother to Marlow, was “an old woman, with a face all wrinkled and ruddy like a winter apple, and the figure of a young girl.” (p.119) Now, years later, contemplating the deaths of Captain and Mrs. Beard and sizing up his own maturing process, Marlow resignedly exclaims, “youth, strength, genius, thoughts, achievements, simple hearts — all die ... No matter.” (p.119)

As the Judea must repeatedly go back to dry dock for repairs, Marlow personifies the ship as a mirror of our own aging process, suggesting, “She was tired — that old ship. Her youth was where mine is — where yours is — you fellows who listen to this yarn; and what friend would throw your years and your weariness in your face?” (p.129)

Marlow piles story upon story of grueling experiences, juxtaposing his exuberant youthful reaction with his older not so exuberant reactions:

And we pumped. And there was no break in the weather. The sea was white like a sheet of foam, like a caldron of boiling milk; there was not a break in the clouds, no — not the size of a man’s hand — no, not for so much as ten seconds. There was for us no sky, there were for us no stars, no sun, no universe — nothing but angry clouds and an infuriated sea. We pumped watch and watch, for dear life; and it seemed to last for months, for years, for all eternity, as though we had been dead and gone to a hell for sailors. We forgot the day of the week, the name of the month, what year it was, and whether we had ever been ashore. (p.123)

But Marlow’s reaction as a young man was one of youthful exuberance and a pride in his ability to withstand whatever fate would dish out to him:
And there was somewhere in me the thought: By Jove! This is the deuce of an adventure — something you read about; and it is my first voyage as second mate — and I am only twenty — and here I am lasting it out as well as any of these men, and keeping my chaps up to the mark. I was pleased. I would not have given up the experience for worlds. I had moments of exultation. Whenever the old dismantled craft pitched heavily with her counter high in the air, she seemed to me to throw up, like an appeal, like a defiance, like a cry to the clouds without mercy, the words written on her stern: “Judea, London. Do or Die.” (p.124)

Marlow’s youthful enthusiasm is juxtaposed to ‘older’ perspectives at several intervals throughout the short story. As he contemplated his relationship to the Captain and the first mate, he claimed he “felt like a small boy between two grandfathers.” (p.117) At another point, he complained of a North Sea pilot named Jermyn censuring him for his youthful lack of common sense and his reckless seamanship. Marlow, in retrospect, had (through the dating process)
come to realize that Jermyn’s assessment of him at that time was probably correct, adding “It seems to me I knew very little then, and I know not much more now; but I cherish a hate for that Jermyn to this day.” (p.118) As an older man now, Marlow has dated himself, reassessing and adjusting that earlier perspective. But even with a greater clarity of perspective, he still harbors a grudge against this one time authority figure.

Youthful rashness and enthusiasm continually clash with mature caution and practicality as Marlow continues to juxtapose his earlier lack of judgment against more mature counsel. After having successfully dated himself, Marlow, with a tiny measure of self-effacing irony, describes a youthful indiscretion in which he rashly attempted to solve a problem that turned out to be more complex than he had anticipated:

Then I leaped down to show how easily it could be done. They had learned wisdom by that time, [something that would accrue to Marlow later] and contented themselves by fishing for me with a chain-hook tied to a broom-handle, I believe. I did not offer to go and fetch up my shovel, which was left down below. (p.133)

Ignited by spontaneous combustion, the Judea erupts into fire. As her situation becomes apparent, the enthusiastic, visionary perspectives of youth again contrast with the sobering realism of old age:

Captain Beard had hollow eyes and sunken cheeks. I had never noticed so much before how twisted and bowed he was. He and Mahon prowled soberly about hatches and ventilators, sniffing. It struck me suddenly poor Mahon was a very, very old chap. As to me, I was as pleased and proud as though I had helped to win a great naval battle. O! Youth! (p.133)

As it becomes apparent that the Judea will sink into the ocean, youthful and mature approaches clash again as Captain Beard, rendered rigid and inflexible by the disaster, obsessively tries to salvage as much inventory from the doomed vessel as possible for the underwriters — inventory most of his subordinates consider useless junk that would jeopardize their escape from the impending disaster. Marlow, on the other hand, wants to get the lifeboats headed for the safety of shallow waters.

Because Captain Beard loaded his own longboat with so much salvage, Marlow becomes the skipper of his own vessel, a 14-foot longboat, and he commands with the bravado and impatience of youth:
I wasn’t going to sail in a squadron if there were a chance for independent cruising. I would make land by myself. I would beat the other boats. Youth! All youth! The silly, charming, beautiful youth. (p.146)

Captain Beard, on the other hand, full of years and burdened by experience, cautions Marlow again about taking needless chances:

“Be careful with that jury rig, Marlow,” said the captain; and Mahon, as I sailed proudly past his boat, wrinkled his curved nose and hailed, “You will sail that ship of yours under water, if you don’t look out, young fellow.” He was a malicious old man — and may the deep sea where he sleeps now rock him gently, rock him tenderly to the end of time! (p.147)

Nevertheless, Marlow does successfully complete his first command, arriving in the Far East, beating the others, who are encumbered by salvage, by
three hours. Looking back on the entire stressful episode, he realizes that the flamboyant energy of youth had helped him to aggressively meet this challenge. Now, years later, having dated himself, Marlow realizes he has significantly changed:

... and I remember my youth and the feeling that will never come back any more — the feeling that I could last forever, outlast the sea, the earth, and all men; the deceitful feeling that lures us on to joys, to perils, to love, to vain effort — to death; the triumphant conviction of strength, the heat of life in the handful of dust, the glow in the heart that with every year grows dim, grows cold, grows small, and expires — and expires, too soon — before life itself. (p.148)

One of the most vivid metaphors of both the flamboyant all-consuming energy and impetuosity of youth and the impending burnout of old age is the spectacle of the Judea consumed by hungry ravenous flames:

Oh the glamour of youth! Oh the fire of it, more dazzling than the flames of the burning ship, throwing a magic light on the wide earth, leaping audaciously to the sky, presently to be quenched by time, more cruel, more pitiless, more bitter than the sea — and like the flames of the burning ship surrounded by an impenetrable night. (p.141)

At 60, I find that Conrad's story "Youth" has more of a bittersweet poignant appeal than when I was 20, my having, in the interim years, acquired the perspectives of accumulated experience. Like Captain Beard, 60 years old when Marlow was only 20, I look back on the loss of my youth with a lump in my throat.

I recently purchased on the Internet an out-of-print vinyl recording of a Ray Conniff album, Concert in Rhythm, Volume II. It contains a musical selection that made a deep impression upon me when I was 20 years old, working as a typesetter at the Experimental Cannery of the Green Giant Company, encoding can lids. One summer evening, a load of peas came through our plant requiring immediate processing. All of us young employees worked from 6:30 p.m. in the evening until 5:00 a.m. the next morning, fighting fatigue and sleep by guzzling down prodigious quantities of Coke or coffee. I remember the bouncing rhythm of a sparkling Ray Conniff arrangement of Tchaikovsky's "None but the Sad of Heart" reverberating repeatedly through my cranium throughout the whole 12-hour experience. I recently converted this vinyl album into a more durable CD in order to play it on my car stereo. Hearing this album reconnects me with the energy and vigor of my youth — sort of — reminding me of the
lyrics of another Ray Conniff album, *Invisible Tears*, with the refrain, “If I just close my eyes, then maybe it will last,” although I resist doing that as I cruise down Interstate 20 at 70 miles per hour.

In my current role as a 60-year-old, I still enjoy a brisk walk around the lake at Tyler State Park, but I find myself carrying a cane or walking stick just in case a rock or tree branch upsets my balance. I enjoy walking through the primitive campsites, but I no longer have the desire to sleep out under the stars in a sleeping bag. Twenty years ago I enjoyed the challenge of driving from California to my boyhood home in Minnesota, in rigorous 10 to 18 hour increments, pulling into rest stops for a brief sleep, only to start the next leg of the journey a few hours later. Today my wife Julie and I trade off driving every two hours, stopping more frequently at restrooms, and pulling in at a Motel 6 or Economy Inn before dark.

For ten years I commuted by motorcycle to work on the Los Angeles freeways. Today, 16 years later, living in Hawkins, Texas, a relatively small town with a population of 1331, I no longer ride the motorcycle, though I still renew my motorcycle license when it comes due. When I briefly attempted to ride my 33-year-old son Eric’s racing bike this summer, he questioned whether I should even be allowed to have a motorcycle license. Twenty years ago, I faithfully lifted weights three times a week. Today my weights are still set up in the carport, but I don’t feel that youthful compulsion to press iron regularly. Since 2003, I have had to get accustomed to waking up in the morning with a red indentation on my forehead produced by my CPAP mask, with a ringing in the ears (tinnitus) caused by the pressure in the inner ear from the continuous positive air pressure, a ringing that only becomes neutralized as I listen to the ‘white noise’ of the cricket and frog chorus at Tyler State Park. After sitting for the 60-mile commute to work every morning, I have to allow one or two minutes for my arthritic knee to become acclimated to walking again.

Ten years ago, I started playing in a polka band, performing the geriatric circuit at senior citizen homes in Longview and Gladewater, Texas. We play to the memories of polka luminaries I listened to 40 years ago, such as Fezz Fritsche (1908-1980), Whoopee John Wilfahrt (1893-1961), Harold Loeffelmacher (1905-1987), and Bernie Roberts, all deceased. But their music still kept very much alive through the magic of time-binding. It is my fond hope that my 15-year-old son, Aaron, will continue the polka tradition long after I can no longer perform. Each year that rolls by, my audiences seem less like father and mother surrogates, and more like brother and sister surrogates.

As I bring this article to a conclusion, I feel sobered that some of my very dear general semantics mentors and colleagues, with whom I have shared many
good times, have gone. Within the last five years, we have lost D. David Bourland, Jr., (1928-2000), Gregory Sawin (1950-2004), Charlotte Schuchardt Read (1909-2002), Allen Walker Read (1906-2002), Kenneth G. Johnson (1922-2002), and Robert Pula (1929-2004).

On the highway of life, my three-second rule (the one that you use to judge the speed of the car ahead of you) is currently focused upon my 87-year-old father, a recent newlywed, having remarried after my mother’s death in 1996. Both Dad and my stepmother Olive have a remarkable zest for life. Dad performs every month with the Salterelli Strings in San Antonio. Following successful lumbar stenosis surgery last summer, he now walks with the help of a cane or a walker, making use of the ubiquitous Amigo motorized carts in the Wal-Mart and HEB stores. Recently he discovered that he might have to, sometime in the future, undergo cataract surgery. When I visit Dad, one of our favorite activities consists of watching the Lawrence Welk reruns on KLRN. Neither Dad nor I could envision a world without a living Lawrence Welk (1903-1992) or one without Ray Conniff (1916-2002) for that matter. In a little over three seconds, or so it seems to me, I will have reached that point in my life where my father is now, and my father will be a mere three seconds ahead of me. It brings to mind the prayer of Moses in Psalm 90:12, “Teach us to number our days [to regularly date ourselves and make plans or adjustments accordingly] and recognize how few they are; help us to spend them as we should.”
REFERENCES


A NOTE ON THE SCULPTURE


“Nine Ages of Man” symbolizes every life as a leap into the unknown. An individual is shown at typical periods of his life from crawling infancy to the grave. Graphically speaking, the horizontal dimension represents time; the vertical dimension, psychic development or evolution. The unique tree of each soul’s life is symbolized by the arching trunk whose tendrils, rooted at both ends of the arch, suggest that every incident or thought has its roots in the past and affects the future: each individual is inextricably bound into the web of all human life. Notice that the rocky mass supporting life in old age is higher than that supporting infancy. This difference of level suggests that cumulatively, evolution is a fact. Presumably mankind has evolved through countless generations to a higher spiritual awareness than its animal ancestors and presumably this spiritual evolution will continue. The motion of the leap of life is irreversible: thus the subsoil beneath the infant suggests a clay-like plasticity, the plasticity of youth, while the broken strata below the earth that is soon to absorb the old man suggest the brittleness of age.

— Randolph W. Johnston, 1980