Seminar-Workshop Report

ON BEING TIME-BOUND IN FORT WORTH, TEXAS: A Testimonial

GARY CHAPIN*

AFTER INTRODUCTIONS at the summer 2006 IGS Seminar-Workshop this June, the first thing Steve Stockdale does is take a photo off the wall of Read House, the new Institute of General Semantics building. The room is lined with such photos, each similar to the others, but each unique. They’re group shots from seminars past. Steve holds the picture from 1939, a black-and-white image of 36 men and women in what looks like a pleasant collegiate setting. Most look happy. The old guy in the middle doesn’t. They’re well dressed in a way that is only extraordinary looking back from the present.

After talking briefly about the longevity of the General Semantics summer seminar-workshop — 2006 marks the first seminar-workshop at the new Fort Worth building — Steve names some of the participants from that early year: Korzybski, of course, the old guy in the middle. There’s Wendell Johnson (People in Quandaries), Irving J. Lee (Language Habits in Human Affairs), S.I. Hayakawa (Language in Thought and Action)!! There’s also M. Kendig, Charlotte Read, Elwood Murray …

* Gary Chapin is a social studies teacher in Farmingdale, Maine. He’s married to Bethany, and the father of Max, Brigid, Emma, Julia, and Sarah. He loves a good non sequitur and plays French accordion music.
Wait a minute. Do I see William Burroughs?
I do.

From the picture, from the names, from Steve’s tone, I get a sense of portent, of catching a glimpse of the creation. This matters to me, the sense of being a part of something larger than myself. It’s one of the “abstracting filters” I carry with me wherever I go. As I sit in anticipatory quiet, in the first hour of the first day of the first workshop at the new IGS building, contemplating the founding generation, I’m thinking about standing on the shoulders of giants.

We begin with an overview of general semantics principles, all of which we would revisit in more depth later in the week. Looking at the timetable, I notice that Steve schedules a half-hour for discussion at the end of each day. I figure he did this with tongue planted firmly in cheek. With this material, and with our group, we had scarcely a moment during the week that was not seriously in danger of careening off into wild discussion. We are inquisitive. We have diverse backgrounds and diverse interests — art, literature, computers, business, education, music, cartography, communications, environmental science, neurology, brain science, etc. All of that comes to the table. Some have been involved in general semantics all their lives. Others only recently discovered it. Some come from the local Fort Worth area. Others traveled many miles, coming from as far away as Maine, Arizona, and California.

It is, if you’ll forgive the construction, a smart room. Maybe these are not, literally, the smartest people I’ve ever sat round a table with, but it sure feels that way. Even working in education — even taking a masters degree — I can’t remember ever having conversations of the caliber I have this week.

And we don’t just converse with each other. Time-binding — Korzybski’s theory about how human beings use language to improve upon their achievements, generation to generation — demands that the past participate with the present. Maybe it’s just me, but I can’t escape the feeling, through the week, that we don’t talk about Korzybski, Read, Lee et al., but that we talk with them. The place is filled with ghosts. Charlotte Read, in a video, discusses sensory awareness. Erica Gann presents Irving Lee’s ideal of the Semantic Person. Andrea Johnson discusses Wendell Johnson’s model of “Dead-level Abstracting.” Steve does the ever popular “buckets of water” demonstration, and later uses a flight map to show when a straight line is not a straight line. Frank Nason reminds me of Neil Postman’s discussion of semantic environments from Crazy Talk/Stupid Talk.
It’s all good, solid, boiler-plate general semantics until we, the group, have our way with it. We discuss. We digress. We infer. We integrate. We make the ideas our own. We begin with a workshop like many others — look at all those pictures on the wall — but then it becomes ours. We own it.

We create a unique unit in time and space. It is the only instance in all of creation that those dozen or so people will come together in that place, encountering those ideas, with those particular backgrounds, those particular prejudices, having eaten that particular breakfast, nursing that particular hangover, etc. The material remains more or less the same (relative invariance), but the material only is in relation to those receiving it — that’s us. A motley agglomeration, to be sure, but in relation to the material a unique and powerful model of both abstracting (meaning making) and time-binding. The workshop represents more than the curriculum or the participants (including presenters). It’s the participants encountering the curriculum. The relating between the two makes the workshop. Maybe that’s how all good education works? Let me try that out: time-binding, the fecund relationship between past and present, defines good education.

Hm. Past and present.

Here’s an apropos digression. John Philip Sousa, the famous military band leader of the 19th century, addressed his band one evening before a concert. The band, apparently, was disgruntled about playing “Stars and Stripes Forever” for perhaps the billionth time. Sousa’s response, paraphrased, went something like this, “Somewhere in the audience is someone — maybe a child — and they’ve never heard ‘Stars and Stripes Forever.’ They’re hearing it for the first time. For them it’s a new song. Play it for them.” Reportedly, they played it better that night than they had in months.

Back to the Institute, I’ve just found Korzybski’s own desk with his own 3-D Structural Differential. These kinds of things, artifacts and such, really excite me. Holy cow. I touch it — projecting somewhat totemic feelings, I’ll admit — and I strongly sense its PLACE IN HISTORY. But I’m also aware of the uniqueness of this present moment. I’m the only one in sight. The Structural Differential (Korzybski Model) exists in a way it has never existed before, in relation to me. And I (June 14, 2006) also exist in a way I have never existed before, in relation to it. I’m the child. It is “Stars and Stripes Forever.” I’m “hearing it” for the first time. It “sounds” better than ever. In that unique space-time moment, we make each other new.

Is time-binding a dance, then, between same and different, foundation and sky, common cause and individual interest, recorded achievement and the unwritten unwritten?

When I get home, I decide, I will build my own Structural Differential.
At the Eleventh International Conference on General Semantics (1968), an argument began between Allen Walker Read, D. David Bourland Jr., and Anatol Rapoport. Rapoport had delivered a paper questioning the relevance of general semantics in the face of rapacious capitalism, the military industrial complex, and the war in Vietnam. (1) Among the many points of contention between the three is Rapoport’s characterization of general semantics as a “cause.” He refers, almost incidentally, to the time in his youth when he “embraced the cause of general semantics.” Read and Bourland both take umbrage at this. “General semantics,” writes Read, “is not a ‘cause,’ but a discipline … for the deep restructuring of human beings to make optimal use of their potentialities.” Bourland comments on the “gaucheness” of Rapoport’s “mysticism,” implying that referring to general semantics as a cause is like referring to biology or physics as a cause, i.e., absurd. It’s actually a rather ugly swathe of rhetoric. Rapoport gets the last word, though, and points out that general semantics clearly has value-based, ethical, and normative aspects. General semanticists are trying to get people to behave in a particular way — something that neither biology nor physics do. Korzybski, in Science and Sanity, does not merely describe phenomena, but advocates the use of a science-based discipline that will lead, he feels, to “sanity.”

Does that suffice to make it a cause, this normative, ethical prescription? I’ll admit I favor Rapoport’s type of “mysticism.” General semantics feels like a cause, to me. Or, rather, I feel general semantics as a cause. On that last day in Fort Worth I can tell you that I filled up with that cause. I want to spread it. I won’t say that I believe in general semantics (the empiricist inside won’t let me), but I can say this: I believe that if more people adopted the practices and attitudes of general semantics, the world might be a saner place. Further, I want this to happen.

How’s that for a cause?

It’s the last day. Nobody has mentioned the emotional element of the seminar. Steve chooses to close the seminar with Natasha Bedingfield’s song, Unwritten:

Today is when your book begins
The rest is still unwritten

My kids, eleven and twelve year old girls, love this song. I’ve pretty much ignored it for months. Today it chokes me all up.
Nine of us come together on this last day of the seminar. Suddenly, it seems to me, there’s this urgency, this sense of potential. What will we do next? I want to avoid speaking for any of the others. Have the nine become a We? Do we have a cause? A common cause? On some level — personal, professional, relational, intellectual — we’ve all felt touched by the week. We have that in common. What will we do when we leave the Institute? Carry through the discipline? Unless we apply it, it remains just a theory.

What will we do next? I look at the photos on the wall. What did Lee, Johnson, Hayakawa, et al., do after they left that seminar? Some things I know — they taught, they wrote books, they founded the Society for General Semantics, they began this very journal! Some things I can only imagine, the intellectual-emotional work that brings “things” into focus. What about after later workshops, what about Steve Stockdale, Andrea Johnson, and Susan and Bruce Kodish? I see them on the wall. What did they do after they left their respective workshops? Well, they taught students, wrote books, created web sites, etc. They gave untold numbers of workshops. They also found and set up this building, Read House, serving as an archive, home, and staging area for general semantics and its aspirations.

Time-binding only begins with the harvesting of the best from the past generations, the laying of the foundation. For the IGS this is a unique moment in space-time. It is similarly unique for the nine of us there on the last day.

What will we do next?

NOTE

ON BEING TIME-BOUND IN FORT WORTH, TEXAS: A TESTIMONIAL

Gary Chapin