MAYBE OUR TIMES WERE
THE BEST TIMES

LOEL BURKET SHULER *

Note from the author

Sometime in the year 1930 the scholarly, boyish looking president of a young book-publishing company found on his desk for submission the better part of an unedited manuscript to be titled Science and Sanity. In his words he “struggled through the onionskin pages of carbon copy” becoming more and more excited by what he read. As it turned out the material did not suit this highly literary house, but it sparked a close friendship between Joseph Brewer and Alfred Korzybski.

Five years later Joseph Brewer became the president of Olivet College, a tiny liberal arts college in central Michigan. Brewer’s ten-year tenure as president introduced a remarkably innovative concept of education based on the Oxford Tutorial System. He staffed his faculty with exceptionally dedicated and visionary men and women who believed with him that a college should graduate individuals who have learned “to live in fellowship with the wisdom of the world.” To enhance that goal he used his wide range of contacts to keep the campus full of visiting authors, poets, and artists who mingled with and inspired the students.

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More than once Korzybski was invited to be one of these guests. Then in 1937 Korzybski offered a fourteen lecture seminar on the campus attended by over 100 of the barely 300 students and faculty of the college. Fortunately a transcription of that seminar is available today through the Institute of General Semantics.

In the fall of 1939, I enrolled as a freshman at Olivet College thus missing that remarkable seminar by two years. However many of those who had experienced it, both students and faculty, were still there and general semantics, though not referred to by that name (when we said “Semantics” we assumed Korzybski.) had become an essential ingredient of the philosophy of education on that campus.

I carried awareness of and respect for Korzybski’s work and later that of S. I. Hayakawa and tended to gravitate towards what I would describe as critical thinkers, but I never consciously focused on a study of general semantics. I never tackled the daunting tome Science and Sanity itself. I constantly wondered, though, at the pervasiveness of uncritical thought that often seemed more like non-thought. I gave Olivet College great credit for influencing my way of experiencing life. But it was only in this past year that my “AHA!” moment came with the discovery in the pages on the IGS website that the seeds sown by A. Korzybski on the campus of a small Midwestern college were the foundation of my approach to human existence.

I share this here because it seems to me we agree that the world desperately needs a dissemination of the principles of general semantics. And it seems clear also that the vast majority of people are never going to pursue serious study of the subject. The vast majority of the human race never pursued Aristotle, Plato, Socrates, Galileo, Newton or the many other break-through thinkers of human history. And yet all those ideas filtered into acceptance and the daily practice of civilizations and societies.

It seems evident that Korzybski himself was acutely aware that the academic world was the place for his work. Teaching teachers who teach teachers is how we promote the flow of important ideas. In October of 1941 the editor of Household Magazine, Nelson Antrim Crawford, looked at Olivet College and wrote the following:

“This is not a program for everyone. It presupposes ability, though nothing resembling genius. What it contemplates even more is a desire for real education — a wish to understand the world and be useful in it. Young people with such ambitions get neglected in standardized school systems, from kindergarten to university. I, for one, am glad to see them get a break — and I wish an increasing
number of schools and colleges would give them a break. I am concerned not only for their happiness, but more for the future of our country, which is going to need increasingly men and women of truly liberal education."

Here we are 65 years, at least four major wars, and a brand new century later. How far have we progressed in the direction Nelson Crawford yearned for? Not very, I think. It delights me when I encounter elementary or secondary school teachers on the IGS discussion board. But I think they are few and far between.

And so I offer this essay, which was written for classmates then and now, and before my “AHA!” moment of discovery of IGS on the “information highway,” to remind us of how significant every pebble dropped into every pond can be. It may sound like heresy to serious students of GS to suggest that it might not necessarily require the name Alfred Korzybski, or the term general semantics to promote the evolution in human thinking we are longing for. “The map is not the territory.” And, “the word is not the thing.”

Teaching is an awesomely responsible profession, and, since we are all “teachers” in some sense, it follows that just being alive is an awesomely responsible profession! It only takes encouragement, some guidance, and role-modeling to introduce young people to the excitement of questioning, thinking, and exploring for themselves. But it is also frighteningly easy to discourage all that. Applying general semantics in our daily lives provides both an example and a foundation to spark the same desire in others.

I was born on Saturday, the last day of the year at five o’clock in the afternoon. As soon as I achieved contemplative thinking I saw I hadn’t planned this well. For starters, if you are going to arrive in the world on New Year’s Eve you ought to do it close to the stroke of midnight. (My brother did that on the fourteenth of March. What a waste of dramatic timing.) But worst of all was that “Saturday” thing.

I was also born into a more than usually literate family. So early on while I was still earnestly impressionable I was introduced to that dangerous little rhyme about the days of the week. I took it seriously and personally. Of that seven-day grab bag the only day worse than Saturday is Wednesday. If you are going to join humanity on a Wednesday you’d better pick either an unbookish family or a non-English speaking one. Otherwise you risk being “full of woe” for the rest of your life.

If I’d just waited a few hours I could have been “fair and wise and good.”
I’d like to have been “fair of face” or “full of grace” or “loving and giving” or I would even have found it romantic to “have far to go.” Instead I was doomed to “work hard for a living.”

As I say, I took this for gospel and I’m afraid it colored my life. Being a child of the depression didn’t help. I know now that one’s life is pretty much what one chooses to visualize. But what comes into your life when you first understand words can be hard to shake off. I also know now that ‘working hard’ can be a joy rather than a misery. It’s a matter of interpretation and until I got to Olivet I interpreted it grimly.

I owe a huge debt of gratitude to Olivet College of the early 1940s and its extraordinary collection of visionary educators who jolted me out of my gloomy image of a lifetime of drudgery.

As Saturday’s child I went off to college assuming that like it or not the goal of this experience had to be acquiring the skill to earn a living. And the only practical means of earning a living I could imagine was to become a teacher. I did not want to be a teacher. I wanted to be a great writer, or an actress, a foreign correspondent, or a successful artist of almost any sort. I wanted an exciting creative career, and public school teaching did not fit into that picture at all. I’m afraid I also thought that if I enjoyed it, it wasn’t work.

My epiphany came at the beginning of my junior year. I had put off taking the required education courses as long as possible, reveling in, besides my major of English Lit, a rich pool of philosophy, psychology, history, political science, sociology, music, comparative religions, and so on and on. Now playtime was over and it was time to pay the piper.

Reluctantly I walked into the office of Dr. Barnes, Dean of the Department of Education, to plot my course load for the year. No doubt I looked as though I faced the gallows. I felt that way. Dr. Barnes laid out the courses I would have to take during the next two years to graduate with a teaching certificate. And all I could see was that my time was to be filled to the brim with boring useless classes. The atmosphere must have gotten glummer and glummer for finally Dr. Barnes put down his papers, looked me in the eye and said:

“Loel, do you want to be a teacher?”
“No.” I said truthfully.
“Then why are you doing this?”
“Because I have to earn a living.”
“Do you think you will make a good teacher?”
This brought me up short. “No.” I said, “I don’t think I will make a good
teacher.” Who would want a teacher who resented teaching?

“Then,” said Dean Barnes kindly, “I strongly suggest you not waste your time and ours.”

It was like Atlas shrugging and with a heart-felt “Thank you.” I practically skipped out of his office.

Although I eventually discovered for myself that there is no more creative profession than teaching, I think I owe more to Dr. Barnes, the teacher who wisely decided not to teach me, than to many of those who did.

Even before my seminal encounter with Dean Barnes, Olivet had primed me for shedding my preconceived assumptions in the person of Virginia Shull.

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Under the guise of English 101 Miss Shull taught an iconoclastic course in Semantics. Aside from the foreign language requirement, it was the only mandatory course at Olivet. Its clear purpose was to rid us of the false ideas we brought with us, and to encourage us to question and think about everything. It sounds simple and obvious, for instance, that the printed word is not necessarily true just because it got printed. Yet that can be quite a revelation to a seventeen year old just out of high school. Miss Shull’s class was often shattering. It stripped away our pat answers and beliefs. But once we got the message, we were ready to start exploring the world of ideas.

I’ve thought a lot about Olivet College in the thirties and forties under the Oxford Tutorial System and Joseph Brewer’s guidance. I know it was a life-shaping experience for me and for most, if not all, Olivet students. And I wanted to understand why. I sense in that “Why?” a significant message for educators today and tomorrow.

First let me rule out the obvious things that Olivet was not at that time. Lord knows it was not a place that would give you instant job preference anywhere in the world, except maybe Olivet itself. And in terms of remuneration, that would have been very low on the rating meter. A degree is a degree and a teaching certificate is a pass to teaching, so as job preparation in those areas went it offered at least what any other college offered. But as a prestigious name to drop? Forget it.

It also wasn’t a place where just getting in carried bragging rights. Olivet College was always rather desperate for students. I doubt that one had to exhibit
much in the way of academic success. In fact, although I don’t know for sure, I suspect that at that time no serious application would have been turned down. Indeed there may have been some students who were there simply because no other place would have them. You did not get academic prestige at Olivet.

It certainly wasn’t inexpensive. Although the College offered generous work grants and other help, it had to be paid for and as things were then, it was a costly place to be, especially compared to state-run institutions where tuition was minimal or non-existent.

So, except for its music reputation (and that was one positive student draw) it really didn’t have an academic reputation. Church affiliation may have accounted for more than a few of us. But Frank Blanning (the son of the minister of the First Congregational Church in Benton Harbor) and I were the only Olivet students from that Church. And there were a large number of college-bound young people in that congregation. Most of them went to Michigan State. There were two other grads from Benton Harbor High who came to Olivet, and at least one from St. Joe, but church affiliation did not bring them. Nor do I think all of them actually graduated from Olivet.

No, it’s more an ingredient of education that I’m looking for. And Olivet at that time had something I believe was rare and precious. *Passionate involvement* may be the term. I have long suspected that the “learning,” the book learning, the laboratory learning, was secondary to something else. And I have a notion that that “something else” is in short supply in our institutions of learning, both then and now. It’s taken for granted that the purpose of colleges and universities is the acquisition of knowledge and the honing of skills. But ought they not to be something more than training schools for the professions? A friend of mine once described an acting class he was observing as “a graduate course in life.” Should not such a course be included in every curriculum?

I suspect that Dr. Ramsay captured it accurately and concisely in his *Credo*: “Some people think of ferment as chaos and resent it. To them it looks like confusion. But if stagnation is the price of order, then give me disorder. Not a little bitty dab of it, but a whole mess of disorder. Because that signifies life and growth, and education has to be dynamic.” (See the full text at the end of this article.)

At Olivet everyone was involved with everything. And some sort of ferment was going on all the time. Sometimes it was academic and creative, and sometimes it was political. Sometimes it was just fun. Quite a lot of the time, though, it was disturbing or negative or irrelevant or downright crazy. But it was always chock
full of passionate involvement. For example, the way that everyone poured out of the dorms and houses whenever there was a fire in the town or countryside. Kathleen Striessguth and I once hitch hiked to a fire in the middle of the night — clearly after hours — and were picked up by Dr. Brewer and one of the teachers. When the car stopped to give us a ride, Kathleen exclaimed, “My God! It’s Little Joe.”

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I’m sure it was no secret to him that we called him “Little Joe Brewer.” I’m equally sure that he understood what a mark of affection and respect this was. A lesser person might have been uptight and offended over such an epithet, but not our Joe Brewer. It was exactly because he exhibited this inner security and sense of self that we could simultaneously revere him as President of the College and laugh because he looked so young and vulnerable that he was often mistaken for a freshman. He did not seem to recognize a gulf of difference between himself as President and us as students. I’m not sure exactly what it was about President Brewer, but I’m sure it was unique. And I’m sure it set a tone on campus that we all responded to.

As it turns out, although I never planned it, I’ve spent quite a lot of my life teaching children of all ages (though not in the straight jacket of the public school system) and interacting with a variety of educators at many levels. What I observe is that in the interest of “educating” and promoting the development of “good citizens” with large groups of children at a time, we structure teaching programs to accomplish the maximum learning with the minimum of disruption and disorder.

It’s hard to argue with this approach. It’s difficult to promote the acquisition of knowledge in an atmosphere of chaos and distraction as every teacher learns first crack out of the bag. It’s just that I think we forget in our eagerness to establish order and get on with the task at hand that the most natural and effective learning is that which comes from the passionate pursuit of whatever captures our interest.

Olivet President Gordon Riethmiller, in his wonderful book about Olivet, On This Hill, necessarily deals briefly with this time in Olivet’s history. During this period, he had left the campus and was developing himself in the professional world and so was not in touch with the College. He observes that students at
that time “regard those years as a high point in the history of the College. Of course,” he adds, “this is largely true of the students of any generation — ‘our times were the best times.’” I can’t argue with the truth of that. But I do truly believe that we of “the Brewer years” are the fortunate few. Perhaps “few” is a key to the equation. There were so few of us, and fewer still as we sped toward involvement in WWII. Ultimately, of course, we hit the numbers law of diminishing returns and the enriching academic stew thinned considerably. So perhaps the enrollment of just under 300 that the school enjoyed in the 30s and 40s was a magic number.

It was more than the happy ratio of student to faculty. We all knew each other with a greater degree of intimacy than is usual for a large group of disparate strangers who come together for a while through something other than choice and then separate. We couldn’t isolate ourselves from each other. Not even the Societies, Olivet’s brand of sororities and fraternities, let us do that. I think that one of Olivet’s life-gifts to us may have been as simple as a greater sense of social ease in the company of the immense variety of people with whom one must interact in the course of a lifetime.

I also believe that what we bought with our tuition money, or what our parents bought for us at considerable sacrifice to themselves, was an awareness of the excitement and value in questioning everything; discovering how to follow our curiosity to possible answers or how to search for doors to possible answers; to be passionately curious and involved in life. It may not have led all of us to high corporate positions, professional careers, or significant artistic achievement. But I venture to guess that more of us spent our lives, as Joseph Campbell advised, “following our bliss” than is the norm.

I feel and have always felt that I control my life; that I can make and act on choices; that I make of my life what I choose to make of my life. It seems to me observable that this is an alarmingly uncommon attitude today. “You can’t buck the system.” “My vote doesn’t count so what’s the point?” “It’s all a right wing/left wing or some other kind of conspiracy.” The ubiquitous and amorphous “they” conveniently takes the blame. I hear way too much of this sort of comment. It’s not a giant step from here to suspicion and fear and that’s deadly. Dean Ramsay’s words echo in my head. “There’s something attractive about order and regimentation. It’s comfortable. Freedom isn’t, because it implies responsibility.”

That same year, he told departing seniors, “I hope we have given you something to serve as a bulwark when it really gets tough. We tried to give it to
you. You have learned something about the need for discipline — self-discipline. The disciplined mind, the disciplined body. You weren’t taught it here, because one doesn’t teach those things. One practices them, and they become part of the whole personality. But the point is that you had the chance to practice them. And most of you did. ... If you are really self-reliant, you know that you are part of a larger scheme. I hope that we have shown you your part in that scheme. I hope that you have learned to be honest, intellectually, morally, spiritually. If you have, you will be able to meet and adapt yourself to whatever lies ahead of you. ... [I have] the awful suspicion that we have only succeeded in getting you up to the point where you are ready to begin to learn. But at least you are awakened. It hasn’t been set for you. It isn’t cut and dried. ... But I think you can take it, and I know you can dish it out.”

Olivet today offers much more than it did sixty-five years ago. I would have loved a pool and swim team, a radio station, a theater, an observatory, and a football team. I find myself envious of those and other things. But then, I swam in Pine Lake. I ice skated on the Kedron’s lagoon. And I found more than enough activities to lure me away from studying. We did have football for few of those years, small team though it was. Besides, by giving up football, we felt ourselves in step with the University of Chicago and that made us feel intellectually superior. I hope and I believe that the exciting seeds we sowed there are still growing beneath the Oaks and permeating the atmosphere. And that today’s Olivetians are not only learning how to learn, but what is infinitely more important, developing and nurturing a desire to learn that lasts a lifetime.
CREDO

I believe in Olivet College.

I believe in it because it has vitality, honesty, responsibility, freedom. These are rare and beautiful things. They are hardly won, and tragically easy to lose. They flourish only if they are encouraged.

There is ferment in Olivet — intellectual ferment. There is excitement — intellectual excitement. There is growth, and it is good to see things grow.

Some people think of ferment as chaos and resent it. To them it looks like confusion. But if stagnation is the price of order, then give me disorder. Not a little bitty dab of it, but a whole mess of disorder. Because that signifies life and growth, and education has to be dynamic.

Vitality implies something creative. Without creative intelligence, there can be no life. I believe in Olivet: because here, one has the sense of being surrounded by life, one has the sense of something happening; because all of you, in your own way, have the opportunity to create within the limits of your own capacities; because all of you have the chance to make something happen to you. You don’t know how precious an opportunity that is.

If you look at what we are doing with imagination, you can understand us. Without imagination we look crazy. But if you can share our vision of an intelligent, responsible, self-reliant, honest, free human being, then you will know what it is all about.

And you will know how to guard against those things in the world that may take vitality and harness it; that may take honesty and turn it insensibly into hypocrisy, that will take freedom and give you in exchange order and regimentation.

There is something attractive about order. It is comfortable. Freedom isn’t, because it implies responsibility. You have to deserve freedom if you are to have it. It ain’t easy, boys and girls, but it’s worth having.

Dr. Robt. Ramsay,
Dean and Registrar, 1941