I was first introduced to GS as a graduate student at St. Lawrence University in the 1970’s. I was in the army teaching in the ROTC program there. I have been teaching at Vermont Academy since retiring from the army 22 years ago. About five years ago I decided to integrate GS ideas as much as possible in all of my classes. (Currently I teach primarily juniors and seniors.) For instance, in a sophomore history class studying the Cold War, students wrote papers arguing that either the US or the USSR was responsible for the initial tensions of that conflict, then they grokdueled in “opposing” pairs in front of the class. [Ed. Note: “grokduel,” coined by Edward MacNeal in 1999, refers to a contest in which two or more parties vie to see who best understands the position of the other.)

In my classroom I have copies of ETC going back several years and I have marked those articles I think most germane for students in a particular course. Starting last October (2006), the students selected one of these articles to read each week. Then each student e-mailed me a summary of the article and a reflection on the application of the ideas in the article to our studies or life in general. I responded to each e-mail. We continued this for about five weeks with students reading new articles each week. Students recommended articles to each other and also frequently brought the ideas from the articles into class discussions and papers. I found this to be a good way to rapidly introduce the students to the wide range of topics covered by general semantics. These e-mails also served as the basis for some of the essays students submitted to ETC for publication.

I intend to keep expanding my use of GS in my classes as a powerful tool for understanding conflict and conflict resolution.

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I’M TAKING a course called Conflict Resolution in which we examine how people deal with and resolve conflict; currently we are studying theories of human nature. Throughout the semester I’ve read several articles in *ETC: A Review of General Semantics*. I was especially intrigued with the idea of black and white thinking as presented in “The Legal Turn of Mind” by Paul Globus. Black and white thinking says that there are only two ways to act in a given situation — right or wrong, good or bad, yes or no. This removes the “gray” area from decision making. Globus points out that this is not the nature of reality and that it leads to misunderstandings and possible conflicts. Black and white thinking is not only seen in the legal system, as shown by Globus, but also on the literary, global, familial, and personal levels. (3)

A literary example of this appears in the novel *Sofia Petrovna* by Lydia Chukovskaya, which shows the hopeless effort of a mother to find her son during the Great Purge of the late 1930’s in the Soviet Union. Sofia Petrovna struggles with having too much faith in the Soviet system. The system put pressure on its people to follow its beliefs or be neglected and abandoned by the society. Sofia was forced by the government to repress her feelings of loss for her son. Fear drove the acceptance of the black and white thinking in this environment. Sofia collapsed under the pressure to be “good.” She was trying too hard to act according to the accepted ideals and didn’t want to admit the faults that she saw in the system. (2)

Used globally when examining the current war in Iraq, black and white thinking translates into a person being for or against the war; a person cannot support one side on some issues and agree with another on different issues. This thinking creates tension among countries and even among Americans.

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For example, the majority of Democrats are against the war in Iraq and most Republicans are for it, as seen in the satisfaction rating of Democrats and Republicans. A Gallup poll released in March of 2006 showed that 60% of Republicans are satisfied with the current state of affairs as opposed to 9% of Democrats, while 89% of Democrats are dissatisfied compared to 38% of Republicans. This poll does not take into account the significant number of people who support some aspects of the war and are against others, neither satisfied nor dissatisfied. This type of thinking, on the global level, influences decision-making. It indicates that politicians look at situations and solutions as absolutes. (1)

Black and white thinking is also seen in my family, where I am expected to follow the morals and values which my parents have instilled in me or not be accepted by my family. For example, in my family honesty is always “right.” I have been taught that dishonesty is never acceptable, even when trying to prevent another person from getting hurt. If I were to lie in order to protect myself or someone else, I would be punished because honesty is, in my family’s eyes, always the best policy.

This same thinking can be seen in the relationship between peers. Peers are supposed to be a friend always or never, but not sometimes. For example, I had a “fair weather” friend. Since we were friends, I thought of us as Damon and Pythias, that we would always be friends, but she thought otherwise. There were many times when she would only spend time with me when it was for her benefit. This showed me that friends and people in general are not studies in black and white.

By considering black and white thinking in my personal life, I am able to see how society has taught me to think in absolutes. I constantly am being asked to make a decision by answering “yes” or “no.” Rarely is a “maybe” or “sometimes” answer acceptable. Society fails to teach me the practicality of compromise, and as a result, my values are absolute, as are those of everyone else, when in fact compromise and seeing differences offer normally more realistic outcomes.

Through black and white thinking, absolutes become more expected and we are more polarized. Compromise is necessary to have harmony at all levels of society. I believe that black and white thinking needs to shift into “gray” thinking with fewer absolutes and more questions.
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AT THE BEGINNING of this school year I was introduced to ETC [the journal of the Institute of General Semantics.] My assignment was to read and analyze articles. The articles that I read focused on varying causes of conflict as well as resolutions to the conflicts. After reading Charles G. Russell’s “Allness and Public Policy” article, I was struck with a desire to explore allness thinking. I was amazed that the sources for our news, and the politicians that represent America were placing masses of complex individuals into simplistic groups. When a non-allness approach to addressing people is used, a clear recognition of human spirit is possible. George Orwell and Ayn Rand have both noticed the connection between language and politics. Both Orwell’s 1984 and Rand’s Anthem explore dystopias and the danger of governments using allness as a way to group and control their citizens. Not only in literature can allness be seen but also in my personal life have I come across situations where allness thinking is used.

Allness thinking was described by Russell as “Simply thinking and talking about the public without the linguistic reminders to designate some limits on a group of people as large and diverse as a total population…. .” The article also made very clear how one can identify when people are using allness and how to question the assumptions made in those statements. Russell suggests that we simply ask “how do you know that?” when we hear or read a statement that appears to include generalizations. This simple step can help a person realize when allness thinking has been used rather than specific personal identification.

The application of thoughtless assumptions upon complex masses of people done in any form is a generalized statement. That generalized statement might not have personal authenticity, thus making it untrue. Allness thinking is especially dangerous because those who influence our minds most frequently are the people

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who are constantly addressing groups using allness. These people soon display actions of allness so frequently that their intentions can be become lost by the public.

From my personal experiences I have gathered that I am addressed with allness thinking constantly. I am herded into verbal groupings and assumed to be like my fellow family members. In a situation where I am to be respected for my individuality; I find I am viewed as a group rather than an individual. I see myself as Alexander McGuinnis, while others see me as The McGuinnis Family. Sometimes when I am over at another family’s house, speaking with them at the dinner table, the topic of college comes up. My mother, father, and brother all went to very prestigious schools. The question is posed to me, “as a McGuinnis, you are planning on going to a nice school, aren’t you?”

This simple use of allness demonstrates how the people that I was with grouped me with my family, rather than focusing on my individual intentions. They assumed because I was a McGuinnis I must be going to a prestigious school. They used allness in thought and word because it’s easier to assume about me rather than question me personally.

In George Orwell’s 1984, the Government uses allness as a way to maintain control of their citizens. The Party uses allness as a basis for their language, Newspeak: Newspeak is a modified expressionless language designed to limit thought. By using allness as a basis for the language, the Party was able to eliminate the personalities of its citizens, to keep the minds of many like the mind of one. “There will be no distinction between beauty and ugliness. There will be no curiosity, no employment of process of life” (Orwell, 267). This was said to Winston Smith by O’Brien, a representative of the Party. At this point in the book, O’Brien is explaining to Winston the intentions of Newspeak. The Party uses Newspeak as a way to prohibit Oceania’s citizens from generating personal identities.

Ayn Rand’s Anthem presents a similar dystopia, where the language used by the people is monitored by the various councils that govern every aspect of life: the Council of Vocations, the Council of Scholars, etc. Through the work of the Councils, all forms of individualism have been destroyed. Allness is the only way in which people think, or speak. Rather than be separate from one another, the citizens refer to themselves as “we” or “them” to prevent any instance of non-allness. For Equality 7-2521, being a classified object is unacceptable and rails against it. “My happiness needs no higher aim to vindicate it…Neither am I the means to any end others may wish to accomplish. I am not a tool for their use. I am not a servant of their needs…I am a man.” (Rand, 95)

The Councils constantly monitor the absolute egalitarian world they created. Equality 7-2521 has no choice in what he does; the Councils decide every aspect of his life. Yet some tingle in his mind motivates him to stand alone and discover
a non-allness approach to living. The oppression generated by the Councils’ use of allness has constructed a place where all citizens must use the Councils’ language, which prevents any expression of individuality. As an idealist, Equality 7-2521 cannot allow his life to be wasted by some limiting factor. He thinks there is something about each person that makes them unique. He thinks there is something the government is trying to hide. The only way that Equality 7-2521 can verify his thoughts is if he flees the city. Equality 7-2521’s quest to discover what the Councils are hiding from the citizens under the curtain of allness allows him to realize answers in himself. His realization is that he is not the same as every one else, that he is his own person. Equality 7-2521 becomes self actualized. “I am. I think. I will. My hands…My spirit…My sky…This is my body and spirit, this is the end of the quest” (Rand, 84)

Consistent allness thinking presents dangers not only to certain individuals, but to societies as a whole. When a government tries to distance people from their individuality in order to group them, all personal ideals are thus eliminated. Establishing control becomes easy when originality is removed. In my personal life, assumptions are made as a way to group me with others. In 1984 and Anthem the ruling powers used allness thinking as basis for monitoring and maintaining power over their citizens. When individuals are noticed and respected, allness is not necessary. The use of allness comes about as a result of lazy thinking. If those who use allness as a way to address others would dedicate themselves to being honest and true, allness thinking would be impossible.

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These are labels I hear everyday and I could connect them to people I know. Recently, I’ve come to understand the importance of labels – they dictate not only how we see ourselves, but also how we see others.

I’m a student currently taking a course called Conflict Resolution. As a class assignment, we read an article from *ETC: a Review of General Semantics* every week and then e-mailed a reflection to our teacher. I took a special interest in the article “But Names Can Also Hurt Them” by Helen Koty Globus. (p.374-378) The author suggests that labeling people is inevitable. In fact, labeling anything is inevitable as we use adjectives to describe objects, even people. After reading this article, I thought about what labeling can do to people.

My class has also been studying B.F. Skinner and his idea of conditioning. There are three methods of conditioning and one includes the environment. Our environment conditions us to think and act in particular ways. According to this theory, when we are brought into this world we are blank slates with nothing written on us. When taken into an environment, we are conditioned by the surrounding outside forces. We do not control ourselves or how we think because we are constantly reacting to the world. For example, many teenagers who attend private schools experience a change in their study habits. They are put into a crowd of students with school as the main priority and they soon adapt to that habit as well. If a student from the Midwest attends a school on the east coast, he or she may adapt accents and clothing styles to match the new environment. It all depends on the environment and the way it impacts them. (Stevenson & Haberman,
The other two methods of conditioning include two types of reinforcement: positive and negative. Positive reinforcement involves giving a person what he wants when he does what you want. For instance, if a teacher wants students to be on time for class, she may reward the timely students with cookies, and the tardy students with nothing. This will eventually condition the students to come to class on time because they will receive something they want. Negative reinforcement involves taking something away from the person. For example, some schools use negative reinforcement with evening supervised study hall. If a student receives good grades, she is excused from study hall as a reward. Both positive and negative reinforcement are effective in B.F. Skinner’s conditioning.

In my opinion, conditioning and labeling go hand in hand. Throughout our lives we are labeled, from the day we are born until the day we die. We are conditioned to fulfill the labels we receive. I can look at my life and see how labeling has affected me. My parents have taught me to be a perfectionist. (I guess they used the label “good girl.”) I try to be the best at everything I do. For example, I scored in the high twenties on the ACT which is a few points higher than the national average. Because I have been conditioned to be a perfectionist, the high twenties is a horrible score to me. I have been labeled and pushed all my life to be the best at everything. If I am not, then I see myself as simply a failure. So I have retaken the ACTs many times to score higher and I will continue until I reach a perfect score.

Students are not only conditioned in academics but also on the athletic field. I play center forward on Vermont Academy’s soccer team and had quite a few goals this season. My coaches labeled me as the “goal scorer” and I soon adapted to that name. Whenever I scored a goal I felt that I had done my job correctly and put a smile on my face. However there was a downside to this. If I didn’t score a goal in a game, I felt that I had let down my entire team. I was a failure at soccer all because I was labeled the “goal scorer” and I didn’t live up to this label.

Globus point out that we label people and these labels become their qualities. (Globus 376) I never realized this, but it makes sense to me. Whenever I am asked by a college to describe myself in five words, I always answer using the labels that others use to label me. My mother labels me a perfectionist, my father labels me intelligent, my roommate labels me hilarious, etc. I take these labels and I become them. I can’t help it; it is how I’ve been conditioned. These key incidents and positive conditioning from other people have made me a confident character.

Labeling can affect people in a negative way as well. Rarely, do people think calling someone stupid or a failure can be hurtful; after all, “sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” Forget that saying — it is a lie. Conditioning through labeling can hurt people.

Know a family that has a “problem” child? How might this have happened?
Perhaps as report cards and teacher conferences do not meet the parents’ standards, the label “failure” gets tattooed on the child’s forehead. He carries this label and has not tried to remove it. He fails at whatever he attempts to do well and struggles to pass classes at school. He has a hard time meeting the standards that his parents and his teachers have set for him.

After a few run-ins with the local police, the child soon receives his second label, the “bad egg” of the family. He causes trouble, whether it is coming home after curfew or sneaking out at three or four in the morning. His parents attempt to discipline him by removing the television from his room, taking away his cell phone, grounding him, and so on, but he always finds a way to get in more trouble. These key events and conditioning have created the troubled teenager, now labeled the “problem” child.

We obviously cannot help labeling people. Everyday we use adjectives to categorize people and objects. We can be careful when choosing what labels we use because it obviously has a bigger impact than we think. Key events and conditioning creates who we are and how we act. We make each other.

The range of what we think and do is limited by what we fail to notice. And because we fail to notice that we fail to notice there is little we can do to change until we notice how failing to notice shapes our thoughts and deeds.

-Daniel Goleman, psychologist and journalist (1946- )
ROUGH STATEMENTS AND FUZZY LOGIC

ROB WELSH *

THE WORDS “FUZZY” and “understanding” don’t seem to go together. Yet in the article “Fuzzy Logic and General Semantics,” Milton Rosenstein shows us that “fuzzy logic” enhances our understanding. (1) How can this possibly be? Even though there is an apparent disagreement, Rosenstein explains the value of fuzzy logic in understanding reality.

To understand fuzzy logic, one must learn about its opposite, Aristotelian logic. “A-logic” has an “is or is not” basis. Something is either white or black; there is no gray matter in between. “A-logic” confines itself to short statements, not “to extended locutions.” (1)

Understanding the fundamental flaws of A-logic highlights the coherence of fuzzy logic. A-logic depends heavily on crisp statements, which are so precisely exact that everything is either so or not so. For example, I say it is 70 degrees outside, even though I do not mean it is 70 degrees exactly; the temperature is approximately 70 degrees. A-logic has forced me to make a false crisp statement, since A-logic cannot handle the “approximate” value.

“The temperature is around 70 degrees” is considered a rough statement. Rough statements are more relevant than crisp statements. “The bus should go faster”, “the room should be warmer”, and “the computer has insufficient storage,” are rough statements. We do not say the bus should increase its speed by 17.5 M.P.H, nor the room temperature should increase 11.3 degrees. We need a language and a logic that employs these rough statements, and that’s were fuzzy logic clearly comes into the picture.

Fuzzy logic’s description of reality is much “truer” when compared to a crisp statement. Fuzzy logic accepts the “gray areas” in between the black and the white; “the world is expressed through shades of gray”: “The world we inhabit, plan

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in, try to control and understand, can seldom be matched by *crisp* statements.”

(1) Through our experiences we know that most events fall within intermediate ranges. For example, even though there are only two political parties in America, many Americans would consider themselves “moderates.”

With that definition in mind, how does fuzzy logic relate to general semantics? It’s simple: the map doesn’t match the territory. Fuzzy logic helps us create better maps for understanding the world, the territory. *Crisp* statements don’t fit with our actual perceptions of the world. A-logic makes the world bipolar, and we know from experience that there are many different parts of the world.

*Crisp* statements can and have led to disaster. Recently, the Bush administration made infamous *crisp* statements about weapons of mass destruction. President Bush said, “We found the weapons of mass destruction. We found biological laboratories.” And Vice President Cheney stated, “Simply stated, there is no doubt that Saddam Hussein now has weapons of mass destruction.” (2) We know today that there were no weapons of mass destruction. If the Bush administration had used *rough* statements, such as “Saddam has used biological weapons against his people, and yet there are people stating he won’t develop and use weapons of mass destruction.” we might be in a much different situation today.

When this is applied to my life, I think of the conflicts that I have waged. In my elementary school years there was no such thing as “gray area.” Everything was either right or wrong, and conflict ensued like a wildfire. But as I aged and matured, I realized that nothing was either black or white, and thus my conflicts began to deflate and burn themselves out.

In my personal experience, the academic grading systems between different countries demonstrate the distinction between A-logic and fuzzy logic. I attended a private high school in Quebec for three years. A grade of 85% was considered an absolute honor; an achievement that only a few can achieve. Anything above 90% was impossible; the highest average in the school’s history was 89%, and the student who achieved it is currently a Page in the Canadian House of Commons. Pages undergo a rigorous screening and interview process, and only 40 graduates a year across Canada are selected.

Yet in the United States, 90% average is almost expected for the top 15% of a school’s population. Can you imagine a B or B+ student, one of forty from across the country, being selected to a similar page program for the Senate? A B or B+ student isn’t even qualified for that! When I returned to Vermont Academy, my average went from 78% (B plus in Canada) to 87%; only 2% off the highest grade average record at my old school.

A-logic cannot explain the gap between the American grading system and the Canadian, yet fuzzy logic can. Fuzzy logic says “He is one of top students who
ever attended here”, and both American and Canadian grading systems would correlate that. A-logic would say he was the greatest, or he was not.

In grade 10, I joined the Public Speaking and Debating Team at Stanstead College. I wrote and presented many persuasive speeches, but now I see I wrote them all with A-logic. Since I did not allow any gray areas in my speeches, I was disconnected from reality. Because of this my speeches did not apply to the real world; they were either black or white in a world of gray.

This idea is also apparent in Freud’s theory of the human psyche. According to Freud, our psyche consists of the super-ego, the ego, and the id. The super-ego is described as our consciousness (conscience?) and regulates our morals, prohibiting us from violating our own rules. The id is our “pleasure principle” or the driving force that wants immediate satisfaction. The id does not care about the external effects, just as long it achieves satisfaction. Finally, the ego regulates the id and super-ego; it will make a decision to both fit the current environment and satisfy both id and super-ego.

The ego has to use rough solutions as it deals with both crisp aspects of the mind, the super-ego and the id. The ego has to satisfy both polar opposites. Our ego cannot use A-logic since it works on an “either-or” dichotomy. Instead, it must work on a “both-and” basis — a fuzzy solution to the psychic conflict. Fuzzy logic fits wonderfully with this theory. The three-part structure of the psyche, with human beings relating to their needs and their environment, represent the perfect example of fuzzy logic at work.

The ETC article, “General Semantics and Fuzzy Logic,” helps explain an important source of conflict within our lives. Rough statements are more logical for the real world because this is a world in shades of gray — who ever said that we live in a black and white world?

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ONE OF THE MAIN ideas of general semantics deals with map-territory relations. This idea focuses upon words as symbols replacing reality. “Just as no map can actually be the territory itself, no word can be the thing itself.” (1) This concept applies to our view of history, specifically to history textbooks written for different nations.

Imagine a specific event in the past. Many people experienced this particular time. The event happened once, and only happened one way. However, not everybody views what occurred in the same way. These differing versions become apparent when examining high school textbooks from various countries. The bewildering factor is that history is concrete; there was only one possible sequence of facts. As people view these moments, the facts become skewed. Eventually, these accounts morph into books, which are taught to children after the events occurred. Therefore, generations are led to believe what they are told, but they cannot travel back in time to witness the reality. When attempting to identify the truth, a problem arises, caused by different versions of the same event. These versions are passed on so that eventually separate cultures view the same facts very differently.

An example of this phenomenon occurred during the Korean War. The Battle of Heartbreak Ridge, or 1211 Plateau, was an intense bloodbath that occurred about a year after the start of the war. The battle took place from September 13 to October 15, 1951, a few miles north of the 38th parallel in Korea. This battle was fought between UN (United Nations) and Communist forces in an effort to secure a position along a strategic line that cut across the Korean peninsula and marked the last major UN offensive in the war. (2)

From an American source, the Battle of Heartbreak Ridge was a US victory. “At

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daybreak on 13 October, the French and US troops stormed the last pinnacle; after thirty days of vicious fighting, Heartbreak Ridge was securely in UNC hands.” (3) This source clearly explains an American victory.

From a North Korean source, the account is quite different. This view perceives the same battle as a North Korean victory: “The shining victory of the 1211 plateau proved to the world the excellent strategies of our dearly adored great leader and showed that our People’s Army always wins.” (3) This quote clearly identifies a North Korean victory.

In this example, two opposing versions come from two separate nations. However, only one battle was fought. The events that happened in the past cannot be changed. There was only one outcome for Heartbreak Ridge. But American children are taught that Heartbreak Ridge was a US victory, while North Korean children are taught that this battle was a US defeat. What is the truth? Who is reporting the truth? Is there an authority that determines the truth? These questions are difficult to answer because we cannot travel back to experience what actually happened.

History is continuous and unstoppable, and the details about what happened are unalterable. A widely used method for acknowledging the past is to record it. This seems simple enough, until we must transform the experiences into words. Language helps us understand the world, but language is not all-inclusive and is certainly not absolutely accurate when compared to actual events. Thus, recording history through written works can intentionally or unintentionally alter the truth. If this is repeated enough or done with different views, entirely separate accounts can be created, such as that of Heartbreak Ridge. It becomes very difficult to understand the past when multiple versions are available.

One explanation for these misunderstandings could be cultural pride. Although one event occurred, people were affected individually. If an act resulted in a loss or embarrassment, the resulting party could decide to omit that moment from their records. In the texts presented in History Lessons, each country focuses on their own history. Each text seems to portray its country in a positive light. American texts perceive their involvement in the Korean War as a helpful, liberating movement, while North Koreans identify the American forces as “invading bastards.” (3) These records are tainted with opinions.

Another variable to consider is the language itself. This world is home to many different cultures that employ various dialects. While all of these languages are used for communication, they are certainly not identical when compared with each other. From English to Russian to Japanese, each language is unique and can be difficult to translate into one identical form. As history is recorded in each language, differences can appear simply because of conflicting translations.

When these facts are reviewed and these variables are accounted for, it seems
reasonable to say that everyone does not perceive history the same way. This is a bit mind-boggling, because theoretically there is only one possible purpose of history: the truthful account of reality. However, once other purposes (such as opinions, nationalism, and personal glorification) enter the scene, facts become contorted and can turn into nonrealistic accounts or blatant lies. General semantics helps us understand that the written word is not the real event; the history book is not history.

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