In the general semantics course I teach at Texas Christian University (TCU), we discuss three quotes that deal with different dimensions of perspective.

From Cassius J. Keyser:
“The present is no more exempt from the sneer of the future than the past has been.”

From Aldous Huxley:
“A culture cannot be discriminatingly accepted, much less be modified, except by persons who have seen through it—by persons who have cut holes in the confining stockade of verbalized symbols and so are able to look at the world and, by reflection, at themselves, in a new and relatively unprejudiced way. … A man who knows that there have been many cultures, and that each culture claims to be the best and truest of all, will find it hard to take too seriously the boastings and dogmatizings of his own tradition.”

And again from Keyser:
“The next-most difficult thing in the world is to get perspective. The most difficult is to keep it.”

Thanks to Mr. Balvant K. Parekh from Mumbai, India, Andrea Johnson and I experienced a variety of perspectives during an 18-day visit to western India this past fall. This special issue of ETC pays tribute to Mr. Parekh and represents a small step toward “keeping” these perspectives by documenting them within these pages. We hope this special issue serves a modest time-binding purpose and proves worthy of your time and attention.

This issue includes five sections dedicated to India, then concludes with the regular Dates and Indexes feature.

We begin by introducing the artist who provided our cover art, Shelly Jyoti. Next, Andrea and I offer our perspectives on the trip, how it came about, what we did, where we did it, and personal reflections on our 18-day adventure.
Next we introduce Mr. Balvant K. Parekh, IGS member and ETC reader for 25 years, who arranged for and sponsored our trip to “increase awareness for general semantics” in India. Andrea and I found Mr. Parekh to embody the highest ideals of “the new sort of man” that Korzybski described. We are pleased to present four short testimonies, or “felicitations,” about Mr. Parekh from the differing perspectives of his daughter, granddaughter, personal assistant, and a recipient of his patronage.

We conclude the introduction to Mr. Parekh by excerpting his own writings and quotes from others that he has found important enough to compile in his own publication, Gamtano Kariye Gulal. From his native Gujarati language, this translates generally as, “If you get what you like, don’t keep it; rather, share it.” He has compiled, published, and distributed this journal — free of charge — since 2003. Each issue has included a section dedicated to General Semantics with reprinted articles from ETC, General Semantics Bulletin, and even the IGS website. We are very happy to now employ reciprocal time-binding and thank him for making some of his compilations available to be reprinted here.

In the third section devoted to India, we take great pleasure and pride in publishing papers from the perspectives of new friends who have only been introduced to general semantics through this trip. These articles include personal reflections, two short reports from local newspapers, and extended analyses and evaluations which we hope you find challenging, insightful, and worthwhile. In particular, please compare the tenets of 20th-century general semantics with the ancient religion of Jainism, or Jain Dharma. Are there striking similarities of orientation? Maybe.

A short fourth section serves as a postscript to the trip from the perspectives of the three individuals most responsible for realizing Mr. Parekh’s intentions: Professor Sitanshu Yashaschandra, Professor Prafulla Kar, and of course, Mr. Parekh himself.

The final section dedicated to India includes perspectives which, arguably, may be the most important articles in this issue as well as the most controversial. They deserve, therefore, more than just a passing summary.

The section begins with excerpts from Nobel Prize winner Amartya Sen’s presentation at the 2005 Jamnalal Bajaj Awards, which we have titled “Gandhian Values and Terrorism.” (1) Professor Sen, of Trinity College, Cambridge (United Kingdom) received the Nobel Prize for Economics in 1998 “for his contributions to welfare economics.” (2) The Jamnalal Bajaj Awards are presented annually by the Jamnalal Bajaj Foundation, named for the close associate of Mahatma Gandhi and loyal member of the Indian National Congress who died in 1942, five years before Indian independence. (3)
In his remarks — delivered two years after the armed forces of the United States and Great Britain (principally) invaded-liberated Iraq — Professor Sen compares and contrasts the “Anglo-American initiative” against terrorism with Gandhiji’s non-violent, yet still confrontational, resistance to British occupation and foreign rule. Some may object to these overtly political remarks, which undoubtedly reflect Professor Sen’s own personal perspective. However, in the context of educating and enlightening our own views, we in “the West” will do well to listen to a voice that harkens not only from another geographic perspective, but also invokes the historical lessons that we seem to have either ignored or never learned. Can it be that Gandhiji was correct in asserting, as Sen claims, that “you cannot defeat nastiness, including violent nastiness, unless you yourself shun similar nastiness”? Maybe.

We conclude with three articles from a remarkable individual who, sadly, we have lost track of over the past six decades — Mr. Surindar S. Suri, a native of Calcutta (now Kolkata). Mr. Suri, then 26 years old, attended two seminars with Alfred Korzybski at the Institute in Lakeville, Connecticut in the summer of 1947 and the following winter. Even before attending these seminars, Suri wrote a series of articles published in Mysindia, a periodical printed in Bangalore, under the title Towards an Age of Science. The 22,000-word series was condensed, edited, and then printed in The Lakeville Journal, the local newspaper in the spring of 1947. Sixty years later, The Lakeville Journal has granted us permission to reprint this article. We also include Suri’s “notes” on the series, which provide some historical context for Korzybski’s work and a concise and informative description of the abstracting process upon which general semantics is based.

The third Suri article, “Common Sense about India,” is offered without apology, but requires explanation. In researching the Institute’s archives, two drafts of this unpublished (to my knowledge) paper were found. This version appears to be the latter. Not knowing what happened to Mr. Suri, or what may have occurred with this paper over the years, I debated whether to include it in this issue. Clearly, readers should be cautioned that the evaluations and opinions represent those, I must assume, peculiar to Mr. Suri, a private Indian citizen at the time they were written in 1947 shortly after Indian independence from British rule.

We must remember that India’s independence from Britain occurred coincident with the partitioning of India and the creation of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. Suri’s “common sense” (circa 1947) therefore represents a descriptive, perhaps insightful, time capsule that seems especially poignant and relevant when read along side today’s headlines.

As I write this, less than one week has elapsed since the assassination of Pakistan’s opposition leader and former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto. In the six decades since Suri’s “common sense,” what has been ‘learned,’ and how has that
‘learning’ been applied throughout the Asian sub-continent, the Middle East, the Balkans, and the rest of the world?

And so we come back to perspective … about the difficulties inherent in gaining, and keeping, perspectives across the multitudinous dimensions of cultures, religions, politics, geographies, and histories. Is it possible that, as Mr. Parekh asserts, “general semantics is a very useful discipline which can be useful in living a saner life”? Is it possible that Professor Sen’s prediction that “the disastrous consequences of defining people by their religious ethnicity … may well come back to haunt the country of the rulers themselves” applies as much in 2007 Iraq (with Sunni, Shiite, and Kurd) as it did in 1947 India (with Hindu, Moslem, and Sikh)? Could Mr. Suri’s contention that “the solution of the world’s problems must be sought in retraining human behavior … without sane and mentally healthy human beings there cannot be a rational and peaceful world” be as valid in 2007, or in 2067, as it was in 1947?

As the Jains might say, “Maybe.”

Notes

1. The full text of Professor Sen’s presentation is available online at:
   http://www.mkgandhi.org/articles/g&world.htm.

All photographs in this issue by Steve Stockdale, Andrea Johnson, or Stacy Stockdale, unless otherwise noted.
“The Alchemist”

In this one life we have, the daily mundane chores keep happening ... it’s important to introspect, meditate, and dream ...

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Shelly Jyoti is a visual and interdisciplinary artist based in Baroda, India. She received her master’s degree in English literature in 1980 and further went to train as a fashion designer at India’s premier fashion school, the National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT), in New Delhi.

Her interdisciplinary work in designing garments, drawing, painting, sculpture, and poetry writing has appeared in a number of solo and group exhibitions in India, North America, and Singapore over the past 10 years.

Her passion for art began at the very early age of six and continues even today just as passionately through different mediums of expressions and creative spaces.

She recently concluded a show in April 2007 of 180 paintings at the India Habitat Centre in New Delhi, which was very well received. Her upcoming events include a solo/invitational show at the Woman Made Art Gallery in Chicago in March 2008, titled, “Beyond Mithila-Exploring Decorative.”

Amongst her recent published works are her paintings published by the University of Saint Xavier’s, Chicago, and poems and paintings appearing in the Indian literature section of Sahitya Akedimi IL238 in 2007.

Shelly works on environmental projects and with special children with Autism disabilities in the capacity of a board member for organizations “Disha” and “Socleen” in Gujarat.

She has also received awards from the Management Institution of Baroda [BMA] in recognition of her work as an artist and also from NIFT as a designer with Traditional Art & Craft skill. She is invited to jury fashion shows and conducts workshops on Art and Fashions.

She is working as an independent researcher exploring the search for ethnic identity in costume history of India and its documentation through visual representation of 20th-century artists. Her works can be viewed at her website, www.shellyjyoti.com. Her email is: shellyjvoti12@yahoo.com.
Last April, I received an email from Mr. B.K. Parekh in Mumbai, India. He wrote to say that, “It was a painful surprise to note from General Semantics Bulletin, No. 72 that I am the only member of Institute of General Semantics in India.” He went on to explain that he had arranged to sponsor a 3-day workshop at the Centre for Contemporary Theory in Vadodara (Baroda), north of Mumbai, in November. They expected 40-45 scholars from across India to attend. He requested that the Institute provide one “expert” who could travel to India to conduct the workshop, at Mr. Parekh’s expense.

After consulting with Andrea Johnson, then-President of the IGS Board of Trustees, I responded to Mr. Parekh that we would gladly support his request, but offered an alternative. Given the travel requirements and the demands of teaching three full days, we felt it would be better to have two IGS “experts” support the workshop. If he would agree to cover the local expenses for two of us, I would donate some of my frequent flier miles for my airfare. He agreed, and so began six months of preparing for a halfway-around-the-world adventure.

The planning became a bit more complicated when we received an invitation to travel to Pakistan immediately after the trip to Vadodara. IGS member Mr. Usman Ghani, who now lives in nearby Irving, Texas, visited the Institute with his father, Mr. Mian Ghani, from Karachi, Pakistan, shortly after we had agreed to the India plans. Mian Ghani has had a long association with Grid International and its founder, Robert R. Blake. Professor Blake, who died a few years ago, is an Honorary Trustee of the Institute and was honored twice to give the prestigious Alfred Korzybski Memorial Lecture. Intrigued by general semantics through this connection, Mr. Ghani immediately invited us to give a seminar in Karachi upon learning of our plans for Vadodara. (Most unfortunately, due to the political developments in Pakistan

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throughout late October, we made the very difficult decision to cancel the Pakistan seminar one day prior to the declaration of emergency in Pakistan.)

After Mr. Parekh accepted our proposal to send two people, he and his staff began to make additional arrangements for seminars and presentations in other venues. We ended up speaking to over 350 people at seven different locations, including:

- Mumbai University, with faculty and students from departments of History, Political Science, Sociology, Philosophy, Literature, and Linguistics.
- Pidilite Industries, Ltd, (of which Mr. Parekh is founder and Chairman) for directors, managers, employees, and family members.
- Indian Institute of Technology (Mumbai), faculty and students.
- Bhavans Culture Center (Mumbai), with local authors, poets, artists, and cultural leaders.
- Gujarati Sahitya Parishad (Ahmedabad), founded by Mahatma Gandhi in 1920, for faculty and students.
- H.M. Patel Institute of English at Sardar Patel University (Anand), for faculty and students.
- Centre for Contemporary Theory (Vadodara), Twelfth National Workshop (3 days). Sixty-eight professors and graduate students registered, with fifty-nine attending from as far away as New Delhi, Chennai, and Kashmir.

Mr. Parekh came to general semantics about 25 years ago through *ETC: A Review of General Semantics*. Much of his extensive knowledge and understanding of general semantics, which he demonstrated privately and during his remarks at each of the venues, came from reading articles in *ETC*.

A native of the state of Gujarat, Mr. Parekh has long lived according to the Gujarati tradition: “If you get what you like; do not keep it, rather share it.” So inspired, in 2003 he began compiling and publishing his own journal similar to *ETC* in which he collected interesting articles, stories, quotations, etc. To date he’s published seven issues and sent approximately 1200 copies of each issue to a distribution list of friends, family, colleagues, and anyone who requests a copy. Every issue has a section dedicated to GS in which he has reprinted four or five articles from *ETC*. Perhaps a dozen people who attended the 3-day workshop in Vadodara mentioned that they learned of general semantics for the first time through Mr. Parekh’s free journal.

Mr. Parekh arranged to make copies of Ken Johnson’s *General Semantics: An Outline Survey* and provided a copy to everyone at each of the venues. Additionally, for the Vadodara workshop, Professor Prafulla Kar (Director of the Centre for
Contemporary Theory) published a bound volume of eleven articles I suggested as pre-reading for the participants. This was distributed to all registrants about six weeks before the workshop and, unlike our usual experiences in the U.S., the participants seemed to be quite familiar with the readings by the time we started the workshop.

The company he founded, Pidilite Industries, Ltd (www.pidilite.com) is ranked by the Economic Times of India as the 131st largest public company in India, with annual sales of over $350M. Their core business is adhesives, featuring the “Elmer’s glue” of India which they developed, as well as an entire line of industrial bonding materials. His daughter Kalpana proudly related that, although he did not have a chemical background, he mixed the first batch of Fevicol (the glue brand name) in their home bathtub. He then saw to it that his younger brother and one son earned graduate degrees in Chemical Engineering from the University of Wisconsin. They and most of the family’s sons continue to manage and direct the affairs of the diversified company.

Mr. Parekh developed Parkinson’s disease seven years ago. He’s done a lot of personal research about the disease and has access to the very best medical attention, so he and his family are optimistic about his condition and prognosis. Andrea and I had little trouble understanding his bright, enthusiastic English.

He was treated as something like a “revered godfather” everywhere we went. Several people went to great lengths to explain what a wonderful, caring, and benevolent “philanthropist” he was. Among the stories we heard:

• The youngest daughter of his nephew and niece (now 10) was born deaf. Diagnosed early, she underwent a successful cochlear implant when she was 18 months old in the U.S. Mr. Parekh’s brother, Narendra Parekh (and the family) not only paid for the surgery and almost a year’s stay in the U.S., but they also funded a private hearing institute in Mumbai for research, study, and investigation into making implants more affordable for Indian citizens.

• He donated funds to build an entire academic building in Ahmedabad at the Gujarati Sahitya Parishad, and insisted that his name not be used.

• He funded the establishment of a Center for the Popularization of Science in conjunction with the Indian Planetary Society in Mumbai.

• He funded the Centre for Contemporary Theory in Baroda, which hosted our 3-day workshop.

• Pidilite is one of the leading-edge progressive companies in India in terms of valuing employees. It was pointed out by several people that few companies provided the benefits that Pidilite offered, including onsite swimming pool and fitness facilities for all employees.
Through the Pidilite Marketing/Communications manager, Mr. Parekh arranged extended interviews for us with reporters from five newspapers: *The Hindustan Times*, *DNA (Daily News & Analysis)*, *The Times of India*, *The Economic Times of India*, and a local Gujarati-language paper, *Divya Bhaskar*.

Mr. Parekh has a broad vision for general semantics in India. I committed to him that I personally would do everything I can to assist him, and to the limited degree I could speak on behalf of the Institute, that the Institute would support him. He and Professor Kar have already held follow-up meetings to plan the next steps for general semantics in India. Professor Kar and his Centre for Contemporary Theory will serve as the focal point for coordinating general semantics activities with universities throughout India and the U.S. as well.
Wednesday, October 24, 2007. Delta flight 16 touches down at 9:15 p.m. After 25 hours of traveling, I feel like over-baked bread, crusty around the edges and none too appetizing. Yet, I’ve made it to Mumbai. After grabbing my luggage, I head for the exit and step into the glare of TV cameras. Photographers lean forward over the rails, and then settle back again when they realize it’s just me frozen in the doorway: clearly not the famous person they awaited. Greeters wave signs at me, but none bear my name. Am I adrift in India? Nope. I missed it during my first dazed sweep: Welcome Ms. Andrea. The adventure begins.

For the next 18 days, I immersed myself in a culture with a 5,000-year-old history. The India I found was one of close quarters, fragrant food, colorful saris, intricate temples, blazing sun, and, of course, people interested in exploring general semantics — the reason I came to this amazing place.

How did I prepare for this experience? This enormous opportunity to present general semantics to so many people and the temerity of doing so within a new (for me) cultural context spurred me to intense research. I plowed through websites about India, skimmed blogs, joined message boards, dug into books about Indian history and culture, and, yes, watched videos. Hooray for Bollywood! I pulled books from my shelves. I combed through Korzybski, Lee, Bois, Hayakawa, Johnson — both Wendell and Ken — and Read. I reviewed my notes from twenty-plus years of teaching at the university level, in workshops and in seminars. From another bookshelf, I grabbed texts on cross-cultural perspectives by Gudykunst, Samovar, Hall, Kim, and Koester. In the nights leading up to departure, intercultural theories and general semantics frameworks danced in my head.

Peeling the cultural onion. Using general semantics gave me ways to think about my experiences within this culture while planning presentations to teach

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† Videshi is Hindi for “foreigner.”
general semantics itself. To help me evaluate my experiences in a new cultural context, I turned to intercultural communication theories, which also helped me to craft appropriate examples (and weed out inappropriate ones) when presenting general semantics to Indian audiences.

Edward Hall is generally acknowledged as having founded the field of intercultural communication by fusing theories and frameworks from various earlier disciplines. To pare it down to bare roots, I would say this field of study tries to understand and explain how people from different cultures perceive, behave and talk differently about their experiences. Hall stated that merely hypothesizing about and studying culture did not produce effective intercultural communication. One had to DO intercultural communication. I didn’t have to look very hard to see the parallels between general semantics and intercultural communication theories.

Baggage and cultural awareness. Too bad the airlines don’t have a “cultural baggage” inspector who could check to see if I packed too many cultural assumptions. After all, I know how the perceptual bias of my home culture limits my experience with and knowledge of another culture. I know I cannot exactly leave US cultural biases behind, but I can recognize that they traveled with me. In previous journeys, I’ve observed US travelers attempting to integrate themselves into a foreign culture. Generally they teeter between assuming the existence of similarities, which overlooks important differences, or assuming everything is different, which overlooks important similarities. At both extremes, they create over-generalized and not terribly useful maps of the territory. In India I tried to keep a close watch on my own tottering assumptions in order to move from generalization to specifics, or from examples to theory, without getting stuck at either end.

Diversity, thy name is India! Fourteen major languages and over 200 minor ones and 1600 dialects are spoken here; major religions of the world have a connection to India with Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism “born” here; people identify with, and are divided by, ethnicity, caste, politics, home state, etc. Sorting through these variables meant some trial and error while trying to achieve a level of effective interaction with the variety of people I met. Triandis (2006) identified four stages of cultural communication competence:

1. Unconscious incompetence — not aware there are problems in communicating
2. Conscious incompetence — the “oh-oh” stage, knowing something’s not right but not knowing why or even how to mend the problem
3. Conscious competence — knowing something about the “other” culture, which improves communication approach, though still only with concerted effort
4. Unconscious competence — integrated, nearly effortless communication.
I hoped to move quickly through stages one and two and hover around stage 3 for most of my sojourn.

On the way from the airport to my hotel, I felt a jolt of the familiar. Mumbai feels like a lot of the major cities I’ve visited—Johannesburg, Paris, Beijing, Madrid, Tokyo, New York. People, people, and more people fill the streets, the little shops, and the outdoor restaurants. It resonates with that hum you only hear in cities that never sleep. “Similar,” I reminded myself, “not same.”

Even with mental reminders to keep my perspectives in the forefront of my observations, sometimes my nervous system relaxed and I produced lazy abstractions. For example, on my first night, I gazed at the scene below my hotel window and “imposed” a familiarity. I saw “construction” tarps and concluded that the hotel was expanding. It wasn’t until the third night that I had enough information to correct this map. I had been looking down at poverty and cobbled together homes of cardboard, plastic, and rags. As Ken Johnson often said, “there’s no such thing as an immaculate perception.”

What do you think of India? What did you expect? Upon learning this was my first visit, curious people pressed close and asked these questions earnestly and waited attentively for my answers. At first, I found it hard to formulate my responses. It was no exaggeration to say I felt charged with excitement from the moment I opened my eyes each day. However, I tried to curb expectations. I made a deliberate effort to keep my map in outline form and allow my experiences to sketch in specifics.

The enthusiastic response of participants to the formulations of general semantics was a pleasant surprise. And when we encountered disagreement or engaged in rigorous debate, it felt more like conversation than either side rejecting all the other said. I wondered about this and it occurred to me that every Indian I met spoke at least two languages and often more. Hindi is the official language, with English as the official “associate” language and the federal government accepts any language adopted by a state legislature as the official language of that state. For example, the “mother tongue” for those born in the state of Gujarat is Gujarati. Additionally, there are different written languages for Hindi, Bengali, Gujarati, Punjabi, etc. How does this translate (no pun) to an openness to general semantics? Each person in the workshops came already equipped with multiple names and multiple alphabets for the “same” thing. They live every day with an understanding that THE word is not THE thing. Moving to “the map is not the territory” didn’t seem like much of a jump either.

Labels of primary potency. On one of our free days, we spent a quiet afternoon at the Gandhi Ashram in Ahmedabad, Gujarat. The stand of leafy trees, simple, functional housing units, along with the flowing Sabarmati River close by produced
a cool tranquility on a hot day. It was here in 1917 that Gandhi invited those from the untouchable caste to join in the work of the Ashram. Gandhi attempted to influence people’s attitudes and behaviors toward the lowest caste by trying to erase historical distinctions. At Gandhi’s insistence, they sat, ate, and worked with members of other castes. Those who objected to sharing close quarters with untouchables were asked to leave. Gandhi called members of the untouchable caste “Harijans” or Children of God. While he had great success with his philosophy of nonviolence, in general, attitudes toward Harijans remained negative and the new label had minor effect.

In *The Nature of Prejudice*, Gordon Allport tells us that some symbols come fully loaded with powerful stereotypes that “act like shrieking sirens deafening us to all finer discriminations we might perceive.” He identified race, ethnicity, disability, and, to some extent, religion as “labels of primary potency.” According to Allport, these abstractions stop thought; they represent language ‘doing’ our thinking for us, preventing us from abstracting other attributes and characteristics from individuals or groups.

The term “untouchables” qualifies as a label of primary potency and reflects other castes’ attitudinal meaning as well. Over time, the stigma transferred from it to Gandhi’s substitute, “Harijan,” to such a degree that the latter has been replaced with yet another label, “Dalit.” Officially, India’s caste system no longer exists. Like most deep cultural constructs, however, the awareness of caste continues to influence some interactions with labels of primary potency. In 2007, the Center for Human Rights and Global Justice reported that 165 million Dalits are condemned to a lifetime of abuse simply because of their caste—even though there has been constitutional and legal protection for 60 years. Could a broader acquaintance with general semantics ameliorate this unfortunate labeling?

*Finding common and uncommon ground.* To prepare for our workshops, I practiced cultural awareness to help me relate to the participants, and to help me develop examples they could relate to — I read local newspapers and watched TV shows and music videos. This made it easier to find ways to explain and clarify gs with political and social examples that came straight from the participants’ daily lives. I watched the endless interviewing and advertising for the latest Bollywood films until I could converse enthusiastically about the stars and the story lines while making gs connections. Confusing levels of abstraction could be seen in the tantalizing almost-kiss, the gleeful running and chasing of inferences (Will she? Does he?), that would end up in a rousing song and dance number. What began as “research” became…well, enjoyment. Not only did I find myself humming popular tunes, I started to sing little snatches of the songs — a rather interesting phenomenon because the words were in Hindi.
I remember an incident where I felt certain the participants and I shared common ground, when, in fact, we did not. In *Beyond Culture*, Hall wrote about the importance of communication contexts within cultures and categorized differences in communication styles. He described “low context” cultures as ones where linear logic prevails, facts take precedence over intuition, questions help determine meanings, and people are action-oriented and individualistic. Information is explicit and consciously organized—“in plain sight.” “High context” cultures value group cohesiveness and are relationship oriented. Meanings are embedded in situations where nonverbal behaviors and shared practices bring a high degree of certainty to inferences. Information is implicit with patterns and internalized context—“below the waterline.” Hall noted that these contexts are on a continuum and that differences can be found within any culture. Hall labeled the US as low context and India as high context. I knew this. And I also knew that many stage 1 and stage 2 errors happen when people from low and high context cultures interact, especially when conditioned behaviors and evaluations are transferred to a new situation without delaying reactions.

At nearly every presentation, I talked about inferences and facts and the importance of differentiating between the two—a critical thinking skill. I gave the participants a variation of the “Uncritical Inference Test” where they read a story about a person named AJ Jones and then marked statements about the story “true” or “false” based upon what they could verify in the story or “?” if the statement could not be verified. Two types of statements almost always tripped up the India groups.

In most cases, a statement with a gender specific pronoun (he) was usually marked as “true” even though the character’s name does not specify a gender. In the 300+ people who took this “test” in India, only a handful scored such statements correctly—and they were all women. (I find similar results from US inference test-takers.) During one discussion, several participants noted the high probability that Jones was male. I stated that probabilities are not facts. When a male participant said, “It’s really not important if Jones is referred to as ‘he’ or not,” one of the women replied, “to some it’s of great importance.”

The other problematic statement referred to an incident in a story where a woman didn’t acknowledge a greeting by Jones. The story describes the woman as “sitting at a desk where the desk nameplate said *Nayana*.” Participants nearly always marked as true the statement “*Nayana did not acknowledge Jones’s greeting.*”

As we scored the test, I pointed out that, since someone else could have sat down at *Nayana’s* desk, the statement cannot be verified by the story and should be marked an inference. To my great surprise, many people continued to insist that the
statement was true. To clarify my reasoning, I asked, “Haven’t you ever sat down at someone else’s desk? I know I have.” The resounding response: “That would never happen in India.” While the “never” part could be debated, I could not debate their assertion. “Everyone knows not to do this” is a valid claim for a high context culture where rules are implicit and rarely, if ever, broken. In an individualistic, low context society like the US, plopping down at someone else’s desk is not terribly unusual, so US participants immediately recognize the possible ambiguity of the statement. I wrote the inference test with confidence and a “sure” eye for what constitutes fact and inference. Dang, I got caught by my own Uncritical Inference test.

When low context culture moves to a higher context. David Matsumoto has said that even people who think they have no culture have a culture; it is just the culture to believe they have no culture. After working closely for four years as Executive Director and Board President, Steve and I have developed many characteristics of a high context culture. We have learned to “read” each other so that information does not need to be made explicit—understanding can be obtained implicitly from our shared history. This served us well in India. For example, during intense question and answer sessions, we didn’t need to determine who would answer what. Instead, like a skillful doubles tennis team, we covered the court and did our best to avoid the net.

One critical incident where meanings broke down resulted, as often happens, from confusing levels of abstraction. At a small gathering, we were offered Indian sweets to enjoy and served glasses of water. I recall feeling deep thirst, but did not want to sound like a prissy American by asking for bottled water. From across the room, Steve and I made meaningful eye contact and our eyebrows inquired of the other—do you think it’s bottled? I lowered my eyes, signaling clearly, (I thought), “better not drink it.” Unfortunately the nonverbal message Steve received was not the one I sent. He drank, while I did not. We each suffered the consequences of our abstractions.

Horizon of experience. The horizon of experience is the range of vision that can be seen from a particular vantage point. In general semantics, we say that’s a map of a territory. If a viewer, or map-maker, believes “the horizon constitutes a limitless ‘all,’” we describe that as an intensional orientation, a failure to understand the abstracting process. When the horizon of experience from one’s home culture is used as a “fair and valid” evaluation of a new culture, intercultural theorists call that ethnocentrism.

Ethnocentric thinking contributes to negative assumptions about a culture as a traveler views experiences through a two-valued lens: the way we do it and the other way. Often, the other suffers from biased evaluations. People from the US may talk about countries where they drive on “the wrong side” of the road, or note that the Arab language is written “backwards.” I knew that India would present
many challenges and unfortunate opportunities for negative stereotyping. I recall an email from an acquaintance who indicated no desire to visit India because “I feel uncomfortable seeing people living on the streets anywhere.” I can understand the sentiment, but I disagree with the implication that India consists only of things to make one uncomfortable.

In my research about India, I didn’t shy away from delving into their social problems. I hoped to stave off ethnocentric evaluations or at least bring them to my awareness. During my stay, I saw homeless people sleeping on sidewalks and I sensed beggars’ hands tugging on my clothes and I had to gulp down the sorrow I felt.

I had internal conversations where I heard the ethnocentric me sputter, “Why can’t the government _____? ” “They need to improve, fix, solve ______.” “What’s with all the garbage on the street?” By observing my reactions — upset, confused — I could begin to evaluate them and determine whether they were appropriate for the new situations. It’s easy to move to false assumptions based on limited experience and knowledge. We don’t understand that we don’t understand. My horizon of experience didn’t reliably produce accurate evaluations in a world of a billion people and limited resources.

My hosts answered questions and provided information about the complexity of problems that went far beyond what I could merely observe. I also learned about the actions being taken and progress already made, and the different levels of intervention and education that have greatly changed lives for many Indians. This is not a static country — it pulsates and hurts and grows and changes. One person patiently reminded me, “You know we’ve only been a democracy for 60 years.” I think I rightly interpreted this as “give us a break!”.

My horizon expanded. By the end of the trip, I had learned to save my cold cheese toast leftovers and dump them on the ground…for the cows to eat, and consider it sharing rather than littering.

*Summarizing, but not “all.”* In the end, I felt a little like Dorothy, having ventured into and then out of the Technicolor world of India, and when I returned to the gray Midwestern winter, I could only wonder… where were the bright colors and soft silks and the white hot days? I came home with taste buds so heightened that they practically wept when I took my first bite of a veggie burger. Fortunately, my local co-op provides tasty Indian food to satisfy my newly fire-tempered tongue.

In this new century of instantaneous communication, we can look forward to maintaining and nourishing the connections we made with the many individuals we had the great fortune to meet during our visit. While different cultures result in different worldviews, we can use general semantics to find the intersections and use them to form the framework for building understanding and cooperation. Namaste.