

The Semantic Person

A Presentation for the 2006 IGS Conference, "Making Sense"

By: Erica Gordon

(Slide 1) Let me begin by taking you back to the basics, to the very thoughts and questions that have brought us together here today.

(Slide 2) What makes you tick? What are you passionate about? How do you make sense of things, of the world, and of your life? While attempting to create a presentation for this conference, I found myself sitting alone in my apartment, silently brainstorming for answers to these same questions. I thought about general semantics and all of the principles I learned in class and during the summer seminar. I thought about response-side semantics, the structural differential, indexing, dating... I thought about the papers and book chapters I've read since I began working at the Institute. Each time I felt like I had an original idea, I lost the momentum to complete it as quickly as I had created it. I needed some guidance. I needed a mentor. I needed a miracle! Sure, there were the words of wisdom from people such as Don Ranly, Aldous Huxley, Irving J. Lee, and Ken Johnson right at my fingertips, but this day someone a little unexpected entered my living room.

(Slide 3) Oprah! Oh, Come on, you all know you've watched it at least once or twice! I suddenly remembered that my roommate had mentioned a teary-eyed Oprah she had seen earlier in the day. Who doesn't like a little wallowing in their own tears when they're already at a point of frustration? It was 7:47pm, just in time for the daily Oprah rerun. It was a success because within the first ten minutes, this is what I looked like (Slide 4).

(Slide 5) Today's guest: Professor Elie Wiesel.

(Slide 6) Holocaust survivor.

(Slide 7) Author of the Holocaust memoir, *Night*.

(Slide 8) Nobel Peace Prize Winner.

The show was a tribute to 50 winners of an essay contest for high school students. The students were asked to reflect upon how Professor Wiesel's accounts of the Holocaust in his book *Night* were relevant to their own lives. As the show unfolded, I saw the way the high school students had been affected by the lives so brutally lost some 60 years ago.

One student by the name of Marisa West, wrote "His strokes are swift – obviously the signature of a hand that has touched his pen to so many inside covers that the letters of his name have morphed into unknown figures. Like many authors, he signed the first page of his memoir, *Night*, as a gift to the innumerable readers who would see his name and attach humanity to the words of a past generation. Elie Wiesel – a name like any other, but his name will always be written with a hand that carries an indescribable burden; a burden carried by the millions of others who still face persecution for being different. As a young, black woman, I carry stories. I carry the lives and the shadows of

the generations before me who have given me more than just the color of my skin and the unruly texture of my hair. The stories I carry are graced with the accomplishments of my race and strengthened with our struggles.”

Another winner, Jessica Goldstein, wrote “Why is Elie Wiesel’s book *Night* relevant today?

Because it could have been anyone.

Because all we have to do is remember. This isn’t some run into a burning building, defy gravity, duck kryptonite and save the day kind of heroism. Save lives by honoring them, even when they’re over. Because it happened, and there are those who do not have the luxury of forgetting. They can never unsee what they saw. Because perception is more powerful than fact. What actually happened is not nearly as important as what we recall. Memory can erase, it can shake the earth like an Etch-a-Sketch and things are gone as if they never existed. Memory can change someone’s name, tear down a skyscraper, obliterate a face. It’s a picture we draw, and it’s not exact. As time passes the picture fades, and if no one takes care of it, it just fades away into oblivion.

Because there’s no such thing as an innocent bystander.”

It was after hearing portions of the essays that it hit me. THIS was time-binding in its most applicable form. (Slide 9) Time-binding, as more than just a principle of general semantics. Time-binding, as a way of **making sense**.

I watched young person after young person reflect on their own lives due to the awareness they had gained of the pain and suffering of those that had come before them. I was impressed with their refusal to any longer be “socially apathetic” or let the stories of what we learned during the Holocaust die. Professor Wiesel reminded the audience of the importance of remembering the stories of the Holocaust. He stressed that through the stories, we can learn from our mistakes, consequently becoming better members of society. *This* is how we **make sense**. Just as I reached my personal high, my manufactured feeling of euphoria, the show took a turn. Oprah introduced two teenagers who had survived the travesties of Rwanda. A reminder that although we think we know how to **make sense**, we continually let ourselves down.

After the Holocaust, the international world made a promise to never let something of that caliber happen again. (Slide 10) Despite this promise, thousands were murdered in Bosnia between 1992 and 1995. (Slide 11) Around 800,000 were slaughtered in Rwanda in 1994, all in the name of discrimination. (Slide 12) Even more recently, non-Arab citizens of Sudan continue to be slain. How can we possibly **make sense** of something as mindless as these atrocities?

In general semantics, we learn about our ability to self reflect. We can reflect upon reflections upon reflections, to an endless degree. We also learn that time-binding sets us apart from all other species. With the ability to pass information on from one generation to the next, we can continually improve upon our societies. In theory, these principles of self-reflection and time-binding **make sense**. However, I was left with the

question: (Slide 13) if this all “makes sense,” why was I watching survivors of Rwanda plead with the world to help stop the madness in their country in the year 2006?

What part of this don't we understand? What piece of this puzzle are we missing?

(Slide 14) Aldous Huxley said:

“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. Such persons are not merely born; they must also be made. But how?

In the field of formal education, what the would-be hole cutter needs is knowledge. Knowledge of the past and present history of cultures in all their fantastic variety, and knowledge about the nature and limitations, the uses and abuses, of language. 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. Similarly, a man who knows how symbols are related to experience, and who practices the kind of linguistic self-control taught by the exponents of General Semantics, is unlikely to take too seriously the absurd or dangerous nonsense that, within every culture, passes for philosophy, practical wisdom and political argument.”

(Slide 15) Is Huxley suggesting that we have a mass distribution of *Science and Sanity*? Is he also suggesting that once the killers of modern time read *Science and Sanity* all evil will cease to exist? No. So, then how do humans become the educated species Huxley refers to?

(Slide 16) In his own moment of weakness, Irving J. Lee once asked Alfred Korzybski, “Now Alfred, you have been thinking about this stuff for a very long time. Can you tell me, in a nutshell, what are you trying to do? What is the objective of all this reading and studying and talking and sweating that you go through day after day, year after year? What are you after?” Korzybski replied, “Irving, we are trying to produce a new sort of man. A man who will have no new virtues, but we will know how to describe him and, maybe, we will know how to create him.” This prompted Lee to outline a set of “characteristics” that, when combined, created a profile of this new sort of person, this Semantic Person, he believed Korzybski was referring to. As expected, this profile serves as a more detailed parallelism to Huxley's knowledgeable human race.

(Slide 17) Among the characteristics, Lee suggested that The Semantic Person would have curiosity about the world and people around him. He would inquire. He would never be afraid to ask. He would have a good memory but have the capacity to forget the unpleasant. This man would have a sense of the similarities and differences among things. He would acknowledge the existence of gray. He would know how to contemplate and act. He would integrate knowing and doing. He would realize that knowing alone is barren, but that acting without knowing is barbarism. This man would

be continually aware of “etc.”, therefore protecting him from becoming the bigot and fanatic. He would have beliefs and convictions, but would always know that there is something more. This Semantic Person would have great reserves of patience, he would be social and friendly, speaking with precision and specificity. He would not succumb to defeat and despair. More importantly, he would know how to date previous defeats. This man would be both individualist and altruistic. And finally, this Semantic Person would be alert to the possibilities and potentialities of the human being. He would be rarely satisfied with his performance as he knows it. He would recognize that the limits of learning are awfully hard to define; that in this vast, tremendously big world of ours, the possibilities of human growth and human development, perhaps, have not yet been readily defined.

(Slide 18) I think Lee created a wonderful outline of the type of person needed to **make sense** of as much as possible in today’s society. However, the main hurdle still remains. How do we graduate from knowing how we *should* act to *actually acting that way*? How do we go from studying the events of the Holocaust to living in a genocide-free world? How do we effectively demonstrate our time-binding abilities through something more critical than the Oprah show? How do we embody this Semantic Person? How do we **make sense**?

(Slide 19) In Konstantin Stanislavski’s *Building a Character*, the character Tortsov has some words of wisdom that Lee mentions as a possible means of helping create this Semantic Person:

“Today you learn something. Tomorrow you think you can already be letter perfect in technique. But the system is not a hand-me-down suit that you can put on and walk off in, or a cook book where all you need is to find the page and there is your recipe. No, it is a whole way of life, you have to grow up into it, educate yourself in it for years. You cannot cram it into yourselves; you can assimilate it, take it into your blood and flesh, until it becomes second nature, becomes so organic a part of your being that you are transformed by it for all time. It is a system that must be studied in parts and then merged into a whole so that it can be understood in all its fundamentals. When you can spread it all out before you like a fan you will obtain a true grasp of it.”

I think we can all agree that a Semantic Person, as characterized by Lee and hoped for by Korzybski, cannot be created overnight. This new sort of person will have to be developed overtime. They will be the manifestation of generations and generations in practice.

(Slide 20) Enter you and me. We are responsible for time-binding this information we have stumbled upon. We must be a voice for the following generations in creating healthier minds, more shades of gray, the realistic beginning to a genocide-free world. We must **make sense** of what we have been given, what we have created, and responsibly pass that knowledge on to those waiting in the dark. But again I ask, how? How, specifically, can we begin embodying this “new sort of person?”

(*Slide 21*) Huxley claimed that education was the beginning. Although I agree that education symbolizes a key aspect, I believe commitment remains the first step.

Commitment to taking the leap, to jumping the hurdle.

Commitment to education, to ourselves, and to time-binding.

Commitment to working each day of our lives toward **making more sense** than we did the day before.

Commitment to educating ourselves to the extent that we learn something new everyday.

Then, questioning the things we learn.

Commitment to testing our questions and constantly redefining what we learned.

Commitment to recognizing that each day represents a completely different day than the ones preceding and following it.

Commitment to molding our knowledge into a reliable and valid foundation from day to day.

Last, but not finally, commitment to practicing this through reading, writing, creating, learning, discovering, challenging, and stumbling upon – like I did that Oprah show.