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## PERSPECTIVES

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# ***THE CHALLENGES FACING GENERAL SEMANTICS***

### **EDITOR'S NOTE:**

The Institute of General Semantics is now three quarters of a century old. During that time the institute has seen, and been a part of, a myriad of cultural, intellectual, and political changes throughout the world. The *Perspective* series is designed to bring contemporary issues facing the IGS into a common focus. This issue's *Perspective* essay is by Ben Hauck, Webmaster of the IGS Web site and a member of the IGS Board of Trustees.

Perhaps sadly, I am continually reminded in my life when in discussions, disagreements, arguments, etc., or when just hearing people complain, vent, etc., how so many people are seemingly unknowingly controlled by their false-to-fact notions of how things “are.” These same people often strike me as ill-equipped to adapt their beliefs or to behave any differently when presented with truer-to-fact notions. So, as they go about their daily lives and interactions, they repeatedly default to their warrior-like, space-binding defense of stubborn opinions, heightening the conflicts they find themselves in with other people, the environment, and themselves. The personal consequences are evident and eventually so become the social consequences. In this age of hypermedia (the Internet, mobile telephony, etc.)—wherein time-honored but slow customs of speech and language that once assured effective, balanced communication genuflect to crude, bullish impulses to reply without meditation, eloquence, or regard for mutual interest—I fear the future social consequences of unmediated behavior and a threat to civility and sanity as revered standards.

Although general semantics is not a panacea for anything, it is a tremendous tool in the development of better-adjusted mental attitudes to diminish the stresses that conflicts evoke personally and interpersonally. General semantics teaches skills for (without being shy of the designation) *great thinking*—skills for effectively developing and communicating ideas, skills for constructively

criticizing beliefs and tired dogma, and skills for just getting along. Thinking can be great in many ways. Ideas can open minds. Logic can carve out reason. Implications can be spectacular and life-changing. And thinking can be horrific in many ways. General semantics provides lessons on how to greaten one's thinking—for greater insight, greater clarity, greater argumentation, and inevitably greater social development. Its efficacy in improving the adjustment of people who have learned it has been shown in time, in its use, and in its applications in different fields by manifold practitioners. If my fear of the future is grounded—if technology is making us less civil and thus into less effective people—general semantics remains positioned as it always has to take on a culture to analyze the language and thinking habits of troubled people, in order to teach greater speaking and thinking strategies, in order to moderate their personal and interpersonal conflicts and taper the stresses that come with them.

There are still challenges facing general semantics as a discipline. On a practical level, perhaps a school system that “teaches to the test” is the biggest hurdle. In such a system, students' individual interests are largely subverted by the school's interest in the performance of the general student population. “If it's not on the test, there doesn't seem room to teach it,” (Source? Rephrase?) and since general semantics is not a compulsory subject, its lessons are to be learned in college—if students are so lucky as to encounter it in a larger subject during higher education.

Another challenge to general semantics might be called “intellectual ageism.” That is, because general semantics was founded in 1933 and had its heyday in the mid-twentieth century, it may by some be disparaged as “old,” as if glossier, new ways of thinking would be better ways of thinking. Over the years, it has not been uncommon for scientists or other thinkers to “discover” new ideas that had already long before been covered in general semantics. Perhaps “What's old is new again” will apply in academia and other intellectual circles, and general semantics will become *de rigueur*. But since general semantics is not a quick fix, since it has a terminology that is occasionally obtuse, and since it isn't aligned with flashy, cutting-edge technology, sexiness will probably forever elude it.

Despite these hurdles, general semantics can hold value for the future. I champion the application of general semantics in writing classes. General semantics, I must affirm, is not all about writing, or language, or speech. However, writing—which happens to serve as a quality method for training one's thinking—is a very strong method for teaching many of the notions represented in general semantics. Writing involves principles—of word

choice, of grammar, of syntax, of rhetoric, etc.—and principles motivate thinking. General semantics' principles are aimed at reconditioning bad thinking toward great thinking, and writing involving its principles motivates thinking in a general semantics, greater way. The beneficial effects of general semantics on thinking become more or less conditioned the more often its principles are practiced when writing.

At school, the demands of writing can be great, and perhaps there is the best gym for training in the field. (For me, it is in school where I practiced again and again writing using general semantics principles.) But obviously getting general semantics into schools is difficult. The future direction of general semantics may lie in getting writers to write employing its principles, and then speaking to its principles' value. Writers need not use the funny punctuation or strange terminology general semantics sometimes asks its learners to use, but instead need only employ its principles to see what clarity, insight, and perspective they provide. High-profile advocates had some push in the popularity of general semantics in its early years. It might be that high-profile advocacy by recognized writers is the ticket toward getting reborn.