

WENDELL JOHNSON:

JOSEPH L. STEWART* **A MEMOIR**

WENDELL A. L. JOHNSON, affectionately known as "Jack," died in 1965; too young, too soon, one year shy of his 60th birthday. His accomplishments in this short lifetime were considerable, his fame in large part the result of his work in general semantics. He wrote six books dealing with speech correction, two books largely devoted to applied general semantics. A posthumous collection of his articles was edited by his long-time colleague, Dorothy Moeller.

While very generous in sharing himself with his students, Jack had a deeply personal side which only one of us ever tried to penetrate. Speculation over his two middle initials, however, provided many a moment's break from the rigors of studying. Contests, in which no winner could be determined, were held to decide what the mysterious "A. L." stood for but no one would ask. Probably the best guess, from one of the wives, was "Abraham Lincoln." The only time I can recall that a student ventured into any personal probing was when my office mate, Martin Young, commented during a staff meeting that over the many years he had been a stu-

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dent, that there were only three topics he had never heard Jack discuss — money, sex, and death. Jack's response was the same as it often was when presented with something unexpected — "How interesting."

The Jack I first met (1956) had recently survived a major heart attack which resulted in his relinquishing the departmental chairmanship, an action which probably added a bit to the relatively little time he had left. This decision allowed him to devote more of his time to activities which were more satisfying, more extensive, and had more impact than ever on his profession.

The nine years I knew Jack were not enough. There was and still is so much that could have been learned from him that even in my own old age I feel shortchanged. Jack and his work were the reasons I chose the University of Iowa for graduate study and the main reasons for staying through to completion. My assumption that general semantics would permeate the department proved to be unfounded. Even though most of the faculty had been Jack's students, there was no evidence that general semantics impacted them as it had impacted on me, and their classes made scant reference to it.

I was first introduced to general semantics by my father shortly after publication of Hayakawa's *Language in Action*, a book which changed our family life considerably. A senior in high school at the time, I decided that my choice of university would be one in which coursework in general semantics was available. As I came from a remote mountain community in Colorado, the University of Denver and Elwood Murray's program there were the clear choice. The adoption of Wendell Johnson's *People in Quandaries (PQ)* in Elwood's classes during my sophomore year provided the greatest impetus for going on to Iowa when the time came. I never imagined that my favorite chapter in *PQ*, "The Indians Have No Word for It," would eventually determine my professional career.

To me, *PQ* marks the time in Jack's life when he changed from a distinguished university professor to a dynamic, long-term force for bringing science to the field of speech pathology and related human behaviors. Most people familiar with

Jack's life already know about the farm boy from Kansas who stuttered and went to college in Iowa because it had a speech clinic, one of the very first, which could help in correcting his problem. He often said that he became a speech pathologist because he needed one.

Johnson's student years coincided with major developments in the field of human communication and its disorders, and the clinic's fame was largely based upon its position that what we see and call stuttering was a neurological disorder caused by confused cerebral dominance which resulted in neural signals being out of synchrony with the clearly obvious results. Accordingly, Johnson went through the regimen of playing ping pong with his left hand to reorient his nervous system and free his speech from "blocking."

The speech clinic at Iowa at that time was located in the psychology department and Jack obtained all three degrees and the title of clinical psychologist from the school. Some time later, after having published extensively on the topic of stuttering, he began to look at himself and his problem in totally different ways, thanks to his work with Korzybski, and became the only scholar I have known who went to work with a vengeance to disprove his own previous theories. Jack has written that *Science and Sanity* was, to him, one of the most significant books ever written. As a result of his study, he grew from a speech pathologist in the narrow sense to a "communication pathologist" in the broadest sense.

In order to appreciate the magnitude of his contributions to the way we view stuttering, it is necessary first to look at the problem more descriptively. Almost anyone "knows" what stuttering "is" and observation of a severe stutterer attempting to speak would lead us to suspect neurological misfirings of considerable extent. This theorizing is less certain when you observe some of the conditions under which stuttering is reduced or absent: when talking to your dog, when participating in choral reading, when singing in or out of the shower, and when speaking with a foreign accent or under an assumed name. The magnitude of the problem is greater when confronted with a telephone, a large audience, the girl you are trying to impress, and any dialog with Mom and Dad. A neurological theory also has to account for such phe-

nomena as stuttering occurring primarily at the beginning of the word and more likely to occur with certain phonemes than others.

After his exposure to general semantics it seems to have occurred to Johnson that, indeed, when it comes to stuttering, the word may indeed seem the thing and from observations such as these evolved the notion that stuttering, first, did not exist in a vacuum and, second, that its onset might well be iatrogenic — caused by the diagnosis and the reactions to that diagnosis.

Johnson came to the conclusion, based upon a substantial body of research, that the problem of stuttering could best be described as a condition in which speech produced by a child — in this case the normal nonfluency of early speech production — was judged negatively, created a corrective response which then created tension and attention which, if continued, resulted in extreme attempts at perfection, followed by "failure," causing more intense attempts at perfection, and thus became a learned behavior very difficult to control. One of Jack's simpler definitions is "stuttering is what you do when you are trying not to do it again."

One of his favorite ways of putting stuttering into perspective was to ask the stutterer what he (they are overwhelmingly males) would do if he woke up one morning fluent. "After you called all your friends and family, what would you do next? How would this change your life?" I never heard one such stutterer respond other than say that his life would not be much different.

The idea that the problem of stuttering first exists in the ear of the listener and is judged by an authority figure who then is largely responsible for creating the problem is still difficult to accept by many, particularly those who have the problem themselves. Certainly it is far easier to accept an explanation that "I have no control over this" in the way that other problems cannot be controlled, for example, rather than dear old Mom and Dad created this in me. Mom and Dad are not necessarily ogres in this scenario, of course, and I suspect that most of them with these standards of speech for their children also have standards for other aspects of development that have the child's welfare mostly in mind.

When I first met Johnson he had gone far beyond being the professor of stuttering. *PQ* had shown the breadth of his applications of general semantics to problems far beyond this one. While he was renowned in professional circles before *PQ*, that book put him in the scholarly and public limelight and fueled his energies further in applying general semantics to life outside the clinic. His introductory course in general semantics was one of the most popular on campus and was always over-enrolled. As with many other renowned professors in their later years, however, the fame of the professor and commitments beyond the classroom mean that the undergraduate students receive only a few intermittent lectures, however well crafted and well presented, from the Great Man and spend the balance of the semester listening to graduate teaching assistants present the material second hand.

Those lectures which Jack did present at the undergraduate level were polished, presented with wit and charm, and gave little indication of having already been presented many times. One of his more subtle touches was the introduction from time to time of a "bounce." Among the earlier techniques for dealing with the adverse non-fluencies of stuttering was to "bounce," or stutter deliberately. Exhibiting the problem relieved the anxiety of knowing there was a problem. At this point in his life, Jack's stuttering was infrequent. His experiences in lecturing over the years and his delight in doing so clearly did not create any stress on his speech but, I suspect, his reputation of being a stutterer was such that he appeared to "bounce" occasionally while lecturing — perhaps to show that it did not bother him.

While Johnson was an excellent lecturer and delighted in teaching, his activities during this time were often conducted away from the campus. As a consultant to the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare he was in Washington for prolonged periods of time, assisting the agency in promoting research and training activities in speech pathology and audiology. As such, he was largely responsible for the great growth of the profession during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. I feel that Jack's greatest contribution to education of students at the university was in the occasional

seminars he conducted and in the interaction with his graduate assistants and those whose dissertations he was directing. The seminar format revealed a Johnson who was a much more potent teacher than was apparent when he delivered a prepared lecture. Often you had the feeling that the topic for the day was whatever interested him at the time and ranged from "why white bread is not as good as it used to be" through "you are better off buying a used car" to "anybody who likes dry martinis, reads Pogo, and voted at least once for Adlai Stevenson is an all right guy."

His absences from campus limited the number of doctoral students he could sponsor. The wait to confer with him when he was back on campus was well worth it and I believe that Jack's greatest teaching impact on me was in directing my dissertation and strengthening the discipline a student needs to assess findings and write results clearly and convincingly. Writing gave him great pleasure but he never seemed to be completely satisfied with whichever draft he was working on. He appeared truly to live one of the sentences from his *Your Most Enchanted Listener*: "All roads of wonder lead, with much meandering, to the Rome of self-fulfillment, a city within a city within a city without end." One of the most amusing memories I have of Jack is of him standing with his coat and hat on and his briefcase at his side, editing a "final" chapter of *Your Most Enchanted Listener* on top of a file cabinet. He was to catch a plane to Washington in a few minutes but could not leave without one last shot at the manuscript which was to be mailed to the publisher that day. Every secretary in the office was busy on some phase of the task; one would re-type the manuscript and give it to another who would take it to Jack for approval when he would again start making changes. Each time a "completed" draft was delivered to him, he would find one or two more things to do with it until the head secretary finally intercepted the rotation and put the document in the mail. His perfectionism was not nearly so amusing to the student doing a dissertation. My euphoria over him telling me that one of my chapters was the "best second draft" he had ever read did not carry over when I later found that the eighth draft of that same chapter was still "not quite right." I did not

know at the time that Johnson had written "we keep on revising the rest of our days" but I came to believe it the closer the deadline for graduation came.

The man I knew seemed exceedingly gentle and incapable of angering. His disposition had a very calming effect in otherwise trying times. During the oral examination of his last doctoral student, one of the faculty members got slightly carried away and charged the candidate with questioning his honesty. The student was speechless at the accusation and in the ensuing silence, Johnson quietly said "Well, Blank, if the shoe fits...." The remainder of the examination was held without rancor. The closest I can recall seeing Jack react in anything less than a dispassionate manner was during a faculty-staff meeting. For whatever reason, we were all attempting to defend a particularly unworthy person who had committed some incomprehensible act. One of the faculty, trying to put the best face on it, said at least the person was sincere. Johnson reacted immediately: "Sincere? A cockroach is sincere!" End of discussion.

It is difficult for me to evaluate Johnson as a scientist. Unquestionably, he brought more science to speech pathology and the study of the problem of stuttering than any other in the field, and he certainly demonstrated one of the highest qualities of a true scientist when he abandoned his early theories of stuttering in the light of new information. I think he was also unsure of himself in this regard. When Martin Young asked him on one occasion what he would do if he suddenly came across a fact that would negate his entire theory of stuttering, his reply was as brief as it was quick: "I don't know." That answer might well apply to any or all of us who contend we are "scientists." I think that Johnson's real contributions here were in the application of new knowledge to clinical problems. If you were to ask where Johnson would sit in the pantheon of scientists at the University of Iowa I would have to say: "probably not in the front row." If the criteria were where would he rank on innovation and practical application, I knew of none superior at Iowa.

Jack the family man was probably the most secluded of all. When he dedicated *Your Most Enchanted Listener* "For Edna — my favorite listener" he gave us a brief and telling insight.

If ever there was a wife who was the "wind beneath my wings," it was Edna Johnson. Mrs. Johnson (even after knowing her for more than 30 years, she was "Mrs. Johnson" to me until the time of her death) was a talented photographer, a dedicated mother, and a most supportive wife. None of Jack's accomplishments nor any of his fame were threatening to her; she had her own talents and interests, she exercised them, and appeared to be exceedingly happy and content in her role. The Johnson children, Nick and Katy, had left home by the time I became acquainted with the Johnsons, but I remember when tape recorders were becoming affordable, Jack spent considerable time doing the research to determine the best system for him to use to send taped letters back and forth to the children. Those tapes were a great source of delight for the family. I also recall the great pleasure he experienced when Nick began his illustrious career in Washington. Ken Johnson, the first executive director of the American Speech and Hearing Association, described the relationship between Jack and Nick as he had observed it; a father and son who viewed each other as colleagues and who delighted when discussing intellectual topics, oblivious to their surroundings or anyone else in the room.

When I left the university in 1959, Jack was apparently at the height of his powers. While he had to maintain a strict diet because of his heart condition, he was energetically expanding his work in completing what was probably his most demanding scientific book — *The Onset of Stuttering*. He was much involved in governmental activities, serving on review and advisory panels for various agencies, and maintaining a regular — if limited — teaching schedule. Over the next few years we met infrequently, usually at conventions, but continued to work together by mail — revising manuscripts and developing further joint research on the cross-cultural study of stuttering. By the time I joined the Public Health Service in the summer of 1965, it was quite apparent that not all was going well for Jack. For several years, his letters frequently referred to visits to his physicians and to limitations of his activities. A few days before he died in August, 1965, I received a very long letter with remarks on his health status,

general philosophizing, and the wish that he could be 50 white rats so his physicians could do the kind of research on his condition that could provide some answers, a typically Johnsonian approach to life.

Some time later, while visiting his widow Edna at their home, she told me the circumstances of Jack's death. Because he had become a cardiac cripple, the basement of their home was converted to a combined living area-study for him. He was restricted to his bed and communicated primarily through his secretary. On the day he died, Mrs. Johnson heard a loud noise coming from the basement and, upon investigating, she found Jack's body by his desk. His heart had given out while he was attempting to do what he loved best — write. I think he had to have known his condition and made the conscious decision to die while writing and this seems, somehow, to me, to be particularly appropriate.

To sum up the Johnson I knew, my best memories are of a pleasant, jovial, dedicated man whose love of life and of people was evidenced in his every act. He cherished his family, his fame, his community, and his university. Tall for a man of his generation and sturdily built, he was the center of any group he entered, intellectually and physically. His best known photograph, taken when he was about 50, is of a broadly smiling, round faced man with a neatly cared-for mustache. After his heart attack, when he had to lose considerable weight, his face took on a more rugged look, but the mustache and the hint of his perpetual smile were always in place.

A final observation. I feel it is tragic that the three teachers under whom I studied general semantics formally — Korzybski, Murray, and Johnson — left no one (in my opinion) of equal stature behind to carry on from their beginnings. While Murray and Johnson both left faculty members who had been their students, the role of general semantics in their institutions was largely limited to that which they themselves had presented. Perhaps none of us students found general semantics to have affected and changed our own lives to the same extent as it did theirs.