

IRVING J. LEE:

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A Teacher for our Times

MY RELATIONSHIP WITH Dr. Lee developed during my years as a teaching assistant at Northwestern University. It was through the letter of recommendation from Dr. S. I. Hayakawa, that I received a special teaching assistantship with Dr. Lee. After receiving my Master's degree at Teachers College, Columbia University in New York, I waited for Dr. Hayakawa who was scheduled to offer a course in "Semantics" as a visiting professor. Somehow I scraped up \$9.00 to buy Korzybski's *Science and Sanity* and underlined virtually the entire book. While all the other students wrote a ten page final exam for Dr. Hayakawa, I brought a typewriter and wrote a fifty page final exam. It might have been on the basis of this that I received the special scholarship. As Irving Lee later told me, all of the teaching assistantships had been awarded, but any recommendation from Dr. Hayakawa automatically qualified me for a teaching assistantship.

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Irving Lee, in my opinion, was the greatest teacher we have ever had in general semantics. He was a professor of public speaking and he knew how to apply what he taught. To Dr. Lee, this was the essence of general semantics, the *application* to one's own behavior. He often pointed out how many students of general semantics could verbalize about the subject but very few worked at applying it to their own behavior.

The Irving J. Lee Method of Teaching

As a professor of Public Speaking, Irving Lee knew the principles of public speaking and effective communication as well as the the psychology of persuasion. He taught these principles and he knew the importance of *applying* these persuasive and motivational principles in his classes of general semantics. What are some of the principles of public speaking and effective communication that Irving Lee was aware of, that he consciously applied, and of which some teachers are unaware?

First, and foremost, Irving Lee had a low and resonant voice. He once thought of becoming a radio announcer, but that presented no challenge to this brilliant mind. He was conscious of the importance of vocal projection and everyone could hear him in even the largest auditorium.

He knew the importance of bodily movement. When I had Hayakawa as a teacher he usually sat at the end of a table and had a more conversational approach, or he would read from his forthcoming book, *Language in Thought and Action* (1949). He only had twenty summer school students so this style fit the class and Hayakawa's style of teaching. Irving Lee always had two hundred to three hundred students and so he needed to move all over the floor in order to communicate with the students in all sections of the auditorium. He once told me that he put the beginning general semantics class, "Language and Thought," later in the afternoon, at 2:30 p.m., and in the Technological Institute, which was situated on the other side of the campus. He said that if he held the class on the main campus and in the morning, he would

have had a thousand students. I'm glad that he didn't. I graded the papers.

Irving Lee used many examples and pictures to illustrate the principles of general semantics. He said that in what otherwise would be an abstract speech, examples and illustrations lower the order of abstraction. They are more specific and concrete and visually illustrate the misevaluations that he was lecturing on.

Most of his examples and illustrations were humorous. He often said in his "Psychology of Persuasion" class that humor was the most disarming means of persuasion. He said that while most of us are not humorists or comedians, everyone can read a humorous example and it makes the principle more meaningful and enjoyable for the class. He knew, as a teacher of public speaking, that he was using humor as a means to the end of education or learning, whereas the comedian uses humor as both the means as well as the end. The purpose of education is to instruct but entertainment can be used in many ways to keep the audience members interested, to motivate, and to make them think. Irving Lee playfully utilized many games and quizzes which illustrated the principles of general semantics and taught his students a new way of thinking.

He had a tremendous impact on college students and on adults as well. He taught the long term course and I taught the short term course at Northwestern University's Traffic Institute. Glenn Carmichael, the director of training, told me that students would tell him thirty years later that Dr. Lee was the greatest teacher that they had ever had.

Irving Lee made his students think. He would point out how their "common sense" would lead toward misevaluations and what is required in this world is the "uncommon sense" of an Einstein or a Korzybski. Many of his students would comment after his course, "I didn't realize that I was that dumb!"

But he always taught with a smile on his face and exhibited a pleasing personality. He would never try to embarrass anyone or make them feel foolish. But it was his technique to get them to reevaluate their unconscious assumptions.

Irving Lee was a teacher's teacher. He was always concerned with the techniques of teaching:

How is general semantics to be taught? How does a person learn these ways of evaluation? Have the textbooks on educational method anything for us? Or does an extensional methodology require new modes of approach? The words "didactic" and "directive" apply to most of the teaching I know. Have we something to learn from the teacher of arithmetic, nature study, art, manual training, or the football coach? What kinds of lectures or demonstrations or dramatized presentations leave the greatest residue? How can charts, slides, opaque projectors, synthetic devices be used? In short, what experiences in the use of training aids should be imitated or discarded? How can the project method, the case method, the laboratory method, the field method be used to help students dissolve some of their "nursery assumptions?" What use can be made of creative dramatics and the socio-drama? Does the wartime WMC Training Within Industry program of training supervisors have anything for us? Is it possible to adapt any of the procedures of those concerned with autobiography writing and therapeutic reading? What other reading experiences make a dent?

Along with these creative developments, we need to begin the systematic analysis of the comparative effectiveness of each. How much does a student learn by what method in comparison with what other method? What devices have higher motivational value than what others? There is room for much ingenuity here. Unhindered by tradition we can move in new as well as in well-tried directions. (1)

The Case Study Method

Irving Lee returned to Northwestern from lecturing at Harvard University with the firm conviction that the case study method was an important teaching device for general semantics. His entire book *Customs and Crises in Communication* was devoted to the case study method. William V. Haney, one of Lee's best students and a future excellent teacher of general semantics, comments on Lee's case study

method in *Communication and Organizational Behavior* (Homewood, Ill: Richard D. Irwin, 1967):

The late communication authority, Irving J. Lee, used to say that the road to becoming a competent practitioner of communication (and of the prevention and correction of miscommunication) was marked by five milestones. First, one acquaints himself with the subject matter — the studies, the theories, and the methods. In other words he acquires the current knowledge of the field. Second, he acquires the ability to recognize and learn from proficiencies and shortcomings in the communication of others. Third, and more difficult, he comes to perceive and understand them in his own behavior. Fourth, he develops skills for improving his own communication. Fifth, and by far the most formidable accomplishment, he learns to prescribe for the communication problems of others....

Most of the cases are simply reports of actual happenings in which communications somehow went awry. They are offered because there is often a decided gap between one's *acquaintance* with a subject matter and his *internalization* of it. The cases afford the opportunity to move beyond a superficial knowledge of the patterns of miscommunication to a more profound and enduring awareness and understanding of them.

It is suggested that the reader will benefit from the cases to the extent that he "bores into them." He should not be content with an appraisal of the obvious. To the cases he should bring questions rather than preconceived answers:

- ◆ *What is going on in the case? What has happened?*
- ◆ *Why did it occur? What are the underlying assumptions of the communicators involved?*
- ◆ *What could have been done to prevent the communication failure or at least to diminish its consequences?*
- ◆ *What can be done now?*

Irving Lee was always concerned with "understanding and being understood." In the preface to *Customs and Crises in Communication* (Irving Lee, ed. New York: Harper, 1954) he

said, "... most impressive is the fact that members of a case-group have an opportunity to scrutinize their own communication processes in the very effort to unravel those of others. Often, too, men and women come to see that there is a difference between sitting in judgment on another and understanding how and what he sees, assumes, and feels. They begin with what is easier, judging, approving, condemning. It is only as they mature in their study of others and themselves, that the easy praising and blaming give way to asking, searching, listening."

In an article on "General Semantics and the Case Study Method" (1952) in the *General Semantics Bulletin* Irving Lee asked the question "What has General Semantics to do with the Case Study Method?"

My answer is of the most tentative sort. During the spring of 1951 I had the pleasant privilege of sitting in on some 100 hours of classes in Human Relations and Administrative Practices at the Graduate School of Business Administration in Harvard University. I read the cases, listened to the discussions, and talked to the teachers and at some length to 46 students outside of class. I now believe that again as much time for observations and interviews would be more than doubly valuable. Looking and listening with the perspective of a student of general semantics, I had a number of impressions.

Many of the varieties of arrogance and know-it-allness are leavened under the interacting scrutiny of students who are free to question and encouraged to enlarge their understanding of real problems.

Several of the patterns of impatience and impulsiveness seem modified in a situation in which each man knows that it is better to be sure, than sorry he opened his mouth too soon.

The case itself seemed to be a continuous brake on certain of those freewheeling over-verbalized tendencies in discussions which fill the air with sound rather than insight, and which make for talk around rather than on the issues.

Dr. Lee presented several other observations of the case study method. Besides the positive educational implications

of the case method, there were many semantic problems illustrated.

My notebook contains a record of several of the ordinary semantic lapses:

Students got away with declarations which sounded factual but which were manifestly inferential.

They assumed a "substance" behind certain words which often was only in them.

Students generalized with ease and assurance from instances presumed but not demonstrated to be typical; demonstration might not be so easy.

Students consumed precious time defending either-or patterns of analysis as if the notion of graded variation belonged only in textbooks.

Students talked of "solutions" as if these had a unitary character, as if they did not range from the approximate to the impossibly complete.

They dealt with statements involving variables as if they were one-valued, that is, they sought to establish the truth or falsity of statements which should have been considered ambiguous.

Dr. Lee asks a further question, "What values might the Case Method have for students of general semantics?" He says, "At this moment I know of no single procedure or technique which can so readily test students in application as can the case method."

Training in General Semantics

In an advanced course in general semantics at Northwestern University, Irving Lee presented a program for training in methods of proper evaluation. He said that you must distinguish between *telling* and *training*. Most education, of course, is telling. Telling is when you verbalize to others. Training, however, is when you set up exercises for the person to *perform*, to *do*. He said that the learning goes beyond the verbal — when you put it in training. As he used to say, "Learning only comes at the point of *performance*."

Irving Lee said that there are three things in a teaching situation. The whole educational process or business of training can be placed under three categories:

1. Telling — giving instructions or information.
2. Awarding, prodding, or threatening.
3. Training — setting up situations or exercises for the person to *do*. Getting off of the verbal level onto the nonverbal level of *performance* is necessary in training. Training takes time and energy. Dr. Lee said, "If you want training in general semantics, don't go to a university." He may have been thinking about the excellent seminars at the Institute of General Semantics where they hold sessions in which they move away from the verbal and onto the nonverbal level.

Dr. Lee asked the question, "What are the kinds of situations that you can set up in making this behavior *habitual*?"

He talked about several different kinds of training.

First he talked about SELF-TRAINING. He said that it is necessary to study the basic literature. For example, reread and study *Science and Sanity* for reminder purposes. You must keep reminding yourself of the system of general semantics.

Secondly, there is the problem of practicing one principle at a time. In *Indexing*, for example, you can learn to see *differences* or index people, situations, and things very quickly.

Thirdly, Dr. Lee said that you must encourage a *generalized extensionalization*. People must be oriented by *life*, by *facts*, rather than by words and verbal associations. This means training in looking, seeing, feeling, hearing, using the senses to become *extensionalized*. This is designed to give your senses an acquaintance with the world, the nonverbal world. It gives you a chance to "shut up," not only overtly but covertly, inwardly; not to talk or verbalize as we are so used to doing.

A fourth kind of self-training is what Irving Lee called "Anti-Irritant Training." In irritating situations, can you learn how to query, not quarrel, ask questions rather than argue. Asking questions consists of a different kind of listening, a new kind of listening for most of us — we must learn how to

postpone quarreling and disagreeing. When faced with a problem, he asks, can you use the *natural order of evaluation*, facts first, then words.

A fifth kind of self-training is "spotting the misevaluation." This is the spotting of semantic factors in your reading, movie and television watching, radio listening, working on the job, communicating at home — in short, in everything that you do. Spot the misevaluations in yourself as well as in others. With one eye or ear you observe or hear what is going on, with the other you see how he or she is misevaluating. You can make a chart where the theme or plot of a play or drama grows out of a kind of misevaluation. You can also do the same for the misevaluations in life situations.

Irving Lee often said that general semantics is not something that happens to you — it is something you *do*. It's an *operational discipline*, it's something you perform. Like a great symphony it's a "score" that you follow and do.

As with many great teachers, Irving Lee had many fine "disciples" who became outstanding scholars and teachers of general semantics. Two very popular books on General Semantics emanated from Dr. Lee's classes. William V. Haney's *Communication and Organizational Behavior* followed from Dr. Lee's introductory course as well as from his book *Customs and Crises in Communication*. Harry Weinberg's book *Levels of Knowing and Existence* derived from Irving Lee's Advanced General Semantics class. I dedicated my book *Understanding and Being Understood* to Irving Lee with the following quote from Plato: "There are always in the world a few inspired men whose acquaintance is beyond price."

NOTE

1. Irving J. Lee, "On the Varieties of Research in General Semantics," *ETC.: A Review of General Semantics*, Spring 1950, Vol. VII, No. 3, p. 172.