

In Memoriam

# Russell Meyers

1904 - 1999

By

**Robert P. Pula**

Russell Meyers, longtime neuroscientific mentor to the Institute of General Semantics and, by extension, to all serious practitioners of general semantics, died on June 4, 1999. Since first encountering an open copy of Korzybski's *Science and Sanity* on a table in a medical library in Brooklyn in the mid-'30s, he was personally associated with Korzybski and his work: presenting at many conferences, lecturing at Institute seminar-workshops, publishing many papers in the *General Semantics Bulletin* and numerous other professional, medical, and scientific journals. In these articles and papers he consistently wrote about general semantics as related to his field, or wrote about neurology, neuro-psychology, etc., in a manner informed by the formulations of Korzybski. He capped his contributions by giving not one but two Alfred Korzybski Memorial Lectures (1958, 1985). His was among the strongest voices espousing the application of rigorous neurosemantics (general semantics) in all modes of human evaluating—including play and poetry.

My association with Russ Meyers goes back to the early seventies when he guest-lectured at a summer seminar-workshop at which I, too, was lecturing. He qualified as a veteran of general semantics by then, so I was relieved and pleased when he approved my work there. In

subsequent years, when I was editor-in-chief of the *General Semantics Bulletin*, and afterward, I regularly sent him pre-publication copies of my reviews of neuroscientific texts for his review, to make sure that I knew what I was talking about. He generally endorsed my evaluations, only occasionally demurring with relation to a particular interpretation involving continua; for example, whether or not comatose patients experience any consciousness at all. (I had suggested not, he was open to the possibility, so I changed my position.) Eventually, in 1993, when I consulted him as I was preparing my preface to the Fifth Edition of *Science and Sanity*, he claimed that he was a fan of my writing. The reader will understand that for these very personal and selfish reasons, aside from my genuine affection for Russ Meyers the man, I deeply regret his passing. But not in any depressed or despairing way. The life called "Russell Meyers" was so long-filled with brilliant accomplishment, the satisfactions of committed family life, with all its joys and inevitable glitches, significant honors, and the admiring recognition of his peers, that we should not resent its ending. His can serve as a model of Socrates' "life worth living".

H. Russell Meyers was born in Brooklyn, New York, on February 25, 1904. His A.B. degree was awarded in 1927, an Sc.M. degree

in 1929, both from Brown University.

In 1932 he earned his M.D. degree at Cornell University; then served a rotating internship (1932–1933) at the Brooklyn Hospital, Brooklyn, New York. Then followed a residency in neurosurgery (1933–1934) at Kings County Hospital, Brooklyn, and a residency in neurology/neurosurgery (1934–1935) at Bellevue Hospital in New York.

He became a fellow at the Lahey Clinic, Boston, Massachusetts, and served a preceptorship (I wonder if that charmingly archaic-sounding term is still used) (1937–1939) under the notable Dr. E. Jefferson Browder at the Long Island College of Medicine and the Brooklyn Hospital, both in New York City. Dr. Meyers was certified by the American Board of Psychiatry and Neurology in 1938, the American Board of Neurological Surgery (1942), and became a fellow of the American College of Surgeons in the fateful year, 1939.

Then he went to work!

He was also a brilliant, renowned, famously tough teacher, intolerant of sloppiness, casualness, lack of seriousness in his students—their eventual patients would be grateful. He taught embryology, histology, experimental and physiological psychology, speech pathology, neurology, neurophysiology and neurosurgery. He was professor of surgery and chairman of the division of neurosurgery at the University of Iowa, Iowa City during the period 1946–1963. Within that period, from 1956 to 1960, he served on the Neurological Advisory Committee of the American College of Surgeons and as chairman of that committee from 1958 to 1960.

Perhaps Russ learned his no-holds-barred approach to teaching scientific applied medicine in the U.S. Army, where during World War II he served as chief neurosurgeon at four general Hospitals of the Army Medical Corps in the United Kingdom, France and the United States (1942–1946). He was determined that battlefield mistakes not be mirrored in the operating room. Much of his work there

involved teaching—and learning and application—of the most demanding kind. In the last year of the war he was neurological consultant of the intermediate zone in Oise, France. He attained the rank of lieutenant colonel before returning to civilian life and the work described in the preceding paragraph.

Dr. Meyers resigned his posts at Iowa to become chief of staff of neurology and neurosurgery of the Appalachian Regional Hospital at Williamson, West Virginia, where he helped reorganize the medical staffs of a chain of ten new community hospitals in Appalachia.

In addition to all that hands-on involvement with his 'job', Russ Meyers was a member of over 30 professional societies, in many of which he held office, yet managed to publish 140 papers and monographs detailing his research in the following matters: neuroanatomy, human stereotaxy, proprioception, neural suppression and extinction, intracranial pressure, epilepsy, Parkinsonism and other abnormal movement disorders, aphasia, consciousness, neurocommunication, neurosemantics (general semantics), the infracortical mechanisms of libido and potency (which he knew something about at the personal level), ultrasonics in neurosurgery, and medical education. He retired from active practice in 1975, but continued his writing, including a book-length manuscript dealing with the need for general semantics as an informing discipline for ongoing medical and general scientific research. Such a man inevitably attracts many awards and prestigious memberships in honor societies (Phi Beta Kappa, Sigma Xi, Alpha Omega Alpha, Phi Delta Kappa). Among Russ's major post-schooling awards was the 1942 Prize for Surgical Research by the New York State Medical Society.

Among his 'non-neurological' passions was track racing—the kind with two legs, not four. And one's own, not somebody else's. Russ ran in seniors track meets into his early nineties, usually winning in his class.

Russ was married for many partnering years to Pauline (Polly) Simmons. Her death in 1994 was a profound loss for Russ and their nine children. I remember with smiling affection and pleasure a Saturday night seminar party where Russ at the piano, and Polly on the drums, brought down the house with an old-fashioned razzle-dazzle, key-thumping, snare-bashing home brew of dixieland, some New York swing, a kind of bouncing blues, maybe a bit of boogie—the mix was original, intoxicating, motoric, and thoroughly American.

Russ served on the boards and as president of both the Institute of General Semantics and the International Society for General Semantics.

So, farewell to Russ Meyers: dedicated healer, mentor, teacher in many media, general semanticist, humanitarian, and, to use the phrase of Korzybski that he loved so well for its simple descriptive yet prescriptive efficacy, *time-binder*.



Bibliography of Russell Meyers' contributions to the *General Semantics Bulletin*—lectures, reviews, and major papers:

1. "Semantic Dilemmas in Neurology, Psychology, and General Semantics", No.10, 1953, pp.35–51.
2. "Irving J. Lee as Remembered by:", No. 18, 1955, pp.14–15.
3. "Potentials of General Semantics in the Age of Space", Alfred Korzybski Memorial Lecture, 1958", No. 22, 1958, p. 3. (Erratum, *GSB* No. 54, p. 59).
4. "Gateways to the Mind: A Popularization Evaluated", No. 24, 1959, pp. 124–128.
5. "On The Dichotomy of 'Organic' and 'Functional' Diseases", No. 32, 1966, pp. 21–37.
6. "The Physician's Dis-Ease as an Expert Witness: Its Semantic Pathology", No. 34, 1967, pp. 23–30.
7. "In Memoriam: Ora Ray Bontrager", No. 53,

1987, pp. 87–88.

8. "The Potentials of Neurosemantics for Modern Neuropsychology", Alfred Korzybski Memorial Lecture, 1985, No. 54, 1989, pp. 13–59.

#### A Note on Russell Meyers

Never met the man, but I remember one thing that he said that has stayed with me for many years. M. Kendig (another giant in the GS pantheon) brought it to the attention of the members of the Institute. She quoted him as saying, "I have just read *Science and Sanity* (my eighth run), and am so impressed with it as to now say without reservation that, disregarding its rhetoric, in the main, its repetitious statements, it is far and away the most profound, insightful, and globally significant book I have ever read."

One weekend in the early 1970s, I made Xerox copies of that quotation, and posted them on bulletin boards, telephone poles, and many other surfaces in Berkeley near the university. The staff at the Institute was so flooded with requests for the book that they reported that "something seems to be happening". They never knew why suddenly more people wanted to buy Korzybski's book.

Bob reports that Meyers happened onto general semantics by coming across an open copy of *Science and Sanity* on a table in a library. That has always fascinated me: a chance happening that changed his life, the lives of everyone who heard him speak or write, and the future from then on. —ed.

**The 2002 Alfred Korzybski Memorial Lecture** will be held Friday, November 8, 2002 at the Yale Club in New York City. The lecture will be given by J. Allan Hobson, M.D., professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School. Dr. Hobson, with Jonathan A. Leonard, is the author of *Out of its Mind: Psychiatry in Crisis: A Call for Reform* (Perseus Books, May, 2002).