

AN E-MAIL INTERVIEW WITH LANCE A. STRATE

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Lance A. Strate is Professor of Communication and Media Studies at Fordham University, and a Trustee and former Executive Director of the Institute of General Semantics. He is also a past president of the New York State Communication Association, and one of the founders of the Media Ecology Association, having served as its first president for over a decade, and is now a member of the MEA's Advisory Council. He is also President of Congregation Adas Emuno in Leonia, New Jersey, a temple in the tradition of Reform Judaism.

Dr. Strate is the author of over 100 scholarly articles and book chapters, and several books, including *Echoes and Reflections: On Media Ecology as a Field of Study* (Hampton Press, 2006), *On the Binding Biases of Time and Other Essays on General Semantics and Media Ecology* (Institute of General Semantics, 2011), *Amazing Ourselves to Death: Neil Postman's Brave New World Revisited* (Peter Lang, 2014), and the co-editor of several anthologies, including two editions of *Communication and Cyberspace* (Hampton Press, 1996, 2003), *Critical Studies in Media Commercialism* (2000), *The Legacy of McLuhan* (Hampton Press, 2005), and *Korzybski And...* (Institute of General Semantics, 2012). He also writes poetry, and his poems have been published in *Anekaant*, *ETC*, the *General Semantics Bulletin*, *Explorations in Media Ecology*, *Poetica Magazine*, *KronoScope*, and several anthologies, including his co-edited collection of creative expression, *The*

Medium is the Muse: Channeling Marshall McLuhan (NeoPoiesis Press, 2014), and his first poetry book was recently published under the title, *Thunder at Darwin Station* (NeoPoiesis Press, 2015).

Translations of his writing have appeared in French, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, Hungarian, Hebrew, Mandarin, and Quenya. Professor Strate is a recipient of the Media Ecology Association's 2013 Walter J. Ong Award for Career Achievement in Scholarship, the New York State Communication Association's John F. Wilson Fellow Award in 1998, in recognition for exceptional scholarship, leadership, and dedication to the field of communication, and Denver Mayor Wellington E. Webb proclaimed "that February 15, 2002 be known as Dr. Lance Strate Day in the City and County of Denver" in honor of the keynote address he gave for the Rocky Mountain Communication Association.

I think the description "an organic intellectual" suits you. You do not limit your scholarship to academic disciplines. There is an underlying concern about many issues of contemporary relevance. You dare to study life-worlds and lived experiences of the self and others. There is involvement and empathy. How is such a fine balance possible?

LS: This is the first time that anyone has described me as an organic intellectual, so I find that interesting. I suppose it goes hand in hand with adopting an ecological view, seeing everything as interconnected, which applies not only to traditional academic subjects and the various phenomena that we study, but also in linking the work that we do as scholars and the lives that we lead. I remember one of my mentors, Christine Nystrom, encouraging me to keep my research rooted in my real life interests and experiences, and that positive reinforcement made a big difference for me. And another mentor, Neil Postman, certainly served as a model of an intellectual who directed his attention and efforts to matters of concern to the general public. I do think we need to learn how to be traditional intellectuals first, however, to master that bit of detachment and separation from the everyday world, because that is something that does not come naturally. We learn in part by imitating our teachers, the ones we encounter directly and the ones we only know through their writings, and that leads us to leave our old selves behind and play at being someone else, following someone else's lead, and focusing on matters that are not part of our own lifeworld. Going through that phase is vital, because otherwise you wind up being an intellectual in name only, substituting so-called "engagement" for real scholarship. So the trick is learn how to be a traditional intellectual, but then not to remain in that mode, but to retrieve our authentic selves and incorporate what we have learned into a new synthesis. To climb up the ivory tower, but not remain locked away inside of it. Antonio Gramsci I believe originated the distinction between traditional intellectuals, aka the intelligentsia, whose work supports the status quo, and organic intellectuals who emerge out of the working class, and I don't think it maps all that well onto American society, certainly not to my experience, but I can definitely relate it to Lewis Mumford's contrast between organic and mechanical ideologies, with mechanical ideologies representing a specialist mentality and the academic silos that go with them, and organic ideology associated with the systems view and an ecological approach. And I do try to keep aligned with an organic ideology. But personally, I am flattered by what you say, but I don't feel like there's anything daring about what I've been doing, I just do what I think I should be doing, what I think is the right thing to do, I guess what the circumstances call out for me to do. It doesn't feel like a balance at all to me, more like being perpetually off-balance, somehow avoiding losing balance altogether, but with true balance remaining an elusive but vital goal.

Lance the general semantics scholar, Lance the media theorist and professor, Lance the poet, Lance for whom writing is a form of activism, etc. How do you find time and space for all these passions, roles and responsibilities?

I think the answer that people usually give to this sort of question is, you just do. Of course, time and space are limited resources, so you have to be willing to sacrifice certain things in your life, there's always a cost to every benefit. But I would say that all of these things are not different

and distinct activities, but rather overlap with one another. They all related to writing, and speaking, to words, and ideas. And to give one example, the poetry I write is very much informed by my scholarly work, which provides a deep resource to draw upon, something that wasn't available to me when I was younger.

How was your first encounter with general semantics? Did you find it fascinating or were you skeptical initially?

I loved it. I was introduced to general semantics as a first semester freshman in Jack Barwind's Introduction to Communication Theory class, and it immediately clicked for me. But so did many other ideas in that class, so my first encounter was not with general semantics alone as a complete system unto itself and a be-all and end-all, but as one of a number of really good ideas that help in better understanding our world and ourselves. Other ideas that really made an impression on me in that course were related to systems theory, including Paul Watzlawick's relational approach, the linguistic relativism of Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf, and the work of media ecology scholars like Marshall McLuhan, Harold Innis, Jacques Ellul, and Daniel Boorstin. And I really was fascinated by communication theory overall. It was a privilege to reconnect with Barwind later in life, after I had become a professor in my own right, and Jack really had an enormous influence on me in first introducing me up to media ecology, general semantics, and the field of communication.

How have you benefited from general semantics as a scholar and an individual living in a society?

I have. The ideas that were presented to me in class and that I read about helped to improve my thinking, to use more precise language, more caution in making assumptions about the world, more reality checking in regard to my mental maps. This came without the need for any experiential exercises, and maybe that's because I was predisposed to understanding and relating to the concepts, but I had no difficulty internalizing them, and in some ways it was simply a matter of giving names to ideas I had already intuited. Later, studying with Neil Postman and Christine Nystrom, I gained a fuller grasp and appreciation for general semantics, as well as learning about its relevance for research and theory-building. We read Wendell Johnson's *People in Quandaries* in the first semester of Postman's Media Ecology doctoral program, and apart from the significance of the ideas about communication, language, and perception, it was also presented to us as a guide for thinking about scholarship, about understanding the process of abstracting, the need for operational definitions, and the importance of distinguishing between facts and inferences. My more recent association with the Institute of General Semantics has deepened my appreciation for the work of Korzybski in particular, the way that he helped to establish the basis of systems theory, and his contribution to the field of media ecology.

Do you have any major disagreements with general semantics as a discipline, general theory of evaluation, interconnected ideas and methods and doable philosophy?

I have disagreements, but I wouldn't call them major. I think the process of abstracting at the heart of general semantics is extremely important, but only represents one dimension of experience. That's why I introduced the idea of the mode of abstracting, which can refer to qualitative differences, as opposed to the more quantitative sense of the level of abstracting. That's where media ecology comes in. It's about differences that make a difference, the differences between different media, which may not necessarily be about being more abstract or more concrete, but relate to other factors. General semantics is also more of a psychological approach, which is fine, but has less to offer on the macro scale of social and cultural analysis, as compared to some other theories. It does have something to offer, but much less than other approaches. General semantics provides only a rudimentary sense of historical change, and does not help much in understanding tribal societies and oral cultures. It misses the fact that Aristotle was a product of literacy, and that a non-Aristotelian approach emerges

out of a culture that has been transformed by electronic media, the telegraph, telephone, and radio, in Korzybski's day. The emphasis on practicality is commendable, and general semantics provides a very effective set of techniques for improving people's thinking and communicating, but it has its limitations in understanding the big picture of human history, society, culture. And the emphasis on developing a teachable system, while of great benefit, came at the cost of implying, to some, that all you need to know is in that one system. It became a closed system for many, which led to a good deal of stagnation, something that goes against the spirit of Korzybski's project. You can never say, this is it, this is all we need to know. That's anti-intellectual, and mechanical rather than organic. What is needed is an open systems approach, an emphasis on continued inquiry, growth and evolution. And that does include understanding what Korzybski was actually writing about, and what others in general semantics were as well, and what others were studying who worked in parallel with the development of general semantics, like Sapir and Whorf, and Bertrand Russell, Alfred North Whitehead, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Susanne Langer, Kenneth Burke, I. A. Richards, etc. And what others who came after had to say, like Gregory Bateson, and McLuhan, Postman, Walter Ong, etc.

You came in a time when traditional general semantics scholarship overemphasized language and awareness. You and a few like-minded scholars shifted the emphasis to include symbols, communication and media with awareness about our environments. Do you see it as a significant paradigmatic shift?

I think it needs to be, and of course Neil Postman tried to accomplish this back during the 1970s, and met with extraordinary resistance on the part of the traditionalists in general semantics. So his efforts failed, and instead of revitalizing general semantics, it has gone into a long and steady decline. But if general semantics is all about the organism as a whole in its environment, as Korzybski stated, how can we ignore the fact that we live in an information environment, a communication environment, a symbolic environment, a media environment, a technological environment? As a field, it needs to grow by expanding its subject matter, and the sources it draws upon.

As a scholar, your interests seem to be diverse. Still your work has an integrated character. Am I right? Apparently, in your case academic, administrative, and creative domains and responsibilities coexist without discord; better, these areas of interest support and enrich one another. How do you make it possible? Or are there tensions, chaos and negotiations that we do not see?

I think you are right about the integrated character of my work. At least, I see it all as interconnected, and ultimately referencing the underlying interconnections, the structure, interaction, relationships, and mediations that form the basis of all sorts of phenomena, of systems and environments, society and culture, communication and consciousness, signs and symbols, human history and human technology, etc. The subject matter may vary, but the underlying philosophical and theoretical foundation remains relatively constant. I say relatively because it is always subject to review, evaluation, and further development and evolution. It is a never-ending quest to further our understanding of things, of life, the universe, and everything, to borrow Douglas Adams wonderful phrase. And when I say never-ending, I mean that I do not believe there is some end state of absolute enlightenment that can be achieved. And how boring it would be if we did! Rather, what we can hope for, aim for, and strive for is a continual unfolding, an ongoing series of revelations, simply put, lifelong learning. And of course, when I say never-ending, I mean relative to human life, which is finite, hence the inevitably that our knowledge and understanding, both individual and collective, will always be incomplete.

As for working in different domains, mostly I find that to be harmonious, the academic and the creative go hand in hand. Writing, thinking, studying, trying to achieve understanding, all are creative activities, and should be clothed in forms of expression that are creative enough to engage others, and also clear and concrete enough to get the message across to others. Teaching is a creative

performance, and I find it a great joy personally. My religious participation is also bound together with all that, entering into a media environment with roots that date back into antiquity, studying sacred texts produced by ancient cultures, utilizing language and writing systems that are not native to me, all have contributed to my media ecology scholarship, indeed, helped to establish it in the first place. There is also the aesthetic and creative expression that goes with prayer, singing, and the tradition of interpreting scripture. But more than all that, there is a need, I believe, to include a spiritual and an ethical to dimension to our lives and our work. I think it's important to have some sense of where you stand, and what you stand for, in the world, and maybe that's the problem with some academics is that they haven't or haven't yet answered that question for themselves. And maybe the problem with some others is that they arrived at too simple an answer to the question, and adhere to it too rigidly. After all, the ground we stand on may seem solid and static, but it is constantly shifting and moving, so the act of standing is not a matter of remaining frozen, it's a matter of maintaining some semblance of balance, or at least not losing your balance altogether. Understanding relativity, there may not be any absolute place to stand in the universe, but what folks who champion cultural relativity overlook is the fact that relations themselves need not be relative. It's the relationships that matter, our relationships with others, with our environment, and with our selves.

Getting back to your question, the one discordant note I find is administrative duties, some of the time. I often joke about colleagues who have become fulltime administrators in universities and say that they have gone over to the dark side, but I do find that the work can be deadening, lacking in spiritual and creative components. It requires a great deal of work on human relations, managing personalities, and that can be very tiresome, and much of it comes down to a temporary, losing battle against entropy, a kind of janitorial duty. Still, we all need to take turns cleaning up, so it is a matter of doing your duty. But it is possible for administrative work to be positive and fulfilling, and that is not so much about resources as it is about lack of constraints. I have had opportunities when I can apply my general semantics training and media ecology approach to administration, to understanding organizations and how they function as systems within an environment, and given the freedom to act accordingly, to establish, nurture, and grow an organization, in the case of the Media Ecology Association, and to help one to heal and find new direction, in the case of the Institute of General Semantics. People working in organizations often see only the little part of the overall system that they are involved with, or otherwise overlook how the parts can all work together, support each other, and feed each other. The times when I have been able to analyze the system and its functioning, and make things happen, have been very gratifying. I think of my work with organizations and in organizing major events like conferences as a creative activity akin to editing an anthology or writing a book. But of course they don't have the same sense of relative permanence as a publication. In the end, the tensions and negotiations have to do with time, in making choices about which activities I should devote myself to, which bring the greatest benefit to others, and to me.

You have worked with the Institute of General Semantics as a scholar, Executive Director, and presently as a member of the Board of Trustees. How do you evaluate the work of the Institute as a time binding endeavour?

I suppose that the first order of business regarding time binding is survival, and the Institute is still alive and kicking, so that is a good sign. The second order of business is preservation, not to lose any knowledge that has been gained over the years. On this point, I know there are mixed opinions, with some feeling that the IGS has lost its strict Korzybskian orientation, which I don't consider to necessarily be a bad thing, although I do think it is essential to study, learn about, and understand the complexities of Korzybski's thinking. There also are mixed feelings about the Institute's preservation of physical materials, documents, archives, and memorabilia, and I think these things are always problematic, distinguishing between items that have nothing more than

fetish value from items of historical and scholarly importance, and I do think the IGS's efforts on that score has been considerably less than perfect. But civilization survived the burning of the library at Alexandria, after all, so what we are talking about here is in comparison very minor. What is most important, the writings of Korzybski and his followers, the ideas they introduced and developed, have been preserved, and continue to be made available by the Institute. There is a third order of business when it comes to time binding, which is that of evaluation, an ongoing process of eliminating error and expanding our body of knowledge. This is where the IGS has somewhat stalled out, resulting in a decline in interest in and awareness of general semantics.

Do you think you have been able to give the Institute and its publications a new vision and orientation?

I hope so, and I certainly tried to. As Executive Director, I was able to restore a long absent and much needed academic connection to the IGS. I organized several conferences that brought together long neglected aspects of general semantics, its history, and other areas of interest and fields and disciplines with important ties to Korzybski and his followers, and brought into the fold others who viewed general semantics as valuable, and were interested in moving the discipline forward. And I re-established the Institute's publishing program, beginning with the printing of a new edition of Korzybski's *Selections from Science and Sanity*, and my own *On the Binding Biases of Time*, which I gave as a gift to the Institute, asking for no royalties or payment. The same is true of the anthology I co-edited with Corey Anton, *Korzybski And...* That's on the administrative side. Intellectually, I have tried to show the connections between general semantics, cybernetics and systems theory, and media ecology, develop new ideas in general semantics such as understanding technology as a form of abstracting, distinguishing between levels and modes of abstracting, understanding the literate basis of Aristotelian thinking, and the role of media in time binding. More generally, I have tried to give general semantics a new direction as an open system that can continue to develop, grow and evolve.

How do you evaluate the current scholarship in general semantics?

It needs improving. I think it's better now than it was at the start of the new century, as there have been a small number of scholars who have been trying to revitalize general semantics and move it forward. But much more is needed. Part of the problem is that general semantics has been absorbed into other fields, as part of their time binding efforts, the field of communication studies for example, so that it informs scholarship in other areas, but is not credited as scholarship in general semantics. Unfortunately, scholars in communication have largely stopped citing and acknowledging the contributions of general semantics, so while they may be making progress that contributes to what general semantics is all about, it is not seen as progress in general semantics. Media ecology is a bit different, in being a more historically minded and book and author oriented tradition, so while general semantics is seen as part of the field of media ecology, Korzybski, Hayakawa, Johnson, and the rest are given credit where credit is due, general semantics itself is recognized, acknowledged, and taught along with related concepts such as linguistic relativity, symbolic interaction, the philosophy of symbolic form, information theory and cybernetics, systems theory, relational communication, and the study of technology.

How do you envisage the future of general semantics?

I believe that the intellectual contributions of Korzybski and others will not be forgotten, and will remain a part of our history of ideas, that much is clear. I think there is value in general semantics as a curriculum, as a teachable system to use Korzybski's phrase, and it has potential to continue on in that form, although it is also entirely possible that it could be integrated and absorbed into some other system, as was the case with Neuro-Linguistic Programming. Whether general semantics has

a future as an intellectual endeavor will depend on whether there are enough of us who are willing to talk about it, write about it, teach about it, and contribute to it as a field of inquiry. I think there is a future, but it may be as part of an array of related approaches like media ecology. And maybe they will all become known by a different name at some point in the future, some phrase or term that no one has come up with yet, that better represents all this to 21st century scholars.

A careful reading would testify that Korzybski did not see arts and humanities as inferior to sciences. He had a problem with the ways in which certain disciplines interpret the 'human' and human problems. Do you think that while Korzybski emphasized a scientific approach to life, he indirectly and perhaps inadvertently undermined the significance of arts and humanities?

Yes. He was a product of his times, of the positivism of the early 20th century, and so elevated science and empiricism above all other forms of scholarship. Like many others of his generation, he had a deep and abiding faith in science, rationality, and progress. And like many others, his faith was shaken by the realities of two world wars, the depression, the Holocaust, and the atom bomb, but only enough to distinguish between the ideals of science and the fact that most scientists, along with everyone else, failed to live up to those ideas. And he was quite right to point to the efficacy of the scientific method, and I do agree that applying that method to everyday life via general semantics is of enormous utility. But it is not a Theory of Everything, and it does not provide all that we need to appreciate and understand feeling and emotion, aesthetic and spiritual experience, human relationships and social interaction, political economy, the impact of innovations on culture, and many other phenomena. I think that what Korzybski was doing was trying to answer the questions and problems of his time, but those answers come across as troubling as times change. That accounts, I believe, for the negative portrayal of the Institute of General Semantics in Jean-Luc Godard's 1965 film, *Alphaville*. Of course, that IGS is a fictional one, and no doubt based on the positive and positivistic portrayal of general semantics in the science fiction of authors such as Robert Heinlein and A. E. van Vogt. I agree that this was not Korzybski's intent, he acknowledged the value of the arts, poetry, and even religion to some extent. But he left precious little room for the arts and humanities in his general semantics, and was especially dismissive of much of philosophy, apart from the analytical and semiotic, and of much of theology.

Your texts about general semantics do more than elucidating and simplifying the ideas. You always maintain an interdisciplinary approach. Besides you have examined the world of ideas and everyday life through the lens of general semantics. Such an approach may make one aware of the potentials and limitations of general semantics. According to you, in the spirit of time-binding, what kinds of re-visions are necessary in general semantics as a philosophy of life (if one may describe it so) and as a methodology?

As a methodology, general semantics is an applied epistemology, concerned with our ways of knowing about the world, and how they can be improved. General semantics needs to expand to take into account in a more comprehensive way than it does at present all of our different ways of knowing about the world, not just perception as the first order of abstracting, but the differences between the different sensory organs, how the acoustic world differs from the visual world, how the tactile senses differ from those that allow for perception from a distance. The kinship between general semantics and linguistic relativism needs more emphasis, so that we can better understand how, at higher orders of abstracting, different languages provide us with different ways of knowing about the world, and how this also extends to different codes and types of symbolic form, numbers, images, music, various art forms, this following the work of Susanne Langer, not to mention myth and ritual, and cultures as systems of communication, following Edward T. Hall. And of course it means how different media and technologies give us different ways of getting information about our environment, media as epistemology as Neil Postman put it. The question of how we relate to

our environment is one that we have only begun to investigate, with the understanding that the only way to understand our environment is to understand how we relate to our environment, since we can never know our environment directly. And in many ways the most complex components of our environment are other people, so we need to understand our relationships as well, not just as I-It but as I-You relationships. Moreover, while general semantics provides us with means of improving our environments, we need to understand that our various means of relating to our environment also are means of modifying our environment, and understanding how we modify our environment, how the way that we do things often yields unexpected results, too often harmful results, including indirect effects, effects of effects, effects of effects of effects, and so on, in an ecological manner. These questions are fundamental not only for time binding, for human survival.

As a philosophy of life, general semantics is essential for providing us with an effective means of reality testing, and evaluating statements, labels, assumptions, etc. Underlying the application of scientific method to everyday life is the basic notion that we have to live in the world, the world as it is, not as we wish it to be. It is quite the challenge to live according to the facts, but also with the awareness that facts can always be proven false, that we need to keep testing what we think we know, what we remember, the conclusions we've drawn and our generalizations against the evidence of our senses and the views of others. In this and more, general semantics is a healthy component of a philosophy of life, but it is not sufficient in and of itself. I think we need to also try to understand what it means to be human, how we have modified human nature in various ways, and how we need to strive to maintain our humanity in the face of an environment that is changing, in large part due to our own modifications. I think media ecology adds something significant to a philosophy of life in regard to those matters, and both general semantics and media ecology stress the importance of an awareness and understanding of context in all matters, and an emphasis on balance as an ecological value. But neither general semantics nor media ecology are sufficient for a full philosophy of life, since both can be used in the service of competing and opposing philosophies. So there has to be an underlying moral and ethical groundwork for a philosophy of life, one that I hope would include respect for the sanctity of life, and a sense of the sacred.

A remarkable thing about your books is the directness and simplicity of style even while discussing complex ideas of great profundity. You simplify without trivializing. How do you do that?

I had a great model in Neil Postman, and I would just echo his advice to read good writing, in particular good essay writing, and his work is a great example of that, and to try to write in a way that communicates to a general, educated public. As Postman put it, "clarity is courage." If there is one specific bit of advice that I can relate that was particularly helpful, it was to write for the ear rather than for the eye. Listen to the sound of the words, if they don't sound right, then rewrite! I also have to credit Christine Nystrom, who worked very diligently with me as my dissertation advisor, and emphasized the need to have each sentence follow the next in logical progression, as a train of connected ideas. I know that sounds basic, but the big leap for most of writers is to learn to spell everything out, not to jump around or jump ahead on the assumption that the reader knows what's in your head. Of course, this is a key point in general semantics, not to make assumptions, as well as to communicate with clarity.

The book that you co-edited with Professor Corey Anton, "Korzybski, And..." maps the terrains of general semantics and its interaction and rupture with other systems of thought and thinkers. This text did break a new ground in scholarship. What made you consider such a volume?

Corey and I both shared the same sense that the value and relevance of general semantics can be better understood, its importance can be better communicated to diverse audiences, and the discipline itself can be better moved forward by relating Korzybski's work to other intellectuals and other philosophies and perspectives, the ones that preceded him and informed his work, the

ones that were his contemporaries, including some of his fellow general semantics pioneers, and the ones that came after him and were influenced by him. We wanted to look at Korzybski in relation to other scholars and writers, and we wanted to provide an entry point for others not familiar with Korzybski's work.

It was you who gave an insightful introduction to general semantics to many of us in India. I attended your workshop in 2009. What particularly interested me was your approach to general semantics that expanded the scope of general semantics and made a dialogue between general semantics and other disciplines and methods possible. How did you arrive at this kind of a pedagogical approach?

I think it's a mistake to view general semantics as a closed system, which results in a monologue rather than a dialogue, and enclosing a non-Aristotelian approach in an Aristotelian frame. To me, pedagogy is about the dialogue of disciplines, the great intellectual conversation that extends across the history of ideas. That is very much a part of the media ecology tradition, which is not to say that anything goes, but to identify the connections that do exist, and I have always been partial to integrating different ideas and schools of thought, identifying the points of intersection, common ground, and homologies, in my intellectual work. A dialogic approach is the basis of a more complex, ecologic approach.

Your way of teaching general semantics does not treat it as a closed system. General semantics opens out, become open-ended. I remember how you connected general semantics with life worlds and lived experiences. It becomes more human and informed by the milieu and history. Is this a method inspired by Korzybski? To put it differently, who have inspired and influenced your ideas and methods of teaching?

I had no first hand experience of Korzybski, for me he is mainly a text, and so not a model for teaching. Instead, it was Jack Barwind as an undergraduate, Gary Gumpert as an MA student, and Neil Postman and Christine Nystrom as a doctoral student who inspired and influenced me as a teacher.

I am fascinated by the way you weave together the ideas of Korzybski, Walter Ong, Marshall McLuhan and Neil Postman. Please do explain for the readers of "Anekaant" the connections and entanglements that you perceive in language as communication and representation, media and general semantics.

That's a tall order for this framework, so all I can do is provide a few cursory comments. I'd start with the idea that the way that we do things, the means, methods, and materials that we use, has much to do with the things we end up doing, and with what we end up with when we do the things that we end up doing. And what we end up doing is not only altering our environment, but altering ourselves. And those means, methods, and materials include our modes of perception and communication, our languages and symbols systems, and our media and technologies. It follows that what distinguishes us as a species is our capacity for language and symbolic communication, which gives us our capacity for time binding. And what separates the kinds of tribal societies that characterized the vast majority of human history from what we have traditionally called civilization is the development of systems of notation and writing, which drastically altered our capacity for time binding from one that emphasized homeostasis to one that allowed for significant accumulation of knowledge and the possibility of enormous progress. We could further note that the invention of the alphabet formed the basis of the distinctive qualities of western culture, with the Semitic alphabet associated with the introduction of codified law, ethics, monotheism, and history as opposed to myth by the Israelites, and the Greek alphabet associated with the introduction of theoretical science, philosophy, democracy, secular history, the theater and the beginnings of literature. To this add the

spread of the Semitic alphabet to India, which led to the invention of zero and positional numerical notation by Hindu mathematicians, the basis of all higher mathematics, as well as the practical contributions in architecture and engineering on the part of the Romans who modified the Greek alphabet to form the Latin alphabet, and the contributions to knowledge made by the Islamic Empire, using another form of the Semitic alphabet. What further set the west apart, and also brought an end to the medieval period in Europe, and the beginning of modernity, was the invention of the printing press with moveable type in the 15th century. And we have been subject to a series of further transformations that begin with the invention of the first electronic medium, the telegraph, in the early 19th century, have a massive impact with the widespread adoption of television beginning in the mid-20th century, and is being further amplified by digital technologies, computers, the internet, the web, and mobile devices, with effects that are continuing to reshape the world now in the 21st century. We can't understand what is happening right now without understanding the role of time binding and abstracting for human life, and without putting what is going on right now into a historical context. And we better try to understand what is going on, because there may not be all that much that we can do about it, but there are some things that we can influence, some decisions to be made, and we better figure out what we need to do, for the sake of our very survival as a species. And that was very much Korzybski's concern, and McLuhan's, Ong's, and Postman's, understanding the human condition, in the context of our environment, in time as well as in space, looking to the past but also with an eye towards the future.

Here at our workshop, you were able to 'creatically' explain general semantics. I mean, you came across as neither a mindless idolater nor an impulsive iconoclast when it comes to an evaluation of Korzybski and general semantics. How is it possible to have such a passionate yet detached scholarship?

I think you have to start with an appreciation and respect for the work of others. I think there is a negative tendency in academia to try to tear down the work of others, to try to justify what you are doing by pointing to the inadequacies of others. It's easy to criticize, after all, and since no one is perfect, and no system complete, as Kurt Gödel established, it's a safe way for academics to go about their business. But what good is it, where does it get us? We need to build on what's been done before, time-binding again, and when it comes to someone who has made significant contributions, like a Korzybski or a McLuhan, rather than finding a flaw and going on about how they were wrong, build on that work and add to it. You can do the exact same thing with a positive presentation that is respectful and building on the work of others as you can with a negative presentation that simply seeks to tear others down. Maybe it means starting with a love of ideas, and I think a sense of awe at the magnitude of it all, and appreciation for getting to work on our own little piece of this great, great puzzle. But the puzzle is far from complete, it is the work of fallible human beings, so I think if you can understand that while still respecting the work of those who came before us, respecting but not worshipping, understanding that it is a privilege to carry on that work, but also feeling a sense of pride in being able to contribute to it. In media ecology terms, we need to make the content secondary, remembering it's always tentative, and follow the medium or method of our mentors, retrace their steps, yes, but then forge ahead following our own path, asking the same good questions that they posed, having attended to the answers that they arrived at, but answering the questions for ourselves, because the answers they arrived at may be flawed, or may have been right for their time and place, but not for ours.

Tell us about Lance, a time-binder and facilitator of time binding. How do you teach and do general semantics? I remember, like Korzybski, you emphasized the significance of practicing general semantics.

When I teach general semantics, I use some exercises, but I don't go in for the complete experiential, touchy-feely approach. Since I teach college courses, I try to emphasize the power of ideas. I think it's up to the individual to find the relevance in the ideas, to internalize them and put them into practice. Experiential exercises may result in a breakthrough, an aha moment, but they are not necessarily generalized into lived, everyday experience, and the same is true for ideas. I know that different people have different cognitive styles, and for me, what I need is to understand things as clearly and completely as possible before I can put them into practice. So I try to convey that understanding as best I can, and model the thinking process, and the process of discovery. Having internalized the ideas myself, doing general semantics just comes naturally. But it's also something that has to be approached carefully. I know some folks who take it to an extreme, and consequently ask for definitions continually throughout a conversation, which becomes tedious. Sometimes you have to wait a while and accept the ambiguity, be patient and often it is resolved later in the interchange, sometimes as a result of the interaction. Taking general semantics to extremes, some people become very critical of others, and wind up alienating rather than facilitating understanding. That's where understanding relationship has to come in, you need diplomacy to deal with arguments and conflicts, negotiation, dialogue, not criticizing other peoples' semantic reactions. But it does inform my work with others in organizations, especially in calling into question assumptions that are being put forth as fact, or views that assume people and situations remain static rather than allowing for change over time. And general semantics is very useful in the critical analysis of written texts, and in my own written work.

Is it possible to teach how to do general semantics? As an educator, I find this particularly challenging. How do you help the students internalize general semantics in a classroom scenario or in general semantics courses and workshops?

As the saying goes, you can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink. I think you have to make the ideas and resources available to students, and then it's up to them to discover it for themselves. General semantics, media ecology, and related approaches often requires a kind of discovery learning, an "aha!" moment when you go from not getting it to finally getting it. I don't think that makes it impossible to teach, but it does require us to present the ideas as clearly, logically, and comprehensively as possible.

I also remember that you were quite critical of post structural theory and theorists who do not proceed beyond problematizing and abstract theorizing. Could you please elaborate?

I follow Postman and others, including Camille Paglia, in finding little of value in poststructuralism, at least for my own work. As the saying goes, what's good about it isn't original, and what's original isn't good. There is too much deconstruction without being constructive, too much relativism without recognizing that relativity does not apply to relations themselves, too much abstract theorizing that does not allow for refutation, falsification, or any opportunity to check claims against evidence, and too much reliance on jargon to make prosaic statements comes across as if they were profound insights. Apart from all that, there is the tendency to totalize, even when criticizing how others totalize, so Derrida for example opposes traditional emphasis on spoken language by totalizing writing, reversing the relationship of writing as a higher order of abstracting, a symbol system representing another symbol system, a written code that stands for the sounds of speech, which Walter Ong was highly critical of. And there is the tendency to view language as the be all and end all of human consciousness, ignoring the primacy of perception. Totalizing language, and even totalizing difference, because if you argue that you can never make a generalization about anything, that all you have are differences, that's just another kind of universal statement. And I understand, it's harder to work with the ambiguity of the middle ground, somewhere in between universalism and particularism, but that is what North American pragmatism is all about, the ability to put phenomena

into different categories, generalizing but not in an absolute sense, differentiating between categories, distinguishing between differences, and differences that make a difference, to use Bateson's happy phrase. It's that pragmatic approach that distinguishes general semantics and media ecology, both of which largely emerge within a North American context, but not exclusively so, I hasten to add. It's the difference between Charles Saunter's Peirce's semiotics, with its distinctions between symbol, icon, and index, and Ferdinand de Saussure's semiology, where all signs move in the direction of the conventional. And the difference between the much maligned linguistic relativism of Sapir and Whorf, and Noam Chomsky's universal grammar, and thankfully linguistics is in the post-Chomsky era, and relativism has been revived as an approach to the study of languages.

The notion of media ecology is intriguing. I see varied possibilities in such a concept. At the same time, there is a menacing, precarious side to it. As a media theorist, and one who actively contributes to and 'consumes' media, how do you interpret such a scenario?

If ecology is the study of environments, and media ecology is the study of media as environments, and for that matter of environments as media, then I hope there is nothing menacing or precarious about it. It becomes problematic when we move from study to applications, at which point one of the questions we have to ask is, what are the appropriate uses of our media, technologies, codes and modes of communication, and consequently what would be inappropriate, and what should be done about it. I think there is room for reasonable limits, for policy and legislation, but you are right that there is a danger of that extending too far, to the point of censorship. And there is something disturbing about the idea of controlling the mix of media to manipulate populations, much like muzak has been used to manipulate emotions and behavior. But the truth is that it's been happening all along, for example in literacy campaigns used to propagate the faith by Christian missionaries, or as part of modernization campaigns in Communist countries. Any set of ideas can be perverted, and the better the ideas, the more dangerous their misuse, nuclear physics and rocket science being prime examples. This brings us back to the need for a moral, ethical, and spiritual foundation, and I do think media ecology is more open to that kind of foundation than some other fields and disciplines. And I also think that part of the solution is to go beyond information and knowledge, to achieve wisdom, and that was part of what Korzybski was looking for, and part of what Postman was pointing to, and it does go back to understanding relationships and mediations.

The terrains of life-worlds mapped in and as the virtual. The map territory distinction is not discernible sometimes; sometimes we have to deal with maps which are more real than territories. How does a (fragmented) organism survive in such a fuzzy environment! Does general semantics awareness help?

The frightening truth is that all we ever have had are maps. That's in *Science and Sanity*, we have no direct knowledge of the territory, only maps that may be more or less structurally coupled with the territory, that are more or less effective and useful for navigation. So general semantics awareness is absolutely helpful, because knowing you are dealing with a map, and that there are always alternate maps that can be made, is essential, even if the map is a hyperreal simulacrum, maybe especially if it is one. Where media ecology helps is in understanding that we do not simply exist in an unchanging environment and make maps, but that we use our maps to remake our environment, making it over in the image of our maps, or blueprints. Is a building, a city, a highway, a map or a territory. Is farmland, which seems naturally but is a drastically altered environment, a map or a territory? Don't get me wrong, I think the map-territory distinction is very useful, but we also need to keep in mind that it is a relative distinction, not an absolute. And general semantics can help us to remember to unplug from the virtual world and reconnect with a more concrete environment, but we also need to know how to map our digital realities, navigate our electronic media environments, understand what is beneficial and what is harmful about new media, and how these new environments are shaping

and changing us, as individuals and as a society. That awareness begins simply by recognizing the environment for what it is, because as new and strange as it all may seem, we very quickly let our gadgets and technologies become part of our routines, so that they fade into the background, go out of our awareness, becoming, in other words, environmental.

“Globalized mass-media consumer culture” has been interpreted by many scholars in diverse ways. Your views seem to be balanced. Is it that you do not share the anxieties of the alarmists or the enthusiasm of those who celebrate the presumed hyperreal, proliferating possibilities of such a culture?

Yes. You have to keep things in perspective. My parents survived the Holocaust, and also occupation by Soviet Communist forces. Compared to that, the problems of consumer culture are trivial, and we can even celebrate the democratic aspects of mass consumption and mass communication, and the fact that we enjoy a better standard of living than earlier generations. We have to count our blessings, and also acknowledge the extraordinary progress that has been made in the world over the past century, and I am referring to progress regarding individual freedom and social justice throughout the world. Of course there are myriad problems, challenges, issues, and concerns, but as Wendell Johnson argued, we need to acknowledge our achievements or we will inevitably wind up frustrated and demoralized. But we also need to recognize that material comfort is not everything, and that much of our consumption is terribly wasteful, damaging to the environment, and if not that, trivial, time-wasting, unfulfilling, and even spiritually deadening. Utopian claims are made for every major new medium and technology that has been introduced, and if you have a historical context, you know not to take those claims seriously, and that what really counts in the end are our human relationships. Aristotle, who Korzybski included as a major inspiration and foundation, said that we should pursue moderation in all things, including moderation, and I'd also add mediation in all things, including mediation.

Instead of lamenting about or uncritically celebrating the spaces and scenarios made accessible by the contemporary media culture, you are making use of the virtual public spaces for conscious and conscientious time-binding. I follow your blogs; it is remarkable the way you make a world of ideas accessible to multitudes. What is your take on the ways of using the social media for production and dissemination of knowledge and information?

When scholars like Postman used to criticize television, some media professionals would get defensive and say that he had no right to do so unless he actually had experience working with the medium, and of course that was a bit absurd, as relatively few people had that sort of opportunity. That has changed to a large extent due with our new media, and for me, using blogs, YouTube, social media, etc., contributes to my understanding of media and modes of communication. I wouldn't say that doing so is absolutely necessary, I think it is still possible to provide valid criticism simply by observing as an outsider, but on the other hand, working with a medium does provide a source of insight. The new media also provide a wonderful outlet for creative work. I envy young people who have the possibility of expressing themselves and getting their work out there to the public in so many ways that were not available when I was younger, and pursuing many different forms of expression. For me, blogging and social media opened up new possibilities of engaging in scholarly and creative activity as well as media production. Writing a blog meant that I didn't have to adhere to any structures or strictures of academic writing to get my thoughts and ideas out there, I could do free form intellectual work, and also indulge more artistic urges, specifically writing poetry over on old MySpace back before that social network was demolished. And through this form of online publication and social interaction, new media also provided me with the opportunity to engage in educational activities and exchanges, to be a teacher not just to the young adults in my classrooms,

but to many others out there who do not have the time, money, or inclination to go back to school, but are thirsting for intellectual stimulation and growth. I found that to be very gratifying indeed.

The self in the virtual domain is often a narcissistic one which refuses to connect with the other. How do you resist this temptation and avoid this trap?

I'm not sure that I have. I know that a significant portion of my online activity is self-promotion, and it's well known that social media have transformed public relations and marketing on every level. I also view it as a form of record keeping, a kind of occasional diary or journal and scrapbook. I do hope that in doing that sort of thing, I am also providing a service for others. If I have avoided the trap of narcissism at all, it may be by thinking in terms of communication with others rather than simply expressing myself.

Tell us about your blogs and do share your views on effective blogging?

I've taught courses on blogging a number of times, and I generally advise not doing what I do, because when I started out, I had no idea what I was doing, and anyway there is a difference between how I approach blogging as a mature academic and intellectual, and the way my students who are just starting out in their careers should approach blogging. My blog is about whatever interests me, and as an established scholar, there is a sense in which I am my own brand, of course one that is associated with media ecology, general semantics, communication, culture, etc. I advise my students to find a niche to start with, to blog about a very specific topic. I also advise them to keep their posts relatively short, with short paragraphs, which is not to say that they should not be substantive, but to keep them visually appealing for readers with short attention spans. For my blog, though, I have many long posts, but then again I am writing for an audience that, I hope, is interested in more in the way of exposition than your typical reader. What blogs make you think about, as opposed to just writing, are matters of graphic design, layout and visual composition, and that adds a new dimension to writing for publication, for writers. Of course, writing on the web also makes it possible to incorporate audiovisual material like never before, especially embedding videos, and I stress how that has to be approached thoughtfully, how bloggers should not give up their voice as author in favor of images and videos, how we always have to introduce and explain what we're putting up there. And what I see as the unique component of online writing are the links, they are what defines electronic text, making it a form of hypertext. I find the idea of hypertext fascinating, flawed at times, and something I have not nearly had enough time and opportunity to explore. But the overall point is that it is all too easy to get locked into doing things the same old way, and particularly to try to do the same thing you were doing in the older medium of print in this new electronic medium, and the trick is to work out ways to break out of that frame and mold, and fully take advantage of the new and unique qualities and capabilities of the electronic media.

Your work on autism is remarkable because it is informed by firsthand experience. Your interventions have influenced the way we understand and approach this disorder. How do you evaluate your contributions in this field, as an organic intellectual and empathetic scholar-activist?

I just think of myself as a father trying to understand my daughter's disability. If it were some other disability, muscular dystrophy, for example, or if she were suffering from leukemia, I would still do what I could to help raise awareness and understanding through various media, and help with the writing and production of promotional materials and fundraising for nonprofit organizations, donating whatever skills I could. It just so happens that autism relates to the study of communication, to language and social interaction, and intersects with media ecology and general semantics in so many ways, that I could actually explore the subject in a scholarly manner, drawing on my own observations and experience, having realized that some aspects of the disorder apply to me as well.

I think maybe I have contributed by explaining what autism has to teach us about the mind, the self, communication, and culture. I'm not sure it's made any difference in helping individuals with autism like my daughter, in any practical way. I did get some positive feedback from a couple of professionals who work with individuals with autism, however.

I remember, when the journal, "Samyukta" published your study on autism, you objected to the editors' decision to use quotation marks around the word, disorder. I was puzzled, but later I understood why you insisted. One may critique the social processes that stigmatize any disorder; at the same time one may have a view that understands a disorder as a disorder. How does scholarship help in making sense of illness and disorders and deconstructing the stereotypes?

Using quotation marks is in fact a device advocated by general semantics, but in this instance they would have been used for this term alone, which would imply that it is the only term that is problematic. And using them for every term whose definition is somewhat open to debate, alternatives, or otherwise ambiguous would mean that most words would require them. In this instance, there is a genuine objection to calling autism a disorder, coming from high functioning individuals who argue for acceptance of neurodiversity. And I can understand their point of view, but it also strikes me as an outgrowth of the general problem of political correctness that goes too far. The fact is that autism is clinically diagnosed as a disorder, and for low and moderate individuals, like my daughter, who never will be able to live independently, it is not a matter of diversity, it is a disability. If you are nearsighted, farsighted, have astigmatism, or macular degeneration, we don't call that visual diversity. If you have social anxiety disorder, is it really helpful to instead call it something like being diversely sociable? This goes back to the fundamental idea in general semantics, and in communicating and writing more generally, of clarity.

Now let's reflect on a more aesthetic possibility of time-binding. How does poetic inspiration come to you? Do you edit your poems meticulously? Your poems are rich in ideas. At the same time they capture poignant emotions and exude optimism. Your expressions have a refreshing air of spontaneity.

I thank you for your kind words, and hope you like my new poetry book, *Thunder at Darwin Station*. Inspiration can come from anywhere, but it often has much to do with the sounds of language, with a few words that come together in a way that I find pleasing to the ear, with a phrase I come across, or a bit of song lyric, advertising jingle, nursery rhyme, biblical verse or prayer. Sometimes it involves a visual component, the look of a word, the way letters line up. And yes, I do edit quite a bit, a habit I carried over from essay writing. I try to pack as much meaning and as many interconnections as I can into the form. Occasionally something springs into being more or less fully formed, but otherwise I think it's the acoustic emphasis that gives you the impression of spontaneity.

Your poems have a crisp epigrammatic way of reflecting on life. You seem to be doing GS through poetry also. Please share some poems with us.

In the context of this interview, it probably makes sense to keep them short, so here are a few of what I call poetweets, poems composed for Twitter, with its 140 character limit, and originally tweeted on my Twitter account:

BOUNCE: Time ellipses, from apsis to apsis, takes a leap of faith across momentary abscess,
stretches and snaps, coming to rest in our laps

SOAP: Sacrificed on your altar, To satisfy your need for cleansing, I give of myself to you, And
slowly I disappear and die for you

CROAK: A tad bipolar, I lies amidst the lily padded figures, paddlin', I am a fibbin' bein', I gots
plans in the hopper for you, fly now

SENT CHANCE: Mortal and aware, abandoned to the random, terrifyingly unfair, living under a death sentence.

QUESTIONS: There are questions without answers, but no answers without questions, and the answer to each question is a question in disguise

THAT I AM: In the space between words. In the space between breaths. In the space between thoughts. I am.

GENESIS: To learn how to speak, one must first learn how to listen. In communication as in procreation, conception follows reception.

AIR: The map dilates the territory. The clock dilutes the tarry tarry. The word delights the thin git rap resents. The cymbal dials for thee.

THE POET: The poet sneezes, calls it poetry, the dog has fleas, and scratches, calls it naught, calls it not, calls its knot, hanky please

What are you working on now?

I always seem to be working on many projects simultaneously, so I won't go list everything, but the next book I'm writing is be my own synthesis and presentation of media ecology as an approach, with the tentative title of *Media Ecology: Understanding the Human Condition*. After I finish that, I want to do a book on new media with an emphasis on the dimension of time, the tentative title being *Cybertime: An Inquiry into Epoch-Collapse*. I'd also like to do some more poetry books, I have quite a lot of material collected from my old MySpace blog.

Balvant Parekh Centre, in the programs and publications, has followed an interdisciplinary approach. General Semantics in India and Balvant Parekh Centre. What do you think?

I had the honor of meeting Mr. Parekh, and was delighted to learn that he first learned about general semantics from reading the journal *ETC* during the period when Postman was editor. He clearly had the kind of wide ranging and open intellectual curiosity that is reflected in the Centre that bears his name. I think you are doing great work here, and that there are new and important contributions that are resulting as you bring a distinctively Indian understanding to this North American tradition. Every culture has something distinctive to offer, and when we can bring them together to create new hybrids, the result is something better, stronger, more robust than whatever we had before.

What are your suggestions for Balvant Parekh Centre and "Anekaant"?

Simply, keep up the good work!