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## CONFERENCE REPORT

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### *THE 46th ANNUAL ALFRED KORZYBSKI MEMORIAL LECTURE*

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IF YOU'VE PARTICIPATED in social discussions regarding general semantics — among folks who would admit to having actually read Korzybski, you've probably heard the inevitable sigh, "(sigh) Somebody needs to rewrite *Science and Sanity* in language that normal people can understand."

Relax. Nobody has, to my knowledge. However, Ellen J. Langer has achieved something almost as significant. Ms. Langer, Harvard Professor of Psychology, author, and guest lecturer at this year's Alfred Korzybski Memorial Lecture, espouses an orientation based on a notion she refers to as "mindfulness." Her findings, derived from thirty years of research and study with

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various colleagues, parallel much of what Korzybski proposed almost 70 years ago as the benefits of a general semantics orientation.

In her 1997 book, *The Power of Mindful Learning*, Professor Langer summarizes the distinctions she makes between “mindful” and “mindless.” A mindful approach to any activity has three characteristics:

- continuous creation of new categories,
- openness to new information,
- an implicit awareness of more than one perspective.

Mindlessness, in contrast, is characterized by:

- entrapment in old categories,
- automatic behavior that precludes attending to new signals,
- action that operates from a single perspective.

Langer gave the 1999 AK Memorial Lecture at the Harvard Club in New York City on Friday, October 22. Drawing primarily on research and anecdotes contained in *The Power of Mindful Learning* and her 1989 book, *Mindfulness*, Langer engaged the audience in a lively, sometimes passionate, discussion regarding her findings. Many of her stories come from research conducted with the elderly in nursing homes. A key conclusion derived from these studies concerns the benefits of allowing — if not encouraging — aging individuals to make decisions and choices for themselves. As her data showed, those individuals challenged to make even seemingly-trivial decisions for themselves exhibited much more mindful behavior, as reflected by testing and — perhaps not coincidentally — longer lives.

Although she herself had not read Korzybski's writings or other general semantics literature, Langer did state to Marjorie Zelner, Executive Director of the Institute of General Semantics which hosts the annual lecture, that several of her colleagues had read Korzybski. On the one hand, as a student of and advocate for general semantics, I would have wished Langer had had some familiarity with Korzybski. On the other hand, however, I find a certain validation and confirmation that her research and conclusions should so closely overlay those proposed by Korzybski.

### **Similarities with GS Formulations**

For example, in Langer's books and in her presentation, I noted the following similarities with general semantics formulations:

- She emphasized the importance of a scientific approach, or method, to how we think and act. We need to mindfully revise our theories and beliefs to fit the facts instead of mindlessly looking to find data to validate beliefs.
- She began her interaction with the audience aided by overhead transparencies to illustrate how our projection influences our perceptions. She showed several ambiguous images familiar to students of general semantics; for example, one drawing may be perceived as any of three different "pictures," an old woman, or a young woman, or an old man.
- She emphasized the importance of creating new categories, new labels, new ways of categorizing, reminiscent of Korzybski's admonition to avoid "hardening of the categories."
- She noted how much of our behaviors and attitudes come from traditions, with no more "mindful" consideration than "that's the way we've always done it." She related an anecdote

dote I'd first heard from a participant at the 1994 IGS seminar-workshop, who perhaps had read Langer's book.

*A young woman used a third-generation recipe for cooking a pot roast. The family recipe required slicing off both ends of the roast. When someone asked the woman why she sliced off the ends, she replied, "I don't know. That's how my mother did it." Her mother was then asked the same question, to which she responded, "I don't know. That's how my mother did it." The young woman's grandmother was tracked down and asked why her family recipe for pot roast included slicing off both ends. The grandmother replied, "Because my pan was too short to hold the roast. So I cut off both ends to make it fit."*

- Langer also emphasized the importance of context, the individuality of experience, and the ever-changing process nature of the universe.

Langer made the provocative assertion that people should strive for mindfulness at all times. Then, acknowledging that this was unlikely to happen, she qualified her statement by saying that in every situation we encounter, we should act mindfully, or maintain the potential for doing so.

Of the five AKML speakers I've had the pleasure of hearing, I found Langer by far the most engaging, informative, and personable. (I would still reserve the "most entertaining" label for Robert Anton Wilson in 1997.) I definitely recommend her books, especially those two mentioned above, to anyone interested in the application and benefits of general semantics.

That said, I temper my otherwise enthusiastic review of Langer's work with two critical observations.

First, although she made an excellent presentation of her research findings and implications regarding the benefits of mindfulness, I didn't get a sense that she offers explicit prescriptions

for achieving a mindful orientation. I failed to find a parallel, for example, to Korzybski's extensional devices.

Second, she seemed to dismiss the work of neuroscientists as if it belonged to a different domain, with questionable relevance to the realm of psychology — she sounded content to let the neuroscientists do their thing, while she does hers. As someone with a general semantics background, I found this a bit elementalistic.

### **Talbot Winchell Award**

Prior to Langer's lecture, Jeffrey Mordkowitz, IGS Trustee and Master of Ceremonies for the evening, presented the 1999 J. Talbot Winchell Award to Robert Wanderer. This award annually recognizes individuals who have significantly advanced the cause of general semantics. Mr. Wanderer serves as a Director of the International Society for General Semantics, and Membership Secretary of the San Francisco Chapter of ISGS, of which he is a founder member and a past president. He edited the Chapter's newsletter, *The Map*, for thirty-eight years. Wanderer has written many articles for *ETC*, including the "Illustrating General Semantics" feature, and has compiled "A Compendium of Definitions" of general semantics. You can find this compendium on the ISGS web site at:

< [http://generalsemantics.org/Articles/GS\\_defined.htm](http://generalsemantics.org/Articles/GS_defined.htm) >

### **Mindfulness Colloquium**

A one-day colloquium to further develop notions related to "mindfulness" was co-hosted by the IGS and the Straus Thinking and Learning Center at Pace University on the day after the lecture, Saturday, October 23. The program, chaired by Jeff Mordkowitz, included presentations by Rachel Lauer, Allen Flagg, Milton Dawes, a Sensory Awareness panel comprising Charlotte Read, Louise Boedeker, Betty Keane, and Mary Alice Roche, with a wrap-up discussion led by Roben Torosyan.