

• FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR •
EATING MENUS IN 2004

This issue of *ETC* marks another transition in the organizational evolution of a discipline. Published from 1943-1948 by the Society for General Semantics, then from 1949-2003 by the International Society for General Semantics, *ETC* now falls under the stewardship of the Institute of General Semantics.

Twenty-seven years ago, this journal experienced a different type of transition. The late Neil Postman, remembered in the previous issue of *ETC*, began his 10-year editorship of this journal with a clearly articulated point of view in the first of his 'themed' issues, "The Roots of Fanaticism."

He diagnosed that, in 1977, there existed a "*state of mind which banishes reason and generates frenzy, [that] has accompanied mankind throughout our history and gives no sign that it is wearying of the journey.*" He observed that this "state of mind" had produced "*the odor of a kind of intellectual decadence that some of us have smelled before.*"

Postman predicted that "*the study of symbolic processes will be a pre-eminent intellectual enterprise for the remainder of this century.*"

To whatever degree 'we' have, since 1977, engaged in "*the study of symbolic processes,*" it doesn't appear to me that we've succeeded in diluting what Postman sniffed as the "*odor of a kind of intellectual decadence.*" Indeed, I contend that this 'odor' lingers, wafts and seeps even more persistently and pervasively in 2004 than in 1977.

Consider the 'issues' that, on a given day, dominate our national interest as evidenced by newspapers, media talk shows, and the Internet. Many of these current (March 2004) 'issues' represent deeply-rooted conflicts that concern "symbolic processes" and the "intellectual decadence" of rulers and/or the ruled, who lack the means to differentiate symbols *as symbols*, rather than 'things,' 'values,' or 'truths.'

- A piece of paper generated by a local government official that symbolizes a societal practice that, in English, we call “marriage” has become a touchstone ‘issue’ for the 2004 elections, undoubtedly to affect every level of elected office.
- The issuance of the piece of paper that, in English, we call a “marriage certificate” has become the object of a movement to generate another piece of paper that, in English, we refer to as an “amendment,” that will change another piece of paper that we, in English, call “the Constitution of the United States of America.” The intent of this amendment is to define *exactly* what “marriage” *is*, and by extension, what it most definitely *is not*.
- The cultural buzz focuses on the recent release of Mel Gibson’s movie, *The Passion of the Christ*. This film presents his (Gibson’s) creative interpretation of the Apostles’ descriptions of their recollections of the events leading to the crucifixion of Jesus. Much of the buzz deals not with the film *as a film*, but with Gibson’s motivations, with what some perceive as his anti-Semitic point of view, and with the question of ‘Truth’ in his creative depiction—is it indeed “*as it was*”? (Except for the special effects, of course—I assume no actors actually suffered or were subjected to inhumane treatment during the filming.)
- The French National Assembly has voted to ban clothing and jewelry that constitute “ostensibly” religious symbols from that nation’s public schools.
- The ramifications of the “wardrobe malfunction” that revealed part of Janet Jackson’s right breast during the Super Bowl halftime continue. Some major media conglomerates have taken actions to curtail or terminate “indecent” and “obscene” programming, even prior to governmental direction or market demands.

It seems to me, then, that our susceptibility to all things symbol-related, and our vulnerability to those who manipulate the symbols (and labels, words, morals, attitudes, beliefs, etc.) has not ameliorated significantly in the quarter century since Postman’s editorial. We still, as individuals, groups, and cultures, exhibit behaviors that amount to ‘eating the menu,’ so to speak. We still confuse flags with freedoms, bumper stickers with beliefs, and appearances with ‘realities.’

So what, then, about the relevance of general semantics? Does our discipline bring anything to the table of “intellectual enterprise” for *this* (the 21st) century? You may correctly presume that I, as the new Executive Director of this ‘new’ organization, would answer in the affirmative.

This special issue of *ETC* features a section devoted to the Twelfth International Conference on General Semantics held in Las Vegas, Nevada, last fall. Some of these papers directly address the types of “*symbolic processes*” that undergird some of our current conflicts. For example:

- Bob Eddy’s explications on belief systems *as belief systems*
- Jon Bouknight’s evaluation of conspiracy theories
- Abdul Salaam’s explanation of Islam and comparisons with general semantics
- The panel discussion regarding the different perceptions of Jesus as depicted by contemporary artists, offered by University of Nebraska-Kearney students RaeAnn Burton, Beth Maryott, and Megan O’Byrne
- Jay Black’s analysis of media ethics and reporting on Iraq and Vanessa Biard’s elucidation of a French perspective on the Iraq war

Twenty-seven years ago, Neil Postman wrote about the consequences of the “symbolic stench” (my term) that pollutes what passes for contemporary cultural, political, and social discourse. Alfred Korzybski warned us over seventy years ago that “who rules the symbols rules us.” The ‘issues’ that exist on verbal and symbolic levels will divide us politically in this election year, even as our living existence is threatened on quite visible non-verbal levels in New York, Baghdad, Madrid and other cities inevitably to be named later.

Our challenge as students, practitioners, publishers and advocates of an extensional, scientific orientation is to forthrightly address the threats to sane, time-binding behavior as we can, using the methods and tools at our disposal.

Otherwise, we will continue to be fed menus, and eventually not object to the taste.

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