

WENDELL JOHNSON—AN APPRECIATION

LUTHER F. SIES *

SEVERAL YEARS have now passed since the death of Wendell Johnson. The announcement of his death was made in the appropriate professional and scholarly journals, and suitable tributes were paid. *Time* magazine carried an obituary notice; and this was exactly as it should have been, for this man was known by many outside the specialized disciplines of general semantics and speech pathology. Wendell Johnson certainly was highly respected by most persons interested in general semantics and speech pathology, but it should also be remembered how effectively he communicated with a large number of persons who had never even seen a copy of either *ETC.* or the *Journal of Speech and Hearing Disorders*.

It was my good fortune to have known Johnson during the last fifteen years of his life. The benefits from this acquaintanceship were entirely mine, for I was influenced by his lively and original mind, of course, but also by the warmth of his personality, the solid stature of the man. This brief article is intended as a note of thanks to this man who was admired by so many.

Two specific incidents that stand out vividly in my mind indicate how the general public felt about "Jack" Johnson, the name his close friends used. Each incident concerns a holiday, an airport, and a cab driver—one who took me to Washington's National Airport and another who drove me from what was then New York's Idlewild Airport. Holidays figure into the incidents because they provided me with the occasion to leave school. In those commuting days, I left Iowa City as soon as the State University of Iowa holidays began.

* Assistant Professor of Speech at Hunter College of the City University of New York.

My flights always took me to either Washington or New York and to the cab drivers who then took me the rest of the way on my journey.

Cab drivers and I seem to converse easily, and both the *New Yorker* and the *Washingtonian* inquired about my flight. Where are you going? Where did you come from? As soon as I replied Iowa City both drivers immediately asked, "Do you know Wendell Johnson?" Perhaps my level of sophistication is low. To say I was surprised is to understate the situation. It usually comes as no surprise to me if Washington cab drivers talk about Democrats (favorably), Republicans (unfavorably), Congress (favorably), and the District Commissioners (unfavorably); New York drivers, about John Lindsay (unfavorably), gypsy cabs (unfavorably), or Traffic Commissioner Henry Barnes (excitedly). But—*Wendell Johnson?* I can readily understand associating Hollywood with Frank Sinatra or Miami Beach with Jackie Gleason, but Iowa City with Wendell Johnson was a surprise.

In each instance, after regaining my composure as well as possible I asked the driver how in the world he knew about Wendell Johnson. Both men had read *People in Quandaries*, and each told me personal stories to demonstrate how he had been helped by reading the book. My stature grew immensely in the eyes of these drivers when I told them that not only did I know Johnson, but he was a close acquaintance of mine. In no other situation, before or since, have I ever basked in such reflected glory and secured such instant reverence and esteem.

IMAGINE COLLECTING a group of New York or Washington cab drivers and naming for them some representative psychologists and speech pathologists. Their lack of recognition would be almost unanimous. Yet each of my drivers quickly associated the words *Iowa City* with the name Wendell Johnson—and, even more significantly, with someone who had helped them by writing a book. Johnson's reaction to these incidents is easily predictable. The resonant voice would have said, "Well, well"; a burst of warm, friendly

laughter would have rushed forth; and he would have slapped his knee and said, "Well, what do you know!" In all this there was no egocentricity or posturing. For Wendell Johnson, I believe, these typical reactions could be traced to his recognition of the absurdity of so many situations in life, to his mature genius, and to his great tolerance. Imagine cab drivers free-associating *Wendell Johnson* and *Iowa City*. Johnson would have been amused, for he possessed a quick sense of humor—an immediate recognition of the ridiculous and the absurd—as well as a lively but gentle wit. Caustic humor or sarcasm was never his style. Rather, it was a warmly enthusiastic generosity that he transmitted to his listeners.

As a lecturer, Johnson was one of the most exciting and stimulating speakers I have ever heard. (Several years ago the students at the State University of Iowa were particularly proud and excited about the deserved fame of two of their most distinguished professors—physicist James van Allen and semanticist Wendell Johnson.) Iowa students crowded into the general semantics course. They came from all departments and schools of the university—English, speech, psychology, speech pathology, journalism, physiology, law, etc. Most of the students left gratified that they had been able to attend this course. Johnson's platform manner was excellent. His speech flowed smoothly with a considerable amount of generous good humor sprinkled in among the many stimulating ideas that continually emerged from the man. Usually there were about 120 students listening to his lectures.

My recollection of the first meeting of his general semantics course is good. During the first class session Johnson outlined his philosophy of learning. "Learning," he would say, "is one of the most exciting of all experiences. Learning goes on best under conditions of mutual respect, warmth, and a feeling of working together on a problem." About teaching general semantics he said: "One has to teach by example. General semantics is a course about thinking. There is an acid test for a teacher to try to teach by example—set an example of a kind of thinking—a kind of thinking that

is extremely effective." About his lecturing he said: "I will try to be thinking through various problems. I will tend to stop, revise, and do over when I think I've made a mistake."

AFTER OBSERVING this amazing lecturer at close range, I soon became convinced that many of his ideas originated right there on the spot as he lectured. This was a spontaneous flow, it seemed, of the richest possible intellectual fare. To say his ideas were spontaneous should not detract from their value. The ideas were continually stimulating and significant for the most part. They seemingly grew from the stimulation Johnson himself received from being part of the teaching-learning process. If he stimulated his audiences to think—and this he certainly did—it is equally true to say that his audiences also stimulated him. About his spontaneous flow of ideas Johnson once told me, "I don't always know what I'm going to say until I've said it." He also would make this same statement in the general semantics course.

Johnson's magnificent flow of ideas in a lecture or seminar situation continually amazed me not only by their number but also with their significance and originality. One new idea after another flowed in profusion from this man. With a fine sense of timing and of the dramatic, he structured his lectures, introducing first this theme then that, returning periodically to the central theme, emphasizing recurrent ideas, and building the lecture into a structured unit. Most of this structuring, as suggested previously, seemed to occur right there on the spot as Johnson worked and re-worked his materials. Seldom did his ability to perform these feats spontaneously fail him. One thing it can be emphatically stated never failed him, however, and that was his humor. The gleam in the eye and the warm laugh were always near.

Right now there are miles of recording tape on which the lectures and seminars of Johnson's last years are preserved. The tapes used to be kept in the basement of his home. He used to say that the tapes and the basement itself both were in an awful mess. This valuable set of recordings, I hope, will eventually be edited and published. Perhaps Johnson's

son will give these tapes the time and affectionate care they deserve. Certainly some foundation should be able to provide sufficient funds to ensure the editing and publishing of these materials. There is one thing of which I am sure: It would take an entire cycle of reincarnations for any one person to work through that mass of recordings. Wendell Johnson was as prolific and brilliant a speaker as he was a writer. Few men are equally skillful at talking and writing. Johnson was one of them.

THIS MAN—respected by scholars and cab drivers alike—came a long way from the little Kansas farm boy whose stuttered speech baffled himself as well as his parents. Johnson as a man still displayed at times a few soft repetitions when he spoke, but the ideas flowed so gracefully and entertainingly from his lips that few would associate the word “stuttering” with his speech. Johnson stuttered from his early childhood through his college years. He came to Iowa City, Iowa in 1926 to, as he put it, “have my stuttering cured.” There was then beginning at the State University of Iowa a program of research into the problem of stuttering. As Johnson said, “Until 1925 nothing in a very scientific way was done about stuttering. I had been to stuttering schools and had been guaranteed a cure. These were emotionally shattering experiences. My stuttering still persisted.

“I heard Dean Carl Emil Seashore, Professor Mabie, and Dr. Lee Edward Travis were starting a research program. This sounded so honest to me that I became a white rat for several years. I’d tried all methods of treating my stuttering—tried psychoanalysis—for ten years tried to change my handedness from right to left. I wore a plaster cast on my right arm for part of ten years. I tried my best to become a southpaw and became a sort of ambidextrous threat to my own thumbs. I could play a fair game of ping-pong with my left hand, but this was hardly what I came to Iowa to get.

“I had tried everything to cure my stuttering, made up some things of my own, read everything in the literature. I was up against a stone wall, and I still stuttered as badly as

I did before. One night in 1936 a friend of mine gave me a book he had to review. Next day early in the morning I was rushed to the hospital for an emergency appendectomy. I had two weeks to read this book, whose title was *Science and Sanity*. There also was a subtitle which I couldn't make out at all: *An Introduction to Non-Aristotelian Systems and General Semantics*. To me this was about like reading: An Introduction to Num-Tah-De-Dum and Tum.

"The first two hundred pages were the strangest I've ever read. I put it aside, but something haunted me about the book. I had by this time taken a doctor's degree in clinical psychology and speech pathology and had worked five years in a speech clinic. Most of this time I had concentrated on the problem of stuttering. There was something new in the point of view of this book that changed my views on stuttering. I finished *Science and Sanity*, and I've never been the same since."

Johnson attended the 1938 general semantics seminar conducted by Korzybski. (He later was to call it "Korzybski's twenty-five hour lecture.") From reading *Science and Sanity* and attending the 1938 seminar came the experiences which drastically changed his views of himself as well as his views regarding his own stuttering and even about the disorder of stuttering itself. From these experiences grew Johnson's research into the nature of stuttering and its treatment. His semantogenic or diagnosogenic theory of the origin of stuttering contributed greatly to speech pathology. In general semantics, of course, his many fine writings—such as *People in Quandaries* and *Your Most Enchanted Listener*—are well known. Wendell Johnson and S. I. Hayakawa have probably done more to apply and communicate Korzybski's ideas than have anyone else.

NOT ALL of Johnson's academic colleagues admired him. Some called him a gadfly—a term which I always took to be a considerable compliment even though his critics hardly intended it that way. If Johnson ever reacted to his critics, I was never aware of it. Just as he freely accepted new ideas, he