

On Structuring - A Way of Making 'Good' Sense

By Milton Dawes



Essay 1

We often seek verbal explanations for what could sometimes be more easily understood through imagination, visualization, experimentation, and so on. The importance we give to words are sometimes obstacles to insights and deeper understandings into situations. Structure, order and relations are considered as “undefined terms” in general semantics. They are defined in terms of each other. We are likely to gain more insight into their significance and value by not only 'thinking' about them in an elementalistic (ignoring interrelationships) way, but also by experience -- 'doing' -- converting them from nouns to verbs (structuring, ordering, relating, mapping).

Here is a suggestion:

- Stand beside a tree.
- See, feel what we call *leaves, branches, bark, trunk, roots*.
- Notice that the leaves are "attached to" - supported by, connected to, or any related term you want to use here - the branches.
- Notice that some branches are "attached" to other branches.
- Notice that some branches are "attached" to the trunk.
- Notice that the trunk comes up from the roots; the roots support the rest; the rest supports the roots; and earth and air support them all.
- Notice that the tree as seen is not divided up as these sentences, but is one object-process. Our wordy mapping of the tree is different from our visual or tactile mapping of the tree.
- Notice the positions of leaves, branches, trunk, and roots.
- Notice that the root is usually in the ground, and that the leaves on the tree are not.

This spatial ordering and relating represent one aspect of our mapping of the tree. We could map our experience related to the tree, not spatially, but bio-physically. We could explore in terms of chemical properties, water, soil conditions, temperature, climate, and so on. Similarly, we map situations, activities, field of activities, etc, in many different ways. And different fields of activities are the consequences of different ways of mapping, ordering, making sense. We can think of our beliefs, plans, decisions, concerns, expectations, hopes, fears, theories, opinions, religions, etc., as maps...particular ways we have made sense of things. We are not usually aware of the process -- it happens automatically. But we can become more self-conscious of our mapping, and develop better mapping skills, leading to what I label “structuring”. At this more

advanced level of mapping, we self-consciously search out the interrelated and interactive constituents of a situation (the variables).

The way we (humans) map-order our experiences is closely related to what we do, and how we do what we do. It determines our (human) attitudes, feelings, behavior, and the kind of institutions, organizations, and societies we create. Unfortunately, when things do not work well whether in our daily living, in societies, or international relationships, we forget to review our original mapping, and engage in relatively ineffective and sometimes more problem creating tinkering. Changing maps is usually mapped as “weak”, “can’t make up mind”, “unreliable” etc. So we usually “hold the course”.

General Semantics principle-tools such as *non-identity*, *non-allness*, *non-elementalism*, *multi-dimensional order*, *multi-dimensional structure*, *multi-meaning*, *structuring*, *consciousness of abstracting*, *consciousness of projecting*, etc., can be considered as “meta-mapping” -- making sense of how we make sense, so we can make better sense. The principles constitute ways of self-consciously ordering, structuring, mapping our experiences (no matter what field of activity) that result in more clarity, less confusion, absolutism, dogmatic 'thinking', deeper, broader, and more inclusive levels of understanding toward higher levels of sanity in our human affairs. (BTW. Our experiences (what we see, hear, smell, feel, etc.), are already ‘maps’ produced by our nervous systems from light waves, sound waves, etc., information. So when we map at cognitive levels, we are engaged at a second level of mapping.)

The term "structure" can be used both as a noun and as a verb. Here is a working definition of the term based on Korzybski's general semantics principles. “Structuring” as a verb (transitive). **A self-conscious act involving imaginative, verbal, graphic, manipulative, etc., ordering (arranging, visualizing), of a thing-situation-process into interrelated and interactive components – with an awareness that a structuring-process exists as only one of indefinitely many other possible structurings. And that a structuring is not, and cannot be the same as (non-identity) whatever the object of one’s attention being structured.”**

Making sense constitutes a process involving information, memories, associations, psychological fractals (similes, this is like that), etc. (Let’s call the sense we make “maps”.) We make sense naturally. We have to make some sense of ourselves-in-our-environments to survive. We never have all information (non-allness principle). The sense we make at any time is closely related to the information we have (past and present). Each one of us makes sense based on the ways we have made sense... a bind. We create political, social, economic, legal, and other structures based on earlier information... another bind -- For situations change, while we hang on to earlier un-reviewed out of date maps; and we (individuals and societies) behave (travel through life space) guided by our maps (rules, regulations, policies, expectations, etc.) From this it makes good sense to me for us to be concerned with the particular way we make sense.

Different individuals, groups, societies, cultures, etc., with different histories, experience, information, skills, values, language, training, etc., will create different ‘maps’ -- beliefs, opinions, values, fears, hopes, judgments, knowledge, theories, expectations, religions, plans, and so on. These unavoidable differences can be a source of much conflict and sometimes violence. It makes sense to remain open to other ideas, other opinions, and other points of

viewing. This way, more information comes our way. And even when false, we still get information regarding the diversity of human behavior...an opportunity -- not often appreciated - - to update our maps.

Two main differences between our everyday automatic sense-making- mapping, and structuring as 'defined' above involve *awareness that we are constructing, and recognizing that "the map (our map) is not the territory mapped"; and our "words are not whatever we use them to 'talk' about."* (*non-identity principle*). In our usual way of observing, thinking-feeling about, judging, theorizing, making sense, etc., we unfortunately are unaware that we leave out one of the most important variables, "ourselves". In our concern to be "objective", we identify unknowingly, what we believe, to be the same -- no different from what is believed about -- a source of much conflict.

The term "structure" as noun, can be a very useful one as it can be applied both to the immeasurably small, and to the unimaginably humongous. Our limited nervous systems cannot easily deal with many of the bigger thing-processes, and invisible tinier ones. We usually order...grossly map our experiences of happenings using adjectives, adverbs, final, and asymmetrical terms such as *before, after, past, present, future, 'cause, 'effect, right, left, above, below, in front of, behind, bigger, smaller, lighter, heavier, shorter, longer, older, younger, faster, slower, beginning, end, desirable, undesirable, ugly, beautiful, senseless, intelligent, stupid, good, bad, failure, success, and so on*. We don't usually think-micro-map in terms of "Degrees of success"; or ask "Good for whom, what, when, where"; or ask "Intelligent in what area?" and so on.

One of the usefulness of having the notion of structure as a tool for improving our life skills is this: We can become better and more creative problem-solvers by reviewing the way we structure-map a situation. We might discover hidden relationships that contribute to a problem. By noticing the factors we have included, we might recognize others we have not. Eventually we could come to realize that we make better judgments, smarter plans, more appropriate decisions, and so on, by being more attentive and appreciative of the importance of having accurate and up to date information. With structuring and thinking in terms of "significant variables", we look for the roots of a problem and avoid ineffective band-aiding. An awareness of our structurings might help us move back and forth from "macro-mapping" (more inclusive) to "micro-mapping"(more differentiating), a situation. This might help us to recognize the immensity, the structural integrity, the bigger set of which the situation exists as a tiny subset, and vice versa.

In terms of "stress management", having structuring as a tool can remind us to look at our own structure-processes. So I have this problem to resolve. Do I have the required time-space at my disposal? Will it take money? How much? Are there equipment, tools, etc, needed? How will I get these? What else am I involved in-with? Do I have the energy 'physical' and 'psycho-logical' to see this through?'. Who are the individuals I can depend on for support? Who are the individuals involved? How are they related? Am I on my own in this? How is it my problem? And so on. We can minimize our stress, we can improve our problem-solving and decision making skills; we can become better managers of our 'times' and better at avoiding and dealing with conflicts; we can improve the ways we treat one another by training ourselves to being more

conscious of the ways we structure our experiences, situations we find ourselves in, our lives, and our relationships.

Essay 2

General semantics provides us with psychological tools, general principles, creative ways we can apply, to self-consciously structure our experiences, improve our selves, and create more satisfying relationships. Of course like any other tool the effectiveness of general semantics tools depends on their being used, and the knowledge and skills of the user.

Life and living involves relationships. In seeking to resolve problems in our personal and professional relationships, we can improve our skills by looking for relationships involved: relationships in the situation; relationships between ourselves and/in the situation; relationship between the situation and other situations. A non-elementalistic (more inclusive) orientation involves 'thinking' and behaving in terms of order- (positional, temporal, etc), relationships-structure.

Our relating with others, with ourselves, with the world, involves some set of beliefs, some metaphysics, some guidelines etc., whether we are aware of this or not. A great deal of our problems, misunderstanding, conflicts, violence, involving our personal, social, economic, environmental, international, and other human relationships, depend on the way we map-evaluate our experiences, observations, etc. We are not usually aware that the way we 'map' our experiences, structures us; and to some degree determine our beliefs, attitudes, the way we relate with others, the way we understand thing-processes-situations, the way we talk, the way we act, and so on.

We have different experiences, and we map our experiences differently. We cannot avoid doing this. We often forget. And in forgetting that we each create different 'maps', we often find ourselves defending our individual 'maps' and 'mapping' as "right" -- dismissing other 'maps' as false and misguided. We could do better by asking ourselves "How can I use the 'mapping' of others to improve and expand my mapping and structuring? Our science, beliefs, religious practices, education, training, experiences, culturally expected way of thinking-behaving ('cewt'), etc., constitute ways we make sense -- usually without awareness that we do this. General Semantics, based on the methods of science and mathematics, as excellent sense-making behavior, provides us with principles we can apply, to self-consciously structure our experiences, to get better results no matter our field of activity or involvement.

Structures structure structures. We often use the term "structure" as a noun rather than as a verb. When we become more aware that we constitute structures that structure; and more self-conscious of our mapping schemes, whatever they happen to be, we provide ourselves with opportunities to improve ourselves, our ways of doing and going about things. We improve our relationships. We improve by correcting. We correct through awareness of structural differences between where-how we see ourselves, and where-how we would like to 'being'. But more than that: with conscious awareness of our structuring, we are also able to re-vise and up-date our structuring schemes, when we find that they no longer benefit us.

I am not saying this is easy. The next time you-me find ourselves reacting to or thinking-feeling strongly, annoyed, dissatisfied, impatient with someone or some situation, something we read or heard, and so on, we might benefit by remembering to self-reflexively ask ourselves "How am I structuring this situation?" And applying non-allness, and non-identity principles, we can also ask ourselves "Is this the only way to structure this?" And being conscious of abstracting, we might remind ourselves that the result of our structuring -- our opinions, beliefs, knowledge, expectations, fears, etc., are functions of our structuring schemes. We might do well for ourselves in our relationships to remember: Whatever we map as going on, much, much more is going on than the ways we are structuring the situation or can ever structure a situation. We could take a heuristic approach to living. Make tentative maps. It's a very big Universe.