

AN INTERVIEW WITH ALLEN FLAGG

MARTIN H. LEVINSON

ALLEN FLAGG, the president of the New York Society for General Semantics, is 83 years young. He grew up in Ord, Nebraska and went to college at NYU where he majored in math and minored in physics and English. After World War II, Allen worked as an insurance casualty underwriter for many years. He lives in New York City in an apartment overflowing with books in every room. I interviewed him there on February 6, 2006.

Levinson: How did you first get involved with GS?

Flagg: I attended a lecture at the New York Academy of Sciences in 1952 given by Horace Kallen, an NYU philosophy professor who was talking about a book that he had written. At that lecture a form was passed around from the New York Society for General Semantics, which had an office in the Academy of Sciences building, requesting that people put their names and addresses on a mailing list. I put my name on the list.

Levinson: What happened next?

Flagg: I attended NYSGS meetings. In the spring of 1959 I became Harry Maynard's teaching assistant for an "Introductory to General Semantics" course that he taught at Great Neck High School. Harry was an executive with *Life International Magazine* and when he was out of town I took over the teaching duties. In the fall, Harry taught an intermediate GS course at Great Neck High and I taught the intro course. A student taking my course was also attending Queens College, and he asked the college administration if they would add general semantics to their program. They agreed to do that so I also taught GS there. I have also taught general semantics classes for IBM, the New School, and Fairfield University. And, in the 1970s, I served as Executive Director of the New York Society for General Semantics.



Allen Flagg

Levinson: Have you attended IGS seminars?

Flagg: I have gone to perhaps 6 or 8 seminars. My interest in IGS seminars started in 1954, when Charlotte Read invited me to participate as a working scholar. I recall that Buckminster Fuller came to one the seminars I attended. Some prominent seminar presenters I remember include Francis Chisolm, who took Korzybski's place, Samuel Bois, Marjorie Swanson, and Harry Holtzman. I have also attended a great many Alfred Korzybski Memorial Lectures. I went to all of them till about 1975, when work took me to California. I have helped organize some recent AKMLs.

Levinson: Have you studied *Science and Sanity*?

Flagg: During the 1950s and 1960s, I participated in a NYSGS *Science and Sanity* discussion group. Kendig and Charlotte Read, along with a dozen other experts, led presentations involving different parts of *Science and Sanity*. I found

it a very stimulating and enlightening way to reflect on Korzybski's seminal work.

Levinson: Have you written about GS?

Flagg: I have written several articles for the *General Semantics Bulletin* and two that have been published in books — one on dream education and general semantics that appeared in *Understanding Sanity and Human Affairs* and one on GS group participation exercises.

Levinson: What are some of your other interests besides GS?

Flagg: I am very interested in working with dreams.

Levinson: How did that interest evolve?

Flagg: I had a strong interest in dream analysis for a long time and that enthusiasm became intensified when I met Clara Stewart, who later became my wife in 1966 (Pearl Eppy, a board member of the New York Society for General Semantics, introduced us). Clara knew quite a bit about dream-work. She followed dream expert Kilton Stewart's system of using dream symbols to improve the work, and I incorporated her knowledge into my dream studies. I find working with dreams is a useful complement to GS — GS emphasizes intellectual and cognitive factors while dreams are useful for understanding unconscious, intuitive levels. Both areas are concerned with knowledge and consciousness and how we know what we know.

Levinson: Are you a member of any dream organizations?

Flagg: I am the vice president of Friends of the Institute of Noetic Science (FIONS). That organization was founded by Edgar Mitchell, the sixth man to walk on the moon. When Mitchell was coming back from the moon he saw the earth, in black space, as a glowing green, blue, and white sphere and this produced in him a feeling of oneness with humanity. When he arrived on terra firma he collected friends of his and organized FIONS. Interestingly, Buckminster Fuller, who gave an AKML lecture, was famous for talking about "spaceship earth."

Levinson: What are some of your other interests?

Flagg: I like to run. I am a “benefactor member” of the New York Road Runners Club and I have many trophies from races that I have won. I currently do three and four-mile runs in Central Park. I also attend Marine Corps reunions. I served active duty with the Marines during World War II.

Levinson: How has GS changed over the years that you have been involved with it?

Flagg: Many people and organizations have taken pieces and chunks of GS and developed useful offshoots from it. For example, Neil Postman took aspects of general semantics to develop the discipline of media ecology; the field of Neuro-Linguistic Programming took some of the neuro-semantic aspects of GS; and Albert Ellis has emphasized various elements of GS in his psychotherapy.

Levinson: What do you see as the future for GS?

Flagg: We need to get more people involved with GS. At the New York Society for General Semantics we offer meetings focused on verbal and nonverbal communication. We consider ourselves as a matrix for human communication that includes the sciences, humanities, art, dance, architecture, writing, literature, and drama. When people come to our meetings we offer them GS literature and encourage them to subscribe to *ETC* and learn more about general semantics. The idea is to show that GS is a multi-faceted discipline that expands one’s awareness of oneself and the world.