

Wendell Johnson: The Addiction to Wonder

DOROTHY MOELLER

With fondness, and long after he had become a national figure and one of the most illustrious members of the University of Iowa faculty, Dr. Wendell Johnson liked to acknowledge the unusual debt he felt he owed to four people who in his early years had wittingly and unwittingly given direction to the course of his life. These four were his first-grade teacher back in Roxbury, Kansas, where he was born and spent the first eighteen of his fifty-nine years; old Dr. Hedinger of nearby Canton, who served the Roxbury community; Dr. Florence Teager, an English teacher at McPherson (Kansas) College; and Dr. George Stoddard, of the Department of Psychology at the University of Iowa, who later held administrative positions at Iowa and then served as President of the University of Illinois and Chancellor in the university system of the state of New York.

In the case of the first-grade teacher, Dr. Johnson recalled that one day, before he was of school age, he had gone to her classroom with older brothers and sisters and had blithely recited a poem. This would not have been a matter of interest except that when he returned as a first grader he found that she seemed bothered sometimes when he talked; his words did get in a jumble now and then, he knew, but it was just because he had so much to say. She seemed not to realize that she was watching what he later called "the incredible effort of a young child to become a member of the human race by learning to respond to and with symbols in speech." She didn't understand. But she was kind and she was concerned. So she visited his parents and told them he was stuttering. His parents, as parents do, responded to that label. Their reactions became interactions, and he soon did indeed begin to stutter.

It was about a year later, as he recalled, that his father took him to see Dr. Hedinger, "a noble soul who probably knew as much about stuttering as anyone did in those days when people knew hardly any-

thing. He patted me on the head, said I was smart as a whip, and gave me a bottle of sugar pills for my sticky tongue. You think those sugar pills didn't help my speech? You are mistaken. They were a great lesson to me. . . . They came to be a symbol of strongly motivated kindness without understanding, a symbol of kindness and ignorance. Ever since then I have done everything I could to destroy them. We have such a desperate need for understanding."

He emphasized that over and over again in his teaching. He would tell his counseling students that he felt it was "wasted effort to work on kindness. People are kind. They have enormous hearts. This is what makes them do such foolish things when they don't understand. They have such motivations! And powerful, powerful motivations in the absence of knowledge and understanding make for chaos and harm." This he had learned first hand, and painfully.

Dr. Teager came into his life during his two years at McPherson College. Both kind and understanding, she encouraged him every way she knew. When she heard of the speech research program being undertaken at the University of Iowa (she had earned a B.A. at Iowa in 1917, later came back for her M.A. and Ph.D. in English), she told him about it. "He seemed to come alive at the idea," she wrote many years later when information was being gathered for a history of the speech pathology project. "He was happy and relaxed when he stopped in my home on his way to Iowa."

But she had done more than tell him about Iowa and urge him to go. She had written Dr. Stoddard about this bright young fellow with the amazingly serious speech problem who was going to have to have a job if he was to make it through the University. Dr. Stoddard responded. He was impressed by the lad as a student and managed to find him a small stipend as a research assistant. Thus began a relationship between the professor and the young stutterer from Kansas, a relationship that deepened with the years and that eventually led Dr. Johnson to look upon Dr. Stoddard as his "academic godfather."

The complex of his several careers was beginning to take shape, even though vaguely, Dr. Johnson used to say in telling of those years. Above all, he was learning a lot from being a stutterer. He was learning what everybody knows but nobody notices, and that is that speech makes a difference. In his life, the lack of fluent speech made a difference in his day, all day, every day. He began to write down those differences, list them, wonder about them. He was learning about problems too, about how it felt to be cooped up inside of one. And he seems never to have forgotten. In his search for an understanding of his own problem, then of problems related to other speech handi-

caps, and eventually of problems that most people seem to have whether they are fluent or not, he demonstrated a deep sense of responsibility for sharing as well as seeking understandings. He wanted people to know, to become uncommonly aware of the fact, that they use language and that language uses them. "We create our world linguistically. How else?"

During his boyhood in Roxbury, though he was almost literally speechless, he was anything but a hermit. He went to grade school, to high school, played basketball and baseball, and was captain of both teams. He was president of his senior class, valedictorian too. And in those years he had the spirit to survive a searing experience at a Milwaukee "Stuttering School" that promised, but did not deliver, a stuttering "cure."

He went to McPherson College for two years. Then, as a lad of twenty, he enrolled as a junior English major at the University of Iowa. Iowa City was his home the rest of his life. He died there August 29, 1965, writing.

In Iowa City he matured as a scholar, a genial and gentle man, a leader on the national scene, a speech pathologist often called the world's foremost authority on stuttering; he became an outstanding teacher, a prolific writer, a lecturer much in demand, a counselor, and a consultant to government and industry. On the way he was a contributing pioneer, at the University and nationally, in three disciplines: the first was speech pathology and audiology, which in a sense was born on the Iowa campus but which when he arrived was hardly an entity, only a small laboratory program that resided in the Department of Psychology but hadn't even a name; the second was clinical psychology, which also was still formless and was a part of psychology, then known as the new psychology, for it had only recently moved out of armchair philosophy and was itself hardly established in the academic world; and the third was general semantics, the "science of man" that Count Alfred Korzybski formulated after World War I and that began to be known in the late twenties and early thirties.

In this Iowa City experience, Dr. Johnson quite refused the role of celebrity. He remained a warm and witty human being who would not give up his shapeless brown hat any more than he would give up his friends on East Court Street, and Brown Street, and Melrose Court, and over in East Hall, and the hospitals, and around the town—and in fine offices in far places.

When he was speaker of the day for the University's August commencement in 1961, he took his listeners back to the Iowa beginnings. "Since I stood here thirty years ago to receive my own doctoral de-

gree," he said, "I have enjoyed a wonderful privilege. Along with millions of people throughout the world, I shall always be grateful to the University of Iowa for pioneering the scientific study of stuttering and other speech disorders. I came to Iowa as a stuttering Kansas farm boy as soon as my family heard of the research program that was being started here, and I arrived in 1926 just in time to serve as a subject in the first experiments to be undertaken in the new speech pathology laboratory.

"That turned out to be the beginning of a long apprenticeship as a 'professional white rat,' which led to my becoming a specialist in my own distress—and for me a happier choice of life work I cannot imagine. I find it hard to believe that there could be anything more fascinating than the problem called stuttering. Caught up in it are practically all of the elements of life, swirled into an intriguing snarl as challenging as a tangled fishline."

To begin untangling that snarl, as soon as he was in Iowa City he made himself available at the speech pathology laboratory until it was said that there wasn't an experiment that he wasn't in, in one way or another. But even then, the idea of becoming professionally involved with speech problems was not in his mind. He had had two purposes in coming to Iowa. One was to regain speech. The other was to get a degree in English so that he could be a writer, maybe a poet; however, it must be said that, much as he enjoyed writing, a career in writing was not his first choice. What he really wanted to do was to play baseball, in the big time. But he had crippled his hand in a printing press accident on his summer job in McPherson the year before he came to Iowa, and so he had reluctantly given up his baseball dream and had settled on writing. He saw that writing had at least one charm that baseball had: it was something he could do whether he could speak or not. He most certainly could not speak, and he had already written a good deal, more than most young people, as if words had been piling up within him and he had to make use of them if he could.

He had written little stories and poems and plays, for fun; he wrote a short novel; he collected ideas for pieces for children—"Strangeria," for example: "if you're going to know a stranger you have to know him fast or he isn't"; and he tried his hand at limericks:

The dachshund though long for a hound
And a poor conductor of sound
Can manage to hear
The approach of his rear
By keeping his ear to the ground.

At McPherson he had been on the newspaper staff and was feature editor for the annual. So when he came to Iowa he presented himself not only at the speech pathology laboratory but also at the office of the *Iowa Literary Magazine*, a student publication. He wrote for it, and the next year he became its editor, meanwhile receiving his B.A. degree in English, in 1928, with honors.

Early that first year at Iowa, in Edwin Ford Piper's poetry class, he met Edna Bockwoldt, a student who liked to make rhymes and even limericks and who shared his enthusiasm for finding the bright particular word. He wrote her some nonsense verses, and she replied in kind. Then they began criticizing each other's more serious writing. They found they enjoyed being together, that they seemed to mesh in their good-humored look on life. One thing led to another, and on the day he received his M.A. degree a year later, a year she had spent in teaching, they were married. They were a working combination from the start, each supporting the other; she saw to it that home was home not only for him and for their family, which came to include son Nick and daughter Katy, but also for assorted relatives and students and colleagues and old friends of whom there always seemed to be many dropping in. He came to her with his writing and with his ideas for talks; he called her his "most perceptive and resilient critic,"-his "favorite listener."

By the time they were married, he had changed the direction in which he had thought he would be going and was now on his way to becoming a speech pathologist—because he needed one—he liked to put it that way, and often did. His M.A., in 1929, was in psychology; his Ph.D., in 1931, was in psychology and physiology. He then joined the University of Iowa faculty to begin a lifelong relationship that amounted to nothing less than an extravagant exchange. The University gave him the fabled place-to-stand. He gave the University his professional labors with their accrual of benefit and honor.

As time passed, he and his colleagues agonized through the slow process of developing knowledges, in the speech pathology laboratory and in the speech clinic that evolved there; these knowledges they had to develop to have subject matter to teach in the classroom. They had to build the bridge before they could cross the river.

At that time the whole idea of studying human behavior scientifically was both new and suspect. Even so, there were two generally accepted theories about the behavior called stuttering. One was that it was caused by a physical defect; the other that it came from an emotional disorder. Dr. Johnson and his colleagues, once they had learned techniques and procedure, eagerly joined the Iowa effort to collect

data for the revolutionary act of testing those theories. Finally, "the data piled high enough to topple the assumptions." Neither of the old theories could be supported by the evidence they were able to collect. That cleared the way for new theories and new therapies that in their turn could be tested, then revised or discarded or accepted as seemed appropriate in view of newer evidence, and so, on and on.

It was in this way that Iowa contributed notably to a great turnaround, from "folk" thinking to scientific inquiry, and it was to that development that Dr. Johnson looked back in his commencement address that August day in 1961. The new formulations about stuttering, after a handedness theory and a dominance theory and certain others had been advanced and tested and rejected, came to center on the so-called psychosocial aspects of the problem, on the interaction of the stutterer and his listeners, whom Dr. Johnson began to call "members of the problem," since each contributed something to the problem, an evaluation or a labeling perhaps, a judgment or an attitude. In that frame of reference, he suggested, "there are no stuttering children. There are stuttering interactions among persons and a child can get caught in them. . . . For all practical purposes it takes two people to stutter; a stutterer has four legs; two of them belong to the listener, usually an adult, often a parent."

Dr. Johnson was almost ten years past his Ph.D. degree, and still stuttering, when his convalescence from an emergency appendectomy gave him time to slog his way through Korzybski's heavy prose in *Science and Sanity*. That was his introduction to general semantics. "And I have never been the same since," he used to tell his students, explaining that from that time on his was a general semantics orientation in all he did. Two Korzybski ideas struck him like bolts. One was that the way a person uses symbols seems to have a great deal to do with the way he manages his life and living. The other was that scientific method can be generalized to common problems, anywhere, any time, by anyone willing to explore three questions: what do you mean? how do you know? what then? (The first question was for clarity, the second for validity, the third for disciplined generalization; all were the Johnson version of Korzybski.) It was in the linking and ramifications of the two basic ideas that Dr. Johnson saw something "a little bit new" that he hoped he could use in coping with his stuttering. What the subtleties of change might have been would be difficult to say; but it can be reported that he worked his way back to speech and that he continued to speak with relative fluency from about 1940 through the rest of his life.

In 1939 he began teaching a course in general semantics, one of the first in the world, a name course on the Iowa campus, one that drew students from all parts of the University. It was a course that, in fact, attracted students to the University. There was no text, so Dr. Johnson wrote one. He called it *People in Quandaries*. It was published in 1946 and is still in print, still in hardcover only. Its sales have passed the 84,000 mark.

He felt that the general semantics orientation was for people who have a "fondness for frontier life, who want to do something better, who want to learn, who want to change, who come running. . . . It is for those who have the courage to explore the significant and exciting possibilities of self-modification, the practical possibilities of developing a considerably more sane society and the ability to enjoy it. . . . It is for those who dare to wonder. . . ."

In 1945, Dr. Johnson was elected president of the International Society of General Semantics; in 1950, president of the American Speech and Hearing Association; in both, he was a board member, chairman of working committees, and editor. At the University in 1943 he became director of the Iowa Speech Clinic, which by then was formally recognized among University services; in 1947 he was named chief administrative officer of the Iowa Program in Speech Pathology, and, in 1951, chairman of the Council on Speech Pathology and Audiology—posts he resigned after a heart attack in 1955. (The Department of Speech Pathology and Audiology was organized the next year, with James F. Curtis as its head.) Dr. Johnson recovered from his illness and returned to the campus for another decade, except for some months in Washington, where he contacted government agencies on behalf of the University and the discipline in general, to explain the purposes and needs of speech pathology and audiology in terms of government support for research and training programs.

In spite of his illness, the years from about 1945 through the fifties were a time of flowering. Publication of *People in Quandaries*, election to national offices, and appointment to administrative posts at the University were part of this. But there was more. Iowa City was called the stuttering capital of the world. Dr. Johnson published two books (see list at end of article) on Iowa research in stuttering, one devoted to a variety of subjects, the other to the so-called *Onset Studies* in which the stuttering problem was explored in terms of its beginnings. And a third book, a college text on speech problems, written by Iowa faculty members including Dr. Johnson, and edited by him, came out in its first edition in 1948, its second in 1956. Also in 1956

Dr. Johnson published *Your Most Enchanted Listener*, which he sometimes referred to as the one book in which he worked as hard as he could on the poetry of language.

In 1956 he was a founder of the American Speech Foundation (now the American Speech and Hearing Foundation), a unit that operates under the aegis of the American Speech and Hearing Association. It is Iowa City's child in many ways, for it grew from the Demosthenes Club, which Dr. Johnson had started some years before to bring stutterers together and help them with their speech. A major activity was to have them go out into the community to learn to talk by talking, until the whole town became a laboratory and was perhaps more aware of stuttering, and more sophisticated about it, than any other place on earth.

Honors had come to Dr. Johnson many times and at many places along the way to that effulgent decade and a half. In student days there had been scholarships and fellowships, election to Phi Beta Kappa and Sigma Xi; later there were awards from professional groups in recognition of his contributions. Perhaps none was more cherished than the "Honors of the Association Award" which he received from the American Speech and Hearing Association in 1946. It was, and continues to be, the highest recognition of that body. Established in 1945, it was in that year presented to Carl E. Seashore, head of the Department of Psychology, dean of the University's Graduate College, and the moving genius behind the speech pathology project at Iowa. In 1947, the award was presented to Lee Edward Travis, the first director of the Iowa speech pathology laboratory and of the program that grew out of it. And thus on the national scene was the Iowa effort noted, as it has been many times since then, for Iowa names have continued prominent on that Honors Award list.

In the 1950s Dr. Johnson came to know the people of the Hill Family Foundation, who began to support his work, on a modest scale at first, in 1952. The support continued and grew, until finally it took care of his total salary, making it possible for him to be freed from many routine duties so that he had more time for writing and research; in 1963 he became the Louis W. and Maud Hill Research Professor, a title he carried "in humbleness and joy."

And it was in the fifties, also, that the University Library began acquiring his manuscripts, notes, typescripts, correspondence, reprints, tapes, transcripts, and other materials as they accumulated. They bulk large as a collection because his writing continued all through his years at Iowa and he wrote at a terrific pace. On the basis of the whole span of his professional career, his output was an average of an article in a

scholarly journal every three or four months; a book, as sole author or as editor and contributing author, about every three years; a book review, which for him usually meant an essay, about every three or four months; and uncounted manuscripts or near-manuscripts which were the careful notes he made for his public and classroom lectures. (During the depression, when salaries were very low, he even wrote pot-boilers, for money, under the pen names of Dr. Robert Clark and Dr. George Hall, selling these to the *Des Moines Register* syndicate, which used them in the *Register* full-page, profusely illustrated with photos of people in the news, and sold them to many papers across the country.)

People in his office area in East Hall were accustomed to seeing him writing on the run, almost; writing between classes, writing while he was waiting for a taxi, taking galley proofs with him to read on the plane. A student one day asked him why he worked so hard. His answer was simply, "I enjoy what I do so I do a lot of it."

One writing project that extended from the late forties to the very hour of his death grew out of his aim to rewrite the definition of "stuttering" in every dictionary and encyclopedia he could find so that it reflected the theory of evaluation and interaction. He had managed to do this in many, and indeed he was literally in the act of writing for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* when he died. (The article, on Speech Disorders, appeared in the 1966 edition, though not as he had planned; editors shortened it below the length they had stated, and in the process did violence to his prose.)

His writing style—direct and graceful and deceptively simple—reflected his "pet prejudice" against what he called academic language. This he described as "the unnecessarily technical polysyllabic vocabulary that is designed by people who have no interest in communication. It is as if they want to say, 'See, you don't understand.' It is a distressing form of magic." Since he placed a high value on communication, he placed a like value on writers who communicate, and he tried to be one of them, content with the labor of quite endless revision that that goal imposed.

He sprinkled his prose with gems. He wrote of answers "hacked out of the solid rock of experience," of the "verbal artist who paints in black and white," of "stretching the word 'thinking' to cover, however skimpily, something or other that goes on inside our skulls 24 hours a day," of the "raisin of fact in the loaf of legend," of the "eagle's eye view from the mountain top." (He used to tell his students that everyone needs a mountain top where he can go off and ponder. "If you don't have one you better find one.")

“Innovative” was an adjective often used to describe his creative venturing. *Time* magazine, for example, singled him out, along with James Van Allen, Mauricio Lasansky, and Paul Engle, when it called The University of Iowa “home of the most adventurous minds in the arts and sciences.” And when the University’s new building for the Iowa Speech Clinic and the Department of Speech Pathology and Audiology was dedicated in 1968 as the Wendell Johnson Speech and Hearing Center, the point was made that that naming was to “memorialize his ideas. . . .” As the speaker explained, “He helped us to revise our perspectives and conceptions. He encouraged us and inspired us.” The speaker was D. C. Spriestersbach, a former student, later a colleague, then Dean of the Graduate College, a man who called Dr. Johnson his mentor and friend and who credited Dr. Johnson with the original idea that led Spriestersbach into his own career in the area of psychosocial aspects of the cleft-lip and cleft-palate problem.

In the sixties, Dr. Johnson was pioneering all over again. He began to see speech pathology, clinical psychology, and general semantics merging in an area that he thought might be called communicology because it would be concerned with common human problems in terms of the communication process, communication being seen as “the warp and woof of human relationships” and communicative behavior as “the most distinctively human of all our bodily functions,” therefore the kind of behavior “most essential to personal and social adjustment.” He held that “symbolization is to the human behavioral sciences and communication is to the social sciences what energy-matter is to the physical sciences.”

His final research, in progress at the time of his death, was an evaluation of his self-reflexive method of clinical counseling, a method in harmony with the idea of communicology. Also in harmony with it were the subjects he chose for the Knapp lectures he was to have given at the University of Wisconsin in 1966. For that he jotted notes on his calendar, indicating that he was going to “talk about talking, use language about language.” He was going to speak about symbolic processes: “in our lives (or how human can you get?), in the laboratory (or how scientific can you get?), in the clinic (or how helpable can you get?), in the home (or how live-with-able can you get?).”

He had concluded, from his own data and from the findings of other investigators as he understood them, that “language fashions and limits our thinking far more than our thinking determines our use of language—so far, that is, as ‘thinking’ and ‘use of language’ refer to different processes. . . . Speaking with no brakes on my tongue I find

myself saying that an understanding of the process of symbolization may prove to be the most important approach to the understanding of the human being that anybody has ever tried to use. But we haven't learned to use it very well yet. . . ."

This was another innovative idea, and it pleased him that some people were disturbed, some stimulated, by it. He was never happier than when he could "put a sandbur" under somebody's "saddle," or "start an itch inside a skull" where it couldn't be scratched, or send his listener off wondering. This became more or less his hallmark. He seemed a born explorer, at war with the taken-for-granted, challenging, cajoling, inviting others to join him in "risking the consequences of that fateful human adventuresomeness we glibly call thinking."

This was the way he put that invitation to students in his seminar in symbolic processes in June, 1963, a little more than a year before failing health forced him to give up teaching:

"I assume you are here to discover yourself a little more fully, to find out what you would say if you were to try a little harder than you might otherwise say what you mean, to get over the embarrassment of learning, to gain what someone has called the courage of your stupidity, to learn to live publicly with your doubts and feelings of limitation.

"I think it would be very fine if in your encounter with education somewhere—and it would be very fine if it could happen in this seminar—you could manage to experience sort of a movement away from enslavement by the obligation to feel certain, if you could learn to acknowledge that this something you cling to that you always thought you needed is really a sort of anchorage in your past that has kept you from growing. So you will cut the anchorage and take off on the adventure of self-realization. I'd like to think that you would get addicted to wonder."

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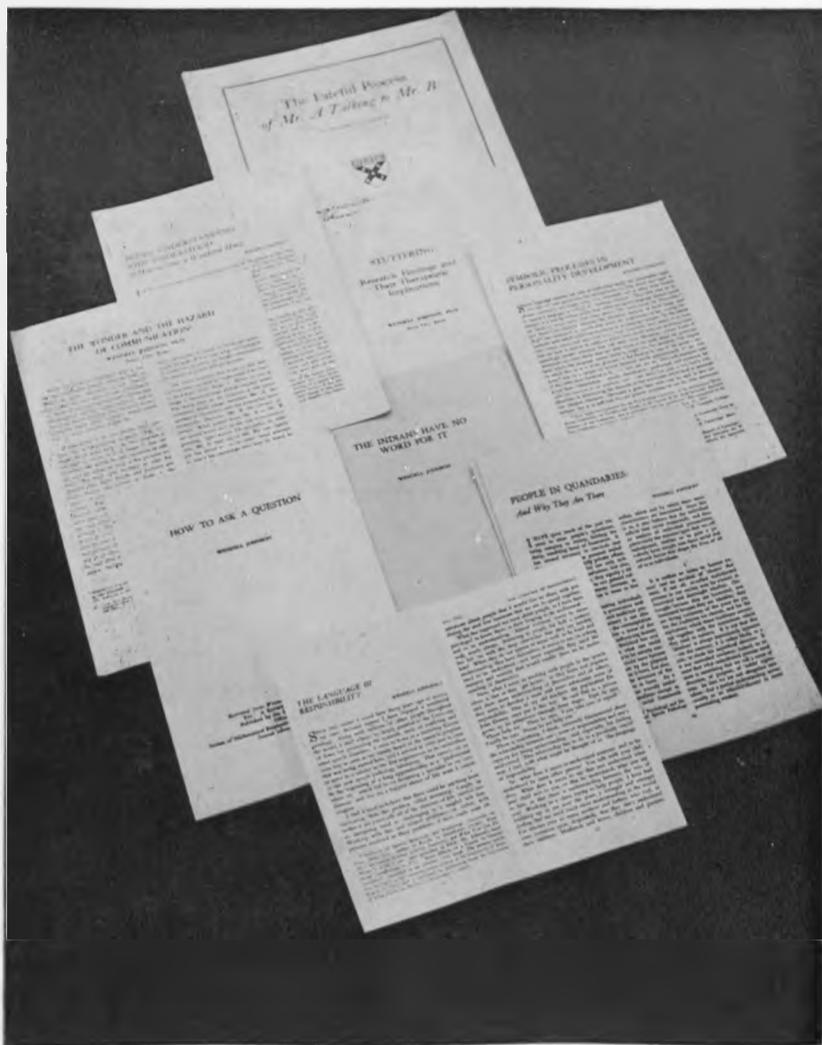
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