

Reflections on The Notions of “Meaning” and “The Truth”

On Meaning

Bernard Lonergan S.J. in his book “Insight. A Study of Human Understanding” reminds us that ‘We live in a world mediated by meanings’. From our natural human tendency to make sense of what we see, hear, read, experience, etc., eventually emerge opinions, ideas, commonsense, theories, mysticism, magic, diverse belief systems, religions, moral systems, ethics, anthropology, archaeology, philosophies, epistemology, mathematics, science, the arts, and so on. With the advent of electronic communication radio, TV, the world wide web, I-pad, I-phones, twitter, face-book, ‘U-tube’, and others to come, making available to us a ‘world’ of information and miss-information (at varying degrees of interpretational accuracy), it’s becoming more and more difficult to make sense of things, or abandon our tendency towards holding on to relatively simplistic or earlier meanings. With so much information to interpret, we could benefit by **developing awareness** that “We **give** meanings”. We could also benefit by thinking of the meanings we give not as certainties, but as points of departure: *starting points* towards more heuristic time-binding refinement and expansion of our understanding of things, events, and ourselves.

In our earlier years, just learning to talk, we asked “Why?” Instinctively, we were not satisfied with just one answer: We kept asking “Why?” over and over again. Unfortunately, through cultural traditions, impatient adults, education systems based on many ‘primitive’ (earlier), simpler interpretations, beliefs, meanings, and many other factors, many of us eventually abandoned our instinctive wanting to ‘hear’ more... We became less inquisitive, less curious, more impatient for quick results, and more easily satisfied with one answer.

When as grown-ups we ask “Why?”; “What’s the meaning of life?”; “What does this mean?”; “What’s the meaning of ...?”; “What do you mean?”; and when we say “This means that...” or more insidiously “This can only mean...”, we are in effect intuitively assuming there is/are something/s else going on, have gone on, or will occur, beyond and besides the words, situations, events, activities, etc., that we are immediately experiencing, seeing, hearing, or imagining. We are also assuming (mainly non-consciously) there is/are something/s associated with, something/s significant, important, of great value and worthwhile knowing, that we think will help us make sense of, and deepen our understanding of things... Sometimes (possibly not often enough), our search for meaning includes understanding ourselves as individuals and as human beings in relationships. A “General

Anthropology”—a study of human behaviors, our developments, achievements, brutalities, etc. over the millennia could help us in our search: Towards this end I recommend: (Korzybski’s “Manhood of Humanity” and “Science And Sanity”. And also Bernard Lonergan’s “Insight”, “A Study of Human Understanding”.

Our survival depends on meanings we give

Meaning, and our search for meaning/s play a very big part in all areas of our living. Considered as a foundation of our existence, our notions of meaning deserves to be explored and valued. Our very survival, our thinking-feelings-decisions-and actions depend a great deal on things we do-based on meaning/s we give. And vice versa, meanings we give determine to a great extent the way we think-feel-decide-what we do, and how we do. The quality of our communication, our disagreements, ‘miss-understandings’ and conflicts within ourselves and with others, feelings of distress, etc., depend on meanings we give. The kinds of cultures and cultural institutions that emerge or that we create, our values, beliefs, policies, what we accept as true or truth; our sciences and religions, fields of inquiry, love, hate, prejudices, disagreements; our conflicts, fears, anger, wars, and attempts at peace making, decisions and behavior, etc, all depend on decisions we make based on meanings we give.

The notion of meaning is applicable to/at all levels of our psycho-biological operations: Neural systems communicate-interact through processing-interpreting-responding (in effect ‘giving meanings’) to electro-chemical information received. A great deal of our meaning-giving generally takes place automatically at ‘unconscious’ levels, based on our non-conscious organismal *interpretations* of events, situations, words, etc. Our “unconscious” (I consider as a label for “neural storage”) is ‘stocked’ with neurobiological analogues of memories, values, beliefs, behavioral patterns and habits, fears, hopes, prejudices, dreams, aspirations, earlier meanings, etc., and deserves more attention than we usually give. We could speculate that meanings we arrive at are functions of neural processing of stimuli originating from internal and external sources: processes that influence our sensing, thinking, feelings, imaginings, attitude, evaluations, beliefs, etc. We *project* many of these inner interpretations, determinations, and conclusions, onto the outside world: Unaware of our projecting, we ‘say’ or think “This means that...” and tend to behave accordingly. We can get clues to our non-conscious “meaning-giving” by practicing “conscious abstracting”...***noticing-attending to*** the way we feel-think about someone or something (including ourselves); noticing*how* we act towards or react to someone or something; becoming aware of our prejudices, biases, expectations, hopes, anxieties, fears, joyfulness, and so on. (In being aware of what/how we are feeling, thinking, doing, etc., we are practicing

what Alfred Korzybski in his book “Science And Sanity” emphasized: ‘making more of our non-conscious behaviors, conscious’. (See “Science And Sanity”, Chapter XXX, “Identification, Infantilism, And Un-Sanity Versus Sanity”.)

Following these ideas, some burning questions came up for me: “Can we ever know what anything means?” Or, “Can we ever know the meaning of anything, the ‘real meaning’, or ‘the true meaning’?” “Can we ever know “the whole truth” about anything?” This essay represents some ideas and insights that came up in pursuing the “notion of meaning” and “the truth”--from general semantics, Lonerganian points of viewing.

We stop to investigate. Things keep moving along

Have you ever switched on the T.V., began to watch a movie that started sometimes before—and found yourself anxiously trying to figure out “What’s going on?” Who are the villains, the good guys, their relationships, the forces at play, the story, etc.? Applying the general semantics principle “structural similarity”, our human situation is somewhat like that: We find ourselves trying to make sense of things; trying to put things in contexts; looking for how things are related; looking for meanings of situations that started long before we came onto the scene: looking for meanings in a very big Universe that was here long before we came along. We even find ourselves *in the ‘middle’ of our own mind manifestations...* trying to make sense of a process—a process that started developing long before its reflective self-conscious operations emerged for ‘us’ to become aware of its existence. (We could be getting hints of an early stage of the non-conscious “meaning-giving” process when we smile and wave our hands at a baby: The baby stares intently at us...then abruptly looks at the mother or father as if asking “What’s going on here? What am I to make of this?”). With modern technology, we could *stop* a movie--even play back parts of it while we are engaged in our figuring-out...Not so with life situations: ‘Things’, everyday situations, keep moving along: They do not stop and wait for us to catch up from our sense-making and meaning-giving efforts. With the film, we don’t know whether we started watching near the start, the ‘middle’, or near the end. With life situations, we also don’t know at what stage of a process we became involved...And unlike the film, we don’t know to what extent our involvement has affected a situation. Consequently, we can assume a **general uncertainty** (a generalization of Heisenberg’s “indeterminacy principle”) regarding any meaning or meanings we arrive at).

In our search for meaning, with different experiences, different ways of thinking about things, and with a “one cause one effect attitude”, we tend to look for “*the* reason”, “*the* cause”, “*the* meaning”, rather than for “possible reasons, causes,

and meanings”. It seems to me that looking for reasons, causes and meanings makes more sense (in a world where as far as we ‘know’, everything is in relationships) than looking for one cause, reason or meaning. With training in general semantics and Lonerganian rigorous critical reflection and thinking based on scientific and mathematical models, we are less likely to *identify* (consider as the same) the cause or reason we assume, as the only cause or reason; or a meaning we consciously or non-consciously arrive at, as *the* meaning, or *the only* meaning. This might not be of much significance if thinking this way resulted only in arguments resulting from a “clash of meanings”: but the meanings we assume are closely related to the decisions we make, and the creative and destructive things we do. The different meanings we hold often result in a clash of individuals, groups, nations, etc. Applying general semantics principles such as “non-elementalism” (interconnectedness, meaning depends on meaning giver, place, time, etc.); “multi-causality”, (many ‘causes’, many effects); “multi-meaning” (many meanings); and “multi-ordinality” (meaning given is a function of contexts and level of abstracting), and others, we can avoid many disagreements, conflicts and problems. (For practice: Listen closely to individuals disagreeing about something; see whether you can spot possible differences in meanings given to words and ideas, that could be a source of the problem.)

Words as triggers and anchors of meanings we give

I once thought of words as “carriers” and “transporters” of meanings. Abstracting from this abstraction, I realized that “If words do not in themselves have meanings, they cannot carry or transport what they do not have”. I now prefer to think of words as “triggers of ‘meanings’”, and “semantic ‘anchors’ and ‘leashes’ among other factors. Words we read, hear, and use, create and activate established neurobiologically stored values, memories, images, beliefs, ideas, thoughts, feelings, meanings, etc.—elements of the psychobiological structure we label “the unconscious”. (Think of a friend’s name; the title of a song you like; the name of your high school, the name of your first ‘good friend’...See what memories, images, feelings, etc. come up.)

Words as “anchors and leashes” hold in mind-space earlier meaning and connections, evoke habitual responses and behaviors; they block, restrain, and discourage us from inquiries that might lead us to new insights--insights which could result in our giving new meanings, and expanding our horizons of understanding and meanings. Over times, words are given more meanings and new meanings....But since the words look and sound the same, this often results in misunderstanding and confusion when some persist in holding on to older and less inclusive meanings, while others are responding and re-acting based on the new

meanings. (For instance: Influenced by earlier meanings I gave to certain terms, I am presently struggling with Aristotle's notion of "infinity": "It is not "that which is beyond itself" that is infinite, but "that which always has something beyond itself"". (Aristotle's Physics (4th. Century B.C.): I cannot yet reconcile my present commonsense notion of "infiniteness" (endlessness, without boundaries), with my notion of "itself" (as wholeness). I also experience difficulties making sense of Cantor's notion of "different sizes of infinity"; "countable infinite", and "the whole is equal to a part of itself" --notwithstanding his historically important contribution to "set theory", based on these assumptions. In a similar vein, I am less appreciative of current recordings of some classical pieces I once enjoyed: Memories and comparisons with earlier phrasings, timbre, inflections, tempo, etc., keep intruding.)

We live in a world of change: But words as "triggers" and "anchors" of meaning can lead us (if we are not attentive to this) to neglect, deny, or ignore change--and so deal with many life situations less effectively. Our language based institutions, organizations, social and economic policies, our education systems, our political systems, our religions, our myths, ideas of morality and ethics, rules, regulations, policies, names, labels, and so on, can be thought of as "triggers, and "anchors of meanings" ("triggers" as evoking familiar meanings; and "anchors" as "keeping within cultural, familiar and acceptable limits"). Our relationships to words act as effective agents in exercising resistance to modifying the institutions we created--even when we have acquired new information. One way we can address these discrepancies involves taking an "intentional" (being attentive to what we are thinking-feeling, saying, expecting, believing, doing, etc.) and "extensional" (structural-functional) approach: We can remember "to give higher importance to what words refer to (extensional)"; and not "intensionally" think-behave as if a word is more important than what the word is about. With this approach, we can set out to re-define and update institutional policies and practices to appreciate new given meanings based on more up-to-date information.

'Hardened' semantic structures

Meanings-beliefs-values-attitudes-expectations-decisions-and behavior, are interacting mind-brain-physical operations: From earlier meanings and beliefs (without critical reflection), will emerge later meanings, beliefs, decisions and expectations. These close relationships often create personal, societal, and national *hardened semantic based (language-meaning-attitude-behavior) structures* (labeled "culture"). They suppress and repress the insights that could mobilize critical evaluation of our attitudes towards our myths, ideas, opinions, attitudes, beliefs, expectations, and behavior—making time-binding (conscious

improvements) difficult. Institutions (cultural subsets) we create, serve to preserve these semantics structures. Through the institutionalization and ‘concretization’ of our meanings and beliefs, we hold ourselves back: In time, institutions expand and become more powerful, making disestablishing, or even improving their operations, extremely difficult. Like a dog on a leash, unable to wander around, the policies and operations of our institutions tend to keep the range of our thinking, tethered. So much of our living is a function of our earlier first meanings-beliefs-and feelings, that following a “principle of least action”, we find much difficulty challenging popular beliefs; undertaking major changes; making inconvenient adjustments; introducing re-organizations, and so on—adjustments necessary for time-binding changes towards improvements.

We give meanings

Bernard Lonergan in his book “Insight” A Study of Human Understanding” on page 308, and in Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, Tenth Edition, on page 28a, we find cautionary notes that the meaning of a word resides in the minds of those who hear or read it, and not in a dictionary.) Our institutions, professional fields, communication, regulations, rules, policies, and so on, could not exist or function without language. So: How, using language (the main glue binding our hardened semantic structures), and without resorting to rebellion, uprisings, revolutions, and wars, do we go about addressing natural resistance to change? How might we go about re-structuring the social-economic-political-educational-legal, and other institutions, that ‘anchor’ and ‘contain’ these semantic structures--structures, that to a great extent, determine our behavior? How could education ‘experts’, ‘politicians’, and each of us persuade ourselves, or be persuaded to explore a proposition that “we could improve our lives and our society if we addressed the factor that **“We give meanings”**? One way involves being attentive to the power of words and ways we use words: We can use general semantics and Lonerganian principles to modify our language habits (thinking, speaking, writing, interpreting, etc.). We could resolve to re-define and update our institutions to include new ‘meanings’ based on more up-to-date information--modified by general semantics principles. To be realistic: It’s highly unlikely that any institution, society, or nations, would set out on such a tremendously risky, and demanding adventure...But as individuals, we can benefit from taking this approach...and hope it catches on.

While awake, we are constantly (usually non-consciously) making decisions...what to do, what not to do, how to go about things, and so on. The decisions we make depend to a great extent on the meanings we give. “Deciding” involves "selecting as a course of action": It’s important for us to remember the

“non-allness principle” that “In our selecting, we also “leave out” selecting other possible courses of action. Our survival as individuals, groups, societies, and nations, depends on decisions we make based on meanings we give. The quality of our relationships at personal, societal, and those involving international interactions, depends to a great extent on what we decide to do, and how we do what we do based on meanings we give. As decisions we make and meanings we give play such an important part in our living, it makes sense for us to *practice catching ourselves* in the acts of deciding and giving meanings. One way involves simply saying to our selves every now and again, “I am deciding to...” and “I am giving this meaning...for now”. After a while, we automatically become more aware of making decisions and giving meanings.

Words, things, etc. in themselves, *have no meaning.*

From a general semantics frame of reference, and applying the “non-identity principle”, “**A word is not the same as whatever thing, situation, event, etc., we use it to represent.**” Words, things, situations, etc. are not *identical--the same in all respects* with the meanings we give them (principle of “non-identity”).

“Words” about words are not the same words; in the phrase “teaching teaching”, teaching (1) is not teaching (2): They refer to different exercises, and different levels of abstracting. “**Meanings are not in things, words, situations” etc.** If words, statements, or situations had meanings in and of themselves; if a word was its meaning, we wouldn’t have to search for meaning any other place than in the word, the statement, or the situation. The meaning we give to anything cannot be completely covered by words we use or beliefs we hold: We can always ask “Is that all?” Our words remain relatively unchanging--But things change...and they often change faster than our words about them. Each one of us interprets (usually non-consciously) what we see, hear, read, experience, and so on--and from our interpretations, based on our different experiences, beliefs, training, etc., we arrive at our different meanings. What we find important, interesting, or of great value, might not be so for others. No one knows all. When in conversations and discussions we give different meanings to the same word, this often results in misunderstanding and disagreements. We could avoid such conflicts by following a non-elementalistic, non-identity and non-allness psycho-logical paradigm and remember that “**We give meanings**”.

If we accept the general semantics proposition that “words, events, situations, experiences, etc., in and of themselves do not ‘have’ meanings”, we could say that “No-thing is meaningless”. (See a poem on “Nothing” at <miltondawes.com>). Declaring something as meaningless does not make it so for everyone, and for all times. What one considers and labels “meaning-less” could be quite “meaning-

full” for others. And if by “meaningless” one assumes “not significant or important”, a question that might arise is “Not significant or important to whom?”). Attempting to answer that question could be quite revealing.

Based on the general semantics principles of “non-elementalism” (we live in world of relationships); “non-allness”, (we cannot understand, know all); “intensionality” (making words, ideas, opinions, theories, etc., more important than what they are about); and “non-identity” (no two things are the same in all respects...and in terms of change a ‘thing’ is not identical with itself...not the same from one moment to the next): It could be considered an example of “elementalism”, “intensionality”, “allnessing”, and “identifying” behavior for us to think that the meaning of anything was limited to the place-time-level of experience and intelligence where we have stopped our evaluations. Following this, I generalize that “To determine *the meaning* of any ‘thing’ one would have to know all about that ‘thing’”: This includes knowing everything about anything associated with, or connected to the ‘thing’(including ourselves), and everything connected to, or associated with those connections and associations. Could it be that in pursuing the notion of meaning we might be experiencing a glimpse of “infiniteness” (indefinite extension).

Since our experiences do not happen over all times and places; and we don’t know all about anything, or anyone: The meaning we give to a word depends on our training, range of experience, language skills, the culture we were brought up in, and so on. Following our notions of meaning, to be more accurately representative of actualities, requires us to consider that “The particular meanings we give, whether we are aware of this or not, **depend on contexts or level of abstracting.** Lonergan referred to “**abstraction**” as follows: “**We speak of “abstraction, and commonly we mean a direction of attention to some aspects of the given with a concomitant neglect of other aspects.”** Important contexts include: “time” (the stage we are at in our own development as interpreters-evaluators); language and culture, the range of our training, experience”, and so on. We automatically give a different meaning and react differently to the sound of a gun shot heard coming from the T.V. program we are watching, than we would, if we were on the street. Our boss’s words are not given the same meaning/s as we would give to the ‘same’ words uttered by a colleague.

More meanings, more choices

As mentioned earlier on: Similar to our thinking in terms of “one cause one effect”, we tend to think one dimensionally in terms of one meaning: We say “the meaning”. This usually results in endless argumentation where we often attempt to

persuade others verbally (and sometimes even violently) of the absoluteness, correctness, and rightness of *our meaning*, or the meaning *we* regard or accept as the “true meaning”. We come into situations from-with different backgrounds. No two of us have the same experiences, training, skills, understanding, concerns, interests, etc.: Consequently, we are very likely to give different meanings to words we use, read or hear; or situations we are involved in. We do not ‘know’ what another means...no matter what they say they mean. We are better off remembering that actions ‘say’ more than words. If we live in a multidimensional world; a world of structures within structures...; a world of change and changing relationships, it makes good sense for us to think in terms of “multi-meaning” rather than “one meaning” (“this” means “that”). Thinking in terms of “multi-meanings” and “multi-ordinality” (meanings we give depend on context), we extend our perceptual-semantic maps and dialectically learn to appreciate others’ meanings. (We can appreciate without necessarily agreeing with.) The more we appreciate the meaning others give--the more we expand our awareness of other potentials and possibilities: More ‘maps’, give us more choices, and improve our chances for success in our life journeys; and more ways of dealing with new and trying personal and professional situations. Recognizing and remembering that we ‘see’ things from “different points of viewing” could help us avoid many conflicts and disagreements.

Meanings-possibilities-non-identity-and creativity go together: The more we consider and appreciate other possibilities, the more meanings we give—and vice versa: The more meanings we give, the more different ways we make sense of things. The more different ways of making sense, the less dogmatic and fanatic we are likely to become; The less dogmatic, the more creative we become. The more meanings we give the more open we are to learn about other ways, and others’ ways of perceiving and dealing with situations. The more meanings we give the less we identify—and vice versa. More meanings lead to better problem-solving: The more meanings we give, the more our chances for making ‘better’ (more appropriate for the situation) decisions: For example: We recognize that at an intersection, the green light does not mean “It’s safe to go”; that turning a key in the lock does not mean the door is locked; that a promise given does not mean it will be kept; that believing that something is true or safe does not make it so; that what we fear doesn’t mean it’s going to happen; that thinking-labeling an action as a failure doesn’t mean that’s all it is; that the vehicle ahead with the left turn signal lit does not mean the driver (if there is one) intends to turn left; that “freedom” does not mean free of, or from everything. We come into situations from-with different backgrounds. No two of us have the same experiences, training, skills, understanding, concerns, interests, etc. From a higher viewpoint of recognizing and

remembering that we ‘see’ things from “different points of viewing”, and that we give different meanings to words and situations, we might avoid many conflicts and disagreements.

Heuristic time-binding definition of meaning

In extending our perceptual maps we become more “conscious time-binders”. (Time-binding in general semantics has to do with **building on and improving what we ourselves and others have thought, said, done, accomplished, and so on.**) For instance: We (as humans) progress from placing logs across a stream, to suspension bridges across rivers; from cave dwellings to sky scrapers; from guesses, myths, and gut feelings, to a theoretical, scientific, heuristic approach. We go from one cause one effect, to multi-causality and innumerable effects; from counting to differential equations and infinite sets...And applied to “meaning”, from “This means that” to “What meanings can I give?”: “What sense can I make of ‘this’ at this time?” and so on. And if we accept that things or words don’t mean--“we give meanings”, instead of saying “This doesn’t make sense”, or “This is meaningless”, we could more accurately say “I am not making sense of this, at this time.”

With the above in mind and other factors not mentioned, I have arrived at the following heuristic (not provable, but useful) proposition: **If there exists a meaning of “x”, the meaning of "x" would constitute the totality of events that contributed to the existence of "x"; and the totality of events consequent to the existence of "x".** In other words, to know the meaning of anything requires us to know the complete history-and-future of that ‘thing’, event, situation, etc. Substituting “meaning” for “x” in the proposition, we could address the age old philosophical discussions regarding the “meaning of meaning” and arrive at this: **The meaning of “meaning” involves all that has been ‘said’, and all that will be ‘said’ about meaning.**

On the notion of “the truth”

I make a distinction between the idea of a “true statement” and the idea of “the truth”. A “true statement”, and “the truth”, both *express a relationship* between a ‘knower’ and a presumed known, about ‘something’. A proposition: A “true statement” is one that can be shown to be, to some degree, in accordance with an actual situation. As a *representation*, a statement involving **words** or **other symbols** considered as a “true statement” or “the truth” is not the same as (identical with) whatever is being represented or claimed to be “true”, or “the truth”. From this we can propose “the truth” as not being a description or definition but as *a label for an ideal*. We could think of our notion of “the truth” as *the*

totality of true statements about 'whatever'--including all its associations and connections... past, present, and potential. But if we accept the premise that "we cannot know all about anything--across all times, possible changes, and unknowns"; and although, we generally non-consciously take "the truth" to 'mean' "the whole truth", it seems reasonable to propose: From a principle of "non-allness" "We cannot know the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth about any 'thing' ...including ourselves.""

It's worth repeating: As our experiences do not happen over all times and places, as we do not know all about anyone (including ourselves) and anything, it makes sense for us to think of "meanings we arrive at", and "truths" we assert, as "propositions": heuristic, theoretical, time-binding semantic working devices—starting points to be continually tested, updated and refined. Similar to our notion of meaning, our notion of "the truth" should also be indexed in terms of "time, place, culture, language, information, *abstractor-evaluator, etc*": *Instead of declaring that "This is the truth", we could say (although not as culturally powerful, impressive, assertive, expert sounding, etc.), "This is true—as far as I know", or, "to the best of my knowledge, at this time", or "In my opinion..."*. Since our attitudes, values, behaviors, organizations, institutions we create, etc., depend on meanings we give and truths we hold, for our own well-being, it suits us to be concerned about our claims regarding what anything means, or the truth about anything. If we think of our notion of "the truth" as involving "meanings we have given based on our interpretations at a date", we can advance a similar proposition for "the truth" as we have done for meaning...not provable--but useful as a heuristic starting point towards higher viewpoints, higher quality discussions, and more refined time-binding understanding.

Proposed definition of truth

If "the truth" about any "x" exists, it would involve a complete description of the origin, structure, operations, interactions, relationships, and duration of "x". Similar to the proposition regarding "meaning": "The truth" about anything represents a judgment we make about its complete history-and-future"--and to the degree that we cannot determine whether this statement is 'true' (a totally accurate report), we also "cannot know the truth about anything".

To summarize

Truths and meanings we arrive at involving words and beliefs, can be thought of as "more or less accurate 'stories' we make up about things." As there are unavoidable gaps in our sensing and awareness, no story or meaning tells the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth about anything. No story is ever the

whole story. Since we depend on light waves, sound waves, and electro-chemical impulses for information about ourselves and about the outside world, to be rigorous, our stories, and the meanings, and truths we declare will always be to some degree, out of ‘synch.’ with what they are about: Things were going on before our arrival, and will likely change (however incrementally) during and after our arrival. In that sense we are always both ‘late’ and ‘early’ on the scene: We could modify our ‘meaning’ and ‘truth’ claims, through “dating and indexing” to reflect this. We could think “based on *my present* understanding”.

As we cannot point definitively to “the meaning” or “the truth” of anything, we might be better off thinking of our meanings and truths as “maps”, “propositions”, “ideals”: yearning for something beyond our reach but which we keep reaching for; and as *partial, heuristic devices*, semantic tools we can use to pursue further time-binding explorations and refinement of the current ways we interpret, understand, and make sense of things. We could also think of our meanings and truths in terms of “semantic variables” (similar to the algebraic “x”): *values we give* as individuals, or groups, at particular stages-times of our experiential, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual development. As students, we could expand our understanding of things by not dismissing the ‘meanings’ others give, and ‘truths’ they hold, but think of them as “other values given to “x”; valuable information related to other ways of evaluating situations, and so on. We improve our thinking when we move from thinking in terms of “the meaning” and “the truth”, to thinking in terms of “meanings we give”, “truths we assume.” This is one way we can deal with irrefutable claims and avoid a great deal of misunderstanding, irresolvable conflicts, and violence.

Remembering the principle of “non-elementalism” (interrelationships...especially including ourselves) in our search for ‘meaning’ and ‘the truth’): Instead of asking “What does this mean?” or “What’s the meaning of...?” or being so sure about “the truth of the matter”, we might non-elementalistically ask ourselves “What sense can **I** make of ‘this’”?, or “What meaning/s can **I** give to this, **at this time-place**, based on information **I** presently have ?” And when someone says “This means that...”, or “This can only mean...”, we could classify their statement as a judgment, a proposition, and as such invite them to “Say more”; or think of their conclusion as **based on their experience, training, the amount of, and interpretation of the information they have, the accuracy of, and how up-to-date the information, and so on. .**” Or instead of asking “What do you mean”, we might paraphrase the French’, “Que voulez vous dire”? (translated literally to “What do you want to say?”) to “What else do you want to say.”) In setting out to explore the meaning of anything, it

might help if we “first, determine what we *mean* by meaning” and following “Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle”, and the general semantics principle of “non-elementalism” remind ourselves to include the fact that we are involved in determining meaning---and as such cannot know how much as “meaning givers” we have contributed to whatever meaning we arrive at—and remember, “no one can say all about anything”.

If we are conscious of abstracting and remember the principle of “non-allness”, we could advance our thinking and avoid many personal problems, by considering that **meanings we give and truths we hold will be only partial**. When we think we know “the truth”; or claim that ‘**this**’ means ‘that’, “**this**” *does not represent the whole situation*: Meanings we give and truths we claim, refer only to the *parts* of a situation we noticed, *parts* that aroused our interest, *parts* we consider important to us, and so on. And as abstractors, each of us will notice different parts. In addition: If we conclude that “A means B” without further explorations of what “B” ‘means’, we non-consciously and *elementalistically* assume that the meaning we give stops at “B”; and that “B” is outside the realm of meaning with *no possible influential connections*. Generalizing: We can propose an incongruity between general semantics principles (“consciousness of abstracting”, “non-allness”, “non-identity”, “non-elementalism”, etc.), and our belief that we know or can know “the truth”...the “true and real meaning” of things, ourselves, and events.

Our *uncritical use* of names, labels, and our beliefs regarding ‘truths’ and ‘meanings’, are habitual, and convenient ways we communicate and deal with life situations: They can also be considered as main contributors to repeated social uprisings, economic, and international problems. As they affect all areas of our living, giving up our “meanings” and what we accept as “the truth” can be tantamount to abandoning our beliefs, values, and sense of self. Practicing “conscious abstracting” helps us catch ourselves interpreting, giving meaning, and being sure we have “the truth”. If, in our discussions, we *start* by sharing (or at least become aware of) our definitions of “meaning” and “truth”, we improve the quality of our conversations and relationships through avoiding misunderstanding, and misinterpretations. Practicing “consciousness of abstracting”, we remember that in a very large Universe, with infinite numbers of interactions and changing interactions, we cannot be *certain* about the accuracy of the meanings we give and truths we assume. Our words and symbols cannot ‘cover’ all characteristics of the world we know of. The axiomatic system of mathematics is so far, the *closest* we have come to evaluational ‘certainty’ (and this involves “assumed mathematical certainty”). As Albert Einstein noted: “As far as the laws of mathematics refer to reality, they are not certain; as far as they are certain, they do not refer to reality.”

We might consider: “As far as meaning and the truth refer to realities, they are not certain”...As far as they are certain, they refer to our imaginings.

Pursuing a notion that “things *have* meanings” automatically leads to conflict creating “one valued” (it can only mean...) and “two valued” (it means either this or that...) ways of interacting: When it is assumed that a ‘thing’ has “one”, and “only one meaning”, or “one of two meanings”; when one identifies what they ‘know’, understand, feel, etc., as “the truth”, since this cannot be shown to be the case, and others have their “truths”, disagreements, conflicts, and often rebellions and wars, are unavoidable.

P.S. Remember to keep in mind: The meanings or meaning you give to the above constitute/s “**your** meaning”. The essay represents some of **my** “present thoughts on meaning and truth”. To expand my notions on the subjects: Please send some of **your** thoughts on “meaning” and ‘the truth’ to <miltodawes@earthlink.net

Notes

1. Korzybski, Alfred. *Science and Sanity* (1933), Fort Worth , TX , Institute of General Semantics (1994).
2. Lonergan, Bernard, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, London , Longmans, Green & Co. Ltd. (1957).
3. Others too numerous to mention.
3. Visit <miltodawes.com> for elaborations of, and some ways to apply general semantics principles. Note also the opening piece on “Stories”.

Milton Dawes/2017