

A Tribute to Wendell Johnson

Given at the dedication of the
Wendell Johnson Speech and
Hearing Center June 15, 1968
D. C. Spriestersbach*

Edna, Nick, Katie, ladies and gentlemen:

Wendell Johnson was born April 16, 1906 at Roxbury, Kansas. He came to the University of Iowa when he was 20 and a severe stutterer. He received his bachelor's, master's and doctorate degrees from the University of Iowa, joining the Iowa faculty upon the completion of his education to spend a life-time in teaching and research, primarily concerned with stuttering and language behavior. His scholarly productivity was astounding. He was the author of 10 books, 150 articles and 100 book reviews. He also directed the thesis research of some 150 graduate students in the areas of stuttering, and communication processes and disorders. He lectured widely; he edited scholarly works; he served on many distinguished committees, boards and panels. He was given the Honors of the American Speech and Hearing Association, served as its president and was founder of the American Speech and Hearing Foundation. He died August 29, 1965. His family included his wife Edna, a son Nick, and a daughter Katie, all of whom are present at these ceremonies.

In a few short moments how does one pay tribute to a person of the stature and complexity of Wendell (Jack) Johnson? Certainly it is very difficult for those of us who were privileged to be his students and his colleagues to express our tributes objectively. For Jack's greatness was the result not only of his penetrating and inquiring mind but also of his humanity. He loved people; he loved us and we loved him. He challenged us; he helped us to revise our perspectives and conceptions; he encouraged and inspired us; he believed in us. He was our comrade.

I am unable to take the measure of the man Wendell Johnson and therefore I will not attempt it. Rather, I shall share with you some of the things that he has written and said, for we pay tribute

* The quotations used in this tribute were largely drawn from material assembled by Dorothy W. Moeller.

to him today and we memorialize this building to him because of his ideas. They will serve as the time-binders between him and us and our successors.

Jack was a man with a keen sense of humor. He loved a good story or a limerick. He shared them with a twinkle in his eyes, a hearty laugh and frequently a gleeful slapping of his thigh.

Here are some samples of his limericks:

The daschund, 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

And he didn't confine the subjects of his limericks to the animal world. He wrote about us too. Here is one about me.

There was a professor named Sprie
Who lectured each Tuesday at three
If nobody came
He talked just the same
And observed his own feedback with glee.

Only a couple of years before his death, Jack spent a glorious couple of weeks in Hawaii. While he basked in the sun on the beaches, he wrote this one:

I thought, as I sat by the ocean,
Protected by conscience and lotion,
That the hula's a vision
Of prolonged indecision,
An agonized notion in motion.

And he was willing to look candidly at himself and his age group as he did in a letter he wrote in July, 1965. In part, he said:

Ever since I reached middle-age, I have agreed with George Bernard Shaw's opinion that youth is much too glorious to be wasted on the insensibilities of the young. I have now lived enough longer to appreciate also that the mellow

years hold rewards far too precious to be endangered by the potentially disabling ambitions of the middle-aged.

Jack had a way with short phrases. He didn't seem to work at producing them. They appeared to flow spontaneously, seeming sometimes to be surprises even to him. Here are some samples:

One person may know ten times as many facts as another and still be less informed.

There is nothing necessarily wrong with being distressed. I'm not advocating that everybody should be as contented as cows are supposed to be. But there is distress, distress, and distress, and so forth. And some of them are unproductive. They're just illness. Some of them are apparently something like what the oyster goes through in making a pearl. But others are what the oyster goes through when he doesn't make a pearl. You know?

Peace is a condition in which we live with each other's differences.

Beware of fancy names of committees. They're just made up of Wendell and Elmer and John.

Much that is found in books is teachable rather than true.

Time is so precious. First thing you know it's Christmas.

Facts are neutral. They have only the meaning we give them. There is no sadness in nature. It's just in us.

There is no particular virtue in having a hundred tools if you can get the job done with a pair of pliers.

I'm constantly dumbfounded at what hasn't been done before.

We love people while hating peoples.

And now may I read some longer statements from his writings which I have chosen to capture some of the many facets

of his interest and concern. The first one is taken from THE RESEARCH FRONTIER which appeared in the Saturday Review in 1956:

Scientific research is itself a kind of behavior, the most systematically cultivated and teachable problem-formulating and problem-solving behavior devised by man. In view of our embarrassing and threatening successes in behaving scientifically toward some of our problem situations, one of our most urgent needs is to learn how to behave scientifically in dealing with other problem situations, particularly those we have created or intensified by virtue of our scientific successes. We need to try to find out, with the thoroughness of laboratory and clinical investigators, just what it is we do when we behave scientifically. What is there distinctive at such times about the questions we ask, the attitudes we exhibit, the values we display, the responses we make in observing and in reporting what we observe, the hypothesizing in which we engage, the guessing, doubting, hunching and, at times apparently, the reasoning we carry on, and, in perhaps a very significant sense, the languages we use and the ways in which we use them? We need, above all, to do research on ourselves, not only in clinics and hospitals when we are ill or mal-adjusted but also in laboratories and other problem-solving situations when we are conspicuously well and most creative.

Jack was concerned about the catastrophes which frequently result when men try to solve their problems with each other in irrational ways. This was taken from his book - YOUR MOST ENCHANTED LISTENER:

Good will without clear thinking can be monstrous: men of all lands have always marched behind the bright banners of righteousness as they have gone forth to do the killing they glorify as war, and always they have come home from battle to benedictions. Clear thinking without good will can be fully as lamentable: millions of human beings have been reduced to wasting torment by their shrewder fellows. Mankind needs desperately one more great teacher--the wanted wise man--who will bring about a close union of clear thinking and good will.

And this from THE DAILY IOWAN of April 16, 1948:

War is a form of behavior. So is peace. At least it keeps our thinking a little more clear to view them that way. It makes it likely, at any rate, that we might now and then raise some clarifying questions. For example, how would we have to behave in order to be peaceful - and to stay that way? Precisely what would we have to do? And in what sort of a society would we be likely to do it? In what respects would that kind of society differ from the one we have now?

.....We cannot have peace so long as we insist on making our local moralities hold for other people for whom they were never designed. We cannot have peace so long as we insist on defending a warlike way of life. We cannot have peace so long as we remain the kind of personalities we now are. The price of peace is change - in each of us, first of all. And this is a far higher price than we have ever thought of paying for it.

The more Jack worked with people, the more he became convinced that man's problems were related to his use of his language and his lack of appreciation that his language could do his thinking for him. Here is a bit taken from one of his last articles on counseling:

"We can create a life of constant combat in the shadows. We do this linguistically. How else? We tell ourselves that we have a problem, that our problem is getting worse, that it has us down, that it keeps us from doing our work. We sound as though we were on the sidelines and that all we could do was report what was happening. We talk not as participants but as victims, at the mercy of a being or spirit or a thing that comes and goes and interferes with our work. We are speaking animistically, we are using a folk language, the language of magic and trouble, the language of it and is

... "The point is that what we tell ourselves about our problem is what we react to. Once we begin to get our language in order, once we move from the folk language of animism to the

highly descriptive language of problem solving, once we begin to talk not about what we have or are but what we do -- and to take responsibility for our doing--we will be inching toward problem-solving behavior. By becoming aware of what we do, we will start to see what we can change. Now we have something to work on.

And again some bits on the effects of language from a lecture which Jack gave here in 1961 entitled COUNSELING THE OLDER DISABLED WORKER:

"Now, I deeply believe in work. I think work is about the healthiest form of human activity and the most satisfying, and I am convinced that for many persons there are disorienting effects of trying to make a distinction between work and play, or work and recreation. I think this must have a great deal to do with such problems as delinquency. We teach children that there are two kinds of activity in the world; one we call "work" and one we call "play." The one we do because we have to; the other we do because we like to. The one is fun; the other is drudgery. With the choices put in these terms, only a fool would want to work. And then we wonder what makes many children seem so irresponsible...

.... "you can't solve any human problem within the confines of a single academic department. Academic departments are institutionalized abstractions or verbal structures. They don't correspond at all precisely to anything outside of themselves. In order to solve any real problem at Iowa, for example, we have to bring to bear upon it all the resources of the university and of the community outside the university. It takes inventiveness to bring all of the available resources to bear upon a problem. In order to do this, we have to knock down departmental barriers within the university - and within the university hospitals - and sometimes we have to offend departmental prides and prejudices. We have to persuade people to do something that very few of them are well trained to do, and that is to work with others who are not like themselves - to work with them, neither to "control" them nor to be "controlled" by them....

... "An exceedingly small number of children in our society manage to get through our schools and colleges and come out thinking and working habitually in accordance with this pattern of

scientific behavior. Almost everybody in our culture is trained to deal with problems by trying to find the persons who are supposed to know the answers. We characteristically go to the doctor, or the priest, or the teacher with our questions, or we look up old Judge Thompson, or we write home to mother, or try to buy our way out of perplexity. Our assumption that there are Knowers makes for authoritarian, and so, essentially, infantile relationships. Most patients treat their doctors as though they were magicians, quite as though, indeed they were primitive medicine men. In the kind of culture that encourages such relationships the scientific approach to problems, especially personal and social problems, is not the rule by any means, and so major research in rehabilitation has been spotty, sporadic, and sparse.

"Nor are we likely, I believe, to change very fast our basic culture and the related principles of child rearing and formal education that run counter to a scientific orientation. Most of our school and college teachers, as well as our counselors and physicians, have been trained to act as though they know all the answers, and they do not comfortably say they don't know. They have learned, somehow, to feel that wide-eyed curiosity is something appropriate only in early childhood. Mostly in the schools we teach "content," or what is known, or believed to be known, as though it were final, instead of methods of investigation and evaluation. Having been made to feel that they should not have to ask any more questions, because they are supposed to know all the answers, most teachers do not train their students in the art of asking questions. There is, meanwhile, no more potent and important art. Certainly it is the art that is basic in the way of life called research. And it is just as basic in the way of life called rehabilitation....

... "The basic fact, I think, about organization is communication. I believe that what matter and energy are to the physical sciences, symbolizing and communicating are to the social sciences. The most important social science of the future will surely be concerned with the basic processes of communication and with problems of communication networks. I think one of the ways we can gather data most effectively in studying communication is to investigate the blockages that occur in it. I think we can identify these in the communication networks of hospitals, corporations, government agencies, and other organizations. I

think we can find out who does not talk to whom when or about what, for what reasons or under what conditions. I think we can find out which way messages flow fast and which way they flow like glue. "

And again on language from THE LANGUAGE OF RESPONSIBILITY:

"The most important thing to understand, I think, is that there is a fundamental limitation to our ability to understand. The kindest people, the ones who are nicest to be around, are those who don't presume to understand completely our most intimate and personal feelings. In their lack of presumptuousness we sense the basic respect they feel for us. We all know how easy it is to get too wordy in trying to console a friend in sadness. Silence often says so much more than words ever could at such times, and what our silence acknowledges is in part, of course, the other person's inescapable aloneness....

... "When you listen to understand you listen without preconceptions. You listen without irritation or anger. You listen without strong prejudice. You keep your own need to be understood from coming between you and the other person you are trying to understand. You listen not to refute and not to persuade, but only to hear the speaker out, to understand just as well as you possibly can what he is trying to say. This sort of listening is extremely rare, of course. I believe deeply that the world would be better if there were more of it. The work I do in the clinic has left me with the profound conviction that we need much more understanding in the world, and I do not know of any more direct way to better understanding than that of better listening. The art of listening is the better part of the art of helping people in the sort of clinic with which I am familiar, and I know of no reason to doubt that it is the better part of helping people anywhere....

... "As people become more mature they use language more and more responsibly to report accurately what they learn when they listen well and in all other ways observe carefully the facts that are of interest and concern to them. They demonstrate the language of responsibility in describing clearly and in detail what they themselves do and what others do that needs to be understood. They speak the language of who, when, where, what, and then what, and of the various possible whys, the language of honest and full report and of disciplined explanation - of thoughtful understanding.

"With the serenity that comes with self-acceptance, and the maturity reflected in the language of responsibility, you can feel prepared to meet the problems that lie ahead with a heartening capacity for understanding. You are able, then, to seek and make good use of the help you may need, but mostly you will be able to take care of yourself, when you are not helping others - to be more understanding and to feel understood."

Time permitting, we could continue to consider this man's astute perceptions. But our libraries will preserve them for all of the generations of readers to come and this building which we dedicate today in his name will serve to remind all who pass here that this man left them a great heritage to be discovered and enjoyed.

And now may I ask Edna Johnson to come forward to unveil the plaque which will be placed in the Wendell Johnson Speech and Hearing Center in his memory.

TEXT ON PLAQUE

To be curious, to investigate,
To think, to learn,
To become as fully aware as possible
of one's self and of one's world,
To evaluate tradition
with the calm and appreciative honesty
that one employs in evaluating
new knowledge and points of view,
And so
To leave the world a bit more favorable
to the full flowering
of each individual in it--
These things, to me, are important.