

Editorial Pondering

This journal edition is dedicated to the recognition of the work and influence in General and Applied semiotics of Thomas Sebeok, Professor Emeritus at Indiana University—one of the central figures in any discussion of modern semiotics. François Tochon, in this journal reviews one of Sebeok's latest works. I have pondered on how to comment on a man who dedicated so much of his life to the field or discipline of semiotics and who was responsible for influencing so many people to utilize semiotics as a theoretical construct, an analytical tool, as a means of seeing, in fact, revising and restructuring how humans, other animals, and their creations interact.

I decided to not attempt to reconstruct a litany of his achievements. Although he was a scholar in every sense of that word, I believe that he was more than his scholarly achievements. In the fine sense that everything changes, reflecting upon the death of a man who was so lively and who was responsible for bringing together people working in cross-disciplinary endeavors and engaging them to work together and with each other in the expansion and exploration of meaning, it is almost a fallacy to speak of the death of a man whose work will continue to represent him and to intrigue and challenge scholarship.

Nevertheless, he will not be at meetings, he will not be personally soliciting manuscripts for his projects, and I will not be receiving almost instantaneous replies to my emails, almost any time of day or night on any continent. I will miss him, so will all his family and his friends, and I am sorry new people entering the field will not have an opportunity to meet him personally.

I met Tom Sebeok at a semiotics conference in Toronto many years ago. I was a novice semiotician, excited at even the idea of examining how children are often frozen into sign systems which rigidly categorize them into groups, i.e., ethnicity, disability, religious affiliation, race, class, and gender before the child has even the slightest opportunity to interact as a being with the world around him or her. As an educator, I was fascinated at the prospect of recomplicating childhood—hearing from a child's perspective what interaction in the world created by adults was like. When and how did a child learn what was “family business” and what could be discussed at school? How did children at the age of four distinguish so finely between friend and best friend—for the work I was engaged in, semiotics provided a means of exploration that engaged the participant as a knowledgeable sign user and sign maker, rather than a passive object.

The first night at the conference after giving my paper I was told that Tom Sebeok had invited “everyone” to join him for dinner and discussion at a Hungarian restaurant in the city—walking distance away. It was a traditional dark, cold, wet, November night in Toronto. Also, I certainly did not consider myself part of the “everyone” of Tom Sebeok’s world. As I hesitated in the hall of the hotel with my friend, Tom called out to us to come along—to hurry up. We were jokingly told that Tom walked at a fast pace and we best be quick. Whoever gave us that message was right on the mark. Tom jaunted through the endless streets replete with any number of welcoming appearing restaurants. He also kept up a fast paced conversation, at times turning around to ask someone walking beside him (very few) or behind him (most) what he or she thought. He managed on that walk to draw almost everyone into conversation. I had no idea that he had any idea who I was, so I was quite surprised when he said he liked the use of semiotics and developmental psychology; it was natural. Naturally, I was surprised and, of course, pleased. But, then terrified as he asked excellent questions about how semiotics and traditional psychology worked. I remember he smiled as he quite sternly, told me to “keep working.” I was also tired and hungry. To this day, those of us on that walk remember with vivid recall the coldness and seemingly endless progression of restaurants that we passed. We also have no idea of how or why Tom managed to select the one truly awful restaurant in Toronto. On reflection, I think he was checking for table size, to get as many of us around a table as possible. And that is what happened. He got all of us in conversation and with a mixture of genuine curiosity and playfulness got us talking and responding as colleagues, considering and appreciating how we were interconnected even in our diverse discourses and disciplines.

The restaurant was amazingly awful, even the wine was weak. But somehow, afterwards, almost all of us, who had been strangers to one another at the beginning of the evening ended up at a café afterwards talking long into the night—laughing and listening to each other. Really listening. We had modeled for ourselves true intellectual curiosity and an invitation to be more than our scholarly selves—an invitation to openly interrogate what we did and learned and to combine what we knew about that work with other researchers and scholars. It is an invitation that Sebeok extended to many and why we, in this journal, honor him and his work.

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