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## Dr. Love - Erich Fromm's Art of Loving

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„Dr. Love. Erich Fromm's ‚Art of Loving‘,“ in: *Voice Literary Supplement*, April-May 2000, p. 139. -  
Typscript from the Internet, 4 p.

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One: Thou shall never love another.  
Two: And stand by me all the while.  
Three: Take happiness with the heartaches.  
Four: And go through life wearing a smile...  
Oh happy we will be  
if we keep the Ten Commandments of Love.  
—*Harvey and the Moonglows* (1958)

One man, one God. These are the laws of Moses and Israel, but I learned them from the doo-wop masters of my childhood. Here's how it works. You see him, he glows. He's the one. With the first kiss, the touch of his hands on your face, your soul melts into his and your bodies become forever entwined. But what's really going on? A state of unconscious bliss we just fall into, intoxicating and overpowering, like drug addiction or alcoholism? Or is it mystical, divine, non rational, that unknowable part of human experience? Published in 1956, two years before Harvey and the Moonglows decreed the Ten Commandments of Love, Erich Fromm's *The Art of Loving* posited an equally rockin' critical theory of human love.

The Frankfurt School psychologist-in-exile argues that human separateness from nature—the expulsion from paradise—is at the root of our torment. Our deepest human need is to leave the prison of our aloneness. Fromm says, „The awareness of human separation without reunion by love is a source of shame. It is at the same time, the source of guilt and anxiety.“ It is inherent in our search for that „special someone,“ in all our rituals of dating, grooming, deodorizing, liposuction, Weight Watchers, Viagra,

and body art. It fuels our desire for hot cars, cool clothes, sleek appliances, success, fame, power, and booty. We will go to any length to kill that pain.

When orgiastic states, autoinduced trances, or drugs and sex are part of tribal rituals, there is no guilt or remorse. But, Fromm maintains, in nonorgiastic cultures like ours, when drugs and alcohol are used to escape from separateness—well, we all know what hangovers feel like. False salvation is also found in conformity. As part of mass society, we forfeit our individuality to feel that connection, anything to avoid the frightening experience of our aloneness. Or else we work ourselves hard to forget our suffering, subordinating our inner lives to the corporation, the profession, the job. Routines and activities, too, soothe our constant cravings. We escape into „fun“ or „leisure,“ sports, manic workout rituals, shopping, cleaning. Creativity might help to reconnect us, but everything is so bureaucratized and alienated, we're still left dazed and confused.

*The Art of Loving* is one of the original self-help books. By now, most of what Fromm says has been vulgarized, diluted into a banal cottage industry of books, tapes, gurus, workshops, and retreats. We have Oprah, *The Rules*, treatises on Mars and Venus, Melody Beattie, 10,000 silly love songs clogging the airwaves, and we still can't dance. But Fromm was on top of the beat: He dismisses most of what we buy into, from Hallmark to Hollywood, as infantile and narcissistic, the stuff of „immature symbiotic union.“ Actually, he argues, love is the mature answer to the entire problem of existence. „The desire for



interpersonal fusion is the most powerful striving in man. The force which keeps the human race together.“ Like most of my „Love is all you need“ generation, I read Fromm’s most famous work in my teens, alongside Siddhartha and Be Here Now. Thirty years and 6 million sold copies later, here we are. Boomer divorce rates have generated offspring who swear they’ll never get married. It’s as if the institution itself represents nothing more than socially sanctioned humiliation and degradation. The rates of depression among children reflect a lonely crowd with little hope of resolving the existential dilemmas Fromm addresses.

If we had actually listened to Uncle Erich the first time around, we might have saved precious time and money on therapy, rehab, alimony—not to mention years of alienation and misery. Fromm embarks upon a critical analysis of love structures: sexual, parental, fraternal, motherly love, self-love, and love of God. He traces our historical progression from the unconditional love represented in our early matriarchal deities to the conditional love of our wrathful patriarchal sky gods. Eventually we grasp a universal truth that radiates from within. Don’t cringe: Fromm says, „Having spoken of the love of God, I want to make it clear that I myself do not think in terms of a theistic concept. ... The concept of God is only a historically conditioned one, in which man has expressed his experience of his higher powers, his longing for truth and for unity at any given historical moment.“

Although mired in cranky old Marxian polemics, *The Art of Loving* will appeal to our nation’s spiritually oriented youth with their instinctive mistrust of organized religion. While Fromm is

guilty of a snobbery toward popular culture typical of some Frankfurt Boys, his central propositions remain valid and timely. Of course, the high-minded 120-page manifesto is steeped in much of the dopey hetero-speak of Fromm’s day. Still, the young casualties of aborted boomer marriages and their wounded parents will find in Fromm both a love letter to the human race and practical guidelines for living more deeply and fully. I’ve spent months trying to learn how to love someone without wanting to shoot him up my arm—how to be loved without being taken hostage. After a lifetime of viewing love as something I do in between deadlines, at the end of a shot and beer, I had to find another way. Like the Moonglows, Fromm makes a fine mentor.

Unlike the theories in most self-help literature, Fromm’s are historically rooted, philosophical, macro-analytic, moving gracefully between the personal, the political, and the metaphysical. He demystifies our prevailing notions of love as a „chemical reaction“ or something that „just happens.“ A radical theory of human loving seeks first to abolish the old way of thinking, to kill it off at the root. If love is to be practiced as an art, Fromm contends, it demands discipline, concentration, patience, and a „supreme concern with mastery.“ Like any other art, love must be perfected on a daily basis. It requires much more than a manicure, a pedicure, and a douche. The idea of taking on yet another job in our already overextended, frantic lives may seem daunting, even dull. Fromm offers us a powerful but simple program for sobriety in love. One day at a time, we can get back to paradise, if we are willing to do the work.