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ERICH FROMM : THE CONSTANT NORTH

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Twelve years ago, a few months after Erich Fromm's death on March 16, 1980, some of us here met at the White Institute to remember for each other the meaning that Erich had for our lives. Much has happened since, and that meeting of our grief, and honor and love seems a long time ago. Yet the living presence of Erich Fromm, his teachings, enthusiasms and encouragement to be one's self, goes on.

There is scarcely a day that I don't think of something he said or did. The art of living is in the details and thus I recall accompanying Erich on one of his daily walks to the flower market in Locarno where Erich went to buy fresh flowers for his apartment, stopping to talk with townspeople along the way. When ^{I am} dismayed about something, I recall Erich saying how much people fretted about problems rather than enjoying what they could.

It was Erich who taught the importance of consciously adopting an appreciative attitude. He also taught that there is no cure without a struggle, and that halfway measures are useless. Act on your convictions, he would say, and don't hold back. "You can't have one foot in the cage and one out", he said.

While freedom, spontaneity and love are the goals of psychoanalysis according to Fromm, they are the attributes of a healthy life and can't be pursued directly. Fromm believed that one has first to be in the active process of a life that is going well, and then these goals are experienced as part of that process, a process that should not be delayed.

And so he was not one to spare the pain and spoil the analysis. But neither was he the austere figure some saw him to be. Because he spoke plainly and directly, some took offense. In analysis, Fromm sought to mobilize the other's energies to encounter life's difficulties with a strength that might be drained by reassurance. I remember him doing this forthrightly and always with compassion.

I first heard of Erich Fromm in 1949 when, newly arrived in New York, I read Escape From Freedom. It hit me like a bombshell, making sense of the world. That book was prelude to my studies in psychology and psychoanalysis, and put me on the path that would some day bring me into collegial friendship with the man who most inspired my life and career. For me, he provided a steady frame of reference. His views on society, psychoanalysis and the revolutionary character who challenged conformity in the search for his authentic self, helped shape a sense of direction for this young graduate student. Reading Fromm's work, I felt then like the "restless needle held by the constant north," as the Scottish poet J.S. Hendry once wrote of a treasured relationship.

Erich was always interested, and sometimes active, in politics. He was a founder of SANE and in the forefront of the campaign to halt nuclear bomb testing in the atmosphere. He delighted when someone he cared for chose not to escape from freedom but to stand up to coercive social forces, like the philosophers Adam Schaff in Poland and Mihailo Marković and Gajo Petrović in Yugoslavia who risked their lives in political protest. I once met Petrović in Zagreb and he described how much Fromm's encouragement meant to him.

As a teacher of psychoanalysis, Fromm provided a liberating atmosphere in the way that he took a new look at psychoanalytic concepts. For example, he referred to transfer^{ence} as the major problem in living. He felt that Freud's concept was too narrow, and mechanistic. At bottom, he said, "transference expresses a need for someone to take over one's life and give unconditional love." As data, so-called transference difficulties are what is most valuable in analysis, he said, "because such distortions capture the living past as it breaks into the present. When this happens, the person may learn directly how early conflicts are acted out in the present."

The request for today's presentation was to provide an oral history portrait of Erich Fromm, to tell what he was like and not describe his theories that we've all read about. I could continue with general descriptions or relate certain personal and painful experiences. Since playing it safe, especially in front of this group, would not be in Fromm's spirit, I will give an example of Fromm at work. It was some time ago, but remains



It is true that Erich could be quite reserved about personal matters, but in the therapeutic exchange, in seminars and with close friends he was open and spontaneous. Many of us who worked with him deeply appreciated his warmth, close listening and incisive observations. For those who shrugged off responsibility, however, Erich had little patience, as when he once ordered an ill-prepared presenter in a seminar to discontinue his case presentation.

His vigor and liveliness are legend and many of us here will recall how energized we felt after being with him. In fact, it was a common complaint that after being boosted by him into a higher-energy orbit, we would return to our offices and shock our patients with unexpected jolts of get-up-and-go, although not being Fromm it was hard to sustain this thrust. When I remarked on this to Erich he said with a smile, "Well, what I say here is to be titrated by a factor of 10 before you respond to your patients."

Erich was a connoisseur of the good time. He relished a fine cigar and loved to eat well. A generous host, he enjoyed putting out a lavish spread during his weekend seminars on Riverside Drive. He truly liked to celebrate. When, in the summer of 1974, I brought a psychology class to Locarno to teach with Erich a three-week seminar, Erich organized a party for the students with folk-singing, dancing and a brilliant buffet table. The next week the students reciprocated, taking over a local cafe. Before long, it was Erich who kept calling for more wine. His ebullient spirit resonated with the students' excitement.

unforgettable. At the time, I was struggling with family and personal concerns, supporting a young family and trying to launch a private practice.

Erich had observed that I had criticized him so indirectly as to indicate hostility. In a group situation I ventured an interpretation of a dream at odds with Fromm's view. Later, in an analytic session, he formulated a good deal about my behavior. First, he noted that my soft-pedaling the issue assumed he required such gentle treatment, rather than a direct disagreement which he would have appreciated. Second, he saw me as trying not to offend, thus holding on to his approval, a kind of bribery. Third, and most important, he said that one must take chances, speak directly, and take the risk of offending the other when you believe that you have the right content.

When you put your ideas across softly, he said, it loses any effectiveness. He quoted from Corinthians (chapter 4, verse 8): "For if the trumpet gives an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle?"

Erich knew just how difficult it is to change something in one's life and once said in a seminar: "Look, small changes are no good. They just fade away. It's like repairing a few houses in a slum. This doesn't do much."

In therapy, Erich did not mince words and some of what he said felt devastating. Once after a session, he asked how I felt and I said, with some surprise, that I felt a little better. He remarked that getting in touch with the truth about oneself is healing. I reflected, and said that actually I felt a lot better. He asked, "Why didn't you say so?" I replied that I didn't know why I'd hedged. He laughed: "You're not yet ready to let

go of your suffering."

The morning after a particularly rough session, I saw Fromm again, and told him I thought I'd learned a lot after a hard night's reflection. Instead of the acknowledgement that I'd hoped for, he asked pointedly: "Well, what have you done about it?" I said that it's just been a few hours. He repeated his question: "What have you done about it?"

This unexpected question had a tonic impact. It maintained a sense of urgency to get things done, not let time slip by, but to act and live with an intensity of spirit. What was so stimulating about Erich was his vision of how one could live, without illusions of oneself or others, increasing one's scope of freedom and always learning. "No one is ever a finished product," he said. He didn't waste time philosophizing. "Philosophy is only useful," he said, "if it teaches you something about how to live." In the process of learning, he urged, form your own convictions, values and direction and live by them. Without this, he said, people had no idea of who they truly were and could be easily victimized.

During analysis, I found Fromm to have the unusual combination of two temperaments; he could be infinitely patient when it was necessary, and impatient and pressing, when that tempo was necessary. I recall him saying that when parents are destructive, one should become indifferent to them and not let them deflect you from your commitments. A scholar of the New Testament as well as of the Old, he suggested I read St. Luke. I found the

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passage he referred to:

"And He said unto another, Follow Me. But he said, Lord, suffer me first to go and bury my father. Jesus said unto him, let the dead bury the dead : but go thou and preach the kingdom of God."

In this spirit Fromm would urge a person not to delay putting new awareness in action. He would often ask: "What are you going to do about this? How will you go about changing this?" I'd had analysis before but nothing had the wallopp of the encounters with Fromm. I thought that one would either sink or swim in therapy with him. He would never give up; nor would I.

Two years later, he commented on a lengthy dream I had:

"This dream indicates that subtle changes are going on within yourself. After getting over the temptation of seeking powerful father figures *you find* the answer to how to save yourself. Here you are capable of enjoying *this new approach* in all its richness. You are on your own and on the way to yourself."

He went on: " It is a message from yourself to yourself not to depend, not to grab, but to be active and alive. This is not just a wish-fulfilling dream in Freud's sense because you can experience the *new approach* and that you can give yourself the message of what you need, shows that you do not only have a wish but that you are in a fruitful process."

Fromm's approach sparks hope because it mobilizes the patient's healthy strivings, and summons and develops his courage.

I think that Edward S. Tauber described Fromm's approach to psychoanalysis best when he wrote of Fromm:

"The analyst is not waiting, figuring things out, cautiously weighing what the patient can tolerate because, Fromm regretfully asserts, most delays are in the service of the therapist's anxiety anyway. The therapist should reveal by his own genuine interest, dedication, openness, and true participation that there is an urgency to grasp life, to live, to search, and to dare uncertainty."

This is how I remember Erich Fromm.