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Interview with Richard Heffner

Erich Fromm
(1965f-e)

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Interviewer: Why do you think so many of our young people are cynical today?

Fromm: Because they feel that between 1914 and today there have been many good ideas, many good intentions, yet the world gets worse and worse. I’m convinced that good intentions are dangerous, because they often befog the issues and make one feel sufficiently good to go on with bad acts.

Interviewer: In my radio and TV programs, I find almost invariably a tendency on the part of the speaker to be overly optimistic. Is this dangerous?

Fromm: Very dangerous. I usually try to impress on my students, without too much success, I gather, that there is *nothing more* dangerous to a patient than to be encouraging. If a person wants to change, wants to get well, he needs to mobilize all his vital energies, and he can mobilize them *only* if he sees how serious the situation is. If, on the other hand, I try to be „encouraging“ and to make him feel „Well, things aren’t so bad, and everything will be all right,“ and so on, I paralyze him; I take away from him the most important thing he has, and that is the ability to act in an emergency situation. When people see the situation is clearly one of emergency, they have energies they never dreamed they had, because it’s finally clear to them what’s at stake. But to most people, it’s not clear what’s at stake in their personal life at any given moment. I’m afraid that holds true for political life, too.

We always say, „Things are not so bad,“ „Things are all right,“ „Things can get better,“ until the moment when we find ourselves, as people say these days, „involved“--as if it had nothing to do with our own decision.

Interviewer: But don’t people believe that fear immobilizes?

Fromm: Well, fear as such might immobilize; but if it is not fear that is engendered but a clear recognition--“This is the fork of the road,“ „These are my two alternatives,“ „I walk either here or there“--then, indeed, I think it is part of human nature to try to save life, one’s own life; to try that which either physically or mentally preserves life. Otherwise, there would be no hope for any kind of therapy or for positive action or for any



change. Most people fail in life because they never see where or when they have to make a decision; they *think* only when it's too late.

Interviewer: You say „fail in life.“ You mean in the larger sense?

Fromm: Yes, indeed. I don't mean in a job. I mean in the *most* important thing or the *only* important thing in which one can fail, and that is in living. I really believe the aim of life is freedom. Now, I don't like the word „freedom“ any more, because it has been so misused these days. We call „free“ any nation that is politically allied with us. That seems to be the only criterion, so I would rather use the word „independence,“ and would mean, by independence, the capacity of a person to owe his existence to himself, to think himself, to feel himself, authentically, genuinely, and not to *think* feelings without *having* feelings--in all fields of life, in love, in art, in everything.

Interviewer: What do you mean, „think feelings“?

Fromm: Well, what I mean is this. You find, let us say, a person who is indoctrinated to believe that modern art or modern music is beautiful. Now, I am not a specialist in these fields, so I'm not saying they aren't--they just don't happen to be for me. But you do find very often people who are brainwashed, indoctrinated, so they see a piece of abstract art and think it is very impressive, or very beautiful, or heaven knows what. While actually if you could find out what they *really* feel--they feel nothing, but they *think* they feel something.

Now, the same thing holds true, let us say, in marriages. People are indoctrinated to think that if two people are married, have children, don't quarrel, the man isn't unfaithful--which these days seems to be a rather rare phenomenon--they love each other, because they have been told that, provided all these things are present, it is love. What you might find in reality is that they feel *nothing*. They have a kind of friendly feeling you might have toward a stranger. This has been shown in some psychological experiments.

I think it is very important to differentiate between what is an authentic feeling and what is a *thought* about a feeling, and there are an awful lot of people today who think they feel something but don't feel anything.

Interviewer: A couple of times you have said „now“ and „today.“ Do you think we more frequently think feelings today than we did before?

Fromm: Yes, I do. It's hard to prove, of course, and I'm not claiming that this is a new phenomenon; but it is quite clear that today there is more indoctrination culturally, there are more books and more lectures that tell you what you ought to feel than in the past, and therefore people know better what they're supposed to feel. If you took a still relatively simple {133} peasant community which doesn't have so much access to all our media of communication, you would find that people are less indoctrinated as to what they are supposed to feel, and therefore many of their feelings are more genuine.

Interviewer: But there isn't any way out of this, is there? Isn't this a phenomenon that



will just increase in intensity?

Fromm: Well, look, if this increases in intensity, we will end up in a mad house. We are already at the point where most people don't know what they feel, and that means they don't know who they are.

Interviewer: Do you see any possibility that this trend can be reversed?

Fromm: Yes, I do. I very definitely do, and I have faith in it. People are getting tired of the sense of meaninglessness of life; of the sense that they are little automatons; of the sense that they have really nothing to say about their own lives; of trying to save time and then kill it; of trying to be a success and, when reaching what they want-with the very few exceptions of creative people-of feeling „So what? What has been the meaning?“ I should like to quote the Old Testament, which says, „They have lacked in joy in the midst of plenty.“ And I think that is what could be said about ourselves. I personally believe this is sin.

Now, how can it be reversed? In the first place, people will react to it. The human individual, the human society, reacts to things that are bad. Just as a body, in fact, reacts against poisons or stuff that damages it. Somebody has to be very sick if his body doesn't react any more. Then it's hopeless.

And maybe we are hopeless. But I don't think so, because I see, on the other hand, signs of great vitality in our society, especially in the United States. We see a great deal of spontaneity, of searching, of freedom, of lack of intimidation; we see a young generation searching for things, being anxious to have answers that are not traditional answers.

Interviewer: Obviously, though, the change must take place on the individual level.

Fromm: I think so. The individual must consider living more important than anything else. But most people wouldn't even know what I'm talking about when I talk of living. Of *being*.

Interviewer: They would interpret it in terms of success. In terms of material things.

Fromm: Exactly. It is an interesting thing, you know, that in the use of the verbs „to have“ and „to be,“ people talk in terms of „I have.“ For instance, people say, „I have insomnia,“ instead of saying, „I cannot sleep.“ „I have a problem,“ instead of saying, „I am unhappy.“ And they have, of course, a car and children and a house and a psychoanalyst; but everything is expressed in terms of „I have“ connected with a noun, and not in terms of „to be“ connected with a verb.

You can find a tremendous shift in our language from the emphasis on verbs to the emphasis on nouns in terms of „I have.“ This is an example of alienation. There is no such thing as a problem or a neurosis or freedom. I suffer, I have difficulties in living-well, you couldn't even say I am free, but I am freeing myself. I am liberating myself, because this is a process. But to talk about nations that *have* freedom, people who *have* freedom is just like talking about people who have cars. „To have“ makes sense in terms



of things, but it doesn't make sense in terms of people. In terms of people, the question is „to be,“ and to experience life, there is being. Now, people today don't experience life as *being* but as *having* something, because our whole system is centering around what one can buy and what one has.

Interviewer: How does one help a young person, a child, experience life as „being“ rather than „having“?

Fromm: In the first place, of course, by example. Now, what do I mean by example? What can a mother do? Not being phony. Being realistic. Being honest. Not expressing feelings that are not authentic. Not gushing, „Isn't that wonderful?“ Not listening to some nonsense or to some triviality and saying, „Isn't that fine?“--which teaches the child, from the very beginning, that really one can or one should indulge in these phony feelings. Being oneself. Not smiling when one doesn't feel like smiling. Not expressing admiration for this, that or the other when one doesn't feel like it.

In fact, I should like to say one thing: Most children are born with faith. The faith that Mother will nurse them when they are thirsty, that Mother will cover them when they are cold, that Mother will comfort them when they have pain. This is the original faith. I am not so convinced of original sin, but I *am* convinced of original *faith*, because otherwise a child could not live. If mothers nursed their children only when they were good, most children would die.

Now comes a peculiar period in the life of a child--and it's not only one event--namely, that which you might call the shattering of faith. The child discovers for the first time that Mother lies. Mother lies not only with words but also with her face. The child sees Mother greet Mrs. So-and-So and smile all over and gush all over her, and then {213} Mrs. So-and-So goes, and Mother says something very nasty about her. Now, we adults more or less take lying for granted; but we don't appreciate enough what a shattering experience it is for the child--what a discovery it is for the child--when for the first time he hears people lie.

Then comes the question: How does the child react to this shattering of the original faith? Let us say the positive reaction is if the child then becomes more critical and yet keeps his faith in a critical way. Now, this faith can be expressed in religious terms, in human terms. But some children never recover, because they get one blow after the other. They eventually end in complete hopelessness or in complete cynicism. The hopelessness sometimes is covered up by phony hope, phony optimism. And sometimes it is plain cynicism. That is what we see in many of the young generation, in many of our beatniks, in many of our delinquents. They are frankly cynical.

Now, what a mother can do is to be very aware of this problem--of the original faith of the child--and try to act so as not to create in the child a feeling that nothing can be relied on.

Interviewer: The child is going to meet lies, whether at the breast of the mother or far from it. How does one prepare a child for the rest of the world?

Fromm: Well, that is a crucial question, and it would take probably several volumes to answer it. In the first place, it is a question of how much faith the mother and the father



have themselves. Faith, I believe, is a character trait. Let me explain what I mean. I have asked many people, „Do you know any people you would be absolutely sure couldn't do certain things? Let us say, they couldn't harm a person in any serious way for the sake of a material advantage. Do you know anyone you would be absolutely certain wouldn't do that?“

Many people say, „Well, I cannot be *absolutely* certain. Ninety-nine per cent--it's very unlikely, but how can I ever be certain about it?“ These are people without faith, because if one really has understood the essence of another person, then there are always some people of whom one could be absolutely certain, as certain as one is of anything that obeys the law of nature.

Now, that I call faith. On what is love based except on faith? How can you love a person unless you are certain this is he or she? How can you love unless you are certain of yourself? There is a very pertinent sentence of Nietzsche's I think touches on this problem. Nietzsche once defined man as the animal who can make promises. What does it mean to make a promise? I am certain of myself. I know that five years from now I shall be the same person I am now. Naturally, we all change and we all develop, and yet there are certain things that remain permanent.

Interviewer: You said that having faith is a matter of character. What gives one person that character? Why does one person have faith and another person not?

Fromm: Well, it may have something to do with constitutional elements, like everything else.

Interviewer: What do you mean by constitutional elements?

Fromm: Constitutional elements are what we call temperaments--habitual moods of a person which are characteristic for him and are constitutionally given, with which he is born.

Interviewer: Have you always felt as firmly as you do now about the constitutional elements?

Fromm: No, I haven't. Actually, I must say about thirty years ago, if I had listened to myself talking now, I would have labeled myself as a real reactionary to put so much attention on constitution, because I would have thought, „Well, that means he doesn't really believe in the possibility of improvement of the human race.“ But I have changed my view in various aspects.

In my analytical work, I have convinced myself that people are different not only because of their experiences in life or their environment. I believe that environment, especially the experience in the early years, makes a great deal of difference; but, nevertheless, I think it is dishonest if I claim that two people, one of whom is very sick and one of whom is relatively normal, are the way they are because of their environment only.

Interviewer: I wonder, as a father, do I want my sons to be trustful, then be hurt? To



create this new person who will, we hope, be more trustful, less cynical, more hopeful, to what extent does a parent prepare a child for what he will find? {214}

Fromm: Well, I would say we are talking here about a basic decision, what one would call a religious decision—namely, the choice between God and Caesar. Now, I don't belong to any religion, and I am a non-believer in any theological sense. However, I find myself very often in a profound understanding with liberal Jesuit priests, because we share a common concern that what matters is man's soul and that if he loses his soul, no riches he gains will serve him.

I think modern parents often don't make up their minds, and of course not only modern parents. Parents have failed to all the time. Otherwise, we would live in a different world. The really important thing in life is to sacrifice certain, or to risk certain, worldly goods, to risk certain worldly advantages, in order to be fully alive, to be fully developed. What matters is to be much and not to have much.

I would like my children, in the first place, to have the deepest insight, the greatest courage, as much love as anyone could have, and to be able to risk that they might, in the worldly sense, not fare so well. I talk often with students, young people, and they say, well, that's all very nice, but if we acted that way, we would starve.

And I usually answer that I think this is a great underestimation of the United States. We may come to that point, which is the point of a dictatorship; but I hope we don't. Somebody could write a very interesting doctoral thesis with the title: „How and to what extent and in what places can honest men succeed in the United States in 1965?“ And I am not joking.

Interviewer: Suppose I were writing my doctoral dissertation on the subject you suggest. In what areas do you think one would find the greatest capacity for an honest man to be happy?

Fromm: Well, I could say in what areas one wouldn't, and there I would talk about some very sensitive points. As, for instance, the areas of the communications industry, of the entertainment industry, which showed themselves to be very easily frightened in the McCarthy times. I would say, on the other hand, the skilled worker, the good professional—whether he is a surgeon or any other professional—anyone who offers services that are useful and necessary has an opportunity to be honest and happy. In services that are easily expendable and are controlled by people who are interested only in their profit, the opportunity is less, naturally.

The tendency toward development of big corporations makes my positive view a little less promising. Last year, I gave a seminar for middle executives of some big corporations, and I asked them, „How much freedom do you really have?“ And most of them said, “Oh, all the freedom. Of course, we wouldn't say things that are unpleasant, or this, that, or the other, but we have all the freedom.“ After the seminar—it was before the election—one of the executives came to me and opened his coat and showed me inside his coat a Johnson button.

Interviewer: Inside his coat.



Fromm: Yes, inside his coat. He said, „Well, I just wanted to show you what degree of freedom I have in my corporation.“ Now, these people are not aware that they don't have enough, that they don't have much freedom, and I don't know, frankly, whether there is a terrific amount of difference between being an engineer in a Russian state-owned factory or in one of our big corporations, with regard to how much they permit themselves to think and feel things they're not supposed to.

Some people, for instance, if they are serious about their independence, and at the same time not wanting to starve, may think of becoming artisans, of doing any number of things in which they are not controlled by an opinion climate that tells them what to say, what not to say. It's true that the areas in which people can express their individuality and can be nonconformist and yet not suffer are narrowing down. Now, here I come to a point that refers to a question you asked before--what can we do?

I think we can try to create sufficient public opinion against the idea that people have to conform in their dress and their hats and their opinions in order to make a good car or a good computer. This is simply not so. We should wake up to the fact that one can produce very successfully even if people don't conform. But all this depends on one thing, whether we really mean what we talk about all the time. We talk about freedom. We talk about individualism. We talk about the values of the Western tradition. Now we must challenge ourselves and ask: Is all this really important to us? If so, then let's do something about it, and if it's not, let's stop talking about it.

Interviewer: This, I would presume, is what the parent can do with the child--to give an example of self-examination, to ask himself, at least within the bosom of his family, if he really means what he says.

Fromm: Exactly. For instance, one of the most important things is whether the child believes the parent means what he says. There are some parents who carry inner authority. You immediately notice or sense that they mean what they say. What they say comes from within. Then you have other people who talk from the head. They talk words.

Now, children have a much more acute feeling for that than adults have, and I have seen parents, with inner authority, whose children are well-disciplined and well-behaved without their ever raising their voices or any spanking or any punishment, because their children know what they want and that they mean what they say.

I am afraid most parents don't know what they want and don't mean what they say, because they have no convictions. In fact, many parents in America today try to learn from their children what's right and wrong because it's the latest. Now, I think here begins a very important thing. What authenticity, what genuineness does a child experience in his environment?

Let me mention a study that has been made in which parents and their schizophrenic children were assembled. The parents were asked to do nothing but talk. Well, these parents talked, and what became apparent was the mood of complete emptiness. I don't mean small talk, which is, you might say, a matter of civilized life, of having some human contact that is not heavily weighted.

But what you find is that many people--well, I have seen many couples who have talked, who have really talked to each other for the first time *only* when they talk divorce. Then they were, for the first time, real--while until then, for twenty years, let us



say, they avoided intimacy. People *think* they want intimacy; but actually they avoid it all the time, because in order to confront another person with intimacy, you have to be willing to show yourself and to be yourself, to shed that image you like to protect.

It requires a certain readiness to see oneself as one is and to see another person. It requires even a certain sense, I would say, of humanity, to let a person be and to let oneself be, without being indignant or over tolerant.

Interviewer: Do you think our inability to say, „This is me and this is you“ is partially the reason for the high divorce rate in the United States?

Fromm: I think it is. I think people avoid each other in the first place.

Interviewer: Avoid?

Fromm: Avoid each other. Look. What happens is, I think, if two people fall in love, that's a wonderful, very exhilarating experience, because two strangers suddenly become intimate. But they become intimate only from being strangers to *not* being strangers. Once they have ceased {215} to be strangers, they are strangers again.

At first, it's physical intimacy, which is very exhilarating, but has its limits as something that makes people intimate. There is nothing more deceptive than physical, sexual intimacy. It's notorious that many people, men and women, can have sex relationships with many other people and never be intimate with anyone. It's a momentary breaking down of barriers, but not necessarily depth of contact. I think that leads to many divorces, because people believe they haven't found the right person, rather than seeing it is a failure in their way of communicating with the person. They will never find the right person.

I think it has also to do, actually, with our consumption society. You buy a new car every second year, and you get yourself a new wife or husband every fifth year, always thinking the new model is better. Well, that is the logic of a consumer industry, in which you want to have something new because you are not really related to anything or anybody.

Interviewer: You started by talking about falling in love. Does this phrase have any meaning?

Fromm: Well, it's an unfortunate phrase, in a way, because even falling in love is characteristic for this whole mood. Falling is not standing, and if you take our American phrase „he falls“ -or „she falls“ for someone, what a fantastic phrase this is, to fall for someone. It is the abandonment of judgment; of realism, for an illusion. It's a, particular kind of idolatry, where you suddenly build a picture of something wonderful. Only when you come to your senses, you see this was all not so. Then you start talking to the lawyers. But it may take some time-one year, two years, three years, five years.

Now, I am not talking against divorce. I think if two people cannot live happily together, they'd better separate, and especially it's better for the children. I have seen many people who have the idea they cannot separate because of the children. Now, that is usually an excuse for reasons of their own why they can't separate. I remember



one man who said he just couldn't destroy his ten-year-old boy's belief in his happy marriage, and that's why he couldn't divorce, although he and his wife were fighting every day, wildly. Finally, the boy said to him, „You know, Dad, I don't know how you can stand to live with that woman. I would have left her long ago.“ Well, that shattered that reason for not getting a divorce. Divorce is very often as much of an illusion as marriage is—namely, it's the illusion that it is the wrong partner, when actually it's the wrong attitude of both people, who avoid intimacy, who cannot experience intimacy, and who then think another object will do.

Interviewer: Do you think it is possible to love someone without having spent considerable time, perhaps even years, with that person? *Fromm:* It depends on the depth with which one person experiences another person. This is in itself a very interesting psychological phenomenon—what one person experiences of another person. Let us take one extreme. A man looks at a girl who looks like the latest Hollywood model, and he is mostly impressed by her legs or something else or by her figure. This is the girl every man would like to have, and so he feels very attracted. She may be dumb, she may be vicious, she may be anything, or she may be very nice; but he is not interested in all that, because his attention is drawn to only one sector, if I may say so, of--

Interviewer: The public sector.

Fromm: Of this girl. That is an extreme case. Let us say he could see the same girl, and while she has all these qualities, he could see she is really a terribly boring girl, and after six months, he cannot stand her; or he could see she's a very sad girl. This is only one example of what I mean. If we really ask how do we experience each other, then we have thousands of layers of depth of experience.

Interviewer: To get back to this question of loving as related to marriage. I have felt so often that in your books you seem to be saying that loving is not related to marriage; it is something else. And I wonder whether it even makes very much sense, in your thinking, to talk about love and marriage in the same breath.

Fromm: Well, there is certainly a fact that many marriages are not based on love.

Interviewer: You say many. Do you mean most or a few or--

Fromm: Well, I'm afraid I would have to say most. There are no statistics, but I think most so-called good marriages, those that avoid the divorce courts, are marriages in which two people have found a common interest, don't dislike each other, are decent to each other, and have a common interest in their children, but no very intense or deep feeling. The question here really is how deeply and intensely a person feels things that have nothing to do with business.

That leads me back to what I was talking about: how one experiences other people. Does one see only the first layer, the most superficial layer? Does one see another layer—a little deeper? How far does one go? What does one see? Or does one see the person essentially as being nice because he doesn't dislike me? Or as being nice because he is



successful? Or as being wonderful if he's very successful? What of the other human being do we really perceive and what of ourselves do we really perceive? There are many degrees to which we become aware of what is real in ourselves.

Perhaps I should say a word about the whole concept of what is psychoanalysis. There is no such thing as the unconscious. That's a sheer abstraction. I may have a cellar in my house, but I don't have an unconscious. What it really means to be aware of the unconscious is to see the full reality of another person and of myself. That is to say, to see *that which is hidden*. Knowledge is nothing but seeing. Most people have an idea that knowledge is information. If I go to the university, if I go to lectures, if I read things, then I have knowledge. That's not knowledge. Knowledge is what I acquire by penetrating actively through a surface and seeing some thing to which I was blind before, which I didn't see before.

That's why the artist has such an {216} important function in human society. He helps us see a reality, a deep reality within a person, which, with the superficial eye of common sense, we wouldn't otherwise see.

Interviewer: Doctor Fromm, from time to time you have made what might be interpreted as hostile, unfriendly, cutting remarks about psychoanalysis. I'm a little bit surprised. I wonder if you would elaborate.

Fromm: Well, yes. I'm a little embarrassed, really, because it sounds rather nasty, being a psychoanalyst, making these cutting remarks about psychoanalysis. Analysis is one of the greatest discoveries for the understanding of man. However, under the impact of its success—namely, of being a new, you might say, substitute for religion—it's becoming a fashion.

I'm afraid many psychoanalysts have failed to live up to the seriousness and to the challenge of their task, and I speak sometimes cuttingly of psychoanalysis as one might speak cuttingly of that which one loves very much, because I am sensitive to the misuses of analysis.

Interviewer: What kind of misuses?

Fromm: Well, people who think that if they talk long enough they will be happy, that one can get happy by talking for five years. Nobody gets happy by talking. One gets happy only—if one gets happy at all, and that's difficult enough—by making a tremendous effort. Analysis has very often, in the urban population, become a substitute for religious interest, philosophical interest, political interest. The analyst replaces the priest. Here you have a man who listens if you pay him for it. One feels less lonely.

But there is a legitimate analysis, which helps one find who one is; discover what is real in oneself and in others; see where one has been blind; enlarge one's sensitivity; relieve a wrong sense of guilt, which is often nothing but fear; and maybe evoke a greater sense of one's responsibility.

Interviewer: Could you define your idea of a „responsible“ person?

Fromm: A responsible person is a person who responds, who responds as a human be-



ing, as a full-fledged human being, to what he is confronted with. Let us say a mother responds to the needs of her child. That's not difficult, because it is partly in the nature of the mother. Most mothers are responsible mothers, because they respond. With a teacher, it's more difficult, because very often he does not respond to the needs of his students, because he only does his duty, and that is to teach them certain things the administrators said he should teach them.

As citizens, we should respond to the political situation or the social situation. I often think in terms of sentences you find in the Prophets: „The lion hath roared, who will not fear? The Lord God hath spoken, who can but prophesy?“ This is response. Fear is a response to danger. Responsibility is not to force a person. Responsibility is not false encouragement. Responsibility is to respond spontaneously to the situation, truthfully, realistically, to say what one thinks, what one feels, and then to leave the other person free, free even to do what's bad for him.

Interviewer: How do you teach your students the ability, shall we say, to respond?

Fromm: I usually say to my students, „If you really learn to concentrate on what the patient says and learn to respond, this is one of the most exiting professions one can have. But if you don't learn that, you will be so bored to death that you will regret for the rest of your lives that you have ever taken this profession.“

Interviewer: By responding, do you mean by being directional?

Fromm: No, no, no, not at all. I mean getting wet by what the patient says, by understanding it fully, by listening with such a concentration that you don't just think, you feel in yourself, you experience in yourself, every situation the patient describes, and then you respond with your skill. By responding, I don't mean you tell him what to do. You tell him what you hear. You tell him, „So this is you.“

Interviewer: How much have you changed your mind about Freud's theories?

Fromm: Early in my practice, I found that certain things in Freudian theory--especially the libido theory--really were not right. But there is only one thing about which I believe Freud was completely wrong, and that is the psychology of women.

Interviewer: How was he wrong?

Fromm: Well, because he had the fantastic idea that libido was masculine, that women were castrated men.

He had no concept of the polarity between male and female, because he was such a convinced patriarchal man that he couldn't imagine the equality between male and female, and really his whole theory about women--that all they want is to be men, and that they are afraid of castration, and all that--is just an example of what I would call the war propaganda of the ruling masculine sex

The war between the sexes has been going on for several thousand years, and men's propaganda about it is just as silly as war propaganda. Men say women are less



courageous; it's notorious that they are more courageous. That they are less realistic; it's notorious that they are more realistic. Women are more concerned with the question of war and peace than men are.

Interviewer: Apparently you believe there are very basic differences between men and women besides the obvious physical ones.

Fromm: Well, I think there are characterological differences, thank God, and personality differences between men and women, because if they were not there--where would Eros be? Then the difference would amount only to an anatomical and physiological difference, which I guess is, to a large extent all the difference we find today in the United States. Not only in the United States. In modern industrial society, there is a tremendous neutralization of Eros--that is to say, of the passion to unite the two poles--and what we find instead is the substitution of sheer sexuality for Eros.

Interviewer: Will you elaborate on that?

Fromm: Well, what I mean is that the basic polarity, the most fundamental polarity, in life is the polarity between male and female, whether in flowers or in animals or in man. That's just how nature is.

Now, there is always the problem of how polarity is met and I think there are only three possibilities. First, the two poles unite, and in this union they become one at least for the moment. They resolve their polarity in the act of union--that's what I call Eros. Or, second, the two poles cannot unite. They still want each other, but they are too afraid or too hostile to unite, and then you have all the many forms of hate and fear that exist between the two sexes.

What we find in modern industrial culture is the third possibility--the two poles tend to neutralize each other. The characterological difference between the male and female personalities is reduced as much as possible, so that the only difference is the obvious physiological, anatomical difference. Thus men and women relate to each other only sexually, and I think this is one reason sex has become so central.

Interviewer: You mean because it's the only level on which we can relate?

Fromm: Yes, and also by which the male-female differences can be expressed.

Interviewer: When you speak of the characterological difference, what do you mean?

Fromm: Obviously, we all feel that there is a difference. We could say the woman normally has a receiving quality, a motherly quality, a {217} natural, a quality of being, let us say, more natural, and the man has more of a penetrating, aggressive quality.

I have written an article that deals with some of the characterological differences between men and women, based on their anatomical and physiological differences--for instance, the physiological difference of the sexual act. The man has to "perform," and the woman doesn't--this can create in the man a greater insecurity, a vague fear of failure, and a greater sensitivity to ridicule.



The woman never has to prove anything, except in very primitive countries, where she has to prove something by having children. So in a more primitive country, a childless woman is like an impotent man in our society. But sexually the woman doesn't have to prove anything. The man has to. It's a clear-cut question--it's what the Spaniards call the moment of truth--whether he is or isn't potent.

With a woman, there is no such clear-cut truth. I think that makes a great deal of difference for the constant self-concern of the man--the need to prove himself. Women are by nature much less vain than men are. Women have to be concerned with presenting themselves well, because they are still the defeated sex, and therefore they have to win the men. But actually, from what I have seen, men are more vain, because men basically want to prove something all the time. Now, whether that is so or not is a matter of research, which hasn't been done. But from what I have seen, men are basically more vain or more narcissistic. Freud's notion that women are more narcissistic is deceptive.

Interviewer: Is this the area in which you think Freud was most mistaken?

Fromm: Yes.

Interviewer: What do you see happening in the relationships of the sexes, in terms of what you were saying before? You say a leveling off--

Fromm: I think a leveling off. It has to do with the basic experience that is happening to people--an increasing strangeness, alienation, lack of intimacy, fear of intimacy. Feelings are suspect, strong feelings are suspect of being sentimental, old-fashioned. Actually, we live in a schizoid culture, in which the style and the feeling are very matter-of-fact, very detached, in which you find what is characteristic of real schizophrenia--namely, a good deal of separation between affect and thought.

I should like to give an example. Take a book like Herman Kahn's on atomic war, and other fairly common statements made in discussions about war. They say, „Well, sixty million dead in the first day of nuclear war is acceptable; a hundred million dead would not be acceptable.“ Now, a man can make such a statement only if the thought is separated from the affect, because the thought itself is so horrible one could not talk so-- I won't say glibly, but so quietly about it if one really *felt* what this means. That's what I call schizoid.

We are all matter-of-fact. We think, we are terribly intelligent: we observe, but we don't feel much, and I think that's the style of our culture. It's very dangerous.

Interviewer: Could we turn for a moment to what you think is valid in Freud?

Fromm: I think that all great discoveries of Freud are valid, only they are somewhat too narrow. They need to be freed from the narrow mechanistic, materialistic concept of the libido theory and be translated into a view that takes in account the whole existence of man.

Freud has seen one of the most important phenomena of life in general and in neurosis specifically--the tremendous importance of the tie to the mother. But I think this tie is not primarily a sexual tie. Instead, I see it as a pregenital tie. That is to say, it is a



purely affective, emotional tie. Mother represents for the little child security, certainty, help, admiration. She is all-enveloping, which makes a little child feel „I am here, I am loved, I am protected, I am admired, life has no problems.“ Life has indeed no problems for the little boy who is loved by his mother.

Now, Freud assumes that this is essentially a sexual tie and that it is particularly strong in the life of the little boy, let us say, at the age of five or six. In the first place, I don't believe it's a sexual tie, for one reason: There is nothing more fickle than sexual attachment. But emotional ties are more difficult to dissolve. Sometimes you find conflict between the fickleness of sexual attraction and the firmness of emotional and human attraction. Besides that, there is another element. {218} Freud and Freudians often think that the later life is only a repetition of childhood, and they forget that in many respects the adult needs Mother just as much as a little child does.

The life of the adult is more insecure, because he is more aware of it. He has to make decisions; he is more uncertain; he is more helpless. In many ways, he is a child; in some ways, he isn't. In other words, the adult, too, is afraid of freedom; the adult, too, wants certainty; the adult, too, wants somebody who loves him unconditionally; the adult, too, really wants to get away from the risks of freedom, from the risks of life, and therefore he very easily retains a deep longing for somebody who promises certainty, love, admiration, who doesn't make conditions.

Now, that can be a woman, that can be the church, that can be the state, that can be anything, an idea. All I'm saying is that this intense attachment to Mother which Freud discovered is not primarily a sexual attachment, but follows from the conditions of human existence--that is, from the deep longing for a source of certainty and protection and admiration, which solves the basic human problem, the problem of uncertainty, the fear of freedom, the fear of independence, the fear of being left alone.

Man is the only case in nature where life becomes aware of itself. He must make choices, make decisions, risk failure. He is aware of all that threatens him and eventually of the ultimate reality and certainty that is death.

What can man do to give an answer to this situation? There are only a certain number of ascertainable ways in which man can solve the problem of existence. As an animal, man wants to live; but as a human, he wants to find unity. He wants to overcome a sense of complete separation. He wants to be one with something.

He can do that in two ways--the regressive way or the progressive way. What I call the regressive way is to try to obliterate that which is specifically human, and that is awareness. Mankind has tried that for many hundreds of thousands of years by the obliteration of reason with drugs, alcohol, sexual orgies, and--

Interviewer: The church?

Fromm: No, I don't mean through the church. I think the church has sometimes turned into a new form of idolatry. All religions have. But basically if you take all primitive religions, you find an attempt to solve the problem of human existence by getting rid of that uniquely specific human quality--awareness--and therefore being rid of the conflict that one is in nature and yet *outside* nature.

Interviewer: This is the regressive way.



Fromm: Yes. The progressive way appeared in the history of mankind at a peculiar point all over the world, between 1500 B.C. and 500 B.C., where you find in China, in India, in Egypt, in Palestine and in Greece a new concept, that man could find full unity with the world not by reducing awareness, but by developing his reason and his love to such a point that he could attain a sense of solidarity, of oneness, of harmony with the world.

This aim--to find unity, to overcome separateness by full development of all the human qualities--has been given different names. In China, it has been called Tao. In India, it has been called Nirvana, or enlightenment. The Hebrews called it God; the Greeks have given it a different name, the „unmoved mover.“ Actually, these are different conceptualizations of the same basic aim a new harmony.

Interviewer: How optimistic are you about the ability of the human race to survive in the nuclear age?

Fromm: I am very cheered up by the active interest of many students and many people in foreign policy. But I am not optimistic. But look here. I don't think it is a question of optimism or pessimism.

If one is very sick and the doctor says there's only a five-per-cent chance to live, one does everything under the sun to make use of this five-per-cent chance. And that is my feeling. I am not optimistic at all; but I am alive, and as long as I am alive and I see life around me, I shall not lose my faith that life will prevail and that man can prevail. That doesn't mean I am optimistic. Statistically speaking, I am pessimistic; but I don't think one can approach human affairs with statistical concepts.

Interviewer: Our children today are surrounded by violence on every side. Do you feel that violence is a larger ingredient in our lives now than it was half a century ago, a century ago?

Fromm: Well, it's awfully hard to say. We bring up our children under a lot of violence. I find the violence we see in the movies or on television just disgusting. No pornographic film could possibly be as harmful as the films that portray violence and sadism and that our children look at five, six hours a day. But it all depends on the social class. In many ways life has become for some people more comfortable today and less violent.

Interviewer: Less brutal.

Fromm: Less brutal. It's hard to compare without really studying this very carefully. But take television. Now, if I had children, I would not permit them to look at most of what television offers. I might not even have a television set. I would consider it like a vice, like eating pounds of candy, which I wouldn't permit, either. I would, however, try to give the children enough stimulation so they wouldn't have any urge to look at that fool thing.



Interviewer: You talked of the fickleness of sexual ties. What implication does that have for the potential of maintaining the traditional marriage relationship? Does this mean that infidelity, which seems to be an increasingly dominant factor in American life, will increase, and perhaps should increase, in recognition of what you consider to be the basic biological fickleness of sexual ties? Are we, in recognition of this basic fickleness, hypocritical? You were talking about the damage done to the child by the parents' hypocrisy. Isn't the element of the marriage relationship that insists on fidelity--isn't that an example of hypocrisy?

Fromm: Well, it could be. It all depends on how serious, how close, how strong the real emotional, affective tie is between the two people.

Interviewer: But you distinguished between those ties, those emotional ties, those ties of genuine feeling, and the sexual ties. Now we have traditionally, moralistically attempted to join these, not with the result that our marriages have maintained themselves or that our wives and our husbands have been faithful, but possibly with just the opposite result. So the question I ask you is whether a parent who is trying not to present himself or herself as hypocritical should perhaps inform a child or stress that physical ties, contrary to our traditional moral precepts, are not bound by the same rules that emotional ties--

Fromm: Well, there are several problems. In the first place, I think--and I implied that before--sexuality as such is not a harmful thing. It's an expression of life. So we should not teach our children to be afraid of original sin and especially of sexual expressions, as if they were a sin. Sexual expressions usually--unless they are very perverted in a sadistic way, or so on--express life, and I would say that all that expresses life is of primary value. I could not look from a Victorian, moralistic standpoint at sex as being something sinful or bad.

However, I have my doubts, grave doubts, whether it is a particularly good situation when married people change their sexual partners, for the simple reason that I think this is possible only at the expense of sacrificing a great deal of intimacy. {219} People are not that secure; people are in need of believing in the real interest and love of another person, and I think--I may be old-fashioned--that all the various, all the sexual changes of partner actually prevent depth of feeling and confidence between people.

Few men are really untouched by the fact that their wives sleep with someone else, and few women are untouched by it--there is, in many cases, a lack of sincerity. In many cases, the whole relationship becomes that of a nice friendship, in which also sex loses its intensity, because, all right, so there is a certain amount of sexual pleasure people find with somebody else; but neither is this relationship particularly deep, nor is the relationship with their wives or husbands particularly deep.

Now, in the upbringing of children, I would certainly not be in favor of telling children that sex is bad and sinful; but I would try to teach them that they might experience something of the depth and intensity of a human relation, of a relationship to one other person, without illusions. But I do believe that from a certain age on, when people are married, the enjoyment of the sexual relationship with other people stands in the way of the full development of intimacy between the two people who are married. Now,



you see one might say there isn't too much emotional intimacy in the first place and there should be no objection to their having sexual affairs. I don't think there is an objection. I do think however, that it replaces quality by quantity. That is to say, instead of trying to work out a human relationship, with all its complications and all its depth, and to arrive at a solution, which is a terribly difficult thing as we all know, one avoids that task by having many pleasant relationships, sexual relationships, and thereby being freed from the task of really solving the very difficult problem of two human beings.

Interviewer: Now let's go back again to the youngsters.

Fromm: Well, with the youngsters--the youngsters should learn very well what is a deep, intense relationship between a man and a woman and what is a superficial relationship. I could imagine a girl who wants to have several sexual affairs without being deeply involved in them, because she wants to know something about this aspect of life and wants to know men. Yet she should know that this is different from what could happen between a man and a woman if they try to develop a very deep, intimate, lasting relationship. Now, you might say theoretically, yes, we could develop that, and still one sleeps with one and one sleeps with the other. But I'm afraid this is very rare in practice.

Interviewer: Would you urge youngsters to have sexual activities before marriage?

Fromm: I would not urge them, because I think that's kind of funny, to urge them. Nature urges them enough. You see, this all is connected with a basic question--the love of life and the love of death. My own definition of good and evil would be: Good is all that serves life and enhances life, and evil is all that strangles life and tries to corrupt it or to kill it. The average person loves life to a certain extent--at least, he loves to be alive, and to some extent he loves life. But some people love life more than others, and I don't mean loving life in the sense of not wanting to die, but loving life in the sense of loving all that is alive, whether it is a child or a tree or a flower or a thought.

In contrast to that, there are the people who are fascinated by death, by all that is not alive, by all that is decaying, all that is dead, all that is dirty, all that is unalive--and, I would add, all that is only mechanical. You find people who come to life only when they talk about death and illness.

You find mothers who are interested in their children only when the children are sick. You find people who are most interested in burials or most interested, when they read the newspaper, in reading the death notices. You find that in dreams, their dreams of feces, of destruction, of blood, of dismembered bodies, and, in fact, people in whom that is very marked are severely sick people.

I believe that the normal instinct is the attraction toward life and to life. But many people--I don't know how many my private guess is about twenty per cent--are attracted by all that is decayed, by all that is illness, by all that is not alive, by all that is purely mechanical. There was a cartoon in the New Yorker some years ago in which a girl asks for a perfume and the salesgirl tells her, „This is very attractive. It smells like a new sports car;“ the point being that today many men are more interested in sports cars than they are in women. Now, I believe that's profoundly immoral.



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Interviewer: Is there some way in which one can foster and encourage the love of life?

Fromm: Yes, by one's own love of life. If a child lives in a family where people really love life, where there is interest in life and not interest in death and decay and in the mechanical, where one can get excited about something that is alive, this will foster the constitutional ability of that child to love life, and I think the ability is there in most children.