



D. E. Schecter:

Schecter on Fromm

Erich Fromm was the most fully alive and awake man I have ever met or can imagine. These qualities were contagious. To be truly with him one felt fully alive and awake.

As a teenager in 1941, I read his book, *ESCAPE FROM FREEDOM*, and I found an orientation to man and life. The book also helped explain the barbaric holocaust and how the sadist needed the masochist, as much as the reverse, in order to achieve what *Fromm*—way back then—called symbiosis. I was determined to leave Canada and study with this man at the White Institute. To my shock, in 1951, I found he had moved to Mexico. But this cloud had a silver lining: he would then come back to New York City 3-4 months each year when I arranged to work with him in intensive supervision—2-hour sessions, four times a week for four years.

If I ask why the supervision with *Fromm* would lift my spirits so high, it has undoubtedly to do with the fact that *Fromm* saw each supervisory and psychoanalytic session as a dramatic search for truth. He was above all a truth-seeker who knew that an essential part of the analysis was to shed sham and illusion.

His face would brighten with expectation when he asked, "What are this man's passions?" Moreover, in almost every supervisory session, *Fromm* would ask in all seriousness, "Well, what did you learn about yourself in this session with the patient?" He was not simply asking about countertransference in the narrow sense but about what new questions and experience I had encountered. For *Fromm* every session was meant to be a meaningful encounter. Otherwise he showed his boredom about following trivial by-ways. It became clear that *Fromm* himself intended to learn something from every supervisory session. These attitudes transformed my attitudes with patients ever since our work together. I now always look for the yearnings, the cravings and desires of the patient and the fears he has associated with these.

A brief clinical vignette will demonstrate *Fromm's* aliveness and passion in our work together. After I described how the patient told of his father hiding the best food in the house when company came to visit, *Fromm* warmed with excitement.

He asked all kinds of detailed questions about the father's behavior and then launched into a talk about the hoarding character which he fully describes in *MAN FOR HIMSELF*. When he felt he was becoming too distant for the patient's experience, he would often say "Forgive me for indulging in some theory but it's relevant here." He went on to talk about hoarding as an anti-life trait.

One day I told him about a patient's fantasy of living inside the underpants of Marilyn Monroe. His face brightened and he made the observation that Freud did not take the Oedipus complex seriously enough. This patient was trying—according to *Fromm*—to recreate a symbiotic relation to the woman. The patient's craving had little to do with genital sex. With excitement *Fromm* went into his idea of every patient having a private religion with a central passion that motivates his whole life. These were heady pre-Oedipal concepts in the 1950s and needless to say my excitement after such a supervisory session ran high and carried itself into my psychoanalytic work which became filled with a new sense of drama. *Fromm* was most generous in his supervisory work. He shared his private associations not only through direct interpretation but through jokes, parables and stories from his own life.

In the summer of 1957, *Fromm* organized a conference on Zen Buddhism and Psychoanalysis with D. T. Suzuki who was his house guest. I was thrilled to be invited and participate in the dialogue of Suzuki and *Fromm* and others. It was clear that *Fromm* loved and admired the then 86-year old Suzuki. *Fromm* was especially interested in the experience of becoming one with the object of perception—for instance a flower—and giving up one's ego boundaries in the process. Suzuki not only taught about this experience but lived it and *Fromm* wanted to learn from Suzuki. Separate from the Zen Conference I was presenting a case of a severely obsessional man to a group of about 7 of us—all graduates of the Institute—including *Schachtel*, *Tauber* and *Green*. The Seminar began at 2 p.m., when we saw Suzuki intently absorbed in the play of *Fromm's* kittens. At 5 p.m. when we adjourned, Suzuki was still thoroughly entranced by the kittens' play. *Fromm* marvelled at Suzuki's power of intense absorption in which Western clock hours seemed to be of little relevance. *Fromm* told the following story: Suzuki had commented that a stone Japanese lantern would look beautiful in the garden and

that he would find one for *Fromm*. Years passed; *Fromm* forgot about the promise. Almost 10 years later, 2 weeks before Suzuki's death, a beautiful Japanese lantern arrived with a brief note: "This is the one."

Fromm was an independent worker who sought help only from experts from specialized fields. When we visited him in Cuernavaca, he excused himself for lessons he was getting in neuroanatomy and neuro-physiology for his book on *THE ANATOMY OF HUMAN DESTRUCTIVENESS*. With a chuckle he explained the barter system: for each lesson he received he would offer an hour of psychoanalytic supervision to his teacher. He was already 72 years old and completely open to learning about areas that were relevant to his work but foreign to his background.

Fromm was a disciplined worker. He explained that he would not be available from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. (he was in his early seventies) since that was his time for reading and writing. He confidently expected us to entertain ourselves. After the evening meal and ensuing discussions—in which he avidly listened to our mother-child research—he would finally say, "Children, it's time to go to bed." On one occasion he visited our bedroom and with great tenderness tucked in our blankets and wished us pleasant dreams.

Fromm was a man who liked little celebrations. On his birthday in March of '73 he opened a bottle of champagne, clasped our shoulders in a circle and began to sing a Chassidic chant, his face and body beaming with pleasure as he swayed back and forth. In 1974, *Paul Lippmann* and I visited him in Locarno. Upon hearing that it was *Paul's* birthday he organized a steamer trip from Locarno to Ascona where he treated us to a festive lunch. It was clear that he was tired. The physical fatigue seemed to be transcended by his spirit of friendship and solidarity. He had several heart attacks but his spirit was undaunted.

The last time I saw *Fromm*, he looked terribly frail. However, his voice and eyes were full of life. He described a group of doctors entering his room and instead of asking how he felt they told him he was well because his blood chemistries were normal. They talked about their yachts to each other during their beside visit to him. *Fromm* was forever an avid observer and analyst of human social functioning. I remember his musing over how one's own narcissism is the most difficult trait to overcome. —David E. Schecter, M.D.