

L' Chayim¹

Bernard Landis and Edward S. Tauber, Eds.: *In the Name of Life: Essays in Honor of Erich Fromm*
New York: Holt, Rhinehart and Winston, 1972.

THERE COME MOMENTS in our lives when a clear event makes us aware of our acquiescence to mediocrity. Such event may be the surprise of the fresh smell of the country when we leave the stale, polluted atmosphere of the city. The event may be a well-tended front patch garden amid the weedy neglect that has crept into city streets, expressing contempt for the passersby. The event may be the taste of a good bread that reaffirms how delicious this daily staple can be, or a movie that electrifies us with its opening flash, as we know instantaneously that here is quality. So it is with a book that hits the mark of what it undertakes and fills us with joy and gratitude for just that quality of performance.

Thus the book *In the Name of Life: Essays in Honor of Erich Fromm* by Landis and Tauber. I am not referring to the quality of the collected essays, though many of them are outstanding, but to the inspiration of having found a concept of honoring Fromm, which so well reflects the essential core of Fromm's message. Already the title of the book, "In the Name of Life," gives the reader the frame of reference which gives meaning to everything else. Fromm knows we are, as human beings, caught in the balance between destructive bondage and creative freedom. He believes in the vision of our potential for a creative, productive, and loving existence. But he also knows that we can meander down the wrong road. Thus he has devoted his writing to making us aware of the choices we are in fact making.

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But Fromm speaks of more than awareness. His awareness is linked to hope that inspires our endeavor to grow. This hope is part of a guiding philosophy, a belief in the God in us which, by intuition more than reason, allows us to sense the best of humanness.

The format of the book consists of essays by outstanding authors from the fields of psychoanalysis, philosophy, social and political science. It honors Fromm as belonging to all of these fields. He is a psychoanalyst, a sociologist, a scientist, a philosopher, a political scientist and also a rabbi or prophet of his own religion. There is more to this than just being a man of many disciplines, more than the refusal to be a specialist. Fromm's philosophy of respect for life, with its flow of many determinants, shuns catching life like a bird into the cage of a construct of one discipline.

The format chosen contains one more important feature. The authors have not been asked to write about Fromm's contributions to their field. They simply have been asked to contribute an essay of their own. One central element in the philosophy of Radical Humanism is the edict against idol worship. Idol worship is the insistence on knowing, on certainty. It represents a back-to-the-womb tendency, a desire to capture life and thus pervert it, and the end of creativity and productivity. The book thus did not wish to idolize Fromm, but by honoring the creative spirit of productive men, honor him.

The reference to idol-worship leads me to my variant of the same theme. The counterpart to the biblical edict against idol-worship, against defining the image of God, is that the essence of God cannot be known. All one can say about God is what he is not; that he is not any definable image. God for Fromm is a metaphor, is a projection of man's sense of himself. Thus the meaning is that the essence of man cannot be known. We can know what man is not; man is not the image or construct we make of him.

I am a psychoanalyst. I am interested in our theories about human functioning. I am a therapist and interested in helping people to lead happier and more constructive lives. In this field, I have been crusading against our idol-worship of our own constructs, our systems of thoughts, and our perverting of valuable knowledge into dogma which stultifies the mind, when that same knowledge could be a stimulus for creative perception.

We have given lip service to our tendency to make dogma out of theory. We think of it as being related to the destructive influence of institutionalization, and we have fended off the problem from our own door. But our dogmatizing tendency pervades our attitude to systems of thought and, much more important, our attitude to therapy.

All of our theories agree that personality trends which are principally designed from the point of view of control or security, trends we call defense mechanisms, are counter-productive, destructive, and interfere with the establishment of good interpersonal relationships. Yet, we do not take seriously our misuse of valuable concepts and tools, when we complacently turn a guideline into an unquestioned rule, by declaring that these concepts and techniques have been proven to be scientifically true.

In speaking of the simultaneousness of permanence and change in all living experience, Fromm speaks of permanence and change in any concept we adopt. He states:

Concepts have their own lives, and that they grow can be understood only if the concepts are not separated from the experience to which they give expression. If the concept becomes alienated—that is, separated from the experience to which it refers—it loses its reality and is transformed into an artifact of man's mind. The fiction is thereby created that anyone who uses the concept is referring to the substratum of experience underlying it.

Thus ideas become ideologies. Fromm goes on to point to the tendency in human nature to strive for systematization and completeness. From a tiny piece of knowledge we structure the world. It is true that we all have this wish for certainty in us; we also wish for unquestioned love, and for reliable assurance of our worth. Yet, it is these demands of the patient, that the world be constructed to suit his needs of security, which we, as therapists, aim to change or at least relieve of its worst vicissitudes.

Another way of saying this is that we do not help an obsessive patient by an approach that manifests the same obsessive features. As we are dealing with a common human quality, we cannot hope to eliminate this quest for certainty in us, but we can reckon with it more directly.

This reckoning, to me, is a matter of philosophy rather than human nature. Two premises seem to me basic. The first one is that the essence of human nature cannot be known, and that human nature is not the constructs we make about it.



The second premise is that there is no life without functional organization. There is no way of thinking about or dealing with other human beings without organizing thoughts or plans. Thus concepts are just as vital, as it is vital to know that they are not a true or the true reflection of any essence of human nature or existence. This is not a paradox, nor a hardship. We leave the vicissitudes of omniscience for the creative respect of humility.

But let us not stop with the word humility for we may easily miss an essential meaning. Humility is a word burdened by Christian-puritan heritage. If the word conjures up images of smallness, insignificance, or self-effacement, then know that this is not the way I am using it. If we do not value life in us, then what will we value? We are our experiences, our ideas, our visions, our concepts; and the actions that spring from them are life and life to be enjoyed. Humility does not mean resignation to not knowing the truth. The excitement of discovery remains and so does its value. There is no end to new forms of existence and new approaches to therapy.

But humility and respect for that which transcends our total grasp is only the base for the attitude we call creative or productive. While we should not rely on ideologies or a school of thought, or a rule of technique to guarantee good treatment results, we need to respect them as valuable tools that are as essential to our skill as they would be to the skills of a creative craftsman. Tools are designed for a purpose and have an effect in keeping with this design. We need to be thoroughly familiar with their specific designs and specific effects to use them with what we think of as appropriateness.

However, the word appropriateness again traps us, as so much of our lingo does. It creates the expectation that there is an appropriate technique for every situation. Therapy is a process that is in continuous change and ideally always creative. Once we know procedures and their philosophy, once they are at our easy disposal, we do better not to focus on techniques but on the patient and on how we can help him live with greater satisfaction.

Much can be said and has been said about the ingredients of a more creative approach in therapy. I like to stress two points.

- (1) In my mind the approach I am talking about requires more continuous education, not less. We can no more rely on our intuitive comprehension alone than we can

on any system of thought. Ideas, philosophies and therapeutic approaches (from Freudian via existential to behavior and group therapy) illustrate potential dynamics and potential relationships, and alert us to considerations which we would not entertain otherwise. Knowing about these considerations becomes part of our skill of comprehending and our confidence in our therapeutic interaction with the patient.

- (2) It is important to understand the interplay between theory and the actual happening. Theory and practice has always been a troubled union, married by myth alone. The student has been taught to fit the patient into the schemata of the theory. He is taught to interpret the events, not listen to them in their own right. Theories are essential only because they make it possible for us to see at all. Without some constructs, without some notion of what to look for, we cannot perceive with alertness. We use constructs to find the patient and not to find the construct mirrored in the patient. The patient's expressions belong to a Gestalt. As therapists, we know, that as we live with this Gestalt, it imposes on us one, then another and again another meaning of its existence. It will speak for itself in many voices, if we can hear them. Theories open our ears to voices in a chorus of despair, anxiety, intent, determination, power, love, and many others. Without training our hearing we cannot hear adequately; but we must know that what we will hear, while familiar, is always a new variation of the song of human existence.

The theme I played in my own variation is a theme that runs throughout the various essays in the book that honors Fromm. It is played in a poetic, beautiful way by Loren Eiseley in his essay, "The Uncomplete Man." Eiseley states:

Nature, as I have tried to intimate in this little dissection, is never quite where we see it. It is becoming as well as passing, but the becoming is both within and without our power. It is this lesson, with all our hard-gained knowledge, that is so difficult to comprehend. All along the evolutionary road it could have been said, "This is man," if there had been such a magical delineation and mind-freezing word. It could have immobilized us at any step of our journey. It could have kept us cowering, small-brained and helpless, whenever the great cats came through the reeds. It could have stricken us



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with terror before the fire that was later to be our warmth and weapon against Ice Age cold. At any step of the way, the word, man, in retrospect, could be said to have encompassed just such final limits. Each time the barrier has been surmounted, Man is not man. He is elsewhere. There is within us only that dark, divine animal engaged in a strange journey – that creature who, at midnight, knows its own ghostliness and senses its far road.

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