

## The Theme of Hope In Erich Fromm's Writing\*

**“HE [FROMM] LIVES IN A day when the sun has gone out of the human condition, and all his writing starts from the conviction that the life of Western man has gone desperately wrong. This sense of urgency which pervades Fromm's work has made of it an ambitious system of social criticism . . . . But if Fromm's criticism runs deep, it is because his hopes run high. He thinks that man today has everything within his grasp—if he will reach out for it. In this, too, Fromm seems a man of the twentieth century, which has not known where to draw the bounds of human life” (Schaar 1961).**

It is true that Fromm hoped; but it is not true that his hopes ran high, nor that he believed everything is within man's grasp. Unfortunately, Schaar failed to comprehend the essence of Fromm's theme of hope. The quality of hope was centrally important to Fromm, and he attempted to describe it with great care. An understanding of his meaning of hope is essential also to an understanding of his style of writing.

I will first comment on his style of writing and then highlight his ideas about what hope is, about hope as an essential quality of the structure of aliveness, about shattered hope, and about the vital relationship between suffering and hope.

Fromm wrote most often in the spirit of the prophet mode. Central to the prophet's message is messianic hope or messianic vision. This messianic vision rests upon the tension between what existed and what was becoming, was yet to be. This vision, or that which is hoped for, may not be realized in one's lifetime, yet one must expect the messiah every day. Hope is thus paradoxical. It is neither passive waiting, nor is it an unrealistic forcing of circumstances that cannot occur. Fromm uses the metaphor of the

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crouched tiger, which will jump only when the moment for jumping has come.

Fromm describes the prophet role. Prophets do not predict the future. They see the present reality free from the blindfolds of public opinion and authority. They feel compelled to express the voice of their conscience to say what possibilities they see, to show the alternatives, and to warn the people. It is up to the people to take the warning and change or to remain deaf and blind. Prophetic language is always the language of alternatives, of choice, and of freedom. It is never that of determinism.

Fromm summarizes four functions of the prophets: 1) They announce to man that there is a God, the one who has revealed himself to them, and that man's goal is to become fully human. 2) As mentioned, they show man the alternatives from which he can choose and the consequences of these. 3) They dissent and protest when man takes the wrong road, but they do not abandon the people. 4) They do not think only in terms of individual salvation, but believe that individual salvation is bound up with the salvation of society. Their concern is the establishment of a society governed by love, justice, and truth; they insist that politics must be judged by moral values, and that the function of political life is the realization of those values.

Fromm writes out of his knowledge as a sociologist about society as it affects the individual and mankind, and he writes out of his knowledge as a psychotherapist about the individual, with a passionate concern for his welfare. Fromm writes in many voices: in one of thunderous exhortation, in one of reasonable persuasion, in a poetic voice, and in one of compassion and wisdom about human suffering. This latter voice, which reflected his clinical experience as a psychoanalyst or healer of souls, is the voice which I, as individual psychotherapist, can dialogue with most easily.

Fromm's most passionate and exhortative voice wishes to confront, to arouse, to stir. He appeals to rational perception and intellectual reasoning. However, the voice which speaks about hope is subtle, compassionate, and appealing to the inner voices in us which so often are barely audible. With full sensitivity to this vulnerable and complex phenomenon, he attempts to describe the nature of hope. He writes:

As with every other human experience, words are insufficient to describe the experience. In fact, most of the time, words do the opposite: they



obscure it, they dissect it, and kill it. Too often in the process of talking about love or hate or hope, one loses contact with what one was supposed to be talking about. Poetry, music, and other forms of art are by far the best-suited media for describing human experience because they are precise and avoid the abstraction and vagueness of worn-out coins which are taken for adequate representation of human experience . . . . To describe it means to point out the various aspects of the experience and thus to establish a communication in which the writer and the reader know that they are referring to the same thing. In making this attempt, I must ask the reader to work with me and not expect me to give him an answer to the question of what hope is. I must ask him to mobilize his own experiences in order to make our dialogue possible (Fromm 1968).

Fromm's declarative prophetic voice presented alternatives to his audience. It was up to them to hear or not to hear, to take it to heart or disregard it. How different this voice, which invites the reader to a dialogue and asks him to contribute from the resources of his own experience. Fromm was to me most meaningful in the dialogic form. His lectures were often in the declarative prophetic mode, only to change to a dialogic mode in the all-important discussion period, a dialogue which invariably brought the audience to life in a spirit of excitement, enthusiasm, and rekindled hope. The lecture itself established a rational frame of reference, black and white, hardly any greys; the discussion admitting the rich, colorful human dialogue in all hues.

It is thus in dialogue with us that Fromm attempts to describe the importance of hope. Hope is ever important. It is an intrinsic element of the structure of life, of the dynamic of man's spirit. Hope is a psychic concomitant to life and growth. It is ever implied by the nature of life. Fromm writes:

If a tree which does not get sun bends its trunk to where the sun comes from, we cannot say that the tree 'hopes' in the same way in which a man hopes, since hope in man is connected with feelings and awareness that the tree may not have. And yet it would not be wrong to say that the tree hopes for the sunlight and expresses this hope by twisting its trunk toward the sun. Does the suckling not hope for his mother's breast? Does the infant not hope to stand erect and to walk? Does the sick man not hope to be well, the prisoner to be free, the hungry to eat? Does love making not imply a man's hope in his potency, in his capacity to arouse his partner, and the woman's hope to arouse him? (Fromm 1968).

Fromm's emphasis on the intrinsic nature of hope in the structure of life is of fundamental importance. The hope for hope resides in this belief. It is not necessarily explicit. Only eyes which



look may see it. Only ears which are attuned will hear it. It often expresses itself by indirection. Fromm, in speaking of hearing the voice of our conscience, describes the difficulties of listening to ourselves. "We listen," he writes,

to every voice and to everybody but not ourselves. We are constantly exposed to the noise of opinions and ideas hammering at us from everywhere. . . . Listening to ourselves is so difficult because this art requires another ability, rare in modern man, that of being alone with oneself. . . . Listening to the feeble and indistinct voices of our conscience is difficult also because it does not speak to us directly but indirectly and because we are often not aware that it is our conscience that disturbs us." We may feel anxious, out of sorts, perturbed, irritated, and yet not know what is causing this oppression (Fromm 1968).

It is this theme of the embedded, often protected, nature of hope which I will choose as one of the foci for elaboration. But first I will conclude highlighting two further important ideas: Fromm's theme of shattered hope and its consequences, and the role of suffering as an essential aspect of regaining hope and thus aliveness.

"Few people," he writes,

escape the fate that at one point or another in their development their hopes are disappointed—sometimes completely shattered. Perhaps this is good. If man did not experience the disappointment of his hope, how could he avoid the danger of being an optimistic dreamer? But, on the other hand, hope is often shattered so thoroughly that a man may never recover it.

In fact, the responses and reactions to the shattering of hope vary a great deal, depending on many circumstances: historical, personal, psychological, and constitutional. Many people, probably the majority, react to the disappointment of their hopes by adjustment to the average optimism which hopes for the best without bothering to recognize that not even the good but perhaps the worst may occur. . . . They present the picture of resigned optimism which we see in so many members of Western society" (Fromm 1968).

Fromm points to the hardening of the heart as a consequence of shattered hope, or a reaction of destructiveness and violence, or the passivity of resignation.

While the end result of the shattering of hope may be a shallow, non-caring optimism, or a retreat into a resigned state of half aliveness, or a pursuit of destructiveness which seems like a revenge on life for withholding its bounty, it also takes the form of suffering and despair in many forms. This suffering or despair, while not a



guarantee for change, is nevertheless an essential ingredient for change.

For hope and despair or hope and the poignancy of disappointment are two sides of a coin, as day belongs to night, death to life, and happiness to sorrow. One cannot have one without the other. This Fromm expresses beautifully in the last chapter of *You Shall Be As Gods*, called "The Psalms" (Fromm 1966).

After the destruction of the Temple, he tells us, Psalms became the most popular prayer book among the Jews. The psalms ceased to be part of the Temple ritual and assumed a new function: They became a human document, the expression of man's hopes and fears, his joys and sorrows. They transcended the particular conditions of time and religious dogma and became the intimate friends and companions of Jews and Christians over many generations.

Fromm divides the psalms into one-mood psalms and dynamic psalms. It is the nature of the dynamic psalms that he wishes us to appreciate. They reflect a change of mood going on in the poet. The poet begins the psalm in a mood of sadness, depression, despair, or fear, usually a blend of these various moods. At the end of the psalm the mood has changed; it is full of hope, faith, and confidence. Often it seems as if the poet who composed the end of the psalm is a different man from the one who composed the beginning. Indeed, they are different, yet they are the same person. A change has occurred within the psalmist during the composition of the psalm. He has been transformed; or, better, he has transformed himself from a despairing and anxious man into one of hope and faith.

Fromm uses the word "dynamic" to indicate that the change arises from the poet's struggle with his sense of despair. The struggle begins with an expression of despair, changes to a mood of hope, then returns to deeper despair. Hope returns, only to plunge into deepest despair; and only at this point real hope emerges. Fromm uses this discussion of the dynamic psalm to convey his belief that only the person who experiences the full depth of his despair can liberate himself from despair and achieve hope.

The role of suffering in the evolution of hope is stated with equal clarity in the chapter called "The Concept of History." "Indeed," Fromm writes, "historical change and revolution seem like a logical paradox; the enslaved man has no concept of freedom, yet he cannot become free unless he has a concept of freedom. The bibli-



cal story gives an answer to this paradox. The beginning of liberation lies in man's capacity to suffer, and he suffers if he is oppressed, physically and spiritually. The suffering moves him to act against the oppressors, to seek the end of the oppression, although he cannot yet seek a freedom of which he knows nothing. If man has lost the capacity to suffer, he also has lost the capacity for change."

I have not done justice to Fromm's presentation of the theme of hope. Even this brief highlighting touches on many subthemes, each rich in implication. If, as I hope, I have enticed some of you into rereading *You Shall Be As Gods*, one of my favorite of Fromm's publications, I will be pleased. I have tried to convey the rich, all-encompassing meanings which Fromm points to in discussing the quality of hope. He points to an emotional activity also described as looking forward to, as faith in, as intention, as an active wishing, as the excitement of ideas or of an encounter. Hope is inherent in caring and in any creative endeavor. It is the emotion which energizes our search, our ideas, our activities, and enhances the intensity of meaning.

The theme would not be so central to Fromm's writing if the quality of hope were not a constantly endangered phenomenon. Its vulnerability is extreme. Resignation, the no-hope counterpart, is destructive of life by omission. If resigned, we make little or no effort on behalf of our own physical and mental well-being nor on behalf of others, nor for our planet, our homestead. We allow the rivers to be polluted, the natural resources to be depleted, the cities to deteriorate, and the nuclear arms race, our means for self-destruction, to escalate.

Few of us have the courage to hope. Fromm was an exception. He cared for those he loved, for his own well being, and for the welfare of the world to come. But most of us are cautiously protective of any hoping emotion in our everyday existence. I want to describe this everyday caution as well as the fierce dynamic battles against the emergence of hope which we encounter in our patients. I will start with describing our habitual way of obscuring our potential intention by means of indirections in language.

I watched my thoughts as I chose the topic for this paper. I would not have chosen the theme of hope in Fromm's writings if it did not echo an interest of mine. In fact, not so long ago I thought: I really "should" write about the poignancy of disappointment and its role in the ebb and flow of our patients' lives. But this "should"



meant nothing as long as it did not turn into "I will." This "should" was, of course, wrapped in comfortable ambiguity. At best it meant: I should write about this, because I have some notions that may be of interest. The "should" does not express a wish or a desire. But if, at the time, I had tried to penetrate the ambiguity and asked, "Do you really want to write about this?" the answer would have been: "Yes, I really do. I do for no particular reason, just out of heartfelt interest, out of the pleasure of letting my thoughts grow on paper." My typewriter is to me a magical instrument. Its end product is never preformed by me. It creates a dialogue with me; it creates my concentration. It reflects disconnected thoughts and thus is a better task master which clearly demands: "Straighten out this confusion! Here is a gap! What is the connection? This thought is not clear! What is it you really want to say?" It is rather pleasurable. Somehow the typewriter believes in me and I in it. And yet, there is this "should" and the ambiguity. Why? Well, it takes effort and time. A writing enterprise changes the pattern of my weekends for as many weekends as it takes. I have to eliminate much that is dear to me; leisure, for one; or escaping the city into the mountains pregnant with spring, mountains in which I love to roam; seeing less of my friends and families. Once, however, I decide to undertake the task and change my patterns for the time required, I do not regret the decision. The "should" and the ambiguity, which are so familiar to all of us, are part of an expression of the pull of gravity exerted by the habits and patterns of our lives. It takes a certain emotional or outside push or a clear decision to mobilize our initiative and our clarity of intention to reorganize the channeling of our energies.

As mentioned, I have stressed this familiar, commonplace phenomenon of our inclination for indirection when our emotions move close to intentional wishing because I want to emphasize its pervasive presence in our everyday existence before I stress the tenacious battle against wishing or hoping which we encounter in our patients. While this battle may be part of an individual pathology, I prefer to think of it as a normal feature of human existence rather than as pathology. The opposing forces are remarkably persistent and strong. The "I wish" or "I would like to" is opposed by a very effective "Don't" in all sorts of disguises. Freud made these observations. He gave them names: the ego controlling the id-impulses and the resistances as tangible evidence of active battling forces.

I want to elaborate on Fromm's stress of the unavoidable re-



relationship of hope, suffering, and despair. As Freudian language and concepts pervade our psychological thinking, it is important to realize that Fromm's emphasis on suffering or pain is essentially different from Freud's. Freud used the pleasure-pain principle as a regulatory, explanatory principle for the dynamics of the mental apparatus. The emphasis in this pleasure-pain principle was on the avoidance of pain. Pain is the important item, not pleasure, which by implication is defined as an absence of pain. Thus Freud's theoretical design denies suffering an important part in normal existence. For Fromm the existence of suffering or despair is essential to vital living. If we risk hope, we risk the pain of disappointment. Psychoanalytic thinking tends to view pain, suffering, depression, and despair predominantly as pathological reactions, while Fromm honors them as reactions to intolerable circumstances which may lead to rebellion and a revival of a productive attitude of hope. I will return to this theme again.

Daring to hope actively in Fromm's sense is vital for meaningful living. But as hoping engages us, involves us in the detailed conduct of our lives, with all its many drops or torrents of sorrow, it is also one of our most vulnerable emotions. The poignancy of the pain of disappointment cannot be underestimated, nor its consequences. We need only watch children or remember our own childhood to note the devastating feeling when a beloved pet dies, or a favorite toy is broken, or a hoped for event does not come about. We, as adults, are not that different. We learn to hide our expectations and our emotions. Many broken promises effectively reduce the level of hoping. The pain of disappointment is greatest when the expected event has most meaning and has been looked forward to with joyful excitement.

But every hoping, every expectation, every intense looking forward to is risking disappointment. Man, more often than not, prefers to avoid the pain of disappointed expectation and thus curtails such emotional reaching out. He plays safe, not knowing that playing safe is invariably an illusion.

I will not elaborate on the ever present social, cultural, and economic factors which tend to shatter hope. I will describe some of the ways in which patients battle with their own sparks of hope. The voices of hope are mostly indirect and faint. In order to hope, we have to learn to hear these voices even when they are disguised. But, as Fromm wrote, we rarely listen to our inner voices. Some





people do not hear them at all. Some hear them, but give them no legitimate participation in the dialogue of events. Others hear them only to encounter fairly stereotyped phrases in their heads which either denigrate the thought, the worth of the person himself, or engage the imagination in order to present warnings of dire happenings if such wishes were to be acted upon. The intention of these counter voices is to discourage the person from letting his mind dwell any further on whatever notion or feeling entered the mental arena. I will give a few everyday examples:

A woman walking down the street is suddenly delighted by a blouse she sees in a display window. A spark of excitement shows in her eyes. She can see herself in the blouse and smiles. There is a slight impulse to buy. But immediately heavy judgmental thoughts wipe the smile off her face and a frowning look appears. Her thoughts are along this line: You do not need this, you have enough clothes in your closet. You cannot just buy anything you see, the money is needed for more important things. You should save, and so on.

The personal denigration is equally effective and frequent. A patient of mine went to an emergency clinic because she had developed a sudden high fever. She had to wait. Though she was aware that her condition was serious and that she needed help, her thoughts were: I should not be here; these other people need the doctor so much more than I. This patient's self-effacing qualities, her sense of invisibility and disconnectedness to the world was very tenacious in spite of good surface functioning. Another patient regularly tells me that she should not come and see me any more, that she should be coping by herself, that her coming is a self-indulgence. These statements invariably occur when her turmoil and her need are greatest. This sense of non-entitlement, of "who do you think you are to wish or expect acknowledgement, help, or encouragement," we encounter every day.

The habit of discouraging by dire predictions is also all too familiar. A weekend trip is almost cancelled because it will probably rain, the food will be bad, the drive long. All planning is burdened by crossing endless bridges before one even knows whether such obstacles have a probability of existence. Even if such a trip is undertaken, the joy has been diminished.

The denigrating and admonishing voices are familiar. However, it is easy to miss the initial thought or feeling which sets the counter



voices in motion. The patient may not tell us. These initial impulses are often fleeting. Thus it is only by careful inquiry into the mental events just prior to the onset of the negative voices that one is able to get the more pertinent information. A patient begins by telling you how worthless he felt on his job, how inadequate. Then you inquire, and you hear that prior to his depressed mood he had tried to tell his superior about exciting results in his research project, but the boss was indifferent. He hardly seemed to listen.

The most dramatic evidence for the strength of these counter voices comes to us through another familiar phenomenon. Patients have anxiety dreams or even severe nightmares at the time when they are making moves to break out of their cocoon, when they dare venture in a new direction. A patient of mine, a painter at heart, had always painted in guarded privacy. But at a certain point of her development she dared to go public. She even took her sketch pad to the office to sketch in her lunch hour, willing to let the artist in her be known. She also made arrangements for a show. She was fully committed to this new venture, so dear to her. But for two months one nightmare followed the other. Her past made these reactions quite plausible, as jealous, undercutting forces had been extreme, and the patient had adapted by placating the forces on one hand and becoming quite secretive about her creative endeavors on the other hand. She never lost her awareness of her love for painting, but this love had to take second place in her efforts to cope with the difficulties of life, difficulties which were increased by her tendency to let other people exploit her. The patient was not a complainer; she coped, and her eyes invariably had a sadness so deep that even an experience of joy could only diminish its intensity. But the patient did emerge. The nightmares subsided. Her paintings changed in color and form. She left the security of an unsatisfactory job for a new job venture requiring learning new skills, a job with risk and promise.

The nightmarish dreams of this patient had the typical characteristics of memories of terrible childhood experiences. Another patient who lived a far more marginal existence than her ability, appearance, loveliness of character, and interests would suggest, invariably had dreams of discouragement just when the possibility of a love relationship was conceived or a faint hope of recognition for her services on her job appeared. These dreams would start in a joyful mood, and then the mood changed and the activity became



unpleasant. She dreamt, for example, that she was dancing with joy and lightness, and then the dancing turned into a sleazy nightclub act, cheap and gruesome. This kind of mood change dream was very typical for this patient, but I have observed them in other patients. The mood change is the reverse of the mood change in Fromm's description of the dynamic psalm, where despair is changed to hope. Here hope is dampened by ugliness and misfortune. "Do not even dream of what you wish for: the gods will punish you."

Both of the patients whom I mentioned behaved with exquisite appropriateness and without anxiety once they had struggled through this stage of transition. The appearance of anxiety should not lead to an underestimate of the patient's inner strength. The appearance of anxiety is a common, to be expected phenomenon in a transitional phase of growth. Therapeutic change is intimately connected to new explorations, to an awareness of what one values, to creative or productive imagination, and always to daring to risk the unknown and leave some illusory abode of security.

Life is a continuing challenge. Adaptation is an active process which seeks integration and a sense of direction and identity. But contentment, love, productivity, and hope are not lasting achievements. These are states of mind and of feeling. They are like plants. We can tend them, fertilize the soil, and assure many periods of blooming and greening. But there are also periods of quiescence and times when the hard blows of a season create doubts about a new spring to come, and despair is profound. One criterion, not for good health, for I do not wish to define it, but for the spirit of our therapeutic endeavor, is our belief that there resides in the person a potential capacity to move from turmoil, frustration, pain, and unhappiness to a state of hope, that they may glimpse a road ahead and have a vision of a goal.

Therapeutic differences are differences in emphasis. My therapeutic message is that hidden hopes and wishes need to be recognized, affirmed, and encouraged. They can be recognized by the pain of disappointment. If despair has been created by shattered hopes, then we at least can recognize parts of the hopes in the shattered remains. The so-called defenses, however inappropriate and curtailing in the present, belong to the struggles of the past where the patient's mode of behavior and feeling were a vital part of his coping with the forces of life in and around him. The forms



of coping often have the distinct intent of self-preservation of an inner core of selfhood. It is a paradox of existence that this attempt to preserve a core of selfhood should later become the greatest hindrance to evolving the same self.

I would like to end with a voice that speaks about hope in much the same way as Fromm does. René Dubos (1972) wrote a book called *The God Within*, even in title similar to Fromm's *You Shall Be As Gods*. Dubos ends his book thus:

“To assert that there is hope when everything looks so dark may appear a naive and pretentious illusion, but it is the kind of illusion that generates the creative faith of which Carl Sandburg wrote:

I am credulous about the destiny of man  
And I believe more than I can ever prove  
of the future of the race  
And the importance of illusions,  
The value of great expectations.

It is often difficult to retain faith in the destiny of man, but it is certainly a coward's attitude to despair of events.”

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