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## On Teaching With Erich Fromm

By Bernard Landis, Ph.D.

Although I have known Erich since 1964--as a participant in two psychoanalytic case seminars he conducted; as a co-activist in SANE opposing nuclear bomb testing; briefly as an analysand; and as a colleague in teaching a seminar one summer in Switzerland, I cannot say that I know a great deal about his life. One reason has to do with geography; when I first knew him, he was commuting from Mexico where he then lived, and later he moved to Locarno, Switzerland. A more basic reason is that Erich has always been a rather private person.

However, I believe that a personal account of a collaborative teaching experience with Erich may contribute something additional about him, and convey something of his later thinking about psychoanalysis. In the summer of 1974, I organized a psychology course in Locarno and brought a class of 22 students from the Purchase Campus of the State University of New York to Switzerland, to co-teach--with Erich--an intensive three-week seminar on current trends in psychoanalysis. Reading assignments had begun months earlier, so that students would derive the most out of this experience. Erich looked forward to the seminar. He wanted very much to know what students were thinking about, their degree of awareness, and aspirations. So



that we would have the best facility, Erich--who was very well-known in Locarno--arranged for us to meet in the spacious council room of the new, modern town hall. We sat around two large tables, arranged like a "T", and had seminars from 9:00 a.m. to noon and 3:00 to 5:30, five days a week. Erich conducted either a morning or an afternoon seminar.

On the afternoon of our arrival in Locarno, my wife Erica, and I went to our hotel, and were happy to find we had a large corner room, with much light, grand views of Lake Locarno and the gardens bordering it, plus-unexpectedly-a good work desk and a handsome dressing table. On thnaking the hotel manager he told us that Dr. Fromm had called him weeks ago to arrange for that particular room for us and that he'd requested specially those additional pieces of furniture.

We went to greet Erich and Annis in their apartment--which had large picture windows overlooking the Lake, flooding the rooms with light and giving an impression of clarity. Large bouquets of country flowers were bright color accents. Annis said she went frequently to the local market for the fresh flowers they love. The surroundings were so modest that I don't remember much about them. I recall a high fidelity phonograph and Erich's record collection of baroque music. I was impressed that the furnishings could be so unobtrusive, and yet provide a commodious setting for people. Looking back, their apartment is quite distinctive in that it used a lot of white and yet expressed so much warmth. Erich's congenial study, however, I recall more distinctly. It is a small room, perhaps 10 x 12, with a wide window band across an entire wall. Books line most of two walls, with room for two colorful nature posters tacked on. Erich sat at a comfortable desk chair in



front of an attractive small wooden desk, with another similar chair at the side. Manuscripts and open books abound and the room looks thoroughly worked in.

As we sat down in the living room that first night to discuss the seminar, Erich took requests for drinks and went into the kitchen to mix them. I remember being slightly taken aback since my experience of Erich had largely been of him as the teacher, hands folded, in front of the seminar table, or in the study of his Riverside Drive apartment, where his sister-in-law would bring us tea. To see Erich mixing drinks was novel, and I must have commented because I recall Annis answering that he also mixed a good salad dressing when he made salads to accompany dinner.

To the students surprise Erich opened the first seminar not by discussing psychoanalysis, but by describing the area and nearby Ascona. He detailed the walks they might take, listing inexpensive places to eat and boat rides they might enjoy. He was full of vitality and obviously happy to be teaching young people again and he established an atmosphere of kindness and intellectual abundance, always inviting, even urging students to raise issues and responding to them in an affirming manner. He started his formal presentation with a discussion of the historical background of psychoanalysis. He referred mainly to Freud's work, then Adler's and Jung, and then reviewed Sullivan and Laing. Subsequently he developed his concept of social character and went on, in later seminars, to raise the question: is classical psychoanalysis enough? It is adequate for symptomatic relief, he said, but certainly not sufficient for the characterological problems people suffer today. Erich said that the major issue that now challenges psychoanalysis pertains to a vague malaise, an uneasiness in society, and



growing detachment--essentially a schizoid condition for which traditional psychoanalysis is not enough; small improvements will have no real impact. Modern systems theory, Erich said, provides a valid basis for conceptualizing significant change and cure. One has to think in terms of an entire system and the principles governing change. For personal growth, one's entire psychological organization and its functions--thinking, feeling, volition, acting--must be changed in an integrated way to permit an authentic transformation of character. In this context, every thing that furthers the growth and structure of a system is rational; thus good conditions for development are rational, while poor conditions that break down the system are irrational. One must go beyond traditional analysis and effectively change one's actions as well as to broaden awareness. ("One doesn't get well by reading prescriptions"). Awareness alone will not be effective. Erich argued against the dangers of being overly interested in oneself, and said that normal healthy living requires that the person be related to the world in a broad, interested way. With respect to the therapeutic work, the emphasis must be as much on stimulating new discoveries and interests as on analyzing pathological patterns. In going beyond traditional analysis, the analyst should inquire with the patient, how does he enrich his life? What are the patient's unique attributes that he can explore, develop and enjoy?

This activated much discussion and students asked how to pursue this goal. Erich replied that "One has to learn to think critically, otherwise one is victim to what everyone else tells him. He described a very close relationship between critical thought and mental health, and spoke about



"reading serious books seriously, which takes discipline."

Among the authors and books Erich recommended were: The Writings of Meister Eckhardt, The Old Testament, especially the prophets Isaiah, Jeramiah, Josea and Amos. He suggested the Oedipus Trilogy, Antigone, Shakespeare, Balzac, Dostoevsky and Kafka. For meditation he suggested "The Heart of Buddhist Meditation" by Nyanaponikia Thera, and for a view of contemporary society he recommended Lewis Mumford. Then, based on one's experiences and reading of the great minds, one should consciously form one's own convictions, values and directions for life; without this, one can have no idea of who he is. This requires responsibility (respondere = to reply) which Erich said is the most important human quality.

Daily self-analysis is a must for growth. Erich also advocated proper attention to one's health and body. Body awareness had been of special interest to him for many years, and he underscored the relevance of this to productive living. He also spoke of the importance of concentration and meditation exercises, and this, too, related to his long-standing interest in Zen Buddhism.

As to training for psychoanalysis, Erich said much academic psychology was not useful. He said it was more important for a psychoanalyst to be knowledgeable of the main creations of the human mind, including the great literature, anthropology, philosophy, mythology and symbolism.

During the sessions, I took note of some of Erich's formulations that made a particular impression on me:

"The main issue is that she has remained a completely dependent child, unable to take a step toward what she really wants. She feels powerless because she hasn't seriously attempted to break loose. Although she is



not beaten down so as not to be able to do something, her problem is that she's never built her existence on her own sense of her will."

"A way that people deceive themselves and others is to make a pretense at a trial; such an effort is a lie because it is done ineffectively."

"As long as one is dependent and afraid, every rebellion is felt as a sin."

"The choice is between a strong current of life and stagnation."

"My identity lies in the very fact that I have made alive in me certain principles by which I live."

"Transference is the major problem in human life. Freud's concept is too narrow. Transference expresses a need for someone to take over and to give unconditional love."

"Most people fail in life because they don't know when the decisive moments are. This is because the decisive events are fractionated. They come in steps".

"Therapy is based not on affection and niceness; they don't do much. Instead it's best to show concentration, attention, sympathy, concern and honesty--without wanting anything in return."

"Psychoanalysis is a method of critical thought. Though history is written by the victors, the human race remembers those who tell the truth."

During the midday break, students either picnicked by a nearby river or snacked at the hotel pool or else continued the seminar discussions at lunch in outdoor cafes. The atmosphere was active. Erich participated in the spirit of things, and one evening arranged a surprise party for the students. He showed a constant interest in their having an enjoyable time. The party took place at the spacious new home of Dr. Laban, a Swiss



physician specializing in psychosomatic medicine whom Erich was supervising in Locarno. (By this time, Erich was spending all of his time in research and writing--he had recently completed "The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness," and was writing "To Have or to Be." Dr. Laban was his only supervisee; Erich had no patients in therapy at that time.) The party has a distinctively Swiss flavor. The foremost choral group of the region had been invited, and sang folk songs for the students, who responded by singing American folk songs. Dr. Laban had provided a magnificent buffet and opened his house completely to the students who were amused by the posters of rock stars in the children's rooms. Students who had been attending seminars very casually dressed came spruced up in crisp jeans. The men surrendered their worn tee shirts for dress shirts set off by colorful bandanas instead of neckties, and the women looked equally bright. It was the first, but not the last time I saw Erich at a party; there were, in fact, two more to come. The second was a rousing return party the students gave for Erich, at a lively Locarno cafe-bar. They had chipped in enough money to cover two cases of wine which soon ran out. Erich, in great spirits, kept buying more wine and encouraging the singers and guitarists to keep it up. One young woman, inhibited about drinking wine, thawed to Erich's encouragement to drink with the rest; she was delighted at the attention and teasing she received. Certainly the students' conception of the noted psychoanalyst was modified that night.

The third party was a farewell dinner for Erich and Annis again given by the students in the dining room of their lodgings. They had carefully prepared the party, and it was buoyant and affectionate with



an awareness that a rich experience was drawing to a close. As his good-bye message, Erich had told the expectant group at the final seminar the Talmudic farewell: "Be brave, and let us be brave together." They had wanted to thank him with a remembrance and selected a beautiful plant and ceramic planter. On the day Erica and I said goodbye at the bright and flower-filled apartment, I noticed the plant was on Erich's desk.

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