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ERICH FROMM: FRIEND AND MENTOR

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THE WILLIAM ALANSON WHITE INSTITUTE

"AN EVENING IN MEMORY OF ERICH FROMM"



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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 arrange 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 analytic 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 assions?: Moreover, in almost every supervisory session, Fromm would ask in all seriousness, "Well, what did you learn about yourself in this session with the



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patient?" He was not simply asking about counter-transference 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 and disgust about following trivial by-ways. It became clear that Fromm himself intended to learn something from every supervisory session. These attitudes of Fromm 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 up 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 ex-



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citement 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 analytic 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 kitten's play. Fromm marvelled at Suzuki's power of intense absorption in which Western clock hours seemed



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to be of little relevance.

Along the lines of Suzuki's entirely different sense of passing time, Fromm told me the following story. Suzuki had commented that a stone Japanese lantern would look beautiful at a certain spot in the garden and that he would find one for Fromm. Years passed; Fromm forgot about the promise. Then, almost 10 years later, 2 weeks before Suzuki's death, a beautiful Japanese lantern arrived with a brief note: "This is the one." By the time Fromm acknowledged the gift Suzuki was dead.

In the years following the conference Fromm and I entered into a rich correspondence. He would sometimes send me the manuscripts for the books he was writing, asking for serious critical comment which he sometimes incorporated in his final version. By and large Fromm was an independent worker who got help only from experts from specialized fields. When we were visiting him for 5 days in Cuernavaca he excused himself for lessons he was getting in neuro-anatomy 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. When we were guests at his home he explained that he would not be available from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. (this was in his early seventies) since that



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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 after the International Forum in Zurich Paul Lippmann and I visited him in Locarno. Upon hearing that it was Paul's birthday he organized a steamer trip from Locarno to Ansona where he treated us to a festive lunch. It was clear that he was tired, especially when walking uphill. The physical fatigue seemed to be transcended by his spirit of friendship and solidarity. He had had several heart attacks but his spirit was undaunted.

The last time I saw Fromm in person was a few years ago to share dinner in his hotel room. He looked terribly frail having had a chronically infected gall bladder and multiple hospitalizations. However, his voice and eyes were full of life. At dinner he launched into the inhumane medical care system. During his illness he had literally made a study of how the system worked. He described a group of doctors entering his room and instead of asking how he felt they told him he



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was well because his blood chemistries were normal. He couldn't get over the lack of true caring of these physicians who "couldn't even stand up straight. They slouched and talked about their yachts to each other" during their bedside visit to him. I mention this incident to show that Fromm was forever an avid observer and analyst of human social functioning. I believe it was also his way of not becoming too pre-occupied with his own medical condition and suffering. I remember his also musing over how one's own Narcissism is the most difficult trait to overcome. Fromm has written an interesting piece on Narcissism in his book "The Heart of Man."

On a more personal note I would like to share with you Fromm's deep capacity for caring and concern as a friend. In 1976 when I was wracked with neck pain before my operation I wrote him asking his advice as to how one could cope with the phenomenon of pain without becoming demoralized. In the return mail I received a 2 1/2 page single space typewritten letter that was a call to arms. Let me quote some passages to you:

"Indeed, if you want to put it that way, one might call it sinful, not sharing with me or even asking my help - as little as it might be - in the constant pain which has afflicted you. ^{In} ~~The~~ fact it is my own shortcoming that since you hardly showed it in my presence and less talked about it, I was not aware at all how severe and undermining it is. What is friendship and confidence if one does not come forth with serious difficulties one has, provided the other one might even think of any possi-



bility of help or at least to share it. This sounds as if I would offer now some constructive suggestion, and I want to confess at the outset that at this moment at least I cannot do this. I actually even now know not enough about your pain. Is it constant with only small interruptions? Is it less when you do something which engages your mind and feelings in a productive way? I must ask you furthermore what it is you have done in terms of T'ai-chi and meditation, and I mean very specifically and concretely. Do you have the pain when you do T'ai-chi, for instance? What the main problem is seems to me why in the evening your morale and spiritual strength is so low that you cannot play the cello? Let me start a step earlier. Why should pain reduce one's spiritual resources unless the pain is of an excruciating nature? What struck me was your sentence 'I am on a continual time - and spirit-consuming search for relief.' That sounds of course perfectly alright and logical, but what strikes me about it, it is as if you search for relief by doctors of all kinds and other people, in a way running away from yourself and not seeking the relief where it must be sought for, namely in yourself.

The main point of all I am saying is that I think that in order to cope with the pain and to end a condition where it is difficult for you to maintain your strength, you should analyze yourself unless you happen to have a very good analyst. As you know, I have had very good experiences with self-analysis which I have done for almost 40 years and find it exceedingly helpful. Think what problems, what conflicts you may run away from which ought to be straightened out, and, in fact, whether behind this whole picture which so plausibly explained by the pain, there is not a serious psychological problem of unsolved conflicts which are the reason for the fact that the pain can have such a hold on you. Naturally I know nothing about the various medical views.



You ask me to share with you how I have overcome some of the assaults on my body and spirit and I can at the moment only answer by trying not to make compromises, to go on and on and on with analyzing, to be critical of what I am doing, to be critical of others. I think the problem of your pain can be solved not by surgical cure but by a radical cure of soul searching and seeing which forces undermine your independence and your forcefulness. This is not something one can just learn from somebody else. Somebody else may be of some help but one must avoid the danger of relying on him and you are aware of the position to formulate a program for yourself. If you let me know it, I shall be glad to write you, and, as you know, when a serious problem is involved I say exactly what I think, without any attempt to sugar the pill. I stop this here because I cannot say more before I have had a response from you. Otherwise, I would be preaching or teaching without having a dialogue with you."

This letter had a profound effect on me even though surgical intervention proved necessary. We entered a dialogue on what it means to have a program in life and how seriously one can do self-analysis if one is ready for it. Fromm, I felt, gave his all in response to my crisis, and I felt blessed with the responsiveness of a true and wise friend - all of which lifted my morale immeasurably.

In his last letter, a few months before he died, he returned my thanks for the joys we had shared together over the years.

I have purposely shared rather private experiences with Fromm since I saw no other way to give you the flavor of my experience with Fromm, the man.