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Deaths

Erich Fromm, 79, psychoanalyst, on faculty 1942-53, dies

Erich Fromm, the psychoanalyst, author and teacher who was a member of the Bennington faculty from 1942 to 1953, died March 18 of a heart attack at his home in Locarno-Muralto, Switzerland. He was four days short of his 80th birthday.

In the world of social philosophy and psychology he is remembered for the twenty books he wrote, notably including *The Art of Loving*, *The Sane Society* and *Escape From Freedom*.

At Bennington, he is remembered by some, including Thomas P. Brockway and Lucien M. Hanks, for his custom of teaching on Mondays, leaving town on Tuesdays to practice psychoanalysis in various cities, then returning from New York on Fridays with a satchel full of gourmet edibles he had bought in delicatessens; he would then invite friends to his home on the Murphy Road to partake of the food.

Fromm, according to Brockway, intended to stay at Bennington but when his wife Henny became ill in the early 1950s he accepted advice that the reputedly radioactive waters of Mexico would be good for her, and he left for Cuernavaca. He took two leaves of absence from the College, his wife died in 1952 and he did not return.

At Bennington, Fromm taught a popular course titled *Human Nature and Character Structure*, which combined lecture and seminar methods. Its emphasis, the catalogue reads, was on "symbolic language as a key to obscure areas of normal personality" as opposed to "pathological phenomena." It was listed the first year as a special study in social science, then the next year became a basic course.

Fromm was born in Frankfurt March 23, 1900, and came from a family in which there had been a long line of rabbis. He was schooled in the analytical technique of Sigmund Freud but later developed his own theories and style of psychoanalysis. He abandoned Judaism in 1926 "because I didn't want to participate in any division of the human race, whether religious or political." He fled Germany with the rise of Hitler in 1934.

His popularity with students at Bennington was attested by the fact that seniors chose him as the commencement speaker in 1948 — a rare honor for an incumbent faculty member.

The College's files contain a lecture titled "The Modern Myth" which he delivered at Bennington on March 31, 1947. Some excerpts from it follow:

The emergence of man can be defined as occurring at the point where instinctive adaptation reaches its minimum. Man becomes a "rational animal" at the point where he becomes, as far as instinctive adaptation is concerned, the biologically most poorly equipped animal. Self-awareness, reason, memory and imagination have disrupted the "harmony" which characterizes animal existence. Their emergence has made man into an anomaly, into the freak of the universe. He is part of nature, subject to her laws, yet he transcends nature outside and inside himself. He is set apart while being a part, homeless and yet chained to the home which he shares with all creatures. He is cast into this world at an accidental place and time — and forced out of this world, again accidentally. Being aware of himself, having memory and imagination, he realizes his powerlessness and the limitation of his own existence. He

visualizes his own end: death. Never is his existence free from this dichotomy. He cannot get rid of his body as long as he is alive — and his body forces him to want to be alive.

It has been argued that man is potentially on the verge of madness and that he has to fight continually against becoming actually mad. Indeed, viewing the intrinsic dichotomy of man's existence, it might be more correct to ask why not all people are insane rather than only some.

... The conditions of man's existence make it imperative and unavoidable for him to seek for answers to his question of the meaning of his life. Myths give answers, varying in contents according to the religious or philosophical systems in which they are rooted; but they are all alike in one respect — they express ideas and inner experiences symbolically as if they were realistic events and sensory experiences.

... Modern man feels like a cog in a vast machine; frightened and powerless he relies on the functioning of this machine, of which he understands only a very small part. The whole man-made world is not felt as his own but as something opposing him, which he is awed by and fears. He has made the estranged and alienated works of his own hands into his gods. He has created a new myth which seems to deal with reality and yet which deals with something as far beyond him as heaven and angels once were.

... Modern man has deified things — the very creation of his own hands; the state, property, business, machines, work are felt to be ultimate goals giving meaning to his life and transcending it. They are not instruments created by man for his own purposes of a bet-



Erich Fromm at Bennington in 1950

ter and happier life, but ultimate entities, idols to be worshipped from which he derives a sense of meaning for his life.

Not only things, but people and human relations as well have become deified. People believe if they could find the one person to be in love with, the problem of existence would be solved. Love and marriage become a myth too. They are not looked upon as expressions of man's own power to love but as something transcending him like God's grace. The picture of the person to be loved is inflated into a mirage of an idol which would give the happiness, peace and unity which the individual feels important to achieve by himself. Marriage, like success, power or the state, assumes a symbolic, mythical quality. No wonder that so many relationships must fail in reality when they are overlaid with phantastic and mythical expectations from the very start.