

Rula Berenda:
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- 1 - Remembrances of Erich Fromm

83

Erich Fromm generally gave a course for every book he wrote (generally before the book was published). He never read from notes and he never sat down while he lectured. Whenever he gave a course at the William Alanson White Institute, all the members of the staff attended. He allowed 15-20" at the end of a lecture for questions and discussions.

I can't remember the year but I know that the course was given at the William Alanson White Institute and dealt with the Biography of Freud by Ernest Jones. During the discussion, Dr. Chrzanowski (not sure of spelling) raised his hand. Unfortunately I cannot remember what he asked but there was malice in the question and it implied dishonesty and personal motives to Fromm's criticism. Fromm's face turned red in anger and indignation. He banged on the table so hard that the water spilled from the jug on the table. Then, pointing his finger at Dr. Chrzanowski, he said: "And you, Doctor, treat patients!! How do you communicate with them when you cannot understand what I am talking about?" After a few minutes of silence, he proceeded with the discussion.

By-the-way, in America, Erich Fromm's reaction and his open and forceful display of anger, would be considered an outburst of temper and a sign of loss of control, and would be followed by an apology - not for being angry, but for the way it was expressed. Americans consider criticism of another or/and the public display of anger or sorrow to be inappropriate and a sign of weakness.

Another example of Fromm's courage, integrity and intolerance of pettiness and malice involved me directly: The course dealt with Erich Fromm's evaluation and critique of "The Life and Works of Sigmund Freud" by Ernest Jones. Someone in the audience questioned why Freud was so critical of his father and never criticized his mother. Fromm agreed with Freud that the father represents reality and what is considered right and wrong in the particular society in which the child is growing up (the super ego). In the outside world we expect fairness and we are rewarded with money, promotions and rewards for our achievements. We can protest against injustice and even fight for fairness. From our mother, we need and want unconditional love. We cannot scream and demand that she love us. Yet, because of our long period of dependency, our survival depends on her. Another person in the audience asked why, in spite of this need for unconditional love on the part of all children - male and female, girls find it easier to be critical of the mother. I raised my hand and said: Mother represents the source and the mystery of life. The little girl shares with her mother in the mystery - she will eventually be the mother of men and women. The man remains an outsider to this mystery - he will never feel the new life like the woman does during pregnancy. This is probably the reason why the girl can afford to be more critical of her mother. Erich got very excited by this

comment and elaborated on it.

A few days later (before the next lecture), I got in the mail a letter from Dr. Clara Thompson informing me that I can audit Dr. Fromm's course but I am not to participate in discussion. I was shocked and puzzled. I had taken a few courses with her and, in a case seminar, she assigned a case to each student. I never got a case assigned to me and she turned away when I tried to question this. Though I paid for the course, I did not receive credit for it.

I showed Dr. Thompson's letter to Dr. Rose Spiegel, who had been a friend of mine for many years. She insisted that I see Erich and show him the letter. The next time, I went to class earlier and, as Erich arrived, I asked to see him. I gave him the letter. He was shocked. He said: "I thought she worked through her identity problems, but it's obvious she did not. This is terrible!" Then he looked at me and said: "You know what she is, don't you?" He realized that I did not know what he was talking about and he said: "You are everything she is not. You are very feminine, attractive and intelligent. She can't forgive you this." He asked to keep the letter (I never got it back.)

Before starting the lecture and holding the letter so everyone could see it, he said: "I have an important announcement to make. I invite Dr. Berenda to all my courses and I value and welcome her comments, always."

Here are some of his comments about therapy:

1. Everyone who comes to you for help is hurting. As a therapist, address yourself to the pain.
2. There are always changes as a result of therapy in the life of a patient. Occasionally, a real transformation takes place.
3. Symptoms are ways of warding off anxiety. Dreams are a message of what the core problems are. They are often symbolic and as therapy proceeds, they tend to become much more explicit.

Erich talked a great deal about alienation – the lack of communication and the emptiness and superficiality of human contact. He gave this example: He walked behind two workmen carrying their empty lunch-boxes in their hand and one said to the other: "I am dead-tired". The other man said: "So am I". There was more communication in this one statement between these two men than among many people who spend hours talking about nothing, Erich said.

4. About love and the capacity to give, he said: "Don't ask a beggar for something. All he can offer you is crumbs. The prerequisite for love of another is a deep sense of personal worth and respect for oneself".



5. About the Jewish Bible: The Jews envisage God as someone with whom they have a direct relationship. There is no intermediary and there are no miracles. Man is responsible to himself and to God for the kind of life he leads and how actively he has been committed to helping others. The Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur) is a day of self-confrontation. All the distractions such as food, drink, sex, are removed and the day is spent in the house of worship where the individual and his fellow-men pray. It is meant to be the one day of the year to assess one's life and to accept one's own mortality by remembering those dear to him who have died.
6. For Passover, which is a joyous holiday to commemorate the Exodus from Egypt and the end of slavery, the man of the house sits like on a throne. But he wears a white toga in which he will be buried - it is again a reminder that he is mortal and should be humble.