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Why We Need Fromm Today: Fromm's Work Ethic

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Lecture presented at the International Conference about "Productive Orientation and Mental Health" on the Occasion of the 20th Anniversary of the International Erich Fromm Society, that took place October 29th to November 1st, 2005, in the Centro Evangelico in Magliaso near Lugano / Switzerland. First published in the English version of *Fromm Forum* (English Edition - ISBN 1437-1189) 10 / 2006, Tuebingen (Selbstverlag) 2006, pp. 31-36.

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"Man is dead, long live the thing!" - Fromm's disturbing cry, quoted from the collection, *On Being Human*, (1992d [1961], p.27) reminds us how much we need his spirit in today's culture. We have, in many ways, lost track of the emotionally healthy life he so passionately advocated. In this essay I ask what Fromm would think of us, in 2005. I concentrate on what he would think of our attitudes about work but I am interested in what he would think of our whole relationship to life.

I approach this question by considering what I think to be some serious current issues that I imagine would have elicited a strong response from Fromm. In my mind Fromm would have provided a much needed corrective to some of today's trends in psychoanalysis, and the wider culture. I look forward to our discussion, and other points of view about how Fromm would see us now.

I emphasize what I would call Fromm's work ethic, as basic to his thinking about healthy living. This is *diametrically* opposed to the Puritan conception of a work ethic, which pits the work segment of life *against* non work pursuits. In sharp contrast Fromm's thinking emphasizes that work should not be compartmentalized or pitted against other activities, as I will elaborate shortly.

A basic assumption I hold is that it is acceptable for us, as analysts, to express passionately held values. I do not believe that a commitment to the analytic enterprise requires me

to pretend I leave my values home when I go to work in the morning. I think that mistaken applications of the concept of neutrality have created much confusion about the appropriateness of the analyst's expression of deeply held values. To emphasize this point, I organize my remarks into a series of values I hold dear.

Integrity

Here, in Switzerland, Fromm wrote a piece for the Milan evening newspaper *Corriere della Sera*, which Rainer Funk included in his collection *On Being Human* (E. Fromm, 1992b). In this essay, originally published in 1972, Fromm describes "What I Do Not Like in Contemporary Society" (E. Fromm, 1992j [1972]). Fromm decried that fewer and fewer people could be trusted since, "Being for sale, how can one be trusted to be the same tomorrow as one is today (p. 39)?" Fromm goes on to relate this to the problem that "ever fewer people have convictions. By conviction I mean an opinion rooted in the person's character, in the total personality, and which therefore motivates action." I believe that Fromm is championing integrity as having significance that transcends time and place. Elsewhere (S. Buechler, 2003 and 2004) I have discussed human integrity as a state in which our motives, beliefs, and actions form a seamless whole. The word, "integrity" relates to the idea of the integer, or whole number. For



example, as an analyst, my integrity is manifested in the consistency with which I express my human values in the way I work. If my words and actions in sessions match my values I am practicing with integrity.

I think Fromm made his conception of healthy integrity in the workplace clear in his writings about alienation. For example, in *The Sane Society*, (1955, p. 178) quoting from C. W. Mills (1951), Fromm uses the thirteenth and fourteenth century craftsman as an example of a healthy work life, “The craftsman is thus able to learn from his work; and to use and develop his capacities and skills in its prosecution. There is no split of work and play, or work and culture. The craftsman’s way of livelihood determines and infuses his entire mode of living.”

In Fromm’s ideal of a sane society the worker is encouraged to strive for full self-development and the integration of work into the fabric of one’s life as a whole. Quoting from Fromm, Funk, in the book *Erich Fromm: The Courage To Be Human* (1982, p. 78) defines the sane society as one in which “no man is a means toward another’s ends but always and without exception an end in himself; where nobody is used, nor uses himself, for purposes which are not those of the unfolding of his own human powers; where man is the center, and where all economic and political activities are subordinated to the goal of his growth.”

Fromm, arguing against the compartmentalization of work in his book *The Sane Society* (1955, p. 326) says, “One cannot separate work activity from political activity, from the use of leisure time and from personal life. If work were to become interesting without the other spheres of life becoming human, no real change would occur.”

If Fromm were alive today, and wrote another essay entitled, “What I Do Not Like in Contemporary Society,” what would he say about our integrity, in the workplace and elsewhere, as analysts, and, more generally, as human beings? I don’t believe Fromm would approve of our willingness to participate in managed care, at least as it is practiced in the U.S.A. In my experience the American analyst is faced with painful conflicts. An analytic way of working is not re-

spected by managed care companies, who only watch the bottom line. They are not interested in us as thinkers, but only in us as “providers” of a service. They reward us for concretizing and rapidly resolving patients’ problems, labeling human beings in the same way we label Campbell’s soup. It is either tomato or chicken. It is never both. If we are willing to label and rapidly “process” our patients, using the categories they deem reimbursable, our patients may get financial benefits. If we are unwilling to go along with this system, our statement of principle most often costs our patients the reimbursement they might have received. Thus giving ourselves the luxury of integrity puts us in an untenable position with our patients, from my point of view.

Years ago I had a patient, an extremely competent professional woman, in a health care related field. She wanted to get some reimbursement from the insurance that was included in her employment benefits. As part of a review of her coverage, she was asked to visit the company’s psychiatrist. As she reported it to me, she was put through a humiliating cross examination. Basically, the gist of it was, if she had a serious depression she should be on medication and not in therapy. If she did not have a serious depression, then she did not need therapy. After this experience the patient chose not to try to get reimbursement, and paid all her therapy expenses out of pocket, a result we both suspected did not displease the insurance company.

When I get an insurance form it always asks for the patient’s diagnosis, as well as their social security number. Thus, it requires me to trust the information will be kept securely confidential, which is something I have learned to question. But what would Fromm say I should do about the diagnosis, to maintain my own integrity and the integrity of my relationship with the patient? Should I give the company what they want, a label for the patient that does not sound like it will cost them a great deal of money, that is serious enough to warrant therapy, but not so serious that it elicits unwanted attention? Should I try to accurately label the patient’s problems, sharing with nameless strangers a description of my patient’s painful human struggles? In this position I have often chosen to give the patient a



diagnosis that is convenient, rather than one that most clearly expresses the truth, to the extent that any human being can be summed up as “tomato” and not at all “chicken.” What has been the cost of this lie, to me, to the patient, and to our work together? I have won the patient money that they need, and I believe they deserve. But at what price?

Self Actualization

In *The Revolution of Hope* (1968, p. 72) Fromm articulated that human nature, inasmuch as it is human is “primarily rooted in this need of man to express his human faculties in relation to the world...” Fromm goes on to state that this means that “because I have eyes, I have the need to see; because I have ears, I have the need to hear; because I have a mind, I have the need to think; and because I have a heart, I have the need to feel.”

Applying this to the world of work I think this argues for a universal human need to use work as a means of self expression and self development. Elsewhere (1996) I have described how Fromm saw the failure to fully use oneself as linked to the development of depression.

Now I would like to extend the idea of self actualization to include fully living the *emotions* we were born equipped to experience. That is, some sadness is part of living a human life, and some disappointment and regret are inherent in the human condition. They are not diseases to be cured. I can not be cured of being a human being, nor should I use medications to anesthetize the normal pain of life. Life hurts.

I believe we are reluctant, today, to accept these attitudes. We look for easy, painless solutions. We should listen more to the poet, Rilke, who said that “almost everything serious is difficult, and everything is serious (1934, p. 35).”

As an analyst I often feel the pull to slide through a session, not fully living it, but just getting by. It is a temptation, but, in a very real sense, I believe it necrophilic. It is against life to avoid fully living emotionally.

A patient came to treatment partly because of the sadness she felt at not being able to bear a child. I helped her differentiate sadness from

depression. Sadness at the loss of a chance for a significant life experience is a normal human reaction, not a symptom of a disease. It can not be cured, and we should not try to expunge it, but, rather, to hear what it has to say.

Recently I attended a meeting of the American Psychological Association, where I met many very well intentioned people, striving to learn how to use behavioral, cognitive, and positive psychological “techniques” to cure people of their feelings. I talked to beaming young graduate students, full of hope that they can take away the anger, sadness, fear, and regret that are inherent in living. They proudly recited the results of their studies, showing that if we only said certain magic words to our patients, or re-framed their reality in accord with some newly discovered psychological principle, all of life’s pain would be eradicated. Perhaps some fairy tales are harmless, and maybe it is beneficial for children to believe them for a while. But I don’t think this one is harmless. It reminds me of T.S. Eliot’s lines about the dangers of hoping for the wrong thing:

*“I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing;
wait without love
For love would be love of the wrong thing;
there is yet faith
But the faith and the love and the hope are
all in the waiting.
Wait without thought, for you are not ready
for thought:
So the darkness shall be the light, and the
stillness the dancing.”*

(T.S. Eliot, 1943, p. 28.)

Can we have the strength to help the young put their trust in the hard work that so often precedes insight? Can we help them accept that frequently, in treatment, enlightenment only comes after years of painstaking struggle in the dark? Can we, in this fast paced era of the sound-bite, embrace this truth ourselves, passing up the temptations of facile, superficial “feel good now” approaches? Fromm’s impassioned call for our full self actualization might be the inspiration we need, to help us withstand the im-



pulse to grab for quick fixes. Charged to aim for our patients' and our own full self actualization, we just might be able to wait until we are truly ready to hope for something right.

Courage

Psychoanalysts and their patients have always needed courage. We have to approach our work with the courage to face the truth, regardless of how uncomfortable that truth might be. This is a crucial part of our "work ethic," that can have a profound impact on the patient's attitudes toward his own work, in treatment and beyond. Fromm stood for courageous embrace of the truth. But, in this post-post modern era, can we ever feel conviction about a truth worth fighting for?

While post modern skepticism has helped us avoid mistaking our subjective biases for objective truths, it has left a gaping hole where conviction used to be. We often blame the culture for failing to show adequate respect for our profession but, at the same time, we are openly uneasy wearing the mantle of the expert. I think we lack the courage to assert that we *do* know something about mentally healthy living, and that is part of why we are paid for talking to people. I believe that the attempt to replace positivism with respect for endlessly varying perspectives can go too far. Fromm, once again, can provide the needed antidote. I believe that Fromm stood for the courage to be amazed, and not shrink from the power of the unconscious. The psychoanalyst Timothy Zeddies (2000, p. 429) expressed this value succinctly, when he said that our job is "helping patients to face and integrate into self-awareness the alien, rejected, repressed, unformulated, unfamiliar, unvalidated, or otherwise unknown aspects of themselves. What is needed much of the time is an increased comfort with- or at least the courage not to flee from- the unknown in ourselves, our patients, and the analytic setting more generally..."

I believe that the courage analytic work requires is the strength to know we are fallible, to grasp the post modern wisdom about our limitations, but still believe we have a valid and va-

luable point of view about emotionally healthy living. We have to have the guts to say the unsayable, and to recognize that, although we are only human, and our vision is inherently subjective, we still have to make countless judgment calls every session and take responsibility for their impact on another human life. Every moment of every hour I privilege some parts of the material, ignoring other aspects. Of course there could be other valid perspectives on what it is clinically important to focus on, with this patient, in this hour. The courage of the analyst is to be *aware* of her limitations but *still* embrace having profound impact, with every word she says, or fails to say, and every silence she keeps or breaks. A patient tells me he has lost interest in his wife. Do I ask how long this has gone on, or whether he has also lost interest in our work, or what losing interest means to him, or when he has lost interest in someone in the past? Do I say nothing? Each of these possibilities, and so many others, indicate to the patient what I think is important in his loss of interest, what is worth being curious about, what our goals are, what place interest has in a healthy relationship, etc. I can not escape having an impact. I am fallible, with a particular slant on life, and yet I must have influence and be responsible for it. I will quote my own recent writing on the subject of the analyst's courage (S. Buechler, 2004, p. 83):

"It is not any particular behavior that confirms the analyst's courage. Analytic courage establishes a palpable atmosphere of profound freedom of speech. It is the *feeling* of being with the child who, at any moment, might say the emperor had no clothes on. In this child's company anything can happen next. No thought is taboo, and anything that can be thought may be spoken. But this child wouldn't lose her sense of being herself if she chose *not* to point out the emperor's nakedness. In her presence, there is always the possibility, but not the certainty, that the previously unspoken will be given voice."

I believe that Erich Fromm can inspire this courage because he helps us have a strong sense of purpose about our work as analysts. Reading



Fromm imbues me with the feeling I am fighting *for life* when I do my work. He encourages me to passionately promote fully living, to tend the life force in myself and others with my whole heart. This strong sense of purpose helps me brave the moral and emotional uncertainty of being a limited human being, and, nevertheless, profoundly influencing other lives.

How does this passion fuse with respect for the importance of analytic neutrality? As we all know, the ideal of neutrality has helped to define our analytic profession. Beyond its historical importance, it has tremendous meaning clinically. The precious opportunity to be fully oneself as an analytic patient would not be possible without some form of neutrality. Neutrality is a major aspect of what differentiates the analytic relationship from any other interpersonal experience.

Elsewhere (S. Buechler, 1999) I have addressed the problem of integrating analytic neutrality with the passion we vitally need as analysts, to effectively address depression and other clinical challenges. In that paper (p. 225) I outlined my personal requirements of an analytic neutrality:

“A neutrality I could embrace would have to leave me free to encourage the patient’s active efforts to fight depression. It would have to allow me to present enough of a new relational challenge to foster hope. It would have to include a valuing of urgency about not wasting time. And it would have to leave me free to describe the patient’s impact on me, so that I can help him understand the differences between his intentions and his effect.”

I am suggesting that we have to embrace the paradox of being passionate and neutral, just as we must be aware of our subjectivity and still influence the patient. As analysts, if we want to be truthful, we have to face how much of our role is paradoxical. The paradoxical element contributes to the inherent difficulty of being an analyst. We need a work ethic that encourages us to believe that what we are doing is so valuable it is worth whatever it takes. In this essay I suggest that Erich Fromm’s impassioned values can help us find that strong a sense of purpose.

Active Hope and the Sense of Purpose

The sense of purpose Fromm fosters in the analyst can serve as an illustration of Fromm’s work ethic. Fromm encourages us to integrate productive work into our lives. While it may be easier for us, as analysts, to find purpose in our work than it is for some others, if the analyst’s approach to her work stems from passion about life she could, I suggest, provide an example to the patient of how core emotional commitments can inform one’s work life, so that work becomes self expression.

In other words, if a human being, analyst or otherwise, actively nurtures his biophilic tendencies these forces will find expression in his work, as well as the other spheres of his life. A biophilic analyst demonstrates how love for life can permeate work, giving it meaning and purpose.

I think, especially in his late work, Fromm understood this active orientation toward life as our best source of hope about the future of humankind. Hope comes from an unflinching dedication to being, rather than having. Hope comes from working hard for something you truly believe worthwhile. Working hard out of such a commitment is, I suggest, fundamentally different from working hard to obey a Puritan work ethic.

Ideally, passionate work should be motivated by love, not by fear of any authority. We would work hard because we believe in what we are doing, not because we are trying to live up to a standard to please God, or, even, to please ourselves. We are not working to earn salvation or any other reward for the work, but, rather, we work hard because the work itself is satisfying to do, and its results are meaningful to us. Another way to say this is that while the Puritan work ethic dictates working hard to please internal and external superego standards, according to Fromm’s work ethic we work hard because it renders our lives more satisfying and meaningful to do so, and because we care about an outcome we believe our work can help achieve. Working hard is, then, an expression of the essence of who we are as human beings and what most matters to us. When we follow the dictates



of a Puritan work ethic, and put in enough labor to judge ourselves “good,” we may feel we have earned some leisure time. In this model, work and leisure might well be entirely compartmentalized pursuits. As a result, we are not our whole selves in either one. But with Fromm’s work ethic, work and other meaningful activities would have to be related, since they would both be expressions of who we essentially are.

We understand human motivation differently when we expect people to do an activity for itself, rather than for approval, whether or not it is self-approval. I think this is one of the central sources of hope in Fromm’s thinking. There is something fundamentally hopeful about a theory that depends on people to do what they want to do, rather than depending on them to do what they know they are supposed to do, or have to do.

I find it hopeful to believe that people can express their real yearnings in their work, rather than that we can be bribed to perform, or push ourselves to perform for treats or signs of approval. Fromm’s hope is practical, active, embracing life’s paradoxes. Perhaps the clearest expression of Fromm’s passionately striving hope is in this passage (E. Fromm, 1973, p. 579):

“To have faith means to dare, to think the unthinkable, yet to act within the limits of the realistically possible; it is the paradox of hope to expect the Messiah every day, yet not to lose heart when he has not come at the appointed hour. This hope is not passive and it is not patient; on the contrary, it is impatient and active, looking for every possibility of action within the realm of real possibilities.”

We need to bring a sense of purpose and active hope to our analytic work today, and, more generally, to our lives. Burnout is a significant, and, I believe, growing problem for our profession. Elsewhere (S. Buechler, 2004, chapter 7) I discuss burnout in analysts as a personal response to cumulative professional losses. The losses at the heart of burnout may include lost faith in the efficacy of psychoanalysis, lost career expectations, literal losses of patients and in-

come, lost pride in response to the wider culture’s devaluations of the profession, and demoralization, due to feeling compelled to continue to practice for financial reasons, despite despair about the work. I think of burnout as a terrible form of depression. It is one of the worst endings a career can have, negating the meaningfulness of all that preceded it. We should focus on preventing burnout by cultivating productive attitudes toward our work, early in our careers. If we wait until burnout has begun it is often too late. This is one of the most important ways we need Fromm today, with his active hope and belief in working to promote a full engagement in life, in ourselves and others.

Freedom

The final issue I want to discuss is the value of freedom. There can be no doubt that Fromm stood for human freedom, but there might be different interpretations of the nature of that freedom. Freedom from what? I will suggest that the fundamental freedom Fromm advocated is the freedom to live the present moment fully. As an example, the work ethic of the psychoanalyst charges him with the responsibility to live each moment in each session fully, so he can promote this capacity in the patient.

What prevents people from living the present moment fully? Many answers are valid, including the traditional analytic understanding of transference as a legacy of the past that colors the experience of the present. The freedom to take in and to know this moment, now, asks of me that I open to surprise. Elsewhere (S. Buechler, 2004, chapter 1) I discuss a continuum between surprise and paranoia. Briefly, I believe each of us is always somewhere on that continuum, from extreme openness to closed minded certainty. To the extent that we are free, we can really have what the present moment offers. We can take in its promise, and be alive to its newness.

What hinders this freedom in people today? One factor, I would suggest, is a tendency in our political leaders to promote a false sense of “knowing the score.” We are encouraged to sum up a culture, or a thousands year old relig-



ion in a sound bite. At least in the U.S.A., we are led to see the present in terms of the past, to replace genuine thought with reflexive prejudice. A superficial “we” vs. “them” mentality is given the name “patriotism.” Labels are an easy substitute for understanding. Simplistically, we are led to believe that we are irrationally hated, and the only solution is exterminating the enemy.

In this climate, it is difficult to retain the freedom to think for oneself. But Erich Fromm can, I feel, once again come to our rescue. Just as he can help us cherish our integrity, self actualization, active hope, sense of purpose, and courage, so does he promote our freedom. I quote from the last pages of Fromm’s book, *The Heart of Man: Its Genius for Good and Evil*. Written more than forty years ago, I believe it is as relevant today as it was then.

“There is idolatry of national sovereignty; a lack of objectivity and reason in foreign policy. On the other hand, there is the wish, among the majority of the populations in both blocs, to avoid the catastrophe of nuclear destruction; there is the voice of the rest of mankind, which insists that the big powers should not involve all others in their madness...” (L.c., p. 141)

“Indeed, we must become aware in order to choose the good- but no awareness will help us if we have lost the capacity to be moved by the distress of another human being, by the friendly gaze of another person, by the song of a bird, by the greenness of grass. If man becomes indifferent to life there is no longer any hope that he can choose the good. Then, indeed, his heart will have so hardened that his ‘life’ will be ended. If this should happen to the entire human race or to its most powerful members, then the life of mankind may be extinguished at the very moment of its greatest promise.” (L.c., p. 150.)

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