



Congress of Erich Fromm, Psychoanalyst and Supervisor

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Ascona, Switzerland

Erich Fromm's Escape from Sigmund Freud, an Introduction to Escape from Freedom

"If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am myself only, what am I? If not now, when?" Talmudic saying, Mishnah Abbott.

"Nothing then is unchangeable but the inherent rights of man." -- Thomas Jefferson.

Both these quotes represent Fromm- the son of a cantor steeped in the old world of the Talmud and Fromm, the European turned American Analyst -- much ahead of his time, in his views of contemporary analytic thought, and yet the humanist steeped in traditions as old as the Bible and as modern as today's times. In Fromm old thought meets new thinking-forming a creative bridge between the old and the new, appropriate to a man who crossed the Atlantic, found refuge in the New World, yet had to write "Escape from Freedom" to express his revulsion over the materialism and marketing sense of his new found environs. He was a man who returned to the continent that he had been forced to leave, and who was then honored posthumously ~~him~~ by Germany which awarded him its most prestigious recognition, the Goethe Prize.

Erich Fromm died March 18, 1980. Having been born at the beginning of the 20th century he was witness to major changes in the world, changes both good and bad. And he saw and contributed



to the development of psychoanalytic thought and practice. As the next millennium approaches it is only fitting that we pay tribute to a man who was both a visionary, an idealist, but at the same time a complex human being, charming, vulnerable and difficult.

His life history was equally complex. Suffice it to say that Fromm, the son of a cantor, moved from orthodox Judaism and an analysis originally of the Freudian mold to Marxism. He stressed again and again that analysis must deliver a new experience, if it is not to be a sham. His own view of the analytic process differed much from the conventional "wisdom" of the 30's, 40's and fifties. Accused by many, Freudians and non-Freudians alike that he was not an analyst, one must ask why such a judgment was made. Is it sufficient to say that he did not talk about the patients he treated himself? Our Mexican colleagues know that while in Mexico for 25 years, he could not talk about his clinical work since many outstanding people in Government and professional circles were his patients and would easily have been identified. But more than that, he did not want to start a Frommian school. He rejected blind allegiance to a leader which would negate his particular emphasis on the individual experience of a particular and unique psychoanalyst and patient dyad. In addition, some of Fromm's writings published posthumously, interviews he has given and tape recordings of lectures tell us more about Fromm the clinician than we thought we knew.

But more of this later. I will now talk to you about Fromm the man as I came to know him as my supervisor. I first met Erich



Fromm when I came to the White Institute for further analytic training. Erich Fromm was one of the co-founders of the William Alanson White Institute where he for a time found a professional home, and where he was both a teacher and a supervisor. Before myself coming to the US on the last American boat to leave Genoa before the 2nd world war erupted in full force, I had been in Zurich at Burgholzli clinic, studying under Jung and Bleuler. During my time there I had a supervisor who also had been one of Frieda Fromm-Reichmann's candidates. She gave me a note of introduction to Fromm-Reichmann who then in turn suggested that I might begin psychoanalytic training at the William Alanson White Institute. Clara Thompson suggested Erich Fromm to me as my first supervisor.

Fromm presented a challenging figure.

He saw people on the top floor of his apartment on the West side of Manhattan where he lived alone. Late night supervision at 11:30 P.M. was not exactly conventional. In addition there were times that he was late or did not show up at all. When my complaint about that reached his ears by way of Clara Thompson, he was quoted as saying that students should be glad to see him at all. Nothing was wrong with Fromm's sense of his own importance - perhaps one needs to have this sense to be as prolific and creative as he was.

Clearly my recollections of his supervision are colored by the passage of time and by my own development as analyst. He supervised me on a patient whose narcissism seemed to get under



Fromm's skin. (It takes one to know one?)

The patient in question was a junior executive in an advertising agency - a place of employment Fromm had little use for, considering his contempt for the marketing personality. Fromm conveyed his view of the patient in ^a rather unique and graphic way: he got up on his feet and pretended mincing about with a dog on a leash. The illusory canine clearly was a spoiled dog with the primary desire to be admired and to be the focus of attention around the clock. Fromm's mimicry or enactment conveyed more than mere words would have done - a perfect caricature of the consummate narcissistic patient.

. During one of my supervision sessions I commented rather apologetically that I had not been sufficiently firm in confronting this patient by pointing to her narcissistic tunnel vision, which prevented her from ever questioning the accuracy of her perceptions. In response to my apologetic stance Fromm commented as follows: "Do you realize that for every mistake that you knowingly make there are an untold number of mistakes you will never know about?" At the time I heard this as severe criticism, and it threw into relief all the doubts I had of ever becoming a competent analyst. Today I hear Fromm's words in a different manner and can appreciate the extent to which he was a visionary and ahead of his time. The words of Kierkegaard come to mind - "nothing ventured, nothing gained". And similarly I recollect Sullivan's emphasis on the importance of "trial and error" or Edgar Levenson's fallacy of understanding. Intellectual



understanding can have little impact on a patient; instead the freedom to make mistakes, to resonate with the patient's reaction and to gradually come to glimpse with the patient ~~and~~ his or her own unique psychic reality is the cornerstone of our work. In our contemporary clinical work we are less concerned with being right. Fromm conveyed with a few words that we should be less concerned with being right, and instead pay attention to the particular resonance between the patient and ourselves, a resonance which goes beyond the "zoom-lens" exploration of a particular patient's life history.

Fromm's view of mistakes dovetailed with Clara Thompson who once said to me that to make a mistake as an analyst is indeed making a gift to the patient.

Fromm in his supervision encouraged me to get away from preconceived notions of causality and Freudian dynamics. He wanted to enable me to get in touch with my own creative visions about a patient -- a vision that was only possible with a free associative stance. Thus at one point he suggested that I close my eyes, breathe deeply, hold my breath, observe what comes to mind when I open my eyes.. With all his brusqueness and seemingly confrontational style he seemed to trust that I would come up with some meaningful image or thought that would have importance for the analytic work. If his comments did not always appear "humane" to an intimidated, cautious candidate -- they were clearly humanistic in their concern for the student and his patient. Fromm was a superb listener and did not hesitate to be both didactic and



personal in his comments.

I regularly attended the White Institute whenever Fromm came in. He invited me at a large meeting to say some words about Sullivan who had just died. I made a few comments and added that Sullivan had died without a penny. Fromm jumped up and shouted at me "how dare you!" I felt badly and returned to my seat next to Clara Thompson, quite perplexed as to what had made him so angry.

My later dealings with Fromm arose out of our shared interest in the International Federation of Psychoanalytic Societies. The reason for founding the Federation was the realization that the 2nd World War had interrupted the connections between analysts in Europe and in the United States. Fromm, as representative of the Mexican Psychoanalytic Society, I myself as representative of the William Alanson White Institute, Schwidder from the German Analytic Group and Caruso from the Austrian organization became the founding "fathers" of a small group who did not really get along with one another. Their animosities delayed joint activities for several years.

The Third Forum of the IFPS in Mexico in 1968 was Fromm's dream of a worldwide analytic event. However it had escaped his attention that ~~was~~ 1968 was the year the Olympics were to be held in Mexico. The meeting had to be postponed to 1969. Unfortunately, however, Fromm suffered a heart attack in Switzerland in the interim and was in no condition to organize a large meeting of that kind. He called me from Locarno-Muralto ~~to~~ to pinch hit for him; a mammoth task as any of you know who have organized a large



scale, international meeting.

Fromm contacted me and asked me that I tell him the specific number of people that were planning to come to the Forum, particularly from the U.S.A and Europe. He also asked that I arrange flights from Europe as well as from the U.S.A. back and forth. I did my best to find out whatever I could, but he wanted numbers which could not be determined the way he wanted.

The actual Forum had some serious difficulties. It was being held during the Nixon years. Two young adolescent boys, who were travelling with their parents to the Forum had the long hair typical of those years. This was being seen as connected to drugs and both clean youngsters were taken by the "natives" and had their hair cut short. When the fathers complained they also had their hair cut in front of a mob. It was left to me to rescue the situation with the help of the German ambassador from deteriorating further. The American ambassador was no help.

Fromm the humanist had clearly his own human foibles, was not always easy to deal with, and yet contributed in many important ways to psychoanalysis as we know it today.

The concept of bridging, the mutual resonance between two psyches which I have used extensively in my own work has its own connection to Fromm, who, as I had said at the beginning, personified a bridge between the old and the new, and the emphasis on that kind of connectedness is reflected in Fromm's commitment to the IFPS. Today the IFPS has grown to include more than 18 groups - several of them dedicated in particular to teaching



Fromm's approach to analytic work. And while its member societies do not always see eye to eye, the organization as a whole tries to live up to the best in humanistic connectedness. I can't help but think that Fromm would be pleased.

I will now address the analytic heritage left to us by Fromm, a heritage that led him to move away from Freud's libido theory, that led him to reject the label 'neo-Freudian'. Yet, confusingly, he saw himself as being closer to Freud than to Harry Stack Sullivan or to Karen Horney.

Fromm had spent the first ten years of his analytic career as a Freudian. He reports being bored in working along Freudian lines; in The Art of Being he accuses Freud of changing his theories to satisfy his adherents. He proposes that the image of Freud had become an icon, that Freud needed to be his own analyst, the creator of himself. Although he does not use these words he seems to be accusing Freud of being a marketing personality -- and in that sense an anathema to all that Fromm stands for. In a book titled Dialogue with Erich Fromm, published in 1966 Fromm describes his thinking as different from Sullivan and Horney in that he emphasizes culture less and feels that "more emphasis should be placed on social structure, class structure, economic structure, the impact these developments have on the development of the individual, and the practice of life which follows from each of these"¹ (p.58). And while this may not be the most

¹Evans, R.I. (1966) Dialogue with Erich Fromm. New York: Harper and Row, Pbls.



important difference which moves him in his own eyes closer to Freud than to Sullivan and Horney he continues as follows: "...I have attempted throughout the years to translate Freud into philosophical and sociological categories which seem to me to correspond more to recent philosophical and sociological thought patterns"². And he continues, perhaps most revealingly "I feel somewhat like a pupil and translator of Freud who is attempting to bring out his most important discoveries in order to enrich and to deepen them by liberating them from the somewhat narrow libido theory"³.

I have often wondered why Fromm never contacted Freud directly in writing or in person. After all, everyone else corresponded with Freud, discussing cases and theoretical issues. If there has been any such correspondence, there does not seem to be any record of it. It may well be that Fromm never could face Freud in a personal way. While picturing himself as Freud's translator he seems to assume the mantle almost of a son. It is my own opinion that Fromm had his own attachment to Freud both because of his own early analytic training and because of a kinship, a similarity of intellectual background. Fromm must have known that by discarding the libido theory he had become more than a pupil and a translator; instead he contributed to building a whole different edifice.

² *ibid.*

³ *ibid.*



Very much in tune with contemporary times Fromm in 1966 called attention to growing criticisms of psychoanalysis. He suggested that we do not pay enough attention to patients with various and sundry conditions not described by classical psychoanalysis. He further asserted that the greatest obstacle to further developing psychoanalytic work with a variety of patients is due to the fact that we follow old fashioned models of social science research. Fromm believes that the psychoanalyst must show imagination and clarity of theoretical thinking as well as self-criticism to understand and hence to be able to help the patient before him. Those who cannot develop these faculties will help their patients to a limited degree only and discharge them before they are ready.

Fromm concludes that psychoanalysts should devote part of their time to psychoanalytic research as has been carried out both by the Mexican Society and to some extent at the William Alanson White Institute. According to Fromm the Mexican Society had begun to address ^{it self} ~~themselves~~ to the kind of psychoanalytic research that has not been done in many places. Later on, as the result of Fromm's interest, the William Alanson White Institute of Psychiatry, Psychoanalysis and Psychology also began a psychoanalytic research project.

Fromm has been accused of not showing himself as a clinician -- not really telling the world how he himself is working. However, while he may not have presented his own case material, his 1968 paper The Oedipus Complex: Comments on 'The Case of



Little Hans'⁴ gives us clear indications of how he views clinical pathology. He feels strongly that to understand pathology the analyst must look not only at the individual within the context of his family, but ^{at} ~~in~~ this individual and his family within the context of society, quote: "the fear of castration is merely one of the manifestations of a general fear, produced by the principle of force and threat that has infiltrated the total structure of society. To be able to recognize this fact, we must go beyond the framework of family life, and enter into a critical examination of the structure of societies." (p.188)⁵.

Early on I called Fromm a visionary. Clearly he had ideas ahead of his analytic time. He alone among the pioneering analysts predicted the kind of alienation endemic to a technological society where person to person contact increasingly takes place in cyberspace and human contact is held to a minimum, where man's connection to nature is becoming increasingly tenuous and where the marketing personality with its emphasis on money and acquisition even can penetrate analytic practice.

In conclusion there is no doubt that Fromm stands out as one of the rare thinkers of the 20th century and as analyst of remarkable stature. His influence on current analytic thinking often goes unacknowledged - and despite whatever aspects of

⁴Fromm, E. The Oedipus Complex: Comments on "The Case of Little Hans". Contemp. Psychoanal. (1968) 4, 178-188.

⁵ Ibid.



narcissism may have fueled some of his preoccupations - I have been left to conclude that he would be pleased that he has not become an icon and instead has had a wide spread influence on our theory and practice.