In Appreciation: Erich Fromm

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When I made a commitment to give this presentation some months ago I had no idea how timely it would be given the current activities of Fromm devotees around the world. March 23, 2000, marked the centenary of Erich Fromm's birth, March 23, 1900. As it turns out the centenary is being observed by the publication of numerous books and articles in Fromm's honor, and various lectures and conferences are being held as well.

In an audience such as this one I would expect that there would be a number of humanistically oriented authors that are favorites such as Isaac Asimov, E.O. Wilson, Robert Ingersoll, Corliss Lamont, Paul Kurtz, Bertrand Russell, Carl Sagan, and, I would hope, Erich Fromm. I certainly enjoy all of these authors but Fromm holds a special place in my life for he, more than the others, was very much a mentor for me as I was making my philosophical transition from traditional Christianity to humanism, and my career evolution from minister to psychologist. I never conversed with Fromm in person although I did have the pleasure of hearing him speak once at the University of Utah years ago. What I did have the opportunity to do was to avidly read his books once I discovered them, especially from the late 1950s to the time of his death in 1980.

My assumption is that Fromm may be fading into obscurity, particularly in this country and with younger persons because the American attention span is so short. I think that's unfortunate given his status in the evolution of humanism over the last 60 years. Gerhard Knapp, for instance, has described Fromm as "one of the most influential humanists of this century." But I express my appreciation for Fromm tonight not just for his personal contribution to me or for his historical contribution but also because I heartily believe his writings are still very relevant as we move into the challenges of the 21st century.

Before dipping into just a few of his books let me quickly sketch in a bit of the Fromm biography. He was born, as indicated earlier, March 23, 1900, in Frankfurt Germany, the only child of Orthodox Jewish parents. Fromm later described his mother as overprotective, his father distant and himself as an "unbearable, neurotic child." And further, "being the only child of two overly anxious parents did not, of course, have an altogether positive effect on my development, but over the years I've done what I could to repair that damage." (It has been said that those of us in the mental health profession often choose that line of work to cure our parents-or ourselves!)

The Fromm family was steeped in Jewish tradition and the young Fromm was an avid scholar of the Talmud and the old Testament, particularly the prophets Isaiah, Amos, and Hosea with their emphasis on justice, righteousness, and universal peace, motifs which would echo through all of Fromm's later writings. In 1926, however, at the age of 26 he officially abandoned his Jewish faith. I was interested to note that was about the same age I officially abandoned my Methodist affiliations.

Fromm's formal education focused on psychology, philosophy, sociology, and later, psychoanalysis. The major intellectual influences for him were Sigmund Freud and Karl Marx although Fromm was eventually to be a revisionist of both of these men.

In 1926 Fromm married a woman ten years his senior who had been his psychoanalyst, Frieda Reichman, but the marriage lasted only
four years. (There are many good reasons not to marry your therapist!) Nonetheless, Fromm and Frieda Fromm Reichman continued to be friends and professional collaborators and she had her own distinguished career as an author and psychotherapist.

In 1933 Fromm left Germany because of the rising tide of Nazism, just one of millions who fled from or perished at the hands of Hitler’s legions. In addition to the horrific and incomprehensible genocide of those days, how can one really imagine the incalculable loss to Germany and the occupied countries of the intellectuals, professionals, artisans, and myriad other talented persons who either died or fled to other countries—much to the enrichment of their adopted countries.

Here in America Fromm became one of the founders of the William Alanson White Institute of Psychiatry, Psychoanalysis and Psychology. At different times he taught at Yale, Columbia, Bennington College, New York University, the University of Michigan and Michigan State as well as the National Autonomous University in Mexico City. He also maintained a psychoanalytic practice for more than forty five years.

Fromm married his second wife in 1944 and moved to Mexico City seeking a more favorable climate for her health. Unfortunately, she died an untimely death in 1952. Fromm was later to marry for a third time, obviously a firm believer in the institution.

In the middle fifties Fromm joined the American Socialist Party and tried to formulate a progressive program for that party—without a great deal of success. However, he continued to be a firm believer in democratic socialism as the most humane and humanistic of political systems. Another prime political interest was the international peace movement and he was a co-founder of SANE, an organization opposing both the atomic arms race and the war in Vietnam. He also was a vigorous supporter of Senator Eugene McCarthy during the 1968 presidential campaign. After Nixon’s election, however, Fromm withdrew from political activism. Nixon was surely the cause of many folks questioning their hope for mankind!

During his lifetime Fromm suffered two major bouts of tuberculosis and three heart attacks before finally succumbing to a fourth attack on March 18, 1980, in the Swiss village of Muralto, just five days shy of his 80th birthday.

Gerhard Knapp has said of Fromm that he „Consistently devoted himself and work to one single goal: the propagation of a great visionary hope for a better and more dignified life for all of humanity. [He] clung tenaciously to his unflagging faith in humanity’s potential for self-regeneration. This unbroken hope is the spiritual center of his life and his works.” Daniel Burston, author of The Legacy of Erich Fromm, has written: [Fromm] was a man who cherished an abiding love for the values of humanistic religion and the Jewish tradition in which he was raised. [He] was nonetheless a committed atheist who regarded belief in a personal creator God as an historical anachronism.” Fromm described himself as „an atheist mystic, a Socialist who is in opposition to most Socialist and Communist parties, a psychoanalyst who is a very unorthodox Freudian.” Fromm was a very prolific writer with hundreds of articles and almost two dozen books in English to his credit. The range of his subject matter was broad including psychology and psychoanalysis, sociology, humanism, religion, ethics, Buddhism, Marxism, socialism and foreign policy. The International Erich Fromm Society is currently completing the publication of all of his collected works in twelve volumes and 6,000 pages in length! How then to deal adequately tonight with that mass of material in our time remaining? Obviously we can’t, but let me just dip lightly into a few of his works to illustrate some of his concerns which I think still have decided relevance for the present.

Fromm’s first book in English was Escape From Freedom published in 1941, almost 60 years ago in the midst of World War II. The book opens with three provocative questions from the Talmud that I have found useful with numerous clients and classes:

If I am not for myself, who will be for me?
If I am for myself only, what am I?
If not now, when?

The first question, „If I am not for myself, who will be for me?” must surely be answered, „no one.” The second question, „If I am for myself only, what am I?” provides the balance between
self interest and concern for others and suggests to me the answer, „lonely“, for persons completely self-preoccupied are not very enjoyable folks to be around. The third question provides the kicker, „If not now, when?“ If we are not fully living now when do we plan to get around to it? Perhaps never!

In Escape from Freedom Fromm describes the growth of human freedom and self-awareness from the Middle Ages to modern times but with a problematic result. Modern man, freed from pre-individualistic bonds of servitude and old securities of stifling and outworn cosmologies can find himself isolated, anxious, and alone. To escape that unpleasant condition one can easily enter into new dependencies and turn to authoritarian states and institutions for meaning and identity. In 1941 Fromm clearly put Nazism in that role-with hideous results in World War II and its aftermath. How distressing it is today to see a resurgence of Nazi motifs whether in Europe or in Northern Idaho or elsewhere! The alternative to abject dependency and compliance to authority, Fromm wrote, was to advance toward a positive freedom based upon the uniqueness and individuality of persons working in concert for the greater good of humankind. The challenge of enjoying and capitalizing upon diversity among persons and life styles is an ever present challenge. (We can cite the current diversity deficit at the University of Utah as a prime example.)

Fromm's second book, Man for Himself, published in 1947, is my personal favorite. My copy is dog-eared, heavily underlined throughout, and the source of many useful quotations. For instance, in discussing the existential realities of human existence, Fromm wrote what I deem to be a classic statement of the humanist stance:

There is only one solution to his problem: to face the truth, to acknowledge his fundamental aloneness and solitude in a universe indifferent to his fate, to recognize that there is no power transcending him which can solve his problem for him. Man must accept the responsibility for himself and the fact that only by using his own powers can he give meaning to his life. But meaning does not imply certainty; indeed, the quest for certainty blocks the search for meaning. Uncertainty is the very condition to impel man to unfold his powers. If he faces the truth without panic he will recognize that there is no meaning to life except the meaning man gives his life by the unfolding of his powers, by living productively; and that only constant vigilance, activity, and effort can keep us from failing in the one task that matters—the full development of our powers within the limitations set by the laws of our existence. Man will never cease to be perplexed, to wonder, and to raise new questions. Only if he recognizes the human situation, the dichotomies inherent in his existence and his capacity to unfold his powers, will he be able to succeed in his task: to be himself and for himself and to achieve happiness by the full realization of those faculties which are peculiarly his—of reason, love, and productive work.

The key words here are „reason,“ „love,“ and „productive work“ that Fromm elaborates upon throughout much of his writings: „reason,“ „love,“ and „productive work“ as the basic ingredients for a fulfilling human life.

In describing humanistic ethics, Fromm wrote (and I've collected several quotations here):

Humanistic ethics is based on the principle that only man himself can determine the criterion for virtue and sin, and not an authority transcending him: „good“ is what is good for man and „evil“ what is detrimental to man; the sole criterion of ethical value being man's welfare. Man indeed is the „measure of all things.“ The humanistic position is that there is nothing higher and nothing more dignified than human existence

...it is one of the characteristics of human nature that man finds his fulfillment and happiness only in relatedness to and solidarity with his fellow men.

Love is not a higher power which descends upon man nor a duty which is imposed upon him; it is his own power by which he relates himself to the world and makes it truly his.

Undoubtedly Fromm's most popular book was a
little volume entitled *The Art of Loving*. It was translated into 28 languages and had sold more than one and a half million copies in English alone by 1970. Reportedly upon publication some librarians and book sellers thought they would have to keep the book behind the counter—a clear indication they hadn't read the book. *The Art of Loving* is a far cry from Alex Comfort's *The Joy of Sex* for instance, or many a tome currently available in libraries and book stores. *The Art of Loving* quickly makes the point that loving is a very demanding human activity. The very first two sentences in Chapter I read: „Is love an art? Then it requires knowledge and effort.ˮ Further, the mastery of an art requires that it be a matter of ultimate concern; „there must be nothing else in the world more important than the art.ˮ What proportion of humankind do you imagine has loving as it’s ultimate concern? „In spite of the deep-seated craving for love, almost everything else is considered to be more important than love: success, prestige, money, power—almost all our energy is used for the learning of how to achieve these aims, and almost none to the art of loving.ˮ A substantive love, Fromm wrote, is not just a strong feeling; it is a decision, it is a judgment, it is a promise. If love were only a feeling, there would be no basis for the promise to love each other forever. A feeling comes and it may go. How can I judge that it will stay forever, when my act does not involve judgment and decision?

In an age of throwaway relationships with passing fancies those words sound rather quaint, don't they? Somewhere in the back of my head I hear the lament of a popular song, „doesn't anyone stay together anymore?“ But not just judgment and decision are called for. Fromm cites other basic elements common to all forms of love: care, responsibility, respect and knowledge. These quotes:

- Love is the active concern for the life and growth of that which we love. Where this active concern is lacking, there is no love.
- Respect means the concern that the other person should grow and unfold for his own sake, and in his own ways, and not for the purpose of serving me.
- To respect a person is not possible without knowing him; care and responsibility would be blind if they were not guided by knowledge.

In a contrary mode, how often do we hear about couples who have a frenzied courtship and marry after only a few days or weeks? Or how often do we read about persons who kill the person they supposedly love but feel alienated from and are quoted as saying, „If I can't have her, no one will!“ Love, Fromm said, requires care, responsibility, respect and knowledge.

In a little volume entitled *Psychoanalysis and Religion*, Fromm spells out the differences between authoritarian and humanistic religion: „The essential element in authoritarian religion and in the authoritarian religious experience is the surrender to a power transcending man. The main virtue of this type of religion is obedience, its cardinal sin is disobedience. Just as the deity is conceived as omnipotent or omniscient, man is conceived as being powerless and insignificant. Only as he can gain grace or help from the deity can he feel strength.”

Humanistic religion, on the other hand, is centered around man and his strength. Man must develop his power of reason in order to understand himself, his relationship to his fellow men and his position in the universe. He must recognize the truth, both with regard to his limitations and potentialities. He must develop his powers of love for others as well as for himself and experience the solidarity of all living beings. Man's aim in humanistic religion is to achieve the greatest strength, not the greatest powerlessness; virtue is self-realization, not obedience. Faith is certainty of conviction based on one's own experience of thought and feeling, not assent to propositions on credit of the proposer. The prevailing mood is that of joy, while the prevailing mood in authoritarian religion is that of sorrow and guilt.

The last book that I want to mention and one of the last that Fromm wrote was *To Have or to Be* published in 1976. It's an admirable
book to read for anyone currently interested in simplicity movements and de-escalating frantic life styles and the perpetual accumulation of material possessions. (However, looking around the benches of this valley it doesn't look like many folks in our part of the world are much into simplicity!) It is interesting to note that *To Have or to Be* has consistently been more popular in Europe than here in the U.S.

Fromm was severely critical of the consumerism that drives our economy, depleting natural resources, increasing the gap between the rich and the poor, exploiting the resources and people of developing countries, and promoting a radical hedonism that breeds indifference to pervasive social needs. To quote Fromm: „The selfishness the system generates makes leaders value personal success more highly than social responsibility? At the same time, the general public is also so selfishly concerned with their private affairs that they pay little attention to all that transcends the personal realm.“ (We can think of the abysmally low voter turnout for elections in this country as just one of many examples.)

The nagging question for us still today is, are we really happy for all of our expansive homes, accumulating toys and endless consumption? Have things really changed much from Fromm's description of life twenty five years ago?

„The observable data show most clearly that our kind of ?pursuit of happiness? does not produce well-being. We are a society of notoriously unhappy people: lonely, anxious, depressed, destructive, dependent people who are glad when we have killed the time we were trying so hard to save.“ And further, „the need for speed and newness, which can only be satisfied by consumerism reflects restlessness, the inner flight from oneself?looking for the next thing to do or the newest gadget to use is only a means for protecting oneself from being close to oneself or another person.“ (Psychologists and psychiatrists are always messing with our heads!)

„Being,“ in Fromm's terms, is living simply with modest wants, with depth and vitality, deeply involved with caring communities, sensitive to the natural world around us, and mindful of the rightful place of all of earth's people. The „having mode“ in contemporary life might well be typified by a *Wall Street Journal* cartoon I saw recently which pictured a man walking determinedly down the street, briefcase in hand, with a long stick arching from his back forward over his head and dangling a dollar bill in front of him. (The *Wall Street Journal* is an interesting place for such a cartoon!)

Well, there is no way I can do justice to the depth of Fromm's writings in this piecemeal fashion, and there is so much more of his work that I would enjoy discussing but time is limited. I would invite you to consider his writings either again or perhaps for the first time. There are significant books that I have not even mentioned and topics that I imagine you would find both provocative and enlightening. Fortunately, virtually all of Fromm's books are still in print, and I have a sheet available listing all of his published works in English. I commend them to you for a consciousness raising experience. The sheet also cites the web address of the International Erich Fromm Society for those of you into cyber exploration.

Let me add this one postscript (and speaking of consciousness raising). Fromm wrote in an era when it was the norm to use the generic term, „man“ to refer to all humans and „he” as the accompanying personal pronoun. You heard that usage in the quotations and you may well have winced a bit when you heard them, especially if you are a woman. Time has moved on since Fromm last wrote and feminists have appropriately helped us to be more sensitive in our language usage. Our language is still cumbersome on the point but gender equity demands that we speak and write without disenfranchising either gender. On the other hand, perhaps fair play would now suggest we typically use „woman“ in a generic sense-and, of course, that includes „man“!
Erich Fromm was a German Jewish psychoanalyst, psychologist, humanistic philosopher, and sociologist. Check out this biography to know about his birthday, childhood, family life, achievements and fun facts about him. Fromm implemented social theories that earned him recognition at the Frankfurt School. He was eventually forced to flee his nation and subsequently settled in USA. In March 1980, the legendary psychoanalyst died in Switzerland, at the age of 79. Image Credit. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1rKRIxJaO18. Erich Fromm was born in 1900 in Frankfurt, Germany. His father was a business man and, according to Erich, rather moody. His mother was frequently depressed. In other words, like quite a few of the people we've looked at, his childhood wasn't very happy. Like Jung, Erich came from a very religious family, in his case orthodox Jews. Fromm himself later became what he called an atheistic mystic. The second event was even larger: World War I. At the tender age of 14, he saw the extremes that nationalism could go to. All around him, he heard the message: We (Germans, or more precisely, Christian Germans) are great; They (the English and their allies) are cheap mercenaries. The hatred, the "war hysteria," frightened him, as well it should. Erich Fromm was born in Frankfurt, Germany in 1900. He studied law at the University of Frankfurt until he changed his field of study to sociology and enrolled in the University of Heidelberg. After he graduated in 1922 with his PhD in sociology, he continued to study psychology and psychiatry at the University of Munich, and he trained at the Psychoanalytic Institute of Berlin. Fromm practiced psychoanalysis in Berlin and established the Psychoanalytic Institute of Frankfurt. Fromm established the William Alanson White Institute of Psychiatry, Psychoanalysis, and Psychology and lectured at Yale University, the New School for Social Research, and the American Institute for Psychoanalysis. From 1941â€“1950, Fromm was a faculty member at Bennington College.