

Some Thoughts on Erich Fromm's *The Art of Loving*

Fromm's books came into my life many years ago when, during a difficult time, they were a source of inspiration and strength. Recently I returned to the slender volume of *The Art of Loving* to compose the following essay.

Erich Fromm (1900-1980) was a prolific writer, lecturer, psychoanalyst and social philosopher whose world view was anchored in his knowledge and understanding of the Talmud and Hasidism. As a descendant of distinguished rabbis both on his father's and mother's side, Fromm studied under a number of noted rabbis before earning a PhD from the University of Munich and studying at the Psychoanalytic Institute in Berlin. The interactions of psychology and society held his abiding interest; thus, he later turned from orthodox Judaism towards secular interpretations of the scriptures. Following the election of Hitler as Germany's chancellor Fromm left for the States never to return to his erstwhile homeland.

In *The Art of Loving* the author wishes to convince his readers that love is first and foremost an interpersonal creative capacity. Furthermore, satisfaction in love cannot be gained unless we actively develop the capacity to love our neighbor with humility and courage. Love isn't a feeling or an emotion; rather, it is a practice that requires discipline, patience, faith, and the overcoming of narcissism. It's a decision, a judgment. If love were a feeling only, there would be no basis for a commitment to love. Feelings come and go. With this book the author seeks to help us learn to love in mature and generous ways.

Various aspects of love are detailed in the book: The love of the mother for her infant, the brotherly love among individuals and groups, erotic love, and the love for God. The basis for our need to love, he states, lies in our separateness and the anxiety this state of separation generates.

Inasmuch as learning to love requires knowledge and effort, Fromm agrees to provide the knowledge while urging us to exert the effort.

A good portion of the book pertains to our attempts to love God and be loved by God. All theistic religions posit God as the highest value, the most desirable good; thus, the specific meaning of God depends on what is the most desirable good for a given individual. Still, some general principles are at hand to demonstrate how the concept of God has changed in the human perception from the beginnings of culture to the present day.

Early on, as humans felt themselves torn from our original unity with nature, we identified with animals and trees, finding security in going back to these primary bonds. An animal is transformed into a god or a totem; a shaman wears an animal mask during ritual or dance. As human skill and artisanship developed, idols are fashioned from clay, silver, and gold. At a later stage these idols are given human form, some female, some male. Fromm mentions evidence to the effect that a Mother Goddess was the norm at one time. In this matriarchal phase, the highest being is the mother. Not only is she the goddess, she is the authority in family and society. Mother's love is unconditional and always present. All of Mother Earth's children are equally loved. At one point, however, Mother is dethroned from her supreme position and a shift occurs from the mother-centered to a father-centered religion. The father becomes the supreme being in family, society, and religion. Patriarchal society, Fromm notes, arose with the gaining of private property. Now the father needs a son who can inherit what is bequeathed, someone who will be most like the father and who pleases him the most. The nature of fatherly love is that it makes demands and punishes the disobedient. Father establishes principles and laws. His love for the son depends on the praise and obedience of the latter. As a consequence, patriarchal society is hierarchical. The equality of brothers has given way to competition and strife.

“Whether we think of the Indian, Egyptian, or Greek cultures, the Jewish-Christian or the Islamic cultures, we are in the middle of a patriarchal world with its male gods, or where all gods have been eliminated with the exception of the One,” writes Fromm. However, since the wish for mother’s love cannot be eradicated from the human heart, the figure of the loving mother is not entirely absent, though she remains hidden. In Jewish religion, says Fromm, motherly love is reintroduced in the various currents of mysticism. In Catholicism, Mother is symbolized by the Virgin. Even in Protestantism she is present—in the concept of divine grace, which leads believers to hope that the father will be loving and merciful.

“In the matriarchal tradition, I love God as an all-embracing mother. I have faith in her love . . . No matter that I am poor or powerless, no matter that I have sinned, she will embrace me. If God is a father he loves me like a son, and I love him like a father,” Fromm explains.

Interestingly, the author points out that a concept of mature love did evolve from faith-based practices. God gradually changes from the despotic tribal chief to a God who cannot be named. When Moses on Mount Sinai tells God that the Hebrews expect him to bring them a named God—they are, after all, idol worshippers, and an idol by its very existence has a name—God tells him to say that God is “I am in the becoming.” This means, says Fromm, that God is not finite, not a person, not a being, and that a translation of the phrase would be “Tell them my name is nameless.”

This can only lead to the conclusion not to mention God’s name at all, not to speak about God. The nameless One is an inexpressible stammer, the ground of all existence: truth, love, justice.

This evolution makes all the difference in the nature of the love of God. The God of Abraham can be loved, or feared, as a father—sometimes his love, sometimes his anger is the

dominant aspect. When God is the father, I am the child not fully emerged into maturity. Still, for most people the belief in God is a belief in a helping father, which is a childish illusion, says Fromm, albeit still the dominant form of religion.

Fromm examines the differences in Eastern and Western thought, explicating Aristotelian teaching versus that of Lao-tse. These comments are too incisive to summarize; allow me instead to cite a few lines from a poem by the mystic Rumi that Fromm reproduces at length. Rumi, a 13th century Persian mystic and Islamic theologian, composed poems that celebrate the twin aspects of love for humanity and love of God.

“Never, in sooth, does the lover seek without being sought by his beloved.

When the lightning of love has shot into *this* heart, know that there is love in *that* heart.

When love of God waxes in thy heart, without a doubt God hath love for thee. . . .”

Regrettably Fromm does not allude to the notable Christian mystic Hildegard von Bingen (1098-1179), a Catholic nun and early composer of church music, though he repeatedly quotes the medieval mystic and scholar Meister Eckhart (1260-1328).

Fromm argues that, laudable as may be our striving to discover who we are, today’s preoccupation with psychology actually hinders in that quest. Psychology “betrays the fundamental lack of love in human relations today.” Instead of being a step toward, it substitutes for the full knowledge of loving. This is because today’s social relations have become, by and large, economic relations. We package ourselves for the consumption of others; in turn, we consume indiscriminately; thus, we become unable to develop the capacity for mature love. Marriage, within this structure, becomes equated with team work, “not so different from the idea of a smoothly functioning employee.” One must be reasonably independent, cooperative, tolerant, yet at the same time ambitious and aggressive. “Thus the marriage counselor urges the

husband to ‘understand’ the wife and be helpful . . . she should listen attentively when he talks about his business troubles . . . this amounts to a well-oiled relationship between persons who remain strangers.” The couple never arrive at a “central relationship” though they may treat each other with courtesy. Love is possible only if two people communicate with each other “from the center of their existence.”

Fromm defines love as composed of responsibility, as in “able to respond” to the unexpressed needs of another human being; respect, as per the root of the word *respicere* = to look at, i.e., to recognize the other as a human being of intrinsic value (rather than as someone who “might be useful to me”), plus care and concern and, finally, knowledge—the knowledge of our common human frailty as found in our own anxiety and loneliness.

In the section on “The Practice of Love” Fromm first reminds us that any art requires practice, whether the art be carpentry, medicine, or love. And practice requires discipline. “I shall never be good at anything if I do not do it in a disciplined way.” To practice only when “I am in the mood” doesn’t get us anywhere.

Further, that it is a necessary to concentrate on the mastery of an art “is hardly necessary to prove,” he says; anyone who ever tried to learn an art knows this. Yet even more than self-discipline, concentration is rare in our culture. We do many things at once. . . .” (The word “multitasking” was unknown at the time of his writing, but Fromm pinpoints its essence all the same.)

A third factor is *patience*. That should come as no surprise; patience is necessary if you want to achieve anything. If we think we lose something—we lose time—when we fail to accomplish things quickly, that’s an illusion. Concern with the mastery of the art is a condition of learning. If it’s of no importance, I remain, at best, a good dilettante.

“Paradoxically, the ability to be alone is part of the condition to love,” says Fromm. Try being alone with yourself and you will discover how difficult it is. You become restless and fidgety, and prone to rationalizing that it’s of no value; it is silly, it takes too much time. (The Buddhist practice of sitting, of breathing, can help us here.) Further, we should avoid trivial conversation. We love to give advice, often without really listening; we fail to take the other person seriously. As a result, the talk is tiring. To concentrate in relation to others means, primarily, to be able to listen, whence the activity makes us “more awake.” We begin to live fully in the present. We learn to become sensitive to the self.

Of specific significance for the ability to love is overcoming one’s narcissism, that is to say, to become objective. “The insane person or the dreamer fails completely to have an objective view of the world outside, but all of us are more or less insane, or more or less asleep; all of us have an unobjective view of the world, one which is distorted by our narcissistic orientation.” You can find examples everywhere, from watching a neighbor to reading the newspaper to watching yourself. The lack of objectivity is readily apparent in how we deal with our children. Parents want the child to be obedient, to give them pleasure, instead of perceiving what the child feels. The lack of objectivity in relations with foreign nations is notorious. “Every action of the enemy is judged by one standard, every action of oneself by another.” The ability to love depends on one’s capacity to emerge from narcissism.

This process of emerging, of waking up, requires faith. To practice the art of loving requires the practice of faith—rational faith, that is, a faith rooted in productive intellectual and emotional activity. Fromm reminds us that irrational faith is the acceptance of something as true only because an authority or a majority opinion says it is so; rational faith is based on one’s own observation and thinking in spite of anyone else’s opinion. The practice of faith begins with

noticing when and where we lose faith, and how we rationalize this loss. We eventually recognize that, although we are consciously afraid of being unloved, the real and unconscious fear is that of loving. Love is an act of faith, love is an activity; if I love I am in a state of active concern for the loved person, provided I am aware and alert. To be active in thought and feeling is to avoid inner laziness.

A loving attitude extends into the social realm. There is no “division of labor” between love for one’s own and love for strangers. To take this insight seriously means a rather drastic change in our social relations. While a great deal of lip service is paid to the idea of loving one’s neighbor, our social relations are mostly determined by the principle of fairness, says Fromm. Fairness means leaving off trickery or fraud in the exchange of commodities and services, and also in the exchange of feelings. “I give you as much as you give me” in material goods—and in love. The Golden Rule of “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” can actually be interpreted as meaning, “Be fair in your exchange with others.” It’s a more popular version of the Biblical “Love thy neighbor as thyself.” According to Fromm, the Jewish-Christian norm of brotherly love is entirely different from fairness. It means to love your neighbor, to feel responsible for and one with her or him, while the fairness ethics results in not feeling responsible. In Fromm’s view, this focus on “fair trade” has led to a disintegration of the love of God, which he finds “a blatant contradiction to the idea that we are witnessing a religious renaissance.” Instead, what we witness is “a regression to an idolatrous concept of God.” Fromm observes that consumerism and our market-oriented society make it difficult to emerge as fully human.

Now I’d like to draw an analogy between Fromm’s vision of love as a learned art and the practice of playing guitar. By Fromm’s standards, my efforts in this regard have remained

dilettantish, though I continue to be inspired by friends who are intensely devoted to the craft, and I do practice regularly. But here is a limitation: my fingers are not long and slender as those of some musician friends, with the result that certain compositions are forever out of my reach. Other limitations intrude also, other priorities, other commitments. Ergo, I am less attentive than what is merited by owning a classical instrument. Likewise in terms of loving I am far from the competence Fromm wishes us to attain; in fact, I am beginning to think that reaching his ideal is only intermittently possible. Yes, there have been instances where I communicated with another human being “from the center of existence” or, as I prefer to phrase it, in self-disclosing conversation (by which I mean dialogue that leads to insight and self-knowledge in both conversation partners). These instances have been rare, though. Sometimes even a family member will push back with, “Why are you telling me this?” At other times, there isn’t time or opportunity to arrive at knowledgeable personal conversation. As for marital relations, where intimate dialogue flourishes at outset, it tends to disappear as we get on with the business of staying alive, earning a living, providing for family. And let’s not forget the annoyances and exasperations—some small, some not so small—that creep into the relationship as a result of either partner’s idiosyncrasies or missteps. All this is by way of saying that I failed—and it doesn’t help to know, so did Fromm; his marriage to Frieda Reichmann-Fromm withered on the vine practically from the beginning. They may have remained friendly as colleagues, since she was a practicing psychoanalyst also but if so, they would have had conversations of professional interest. Would intimate dialogue have been part of the talk? Fromm did procure a visa for his estranged spouse, making it possible for her to escape the Nazis, but they divorced in the States in 1942.

Fromm never remarried. In one of his books he mentions the pervasive loneliness of growing up an only child in a household of strictures. It's almost as if he imported the modus into his later life. I pray he experienced love, including physical love, now and again during his long and solitary journey. In Switzerland at eighty as he prepared to leave this world, did some beloved someone remain by his side? I was with my ex-husband the last ten days of his life, but whether someone other than staff sits at my bedside when they take me out feet first is to be doubted . . . though, at present, adult children and grandchildren stay with me in my home when they go hunting or snow skiing nearby.

Back to the premise of this essay. If Fromm ultimately failed to live up to his own ideals, does that let us off the hook? Are we absolved from practicing what he preached? Not at all. To exercise self-discipline, patience and faith in everyday dealings is worthwhile in itself; it doesn't have to focus on a specific relationship. Ditto for overcoming narcissism. I find it revealing that Fromm implicitly includes himself when he says, ". . . all of us are more or less insane, or more or less asleep; all of us have an unobjective view of the world, one which is distorted by our narcissistic orientation." Not even a man of his intellectual caliber feels he has fully freed himself of the folly of narcissism. Astonishingly, he is willing to say so.

I want to add that we must allow for the frailty of our efforts, must accept our human-all-too-human limitations. All the more reason to rejoice when, now and again, a breakthrough does happen: We encounter each other in our nakedness, our neediness, our loneliness and sorrow. Even if the relationship reverts to the politeness of strangers, who knows, another encounter may develop sometime in the future. To paraphrase another poetic line, "Let me be a little more active" in pursuit of what Fromm posits as the art of loving.