

## Some Thoughts on Erich Fromm and the Power of Self-Disclosure

Erich Fromm's seminal *The Art of Loving* appeared more than fifty years ago and was republished last year as Jubilee Edition. I studied the book in 1970, reread in its recent incarnation, and found many of Fromm's insights to be as valid today as they were then. Hence, when asked to present a guest lecture at Unitarian Universalist Church of Cheyenne (UUCC), I focused on Fromm's book-length essay, summarizing certain concepts and illustrating these with examples from my own and other writers' experiences. I also added comments on Sidney Jourard's *Psychology of Self-Disclosure*. This essay is an extension of that effort.

*The Art of Loving* urges us to learn to love with humility and courage, "the courage to judge certain values as of ultimate concern—and to take the jump and stake everything on these values." 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. Love is "the ultimate and real need in every human being" and, because learning to love requires knowledge and effort, Fromm provides the knowledge while prompting us to go forth and exert the effort.

Hardly any activity or enterprise starts with such tremendous hope yet fails so regularly as love, says Fromm, and yet we rarely inquire into the reason for the failure. This may be because in today's society only those things are considered worthy of learning that lead to financial reward or prestige while studying love, which "only" benefits human relations, is a luxury we can't afford. A culture of sappy love songs and romantic films leads us to believe the problem of love is the problem of an object, not a faculty. In other words, most of us see the problem as one of being loved. We think we must find the right object to be loved by. To this end we seek to make ourselves attractive, present ourselves as an appealing package—and many of the means to

do so are the same as “to win friends and influence people, a mixture of being popular and having sex appeal.” Two people thus fall in love when they feel they have found the best object available. Rather than learn how to practice love we search for an experience that provides the “being loved” feeling of romantic love.

Love is possible only when people communicate “from the center of their existence.” Romanticizing love as an emotion is in error. We should think of love as an activity that, like any art or craft, needs practice. If love were a feeling only, there would be no basis for a commitment: Feelings come and go; indeed, their fleeting nature may make us wander from lover to lover. Fromm warns that romantic love is bound to fail unless we “actively develop the capacity to love our neighbor”—and there is no “division of labor” between loving one’s neighbor and loving a family member or romantic partner.

To love we must confront our self-centeredness and, from there, arrive at a realistic view of our environment. “[A]ll 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.” At first hearing this idea may seem way out there; once it sinks in, however, it changes how we approach our relationships. Unmet expectations cease to confound us.

Eighteen months ago I arranged to perform a guitar duet with a fellow guitarist during UUCS services. We practiced the duet at my home and presented at Cheyenne Guitar Society. A practice session at UUCS was recorded by the church’s sound engineer. Nevertheless, the week before we were to appear the guitarist emailed she was visiting a daughter and granddaughter out of state. When I reminded her of our agreement she replied, “My granddaughter is important.” I had misjudged her willingness to commit; in Fromm’s words I had been “unobjective.” I knew

the guitarist by her mask but not by the center of her existence.

In a similar vein, a few years ago I was involved with a man who seemed the perfect partner. He was good-looking and witty and retired like me. He commented endearingly on my newspaper-column writing. When I said I planned to lobby the Wyoming legislature he said he would help. Just then the science curricula in primary schools were under attack by a group of creationists who insisted that science teaching needed to be augmented by a creationist story. Along with many other Wyomingites we traveled to a hearing in Casper of the Education Commission to argue against the creationist group's demands. Later we appeared before Wyoming legislators. In the midst of this my friend informed me he needed to leave for Japan. His daughter-in-law had sent an email asking that he help his son quit a drinking binge. When I asked if this was the first time he said no, it happened "about once a year." This would be his twenty-third trip to whatever country was his son's current residence as star in computerized technology—Australia, Turkey. Next I inquired if, provided I could arrange a last-minute session, he would talk with someone knowledgeable about recovery from substance abuse. He agreed, and Laura Griffith met with us. My friend addressed Ms. Griffith as "Counselor" and took notes but did not change his conviction that this time his presence would heal his wayward son. As on previous occasions, he would take away the son's credit cards and dump the booze down the drain. He would hold and hug him close. "I love him. He needs me," he said. Soon after he returned from Japan he informed me he planned to move on. "I want to live at fifty different addresses before I croak." He was then at Address # 43. What kind of value is that? My friend was a retired professor; you'd think he'd know better.

Fromm's concept of love postulates that, laudable as may be our striving to discover who

we are, a preoccupation with psychology actually hinders. Psychology “betrays the fundamental lack of love in human relations today.” Instead of being a step toward, it substitutes for the knowledge of loving. This is because today’s social relations have become, by and large, economic relations.. Marriage turns into a kind of team work, “not so different from the idea of a smoothly functioning employee.” The couple never arrive at a “central relationship.” Though they may treat each other with courtesy, they remain strangers; they live parallel lives but don’t connect. The commercialized psychology Fromm observed may have been a forerunner of the “selfies” phenomenon of today. It must be remembered, however, in Fromm’s time psychoanalysis was rooted in Freudian patriarchy. Concepts of traumatic stress and post-traumatic stress were unknown, as was the healing power of confiding in others. Although Fromm distanced himself from Freudian doctrine, he could not entirely escape its influence.

Neither Fromm nor his contemporary Albert Einstein experimented with self-disclosing writing. Few “manly men” did, in the day. The poet Rainer Maria Rilke, rejected like Darold, with his sense of self assaulted early on, confessed debilitating fears in fictional *Notebooks of Malte Laurids Bridge*—and even that only on therapy with Sigmund Freud. Like Fromm, Rilke abandoned his marriage soon after consummation. Just once in Fromm’s many books did I find an aside about a childhood pervaded by loneliness. He was an only child in a family who valued the traditions of orthodox Judaism. Later he continued the ascetic life that seems to have been imposed on him in childhood. His one and only marriage fell apart practically at outset. Where Einstein left my native country at first sign of the National Socialist terror, Fromm did so when Hitler was elected Chancellor in 1936. He did procure a visa for his estranged spouse to escape the Nazis, but they divorced soon after Frieda Reichman-Fromm arrived in the U.S.

Fromm notes that our market-oriented society makes it almost impossible for us to emerge as individuals capable of practicing the art of loving. Among other ills, the focus on consumerism has led to a disintegration of the love of God, “a blatant contradiction to the idea that we are witnessing a religious renaissance.” What’s happening is “a regression to an idolatrous concept of God,” where a god is supposed to help when we are in trouble, or make our team win if we pray to him before the ballgame. To Fromm, if we so much as use the name of God we reduce him-her-it to a human-like being, and he quotes God’s answer to Moses that “I am in the becoming,” which Fromm translates as “I am nameless.” Then he reproduces a poem by the Muslim mystic and theologian Rumi of thirteenth-century Persia. One of its lines reads, “When love of God waxes in thy heart, without a doubt God hath love for thee.” The joy of “When love of God waxes in thy heart” arrives whenever I gaze up into a night sky of stars. The enormous universe, and our minuscule existence within it, is as wondrous as an unfathomable energy falling to earth in photons of light.

Another astute remark holds that patriarchy, aka Law of the Father, arose with the acquisition of private property. Owning things demands that the father produce a son to inherit his possessions, says Fromm. Like his heavenly counterpart, the earthly father insists that the son be like him, that he lavish praise on his progenitor, that he obey the father’s injunctions. “Whether we think of the Indian, Egyptian, or Greek cultures, the Jewish-Christian or the Islamic cultures, we are in the midst of a patriarchal world with its male gods, or where all gods have been eliminated with the exception of the One.” As such our society is authoritarian and profoundly inequalitarian. Women and children, indigenous populations, and people of color are inequality’s most vulnerable—and most frequent—targets. Consider the statistics on American penal sentencing

that punishes women and people of color more harshly than white males, the latter often getting a fine where others are thrown in the slammer. The “business practices” of privatized prisons is an obscene outcome of our social system. Judging by Tim Requarth’s May 2019 report in *The Nation*, “Prisoners of Profit,” profiteering has doubled or tripled since Fromm’s critique of commercialism. Requarth’s statistics of just one in a long list of injustices, “The Big Business of Prison Phone Calls,” show that, depending on the state in which you are detained—in a jail, prison, immigrant detention center, even an immigrant child-detention center—charges can be as high as \$22.56 for a fifteen-minute call. By comparison, it costs me less than fifty cents to call Germany for fifteen minutes. Do any of us grasp just how disadvantageous is the Law of the Father for vulnerable populations? Patriarchal males, however, carry burdens also, without will or choice.

Early in our marriage my husband confided that he was an unwanted child. His mother, certain that her days of childbearing were behind her—two sons were fifteen and seven—blamed her husband for the pregnancy. Overhearing his parents’ arguments over his existence when he was small ever remained a painful memory. Darold rarely was at peace with himself. Supposing his mother had experienced autonomy, had been empowered to love, would she have welcomed her third child, once he was born? We are shaped by kith and kin, and sometimes the traumas of forbears turn into our own, but how do we confess childhood lovelessness without thinking we betray family? Darold was in high school when his mother passed. He could disclose her failure to love without having to worry he’d offend her; even so, he never brought up the painful memory again, not in the encounter group in which we participated nor in counseling sessions—but then, neither of the two counselors we consulted was interested in the messy past. Competent

counselors do exist, as we glimpse from Edith Eva Eger's *The Choice*; regrettably, in our marriage they were absent. Yet confiding a traumatic memory but once is hardly sufficient. How often have I talked and written about the fate of my unfortunate brothers! How often did Eger need to speak her teen years' trauma in a Nazi death camp? Many times. Many, many times.

Both Darold and I suffered trauma early on. Darold's was a loveless childhood, mine was buffeted by war and post-war terrors plus the devastating influence of parents who suffered childhood losses in the first great war. Not unsurprisingly, my sons remember our home as strife-riven. Our middle son broke off all contact with his parents once his dad riled against the young woman he had chosen to marry. Even as his father lay dying Frank could hardly bear to be in the same room with him. Shades of Albert Einstein: When his son Hans Albert decided to marry Frieda Knecht (misspelled "Freida Knecht" in *The Human Side of Science*) his dad opposed the marriage just as his own parents once opposed Albert's union with Mileva.

All of us are "more or less insane" though we exist as college professor or guitarist, as attorney in California like Darold or child of war like myself. A genius like Einstein.

Einstein's attempts at loving, like Darold's, were thwarted by self-absorption. The mathematician died in 1955, yet he remains revered even today. His face gazes down on us from billboards as we purchase "Baby Einstein" CDs that are supposed to turn our tykes into the likes of the great man. We should be careful what we wish for. Einstein is a poster child for Law of the Father run amok. Hans Ohanian's *Einstein's Mistakes* covers the thinker's professional errors, omissions, and infidelities but he also allows the occasional glimpse into disastrous personal relations. Some Einstein notes to family he terms obnoxious, ugly, and hypocritical.

In public Einstein proclaimed Marie Curie a dear friend and valued fellow scientist, but

in letters to his mistress he didn't hesitate to badmouth the colleague. Ohanian first reproduces Einstein's German words, then provides his own translation: "Frau Curie is very intelligent but meager in emotion, that is to say, impoverished in any kind of joy or pain." Did the man imagine he had a direct line to the inner life of another human being? "Confess your own sins, not someone else's," we want to say to him—and then it comes to us that we ourselves have indulged in gossip a la Einstein. We, too, would rather spread rumors than stay the course with a friend with whom we have issues.

Einstein used his parents' Judaism as excuse not to marry fellow physics student Mileva Marić when she found herself pregnant with his child. The couple did marry after the death of the elder Einstein—in those days Albert relied on Mileva's support and collaboration—but the damage was done. Mileva had to leave their baby with her Serbian relatives. The girl died young. Even after he amassed great wealth, he was stingy with the two sons Mileva bore him, as Michele Zackheim points out in *Einstein's Daughter*. Son Eduard languished for decades in a bare-bones mental institution where he was forbidden to play the piano he loved. In this, Einstein's mother proved unrelentingly loveless. Pauline Einstein never ceased her campaign against the girl from the East. How much her badgering contributed to Albert's decision to divorce Mileva and marry his much-older cousin is anyone's guess.

One time Einstein lost his temper over his granddaughter's presence in his study. She had not touched a thing but he manhandled the eight-year-old so roughly, she tumbled down a flight of stairs. The autobiographies Einstein composed never mention any personal relationships at all. He imagined family obligations kept him from pure thought but the opposite happened. His thinking in the latter half of his life was so muddled, mathematicians who understood his calcula-

tions called them nuts. To his admirers, however, the scientist presented a mask of benign friendliness. He was good at promoting himself, what Fromm terms packaging ourselves for other people's consumption.

On to something less dispiriting, to Laura Griffith's appearance as guest speaker at UUCC. Before explaining the mission of Recover Wyoming, an organization she founded, Griffith described her own decades-long struggle with substance abuse. The path to her recovery was truncated by backsliding. I, too, once stood before our congregants confessing my parents' fragile mental health—two of my bothers killed themselves within the span of a decade. Listening to Griffith I flashed on her sister Lynn Carlson, a fellow writer. Carlson once read an essay aloud about her sister showing up on Christmas Day dead drunk, and Carlson shutting the door in her face. "It was so painful," reads her essay, "I composed an obituary for my sister. I was certain she would not survive." What Griffith tried to convey to the professor with the son in Japan: So long as the substance user refuses to recognize the extent of her dependency, no one can do it for her. That moment may never arrive, or it may come in spurts and stops. Since Griffith's UUCC presentation, her sister has edited *Watch My Rising*, a book of poems and stories from people in recovery who do their best to stay recovered. The book came together as a fundraiser for Recover Wyoming. "Pin forgiveness to your heart," Carlson quotes from a poet in the anthology. It's another way of saying, Practice the art of loving. Speak from the center of your existence. Disclose yourself.

The McDaniel family is well known in Wyoming. Patricia McDaniel has worked with public and private child-welfare agencies. Spouse Rodger is the minister of Highland Presbyterian Church in Cheyenne. Many of us know him through his weekly columns, and those who

go back long enough remember him as attorney and state legislator. *Watch My Rising* includes an essay by Patricia McDaniel, “Family Interrupted,” that details how their fifteen-year-old daughter became addicted to meth. The family was immersed in years of turmoil, not to mention the expense of treatment. Now that her daughter is past thirty, those troubled years are behind her family, but McDaniel closes her essay with a paragraph in which she says she used to be judgmental. If a child is a mess, it’s “because the parents are a mess, or someone dropped the ball somewhere.” Then another woman reminded her, when you have children, anything can happen. Anything. So you’d best be prepared. And you’d better not judge. McDaniel concludes with, “Now, I never judge.” That closing paragraph comes from the center of her existence, from what is authentic in the speaker. It’s a small gesture of love.

Poignant poems enliven the collection in examples of self-disclosure, confessing our own sins rather than someone else’s. (It’s understood, I hope, this essay uses “sin” and “confession” with poetic license.) These poets pin forgiveness not only to their own hearts but also to those of their listeners and readers.

My final Wyomingite example comes from *Blood, Water, Wind, and Stone: An Anthology of Wyoming Writers*. In “Moose Bell,” the poet Carrie Naughton sits on the stoop of her home somewhere in the valley of Jackson Hole, watching “the alpenglow” over the Tetons, when a moose wanders by. The animal stops momentarily, looking like “a giant piece of yard art.” Human and non-human eye each other, and the poet imagines talking to the moose about a friend who informed her “that I’m bound for hell because I don’t believe / a god exists who would cleave this world into / the saved and the damned.” During that moment of conversation with the friend, the writer “took the jump” to reveal the center of her existence, what Fromm has in mind

when he urges us to love our neighbor. Love does not demand we endorse narrow-mindedness or maintain a fake friendship; the relationship of which the moose poem speaks likely terminated when the writer asserted her own values. Still, she practiced a moment of love.

Perhaps moments is all we have, all we can hope for in this world. Perhaps moments of love is all Fromm ever had, notwithstanding his theories on the art of loving. Moments is all Darold ever had, but he did have the few. My sons? They're overworked, harried like their dad.

To speak from the center we must lower the mask. Geniuses like Einstein are not the only ones who wear masks; to keep social relations functioning, we all do. However, a mask worn permanently displaces all that is authentic within. To lower the mask is embarrassing; in fact, it can be downright frightening. Even the valiant Viktor Frankl initially thought his death-camp memoir ought to be published anonymously. Disclosures about my brothers to congregants left me unmoored even though I came fortified by Frankl's burst of candor, which by then had been expanded into workable practices through the insights of Sidney Jourard, Gordon Allport and, more recently, Jeffrey Berman.

Before going further we need to take a detour into a literary slander of some years ago that weighs on me even now. I was enrolled in a program that promised hands-on training for participants to become competent teachers of college writing. Since I was acquainted with Professor Berman's methods through one of his book, I looked forward to trying his approach under the guidance of my advisors. Problem was, the professors who advanced the program, a doctorate of arts, decided to style it after the PhD in English. They dismissed my ideas and demanded a dissertation of literary criticism. Such literate commentary is often composed to advance the writer's career; as such, it can be mean-spirited and opportunistic. Rollo May's attack on Viktor

Frankl is a case in point, where he reviles Frankl as “prima donna” and “authoritarian” in his treatment of patients. (Eger found Frankl a wise and compassionate counselor, and I knew him thus as correspondent.) And so, prodded by those in authority, I traipsed down the Rollo May path. Rather than emulate Berman I ended up unjustly criticizing his work—all in an effort to secure a place for myself in the social hierarchies of Americana. After it was “approved” I threw the blighted dissertation in the trash and sent a note of apology to Berman. It’s no consolation that my misdeed damaged me more than the object of my attack.

Sidney Jourard's *The Transparent Self* proposed that self-disclosure enhances both the speaker’s and her listeners’ health. Hence Berman, Distinguished Teaching Professor at SUNY, Albany, encourages self-disclosing writing at the college level. His students have the option to share their efforts with classmates even though the writing reveals painful, intimate encounters. *Risky Writing*, the final volume in a Berman trilogy, is subtitled *Self-Disclosure and Self-Transformation in the Classroom*. It goes without saying, Berman’s principles need not be limited to the classroom; any written or spoken conversation that endeavors to emanate “from the center of existence” opens a path to the power of healing. Today Oliver Sacks ruminates on the imminent end to his life; Yvette Johnson and Ta-Nehesi Coates pen book-length memoirs of racial trauma, Wyomingite Annie Proulx takes on gay-bashing. We could do worse than emulate these writers. Not only are we empowered in the art of loving as we share painful stories but also we reduce the “more or less insane” aspect of our existence.

The stories that follow may get you started on your own speaking and writing. One of these fictionalizes life in California from Darold’s point of view. If you wonder why my encounter with Viktor Frankl takes pride of place, it’s because I am certain you, too, will discover

life encounters that affirm your humanity.