

## Fromm with a Dash of Jourard

Erich Fromm's seminal *The Art of Loving* appeared more than fifty years ago and was republished recently as Jubilee Edition. I had studied the book in 1970 in California, and I read its recent incarnation last year in Wyoming. Many of Fromm's insights are as valid today as they were then, but here I augment his findings with Sidney Jourard's *Psychology of Self-Disclosure*. In my California days I exchanged several letters with the Viennese psychiatrist and death-camp survivor Viktor Frankl; hence, in keeping with Jourard's dictum in *The Transparent Self* and Frankl's example in *Man's Search for Meaning*, I have added anecdotes from my own and other writers' experiences to illustrate Fromm's concepts.

Fromm observes that hardly any activity or enterprise starts with such tremendous hope yet fails so regularly as love, and yet we rarely inquire into the reason for the failure. This may be because in today's society only those things are thought worthy of learning that lead to financial reward or prestige. Learning how to love, on the other hand, which "only" benefits human relations, may seem a luxury we can't afford. Moreover, the relentless marketing of romantic films and novels and love songs leads people to believe that the problem of love is the problem of an object, not a faculty, says Fromm. We see the problem of love as that of being loved; we think we must find the right object to be loved by. To this end we present ourselves as an appealing package. We seek to make ourselves attractive—and many of these strategies are the same as "to win friends and influence people, a mixture of being popular and having sex appeal." Rather than learn how to love we search for an experience of romantic love that corresponds to being loved.

*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.

Love is possible only when people communicate “from the center of their existence.” Romanticizing love as a feeling or 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 be able to love we must overcome our self-centeredness and 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.” This profound revelation may strike us as unrealistic at first but once it sinks in, change happens in our relationships. Unmet expectations cease to upset us.

Eighteen months ago I arranged to perform a guitar duet with a fellow guitarist at a service of the Unitarian Universalist Church in Cheyenne (UUCC). We practiced the duet in my home and at a Cheyenne Guitar Society meeting. A UUCC practice session 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 in another 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 did not know the guitarist from 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 columns. 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 other Wyomingites we traveled to a hearing in Casper of the Education Commission to speak against the creationist agenda. Later we appeared before Wyoming legislators in Cheyenne. In the midst of it my friend informed me he needed to leave for Japan. His daughter-in-law had sent an email urging him to help his son quit a drinking binge. When I asked if this was the first time my friend said no, it happened about once a year; indeed, this would be his twenty-third trip to whatever country was his son’s current residence as star in computerized technology—Australia, Turkey. I asked 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 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 him and hug him close. “I love him. He needs me,” he said. Soon after his return 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 observes that today's social relations have become, by and large, economic relations. We package ourselves for the consumption of others, which makes it difficult for couples to disclose ourselves in a way that's central to our existence. Though we may treat each other with courtesy, we remain strangers; we live parallel lives that don't connect.

Regrettably, Fromm never took to self-disclosure, although Jourard was a key figure in the Humanistic Psychology movement. Only once in Fromm's books did I find an aside about a childhood pervaded by loneliness. Tutored by noted rabbis in my native country, Fromm earned a PhD from the University of Munich. Thereafter he studied at the Psychoanalytic Institute in Berlin. Deeply influenced by Freud and Marx—where Freud postulated that our characters were determined by biology, Marx saw people as shaped by society, especially by the economic systems that constrict our lives—he combined a humanistic approach to psychology with an abiding interest in the workings of society. He co-founded the Frankfurt School of Thought where scholars developed the tenets of critical theory, but left Germany at first sign of the National Socialist terror.

A market-oriented society fails to produce individuals capable of loving, says Fromm. 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 God helps us out when we are in trouble or makes our team win if we pray before the ballgame. He quotes at length from 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.” I think that the

joy of “When love of God waxes in thy heart“ can arrive whenever we gaze into a night sky full of stars. The enormous universe—and our minuscule existence within it—is as wondrous as an unfathomable love falling to the earth in photons of light.

One final point. Patriarchy, known today as Law of the Father, arose with the acquisition of private property. Then as now, owning things demands that the father produce a son to inherit what is owned, says Fromm. Like his heavenly counterpart, the earthly father insists that the son become like him, that he lavish praise on his progenitor, and 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 patriarchy, our society is authoritarian and profoundly inegalitarian.

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 by with a fine where others are thrown in the slammer. The “business practices” of privatized prisons, a particularly obscene outcome of our unequal system, grow bigger and bigger. Judging by Tim Requarth’s May 2019 report in *The Nation*, “Prisoners of Profit,” profiteering has tripled since Fromm’s critique of commercialism. The report’s statistics of just one in a long list of injustices, “The Big Business of Prison Phone Calls,” notes that, depending on the state in which you’re detained—in a jail, prison, immigrant detention center, even in an immigrant child-detention center—charges can be as high as \$22.56 for a fifteen-minute call. By contrast, a 15-minute telephone conversation with my cousin in Germany costs me less than fifty cents.

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 third 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 felt the least autonomy, would she have welcomed her third child? We are shaped by kith and kin, and sometimes the traumas of forbears turn into our own, but how do we talk about it without feeling we betray family and loved ones? Darold never brought up the painful memory again, not in our church's encounter group and not in counseling sessions. "You are two neurotics who have found each other," our counselor smirked at our first meeting. Competent counselors do exist, as we glean from Edith Eva Eger's *The Choice*; alas, in the authoritarian culture of our young marriage they were absent.

I have learned that confiding a traumatic memory needs repeated effort. While 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. How often have I talked and written about the fate of my unfortunate brothers! Not unsurprisingly, my sons remember our home life as strife-riven; indeed, our middle son broke off all contact when 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.

All of us are "more or less insane," no matter we exist as college professors or guitarists, an attorney in California like Darold or a product of terrors like yours truly. Our children perpetuate the heritage we leave them.

A couple of years ago the aforementioned Laura Griffith was guest speaker at UUCC.

Before explaining the mission of Recover Wyoming, an organization she founded, Griffith described her decades-long struggle with substance abuse. The path to her recovery was truncated by backsliding. I thought of her sister Lynn Carlson, a fellow writer who once read an essay aloud about her sister showing up on Christmas dead drunk, and Lynn shutting the door in her face. “It was so painful,” reads Lynn’s 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 talk, her sister has edited *Watch My Rising*, a book of poems and stories from people in recovery who do their best to stay sober. The book came together as a fundraiser for Recover Wyoming. “Pin forgiveness to your heart,” Carlson quotes from a writer 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; some of us remember him as attorney and state legislator. *Watch My Rising* includes an essay by Patricia McDaniel, “Family Interrupted,” that details the family’s years of turmoil, not to mention the expense of treatment, while their fifteen-year-old daughter was addicted to meth. 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, so you’d better not judge. McDaniel con-

cludes with, “Now, I never judge.” That closing statement is wrested from the center of her existence, from her authentic self.

Poignant poems enliven the collection also. They are examples of self-disclosure, of confessing our own sins rather than someone else’s. (Here I use “sin” and “confession” with poetic license.) These writers pin forgiveness not only to their hearts but to those of their listeners and readers also.

To speak from the center of our existence we must lower the mask. We all wear masks; the smooth functioning of social relations depends on it, but when the mask is worn so consistently as to become fused to the face, it displaces all that is authentic within. To lower the mask is embarrassing; indeed, it can be downright frightening. Even Viktor Frankl initially thought his death-camp memoir ought to be published anonymously. During one church service, disclosures about my brothers, all three younger than I and two of them dead by suicide, left me unmoored even though I came fortified by Frankl’s burst of candor, which by then had been expanded into workable practices by Jourard and, more recently, Jeffrey Berman.

Before going further I must take a detour into a literary slander of years ago that weighs on me. 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 books, I looked forward to trying out 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 imposed a dissertation of literary criticism—something that’s usually composed to advance the writer’s career and can be mean-spirited or 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.) Nevertheless, produced by those in authority, I traipsed down the Rollo May path. Rather than emulate Berman I ended up unjustly criticizing his work—all 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; still, it was a good moment when I found Berman’s email response in my mailbox. Perhaps moments is all we have, all we can gain in a stratified society. Perhaps moments of love is all Fromm ever had, notwithstanding his theories on loving and his three marriages. Moments is all Darold ever had, but he did have those few.

Before his untimely death in 1974, Jourard proposed that self-disclosure enhances both the speaker’s and her listeners’ health. To lead a fulfilling life, says *The Transparent Self*, we must be authentic in our endeavors and disclosures, willing to share our downs more than our ups, our grief more than our accomplishments. Hence Berman, Distinguished Teaching Professor at SUNY, Albany, encourages self-disclosing writing at the college level, and students have the option of sharing their efforts with classmates. His *Risky Writing*, the final volume in a trilogy, is subtitled *Self-Disclosure and Self-Transformation in the Classroom*. The subtitle says it all: Self-disclosure is a way of lowering the mask, of practicing the art of loving. Needless to say, Berman’s principles need not be limited to the college classroom; any conversation that endeavors to emanate authentically, “from the center of existence” avails itself of the healing power of confiding in others. Not only are we empowered to love as we confide painful stories but also we reduce the “more or less insane” aspect of humanity.