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Now More Than Ever – Why We Need Fromm Today

Sandra Buechler

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Let me first say how much I appreciate the opportunity to discuss Dr. Funk's paper. I have long admired his unstinting efforts to preserve Fromm's legacy. By translating and commenting on Fromm's writing, by organizing conferences, maintaining the Fromm archives, working on behalf of the Fromm Society, and so many other professional activities, Dr. Funk keeps Fromm's voice alive.

And, from my perspective, we need Fromm now more than ever. My country is in an especially precarious moment in our history. Forces of fascism, bigotry, misogyny and profound cynicism threaten to overpower us. I imagine Fromm would understand our potentially paralyzing sorrow, but encourage us toward an active stance. I find an enormous number of passages in Fromm that seem to me relevant to the challenges we face today. Here are the few that I think express what we suffer from, and what we must find the strength to do.

To quote Fromm:

"I would compare us with a patient on the critical list. In other words, there is the possibility, and if I let only my thinking speak, perhaps even the probability that we are headed for the megamachine or for the technotronic society, and for the extinction of individuality, and that means for culture as we have known it. But I also believe there is a great probability that we're headed for thermonuclear war. But I think all this is not a necessity. That there is so much in a protest longing for life, awareness of what's going on, that there is a possibility to change our course. And what I mean is, it doesn't matter so much whether we go 10 miles or 100 miles in another direction; what really matters is whether we change the direction. The faster one goes in the wrong direction the faster one gets into catastrophe."¹

Fromm's dream for society² was reflected in what he called the "messianic idea:"

"It was to establish a new peace that was more than just the absence of war; it was to establish a state of solidarity and harmony among individuals, among nations, between the

¹ E. Fromm (2012b): "Is Man Alive?" Interview with Edwin Newman given in the NBC series 'Speaking freely' on June 11, 1968; reprint in *Fromm Forum*, English edition, 16/2012, pp. 9-10.

² Cf. E. Fromm (1975d): "The Relevance of the Prophets for Us Today", in *For the Love of Life*, Free Press, 1986, pp. 134-139.



sexes, between man and nature, a state in which, as the prophets say, man is not taught to be afraid. In their eyes, that would be a time of abundance – not of luxury, but of abundance in the sense that for the first time the table would be set for everyone who wanted to eat at it, for everyone who, as a human being, had the right to sit at that table and join in the shared meal with all other human beings."³

For Fromm, we can't truly love another person without loving all of humanity. As he put it in *The Art of Loving*:

"If I truly love one person, I love all persons, I love the world, I love life. If I can say to somebody else, 'I love you,' I must be able to say 'I love in you everybody, I love through you the world, I love in you also myself.'"⁴

In other words, the productive, healthy person, who is capable of loving, will embrace the Golden Rule. Further, as Fromm says: "No man must be the means for the ends of another man." (Ibid., p.14.)

Fromm argued passionately for psychoanalysts' active involvement in politics. In "In the Name of Life: A Portrait Through Dialogue"⁵ he pleads:

"...If we love our fellow humans, we cannot limit our insight and our love only to others as individuals. That will inevitably lead to mistakes. We have to be political people, I would even say passionately involved political people, each of us in the way that best suits our own temperaments, our working lives, and our own capabilities." (Ibid, p. 116.)

In today's paper, Dr. Funk reminds us of some of Fromm's fundamental contributions. I will focus on just two ideas from his summary, the concept of social character, and the "evaluative question." As I understand it, Fromm wrote of our individual character, a product of personal experiences, and our social character, which is created by experiences shared by a social group. Both of these are internalized. Conflict can occur between the dictates of conscious vs. unconscious individual character, or conscious vs. unconscious social character. Conflict can also develop between the dictates of the individual vs. social character. Thus, if, from our culture, we internalize values that radically oppose the values we learn from our individual interpersonal experiences, profound conflicts will develop. In other words, if our society inculcates, let's say, prejudices that we internalize, but, in personal relationships, we internalize values that are diametrically opposed to prejudice, we will be in conflict with ourselves. To me, this means that the analyst can't afford to look aside from the dictates of society, since they are likely to be a significant aspect of our patients' conflicts.

As I understand the "evaluative question," this concerns whether the analyst takes a position about what constitutes healthy living. There is much to say on this subject. In a correspondence Dr. Funk suggested that we should distinguish between how our values might affect the goals of treatment, versus the treatment method, which must be free of value judgments.

³ Ibid, pp. 137-138.

⁴ E. Fromm (1956a): *The Art of Loving*, New York (Harper and Row), p. 46.

⁵ E. Fromm (1974b): "In the Name of Life. A Portrait through Dialogue", in: *For the Love of Life*, New York (The Free Press, Macmillan) 1986, pp. 88-116.



I certainly agree that this is an extremely important distinction. I also agree that, ideally, our method should optimally facilitate the patient's free self discovery. One of my own attempts to grapple with this question was expressed in a paper called "Searching for a passionate neutrality." I believe that the aspect of neutrality we must retain is the openness to hearing everything our patients tell us, verbally and non-verbally, consciously and unconsciously. But I don't believe any analyst operates without some notion of health, and these notions affect our method, as well as our aims. For example, we may or may not be consciously aware of our own assumptions about healthy expressions of anger, fear, sorrow, and so many other feelings. But our assumptions will draw us to focus, perhaps question, remember, and perhaps interpret, some parts of the material in a session and not others. We could not possibly register everything, so, without always consciously knowing why, our attention, itself, selects some verbal and non-verbal messages over others. What we select is, I suggest, in part, a product of how we understand healthy functioning.

Elsewhere⁶ I delineated a set of "clinical values," that I believe generally inform our work. Let me be clear. I believe our values, honed by our personal life experience, professional experience, and cultural experience, inevitably affect our understanding of treatment's *goals and methods*. At the same time, we should be aware that we owe our patients an open reception, a value free exploration of who they are, and who they want to become. Freud's evenly hovering attention, and Anna Freud's equidistance between id, ego, and superego, are crucial, and, in my judgment, unachievable. This contradiction makes our work so very difficult.

Might we differ with each other on how we each understand health? Sure. I hope we explore these differences in our discussion. I happen to believe strongly in Fromm's concept of productive living. Perhaps some of us have other conceptions of health. Regardless, unless we raise our own consciousness of the conceptions of health each of us has taken in, from our experiences in the world, our slants will operate outside our awareness, but, I believe, they will still affect our understanding of treatment's goals, and our focus, selective attention (to use Sullivan's phrase) and perceptions in a session. Outside our awareness, they will incline our hearing, distribute our vision, shade our tone, influence our memory, tense our muscles, and impassion us more at some moments than others. As Rollo May succinctly put it, (Psychology and the Human Dilemma 1967, p. 155) "Concepts are the orientation by which perception occurs. Without some concepts presupposed the therapist would not see the patient who is there or anything about him." I am suggesting that since our perceptions and interactions with the patient are inevitably colored by our conceptions of health, let us examine, discuss, and contrast these conceptions.

In a beautiful essay, in Cortina and Maccoby's book, *A Prophetic Analyst: Erich Fromm's Contributions to Psychoanalysis*⁷ Marianne Horney Eckardt declares⁸:

"We are children of our Western cultural tradition. Our cultural values as well as our per-

⁶ S. Buechler (2004): *Clinical Values. Emotions that Guide Psychoanalytic Treatment*, Hillsdale (The Analytic Press).

⁷ Nothvale and London (Jason Aronson Inc.) 1996.

⁸ M. H. Eckhardt: "Erich Fromm's humanistic ethics and the role of the prophet," in: M. Cortina and M. Maccoby (Eds.), *A Prophetic Analyst. Erich Fromm's Contribution to Psychoanalysis*, Nothvale and London (Jason Aronson Inc.) 1996, pp. 151-165.



sonal values are active ingredients in our way of conducting therapy, in what we respond to with pleasure or with concern. We do want to make our patients into beings who are more capable of loving, of being creative and less destructive. Let us affirm the fact that those are our own precious values that guide our enterprises.”⁹

To conclude, now more than ever, as clinicians and as human beings, we need Fromm's conception of a humane society, and healthy, productive functioning. I hope we can discuss how humanistic values can be *integrated* with an open, freeing, non-coercive, analytic method. I am aware that this will entail grappling with weighty contradictions. But if, as a society, we don't find a way to integrate our values about health into our commerce, our philanthropy, our education, our psychoanalysis, and our daily lives, it could literally, cost our lives, and the lives of our children and grandchildren.

Fromm quoted from Deuteronomy (30:19): "For I have set before you life and death: blessing and curse; choose life, that you and your children may live."

⁹ Ibid., p.164.