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Erich Fromm's psychotherapeutic technique of "directness"

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In the last letter I got from Romano Biancoli he spoke of his illness, the heavy symptoms brought about by chemotherapy, and how he in this situation experienced his life. He wrote: "For me this is already a period of life lived, full in its material limits, with friends and cultural interests. Moreover I'm experiencing a way of *being* that I didn't know."

The way Romano dealt with his illness reminded me of an answer of Erich Fromm. After the very strong third heart attack he suffered in 1978 I asked him if he was not afraid of being thus confronted with his death. With steady voice he answered: "Look, I have lived a full life and can say with the psalmist that I am full of life" – and he used the German word 'satt' which means 'sated'. "I have experienced my life with such richness that I do not have to hold on to it but can give it away."

For both, for Erich Fromm and for Romano Biancoli, the biophilic way in which they dealt with the question of their own death provides information about their attitude to life. Both, I guess, had to cope with poisoning influences from the very beginnings of their lives, and both were able to overcome those threatening devitalizations by strengthening their love for life and by focusing this love for what is alive particularly in their therapeutic work.

Despite the fact that, to my knowledge, Romano Biancoli never met Erich Fromm personally and thus could also not directly experience how Fromm personally practiced biophilia, he nevertheless was an outstanding scholar of Fromm's concept of biophilia. There must have been a deep-reaching intuition on the side of Romano Biancoli that Fromm's concepts of the being mode and of biophilia can only be evaluated by *practicing* them, that is to say by getting in direct contact with those – very often hidden – strivings that are longing for life.



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Fromm's writings had so to speak the effect of a remedy against those intoxications which he and all of us suffer for individual and especially for social reasons. Thus he felt a strong wish to transmit the impact of his biophilic practice from the middle of the eighties on and to translate these experiences into his therapeutic practice. Actually, in those years there was nobody in Italy who was able to transmit these biophilic experiences better than Romano and to write about the psychodynamics of biophilia and their relevance for the way to be related to patients.

We witnessed these steps not only in the way he conceptualized the Bolognese Fromm Institute but also in his publications. Just to mention some titles which show his progression: in 1991 in a joint seminar in Verbania (Italy) he presented a paper entitled "The Being Mode in the Hour of Psychoanalysis". Shortly after he discovered Groddeck and the 1959 lectures that Fromm had given at the William Alanson White Institute he published "Center-to-center relatedness between analyst and patient". At our joint 1997 Fromm conference in Ascona (Switzerland) he spoke about "The Idea of 'Whole Man'". Another paper was entitled "The Dream Between 'Here-and-Now' and 'There-and-Then'", and one of his last publications was focused on "The Search for Identity in the Being Mode". It is quite amazing, in fact, that Romano Biancoli, without having had any direct personal contact with Fromm, grasped Fromm's technique of directness as if he had trained with him for years.

Let me give you an idea of this Frommian way to be related to the patient by my experience when I met Fromm for the first time in 1972 and by some of Fromm's descriptions, which you will find preferably in the above-mentioned lectures of 1959.

Let me start with the directness which Fromm showed in our first meeting, when I visited him to discuss some questions referring to my dissertation on his concepts of social character, religion and ethics.

Fromm looked at me in such a straightforward way that my attempts at polite conversation abruptly ceased and any role-specific behavior became unnecessary. Although we had only met face-to-face a few minutes before, a dimension for the relationship had already emerged, allowing closeness and trust, but no longer allowing the evasion of a question or topic that had been broached with clever remarks. Somehow Fromm's eyes, encircled by wrinkles, and scrutinizing me intently, managed to initiate a conversation that appeased my anxieties and made it possible for me to concentrate intently.

The initial focus of our meeting was by no means my questions raised by my dissertation about his works and thoughts. Fromm inquired about my professional



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situation and why I was interested in his body of thought, particularly his ethics. His questions were intended to reveal my deepest concerns and preoccupations. Fromm wanted to understand my innermost being: if and what I loved and hated, valued and sought, critically assessed and rejected, what appealed to me, encouraged, stimulated and angered me, delighted or thrilled me, what made me feel anxious or guilty or what frightened me. He was curious about my feelings, my needs, my interests and passions.

Fromm's undivided interest was directed toward coming into contact with inner strivings and feelings and understanding them not as obstacles but as bearers of energy. Even if the emotional powers were less than flattering and prevented thought and action in line with reality, it was crucial to make contact with them and meet them with understanding. Only in this way could the hidden meaning of intense feelings of jealousy or a paralyzing sense of inferiority, for example, be recognized, and the energy bound there be released for a rational or loving approach.

Through his interest and questions Fromm wanted to get in touch with my inner world, my rational and irrational, overt and covert strivings. To do so, he utilized eye contact. Since infancy we have all learned to express our inner state—our affects, feelings, wishes, needs as well as our inner reactions—through eye contact.

But there was something else about the way Fromm looked at me, spoke to me and focused the conversation. Despite the directness and bluntness with which he approached uncovering my soul, I did not at all feel interrogated, cornered, judged, unmasked or exposed. I quickly sensed that he was dealing with me in a pleasant way, with understanding and warm-heartedness, and that I had no inclination to justify or to conceal myself. He reached out to me and, through his sincere interest in what concerned me, let me sense that there was no reason to fear oneself or one's inner world. Every look and every word conveyed a sense of solidarity and kindness.

This type of human encounter was an entirely new experience for me: this way of conversing, of being with the other, of venturing into that world of feelings and passions which is at work behind our thinking, together with the assurance of a well-meaning glance from the other person, made small talk or pretences at concealment superfluous.

Approximately twenty years later, as his literary executor, I was preparing a number of Fromm's unpublished manuscripts for publication, when I came across for the first time the already mentioned lectures he had held at the William Alanson White Institute in New York City in 1959. There precisely this expe-



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rience of solidarity was described:

“The feeling of human solidarity is one of the most important therapeutic experiences which we can give to the patient, because at that moment the patient does not feel isolated any more. In all his neuroses or whatever his troubles are, the feeling of isolation, whether he is aware of it or not, is the very crux of his suffering. At the moment when he senses that I share this with him, so that I can say, ‘This is you,’ and I can say it not kindly and not unkindly, this is a tremendous relief from isolation. Another person who says, ‘This is you,’ and stays with me, and shares this with me.”¹

What Fromm says here about the therapeutic relationship also held true for him in general. In every type of relationship there should be a “direct” meeting with the other person, a face-to-face encounter. The face reveals the inner world of the other. A face-to-face encounter goes beneath the surface, making a “central relatedness” possible between both. The other “is not a thing over there which I look at, but he confronts me fully and I confront him fully, and there in fact is no way of escape.”²

The “direct” meeting facilitates coming into contact with the feelings and passions of the other in order to be able to experience him or her as a whole person. For Fromm, there was one definitive characteristic of this kind of direct encounter with the other: “If you really see a person ... you will stop judging provided you see that person fully.”³ No matter how often we are forced to pass judgment on what we want and what we resist in the course of living and in safeguarding our existence, in a “direct” meeting, in a direct encounter with the other, we must refrain from judgment, if we truly want to see him or her. “If you see yourself, whatever you are, you will stop feeling guilty, because you feel: ‘This is me.’”⁴

Significant in the “direct” meeting is the direct encounter: “At the moment when you see yourself or another person fully, you do not judge because you are overwhelmed with the feeling, with the experience: ‘So this is you’, and also with the experience: ‘And who am I to judge?’ In fact, you do not even ask that question. Because in experiencing him, you experience yourself. You say: ‘So that is you’ and you feel in some way very plainly: ‘And that is me too’.”⁵

1 Erich Fromm, *Dealing with the Unconscious in Psychotherapeutic Practice* (3 Lectures 1959), in: *International Forum of Psychoanalysis*, Vol. 9 (No. 3-4, October 2000) pp. 167-186, p. 178.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 174.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 174.

4 *Ibid.*

5 *Ibid.*, p. 178.



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How crucial the direct encounter with the self is and what consequences it can have were phenomena which I initially observed with Fromm himself. Hardly a day went by when he did not actively seek this direct encounter with himself. Fromm usually allotted an hour in the late morning for “his exercises.” What he meant were physical and contemplative exercises which he had described in *The Art of Being* as exercises promoting attentiveness and self-perception, sensory awareness exercises, Tai Chi as well as self-analysis. He concentrated on his body movements, on his breathing, attempted to become totally empty and to meditate. He also tried to become aware of what resounded in him emotionally or preoccupied him mentally: for example, a feeling of uneasiness that persisted after an interview, or the impulse to write a letter to the editor for *The New York Times*. Whenever he could remember a dream from the night before, he tried to decipher its message, in order to be able to confront his own unconscious strivings, fantasies, emotional powers, and conflicts.

The effects of these exercises seeking the direct encounter with the self were clearly apparent, not only to Fromm himself but to those around him as well. The most impressive example for me was the opening address Fromm gave at a symposium in Locarno-Muralto in May 1975. During the preceding weeks Fromm had been considerably incapacitated by a broken arm, and for a long time it had been uncertain whether he would be able to hold the opening address. He ultimately spoke extemporaneously for two hours on “The Meaning of Psychoanalysis for the Future”⁶. Afterward I asked him where he had found the concentration and energy for the lecture, and he replied, without any pretentiousness whatsoever: “Well, this morning I spent twice as long doing my exercises.”

Someone who practices the direct encounter with himself or herself can draw on powers also serving the direct encounter with other people, facilitating his or her total absorption in a topic and in the other person. The opposite is also true: Someone who practices the direct encounter with others draws on experiences facilitating the encounter with the foreign and the other within himself or herself.

That Fromm was versed in both and consequently able to be with himself and with the other could readily be seen in his facial expression. After his death, I found a series of photographs of Fromm, taken with the assistance of a photographic innovation (a battery-powered rewinding mechanism) allowing an entire series of photographs to be shot within a few seconds. On the strip of de-

⁶ This paper so far was never published in English but will be included in the forthcoming volume: *Beyond Freud: From Individual to Social Psychology*, New York (American Mental Health Foundation) 2010.



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veloped negatives there was one photograph that showed Fromm with his eyes shut next to another photograph in which he was looking directly at the photographer. In the course of these sequential images Fromm must have closed his eyes for a split second and been photographed in the process. On closer scrutiny this photograph depicts a face concentrated on the inner self, a face totally immersed in itself. The adjacent photograph of Fromm with his eyes wide open gives the impression that his eyes are totally focused on the observer. In the first, he is totally with himself, in the second, he is totally with the other.

These portraits reveal how intensely Fromm must have practiced the direct encounter to learn to be with himself and with the other. At the same time, they also illustrate the significance of the practice of the direct encounter for the successful realization of humanity and of social existence. Regardless of the type of relationship in which the direct or face-to-face encounter is carried out, in the relationship to others, in scholarly or scientific work, in artistic or therapeutic endeavors, in dealing with nature or in dealing with one's own inner powers, the direct encounter always releases energy for direct encounters in other areas of life.

The experience drawn from the practice of the face-to-face encounter inspired Fromm's development of the concepts of the "productive character orientation," "biophilia," and the "being mode of existence." "The person who fully lives life is attracted by the process of life and growth in all spheres,". Whenever I wanted to more fully comprehend what Fromm actually meant by "productivity," "reason and love as [one's] own powers," "biophilia," or the "being mode of existence," I found it helpful to recall the effects of the face-to-face encounters with him.

Fromm's capacity for the face-to-face encounter finally explains why his writings have a special appeal for many people, particularly those who have difficulty reading and comprehending highly conceptual, abstract theories. Once Fromm confessed that he had no gift for abstract thought. He could think only those thoughts that relate to something that he could concretely experience. This is why Fromm also sought a direct encounter with the issue or problem under consideration in his written work. Before beginning to write, however, he had to find a mental but not totally unemotional approach to what others had written on the same question. When reading a primary text it was vital that he could directly relate to what he was reading. With certain authors this was regularly the case—above all Sigmund Freud and Karl Marx, Baruch Spinoza and Meister Eckhart. With a number of other authors this was rarely the case—for example, with Hegel, Heidegger, Adorno and most of the sociologists.

When Fromm finally did start to write, he generally put his ideas on that specific



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topic on paper in one sitting. The following day he read what he had written the day before and sometimes started over from the beginning, if he had been unable to express what concerned and interested him and what he wanted to say. He then made another attempt until he felt that he had become one with the topic. While writing, Fromm also sought the direct encounter, namely, with a topic, with concepts, arguments and ideas; not until this encounter in his opinion had been correctly conveyed in the written text did he give the handwritten text to his secretary, so that she could prepare a typewritten manuscript.

Because Erich Fromm's writings arose out of a direct and inwardly perceived encounter with the works of other writers and with a topic, and were not the outgrowth of abstract thought and conceptual-logical thought processes, many readers feel addressed by them and are able to enter into an inner dialogue with what they read.

This held also true for the reader Romano Biancoli. He not only read Fromm's writings but tried to come into a direct encounter by practicing what Fromm wrote about.

Fromm lived and felt what he said and wrote. Teachings and life were closely interconnected in Fromm's person and works because both involved the practice of direct encounters. This is Fromm's legacy for all who work therapeutically. And it is the legacy of Romano Biancoli.