

The Art of Loving

I have always felt that one of the most important books of the 20th century was *The Art of Loving* by the American psychologist Erich Fromm. The theme of this book, which I would like to emphasize in the following lecture, is that of human communion, or oneness, and its relation to love. Most religious organizations in the US today use the words “fellowship,” “togetherness” and “love” with great frequency, since they all relate to the concept that all human beings are part of the same divine Totality. This is the idea that Paul also expressed in his letter to the Ephesians when he said that there is “One body and one spirit..., one God and Father of all, who is above all, through all, and in all” (Ephesians, IV, 4-6). Because of this essential oneness we have been told that, in addition to loving God above all things, we must also love our neighbor as ourselves. In *The Art of Loving* Erich Fromm gives us some important, practical advice about the way in which we can carry out this important commandment.

Fromm begins with an attempt to determine what is our most basic need in life. Many great thinkers have tried to answer this question and they have come up with many different answers. Erich Fromm feels that man’s greatest necessity is to find union, or togetherness, in order to escape from the prison of his aloneness. The experience of separateness, Fromm feels, is the fundamental cause of anxiety and despair.

People have tried many different ways to satisfy this need for togetherness. However, the only way that has ever been completely successful is through the act of love. As Fromm puts it: “The full answer lies in the achievement of interpersonal union, the most powerful striving in man. It is the most fundamental passion; it is the force which keeps the human race together... Without love humanity could not exist for a day.” These are strong words, but if we think seriously about it, most of us will agree that this is true. We sometimes tend to dwell on those things with separate us such as war, hate, selfishness and greed, without realizing the underlying power of relationships. The very fact that humanity continues to exist on this planet, in spite of all the destructive forces which divide it, is proof of the unifying power of love.

But this is only theory. In order to determine why this is true and how it works, we must examine some of the practical aspects of love. The first of these is the fact that love demands something of us. As Fromm says when he speaks of the “art” of loving, loving is something which we must learn. It does not come naturally; it is not something which we do instinctively. Loving is a skill which must be learned and practiced in an active fashion. Many of us have grown up with the idea that it is our right to be loved. We therefore have a tendency to wait, passively, for someone to love us, and then we feel unjustly treated when nobody seems to care. However, in order for love to exist, someone must act; someone must do the loving. What Fromm tells us is that love demands much more than our passivity. This implies, therefore, that if we expect to receive love, we ourselves must be prepared to give love. Love is not a “one-way street.”

And that brings us to the second practical aspect of love which is that, since love is active rather than passive, it is also basically giving. This is a point which is often misunderstood. Many people interpret this as meaning that love is “giving up,” that it means sacrificing, or being deprived of something. They also often feel that love destroys their freedom as an individual. Fromm says this is not true, for two reasons.

The Art of Loving – 2

First, love is not limited to giving in a material sense. The most important aspect of giving is that we give of ourselves, of that which is alive in us, of our joy and our sorrow, our interest and our knowledge, our understanding and our concern. Then, secondly, giving ourselves in love does not, as some people fear, mean sacrificing our freedom as an individual. This is expressed in the paradoxical Christian, and the Buddhist, concept that we must lose our self, in order to gain our self. What we must lose is our selfishness, our self-centeredness. We must lose the ego, in order to gain the soul. And for those who are worried about freedom, Fromm emphasizes that to give ourselves in love *proves* that we are free to give. Loving is giving that enriches the giver because it heightens his sense of being a free and active individual who has something of value to give to another person. Love is active, love is giving, and love produces union which strengthens our true individuality.

In addition to these basic aspects of love, Fromm also discusses other elements of love which are care, responsibility, respect and knowledge. Care is the active concern for the life and growth of the person we love. Responsibility is the effort to respond to the needs of another, a sense of openness to the person we love. Respect means that we respect the other person as an individual, that we accept him as he is and do not try to change him or turn him into an object for our own needs. Knowledge means that we must try to know the other person, both on a rational and on an intuitive or emotional level.

The last element of love that I want to discuss here briefly is that of faith. In order to give ourselves in love to another person, we must have faith in that person. To love means to open ourselves, and to be open means to be vulnerable. Some of us hesitate to do this because in the past we have been hurt or disappointed in love. But without this sense of openness, which is based on faith, there can be no love. Love is therefore an act of faith, and whoever is of little faith is also of little love.

After talking about these aspects of love—giving, care, responsibility, respect, knowledge and faith—Fromm goes on to discuss the different types of love which are: brotherly love, motherly love, fatherly love, self love and erotic love.

As he begins to discuss brotherly love, Fromm makes a rather startling statement. He says that unless we love everybody, we don't really love anybody. This is of course part of what is behind the difficult commandment that we must not only love those who love us, but we must also love our enemies. Real love is based on an attitude, a way of thinking or feeling, which is directed toward the entire world and everything in it. If I have developed the capacity for love, then I can't help loving my brother. If a person says that he loves just one other person, or one group of persons, and is indifferent to the rest of his fellow men, this is not real love. On the contrary, it is a form of selfishness, or what Fromm calls, "egotism for two." In order for love to really be love, and not a form of selfishness, it must be this all-inclusive, unselfish love which Fromm calls brotherly love and which is the basic attitude underlying all other types of love.

As an addendum to this point, I would like to say that to love one's enemy does not mean that one must love everything another person may do. That person may perform an act which you feel is wrong, so that it is all too easy to condemn the person for this act. What love demands, however, is that we separate the person from the act. In

this way we can express our disapproval of the other person's actions without having an unloving attitude toward that person. This may not be easy to do, of course, but no one can say that love is easy. It is much easier to hate or be indifferent, which requires no effort at all. But love always requires effort on our part.

Now let us look at the different types of love. One of the most common types of love is motherly love, which is unconditional love with no strings attached. The mother loves the child regardless of what he does, simply because he is her child. On the other hand, fatherly love is conditional. That means that father's love is not always there, that it depends on the conduct of the child, on whether the child obeys and fulfills the expectations of the father. Fromm is quick to point out, however, that just as we all have within us a mixture of so-called masculine and feminine characteristics, each person also has ability to express both motherly and fatherly love. In fact, mature love results from the ability to balance these two different types of love. When either type of love is exaggerated, there is a negative effect. Motherly love, if it is too strong, tends to become possessive and limits development by making the child too dependent on mother. Fatherly love, when it is exaggerated, tends to be harsh and authoritarian. Therefore, it is important that each person learn to achieve a balance between these two forms of love. As Fromm says, in this balance lies the only basis for mature love, not only for our children, but for all other people as well.

Speaking of motherly and fatherly love from the point of view of the child, Fromm says that in the beginning the child loves primarily in response to being loved. He senses that he is the object of unconditional mother love. This need for the mother's unconditional love is obviously something which nature has given the child to protect him in his early period of development. But although it is good for the child, this kind of self-centered attachment, which is based only on need, is not good for the adult. Unfortunately, some people never outgrow this form of childish, immature love which only expects to receive, and not to give. Fromm puts it very succinctly when he observes that the immature person says "I love you because I need you," while the mature person says, "I need you because I love you." The immature person always puts his need first, while for the mature person love is most important.

Another important type of love is self-love. It may seem strange to talk about self-love, since it appears to contradict much of what has been said about love being open and all inclusive. Fromm points out, however, that this is not the case. This is because first of all, we must distinguish between self-love, and selfishness. Selfishness is a form of egotism which has nothing to do with love. In fact, Fromm feels that the selfish person doesn't even really love himself because his selfishness cuts him off from others and makes him suffer aloneness. On the other hand, a loving person who loves all people also loves himself. If it is a good thing to love my neighbor, then it must also be good to love myself. This idea as it is expressed in the Bible, "Love thy neighbor as thyself," implies that love for one's self cannot be separated from love for another person.

One can even go so far as to say that unless I first love myself, I am incapable of loving another person. Unless I love myself, that is, unless I have confidence in myself as a person who is worthy of being loved, I will always feel insecure and dependent on my relation with another person. This results in an immature relationship which is based

The Art of Loving – 4

on need, and the need to find protection for my insecurity will inevitably destroy my ability to open myself in love.

Fromm feels, and I think we will all agree, that erotic love, or physical love is often greatly misunderstood. People often make the mistake of thinking that, because they are attracted to another person physically, they also feel love for that person. If the relation is only physical, however, it never satisfies the basic need for togetherness except in a brief, transitory sense. In fact, if the relation is only physical, it can make people feel even farther apart than before. It can actually make them dislike, or even hate each other since it emphasizes their basic aloneness. If, on the other hand, physical love is accompanied by a loving attitude, if it is also brotherly love, it can be a form of mature love. And in this way it can also be the means of achieving union in more than a transitory sense.

Fromm has more to say about love, but last point that I want to mention here is the importance of love in present-day society. Fromm feels, and I agree, that the position of love in our world today is not a favorable one. He feels that, in fact, the basic principles on which our society are based are often not compatible with the principle of love. In modern society, the so-called free enterprise system is based on the idea of competition, on the idea of getting ahead at the expense of someone else. Material values are all too often emphasized at the expense of spiritual ones. Fromm does not feel that it is impossible to love in today's world, but he does feel that it is difficult, and that sooner or later some radical changes must be made in order for love to survive.

The typical response to an observation such as this is to be fatalistic and say, "I can't change the world, so why should I try?" That may be true, but any effort to change society must begin with each individual. And if enough individuals make an effort, change *can and does* occur. Just as certain as the fact that hate produces hate is that love can produce more love. So in our effort to be loving persons these, once again, are the things to be kept in mind. Love is active, love is giving, and love is all-inclusive. Love demands that we give up our egotistical self so that it can enrich our true self. Love is not based on selfish need, but on the recognition that we all are part of the divine energy that forms the universe.

In this respect, it is significant to note that the so-called "new physics," which has resulted in large part from Einstein's discovery that matter and energy are interchangeable ($E=mc^2$), is also beginning to accept the idea that all reality is part of one universal pool of conscious energy, a concept which parallels the Biblical passage that says: "In God we live and move and have our being," (Acts, XVII, 28).

With this, we return to our point of departure, the idea of oneness, which is the true goal of love. In order to emphasize this final point I would like to conclude with a passage from the Gospel of John (Book 17, verses 11-26) where Jesus prays for his disciples, and for people of all religions: "Holy Father, protect by the power of thy name those whom thou hast given me, that they may be one, as we are one... may they all be one: as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, so also may they be in us, that the world may believe that thou didst send me... that they may be one, as we are one; I in them and thou in me, may they be perfectly one..."

(See also "The Undiscovered Self" at <http://www.armandfbaker.com/lectures.html>)