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Title: How to make friends and attain self-realization?

Organizing and controlling have become an obsession in the present western culture. Arranging into a structured and controllable whole every aspect of our lives: our profession, income, worldview, identity, time, vacation, diet, learning, teaching, making friends and making love... Science, a systematically organized body of knowledge, is what we all believe in, without doubt. There is such a strong belief in the idea that organization and control will bring us happiness, to the point that I am almost tempted to call it a new religion. A story comes to mind, of God and Satan walking down the street together when they see a brilliant shiny object, God says "Oh look it is truth" and Satan replies "Oh yes, here give it to me I will organize it". Obviously sciences, organization of knowledge and society, as well as religion, have all brought many good and beneficial things. Nevertheless blind repetition, without self-enquiry, leads into dogmatic methods. Spiritual, religious and even psychotherapeutic practices are always in danger of becoming a dogmatic method leading towards an organized picture of a goal that we have thought up in our minds. There is not much space left for anything else if we already know where we want to go and how we are getting there. No space for truth, mystery or surprise. Genuine human relation is where, I believe, still lies the possibility of the surprise element, the mystery of life that cannot be predicted or controlled. In line with everything I just stated, the present essay is a portrayal of an idea, instead of organization of thoughts into another theory that wants to replace reality.

Genuine relation

To describe what I mean as genuine relation I will take a brave plunge and share one of my intimate experiences of it:

I am in the crowd at a concert. The music is so beautiful it brings tears to my eyes. With my whole being I feel that everything already is, right there

and then. All at once existing just right. At the same time I am aware no one else is sharing this feeling. I am alone in the crowd. Certain sadness washes over me. That is when a person suddenly appears, leans towards me and says: I feel like you feel. Our eyes meet in the knowing how the other feels and relaxing in our feeling together and yet standing in our own being. When the concert finishes we embrace and each go our own way.

In Buber's ideology this would be called an I-Thou meeting that happens when two stand in relation in a manifest presence, not trying to experience it, explain it, use it or conceptualize it. Buber's poetic language (2002) best captures a moment like this:

Only when he who himself turns to the other human being and opens himself to him receives the world in him. Only the being whose otherness, accepted by my being, lives and faces me in the whole compression of existence, brings the radiance of eternity to me. Only when two say to one another with all that they are, 'It is Thou', is the indwelling of the Present Being between them (p. 35).

The I-Thou relation cannot be found by seeking, it is an act of a whole being, when will and grace are joined (Buber, 2004). In my above described experience there was grace in surrendering to the world, there was also a clear awareness of the I being separate to, what Heidegger calls, 'one' (impersonal, nameless, faceless crowd) and finally there was will to reach out to Thou. Buber (2002) exclaims, "A man is truly saved from the 'one' not by separation but only by being bound up in genuine communion" (p. 210).

Attempts to replace reality

As a juxtaposing example to this one I can remember being a young solitary girl searching for some kind of connection that would make my life meaningful and intending to help myself with a book titled "How to win friends and influence

people". Looking back on it now, it seems quite paradoxical how I was intuitively searching in the right direction but with an entirely wrong approach. Approaching people by following advice from a book meant hiding myself behind a method that was supposed to bring me a desired outcome. In Buber's terms I was making an I-It relation; objectifying, using, experiencing people as an It. At the same time I myself was coming from a purely cognitive and fleeting way of being an I. Not ready to disclose who I am and not willing to truly see others. This is the standard way we interact with the world. There is nothing wrong with it, apart from it leading astray from connecting to oneself or others. This way we only distance ourselves from the world and the possibility of knowing it, as we get carried away from experiencing it to thinking about it and wanting it to be something else than what it is. Wouldn't it be dull if at the end of the journey we always got exactly what we imagined at the beginning? I believe how we walk every step of the way is more important than where we are headed. The way is not just the means to a goal, rather the way is the goal. By letting a method be our way, we succumb the mystery of our life to a false security of an illusory world waiting for us in the Never-never land. In the words of Buber (2002) "Revelation will tolerate no perfect tense, but man with the arts of his craze for security props it up to perfectness" (p. 21). It is not possible to live in the bare present, but it is possible to live only in past and future, where the insecurity of the unpredictable present is controlled. Sometimes it helps having a map to find our way around, but that is only until we keep in mind that the map is not a replacement of the world, for "a world that is ordered is not the world-order" (Buber, 2004, p. 31). Nonetheless this is usually the pitfall we all trip into. Mistaking religion for our own feeling of faith, psychotherapy for genuine relation, morality for compassion, a polite exchange of words for a sincere conversation, a movie for a life, making money for doing a good job, perfectionism for the best we can do. Blindly following any kind of method, plan or a goal is an "attempt to replace reality" (Buber, 2004, p. 119). "And in all the seriousness of truth, hear this: without It man cannot live. But he who lives with It alone is not a man". (Buber, 2004, p. 34)

Isolation

Buber's view on self-realization and isolation divides him from most of the popular culture, spiritualism, psychotherapies and so forth. For him self-realization is a by-product rather than the goal. The goal is "completing distance by relation, and relation here means mutual confirmation, co-operation, and genuine dialogue" (Buber, 1998, p. 11). Buber does not write about I-Thou relation as merely another dimension of relational existence, along with personal, physical and spiritual, like other authors have (for example: Binswanger, 1946; Deurzen-Smith, 1984) but as one of the two essential ways of being-in-the-world, the only one worth living, but also the one man can (sadly) live without.

According to Buber (2004) there are two kinds of solitude depending on what we turn away from. One may seek solitude in order to free oneself from experiencing and using of things and others, as a purification to be able to step from I-It into I-Thou relations. This is what I believe isolation into meditation should be: a preparation to meet others and to hold our ground when we meet them. Never forgetting that it is merely a method and not a self-righteous goal. The other kind of solitude means absence of relation, isolation from the world, where a man conducts "a dialogue with himself – not in order to test and master himself for that which awaits him but in the enjoyment of the confirmation of his soul – then we have the real fall of the spirit into spirituality" (p. 104). It is concern with oneself that keeps one away from mystery of meeting the other. A man can never be a surprise to himself (Buber, 1998). Finding that special connection that most of us yearn for, which Buber calls God, cannot be reached by isolation. In his view a man turning aside from the course of his life in order to seek God is "foolish and hopeless", because "even though he won all the wisdom of solitude and all the power of concentrated being he would miss God" (Buber, 2004, p. 80). For example in Buddhism there are stories of monks that talked to the Buddha or just met him and attained enlightenment merely through that genuine interpersonal encounter that managed to do what years and years of meditation, effort and sitting in solitude could not.

Previously I described the feeling of sadness I felt at the concert, which I think is very common in experiences of “everything and everyone being connected or being one”. With perceiving that “everything is one”, there often comes the realization that nobody else perceives it. Paradoxically it turns out to be a very lonely feeling. But genuine meeting brings this same feeling of connection with an addition of mutuality. Another universe is looking back at you from the other person’s eyes, saying “I feel what you feel”. Genuine saying of Thou to the other essentially means “the affirmation of the primally deep otherness of the other, ... which is accepted and loved by me” (Buber, 1998, p. 86). This is exactly what gets devalued and destroyed in the ancient religions and modern spiritualism through teachings of identity like “you are me” or “all is one”. Buber (1998) sees it as “annihilation of the human person, ... for the person is through and through nothing but uniqueness and thus essentially other than all that is over against it” (p. 86). When one says to the other “I accept you as you are” that is genuine human meeting and here first is “uncurtailed existence” (Buber, 1998, p. 86).

Meeting unto self-realization

Buber sees self-realization as becoming an authentic self, essentially through mutual confirmation. For a genuine meeting to unfold Buber (1998) writes about three necessities: not to give into seeming, not to impose oneself on the other and making the other present in one’s personal being. This is where I see the overlap of genuine meeting and psychotherapy, leading to self-realization. I speak only of certain kinds of phenomenologically based psychotherapies that are non-directive and include development of a sincere relation. The psychotherapist knows the actualizing forces that have shaped and still shape him and trusts their effect in the struggle against the counterforces. Existential communication between one who is an “actual being” and the other who is in a “process of becoming” turns into a genuine dialogue that “opens out” potentiality (Buber, 1998, p. 72). That is why I believe the therapist must essentially trust in the effect of the genuine meeting, which gives him the strength to persevere in the unknown, without a method or a goal, and thus is able to leave the client really to

himself and see where he is being drawn. Existential healing takes place when there is trust of one whole person to another whole person as they honestly acknowledge to each other that they are both reeling in chaos (Buber, 1957). This does not mean healing of only a certain part of the client as through insight or analysis, rather this is healing of the client's being-in-the-world. David Smail (2015) suspected that psychotherapy only really works if the therapist and the client become true friends. I acknowledge his point but would reiterate that for a successful therapy to take place there has to be an I-Thou relation between the therapist and the client (at least on certain occasions). Thus in the relation between them exists an opening that allows for something to spring out that has not been there previously, neither in between nor in any of the two. It springs out of the genuine meeting.

Play in between

Buber (2004) claimed there is no method or prescription that can lead us to the meeting, and no cure to forget about it, "as only acceptance of the Presence is necessary" and "nothing can any longer be meaningless", the meaning is not of a world "yonder" but of this world of ours, that seeks to be lived, and nothing but lived, continually, ever anew in this life and in relation with this world "in the totality of its antinomy" (p. 95, p. 110). Once we know true freedom of free giving between I and Thou we must practice directness-even if we are the only being on earth who does it (Buber, 1998, p. 69). The genuine meeting is a mystery that leaves us with more questions than solutions to the riddle of life of how I can exist ever changing between It and Thou. Maybe the answer is to fully enter into the never-ending play between these two spheres of being and opening up to the ever-surprising present?

Moment of genuine meeting
comes as a falling star, abruptly,
tearing out of the surrounding world
and cutting deep into being,

we become aware of it
only after it is gone
and leaves a scar on our iris,
changed forever.

For that moment
we were present being
sharing a magical moment with the universe.
And even with only one in a million chance
to catch it again,
this does not hinder me
to look into the sky
with eyes presently open.

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