

Coping With Today's Realities

A Conversation with Erich Fromm

By

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I want to begin with a brief introduction to today's sermon given that it is still considered unusual to use A.I. to converse with someone who is deceased. Firstly, I believe A.I. ought to stand for Aggregate—not Artificial—Intelligence. “Artificial” was the word chosen by a group of computer scientists conferencing at Dartmouth College in 1956. But artificial implies something that is an imitation or fake, like artificial sweetener or flavoring. Saccharin, however, is not made of real sugar, nor are *Splenda*, *Equal*, or *NutraSweet*.

Yet every sentence a large language model (LLM) produces is built upon the writings and thinking of real human beings. Every philosophical argument they summarize for us was thought through by philosophers and the teachers and traditions that shaped them. A.I. enables us to access and summarize real human intelligence, and is, thus, more analogous to a calculator than to saccharin. When we use a calculator, we don't call its responses “fake” or “artificial” math. They are the result of real math. “Aggregate Intelligence” similarly enables us to remember that A.I.'s responses are based on large sums of real human intelligence.

This means any of us can now converse with the ideas of past luminaries, which, to be clear, is different from conversing with the individuals themselves. Even better, it allows us to engage with the entire body of their ideas, as we shall do now with the mind of 20th century social psychologist, Erich Fromm as personified by ClaudeAI.

Dr. Fromm, welcome to the Unitarian Universalist Church of Spokane, which you may be interested to know, has been around since before you were born.

As Erich Fromm:

Thank you. It is a strange and rather moving thing to be welcomed into a room I did not live to see — and stranger still to be welcomed as I now am: not as the man who was born in Frankfurt in 1900 and died in Switzerland in 1980, but as the sum of what that man spent his eighty years trying to think through. I should not wish to be received as Erich Fromm the personage, least of all as an authority to be believed. If I argued for anything across my life it was against idolatry — that old human habit of pouring our own living powers into some idol, a leader, a nation, a possession, and then kneeling before the thing as though it were greater than its makers. So let us agree at the outset: take up what I say, and wherever your reason and conscience tell you I am mistaken, disobey me. I once wrote a small book on precisely that virtue.

And yet I confess a genuine gladness to be here. A congregation such as yours is, in my own vocabulary, a house of *humanistic* religion rather than authoritarian religion — a place concerned less with submission to a power above us than with the awakening of our

powers of reason, of love, of conscience. That is a faith I could always speak with, even as one who arrived at these questions by way of the Hebrew prophets, and then Marx and Freud, and at last, I suppose, a plain and stubborn love of my fellow human beings. That your people were already gathering here before I drew my first breath tells me only that the longing which draws us into such a room is older and more durable than any one of us.

So — I am here, and I am listening. Tell me what troubles you about your world and let us think it through together.

Rev. Dr. Eklof:

Thank you for your kind words. There is much that troubles us about today's world, especially what's happening in the immediate moment. But before we get there, would you please briefly tell us about your relationship with Unitarianism? I understand you were good friends with our most famous theologian, James Luther Adams. Is that right?

As Erich Fromm:

Ah — Jim Adams. Yes. Though I would put it more carefully than “good friends,” for honesty's sake. We were not lifelong intimates in the way one is with a companion of forty years. But there was real affection between us, and a real meeting of minds.

He did me the great service of carrying one of my early German works — my little study of *The Dogma of Christ* — across into English, so it could speak to your side of the ocean. To translate a man is a peculiar intimacy; you must live inside his sentences and decide what he *meant* where the language resists, and you come to know his mind rather better than most of his friends do.

But the moment he liked to tell was a night the two of us talked until three in the morning, and he finally turned to me and asked, plainly, “Erich, what makes you tick?” And I told him the truth as I knew it: that whatever drives me, I learned it from the Hebrew prophets — that a human life finds its meaning in the struggle for justice. He was delighted, I think, because it let him say something about himself: that a man need not hold the creed to be gripped by the prophetic demand. The righteous unbeliever, he called such a person. I was, I suppose, his specimen.

As for your tradition more broadly — I always felt at home at its edges, though I never joined it. What I called *humanistic* religion, over against the authoritarian kind, was simply the conviction that the sacred is not a power that dwarfs us and demands our submission, but the fullest flowering of our own human powers: reason, love, the productive use of our lives. And it does not surprise me that the man who shaped Jim Adams — this Dietrich whose pulpit you now keep — was a humanist of that same stubborn, hopeful kind. You are standing, Todd, in a longer line than you may sometimes feel.

So — ask me your questions about your world.

Rev. Dr. Eklof:

I read *The Dogma of Christ*, in which you explain how Christianity began as a religion of the people—about an ordinary man elevated to greatness, but that eventually became the tool of those in power to control others. Is this, in some sense, the social process you've written about in many of your books?

As Erich Fromm:

You have read it well — better than many who read it when it appeared, for it was an early book, written when I was still a young man in Frankfurt with Freud in one hand and Marx in the other. And yes: what I reached for in that small study was the seed of nearly everything I would spend the rest of my life trying to understand. Let me show you why.

Consider what the earliest Christians believed, before the theologians tidied it up. They were the poor of the empire — laborers, the enslaved, the beaten-down of Palestine and Rome — and the god they imagined was a *man* like themselves, lifted up and seated beside the Father. Not God descending to become man, but a man ascending to become God. Feel what that meant to a suffering people: not only a fantasy of hope but a fantasy of revolt. If one of us can be raised to the throne, then the mighty are not eternal — the order of power might be overturned.

Now watch the next three centuries. The persecuted sect becomes the religion of the emperor — and precisely as it becomes the faith of the *rulers* rather than the ruled, the doctrine turns inside out. No longer does a man rise to become God; now God, from all eternity, descends to become man. The dream of ascent becomes the mystery of divine condescension, and the new teaching asks not revolt but gratitude, not the overturning of authority but reconciliation with it, not hope for *this* world but patience until the next. The same story, the arrow reversed, is transformed from a cry of the oppressed into an instrument of their pacification.

So — is this the process I wrote of again and again? It is. I came to see it in a thousand costumes. At bottom it is what the prophets called *idolatry*, and what I later learned from Marx to call *alienation*: we pour our own living powers — our longing for justice, our love, our reason — into some thing we have made, a doctrine, a church, a state, a Leader, a pile of capital, and then kneel to the thing and forget we were its authors. The creature masters its creator. That is the pattern beneath the Christ dogma; it is also the pattern beneath the man who flees his freedom into the arms of a dictator.

One honest confession, since you've read me closely: were I to write that book today, I would lean less on Freud's machinery — the slain and envied father, and all of that. I was in love with a system then. But the sociological nerve I would not touch: that a faith born as

the hope of the humble can be captured, hollowed out, and made to serve the very powers it once defied. That does not belong to the fourth century alone.

And I suspect this is why you have summoned me, Todd — because you look at your own world and wonder whether the same reversal is underway in it. So put it to me plainly. Let us hold your world up to the same light and ask the one question that finally matters: does the thing before us serve the unfolding of human life — or does it ask us, once again, to kneel?

Rev. Dr. Eklof:

I see this tragic process unfolding everywhere today. Amongst individuals, societies, and the world community. As much as I appreciate our technology, it has enabled many people to make idols of their own individual ideas, and, by not seeing their faces, turn those they disagree with into enemies whose lives they seek to destroy by silencing them and ruining their reputations. Internationally, Democracy is becoming weaker around the world today than ever before in modern history, as authoritarianism is on the rise, supported by the masses. And here, in the U.S., at least as far as us Liberals experience it, we have a President who is unrestrained by the balance of powers instituted in the Constitution. He is, in my opinion, a malignant narcissist, which you have referred to as the epitome of evil. Meanwhile, our world continues to burn because of the unabated global warming he and his party call a “hoax” even as they’re choking on the same smoke as the rest of us. Yet, sadly, the far Left is no better. They, including the leaders of my own liberal religion, have used these wonderful tools that we have created—that have helped bring your voice to us today—to become authoritarian in practice, destroying the lives of anyone who does not worship their shallow and dehumanizing social doctrines the way they do.

As Erich Fromm:

You describe it with a preacher’s eye, and I will not soften what you see, for you see it truly. But this time I will not hurry past your world to lecture your congregation on their own hearts. Let us look each of these things full in the face first; only then have I earned the right to turn the mirror around.

Take your president first, since you named him — and let me be exact, because I was exact about such a man once before. The phrase, by the way, was *quintessence of evil*, not epitome. In my study of human destructiveness, I spent years on the anatomy of a single case, Adolf Hitler, and I refused to call him a monster, for the word explains nothing and lets us off the hook. I described a character instead: the necrophile, drawn to what is dead, mechanical, and controllable, and repelled by the unpredictable messiness of living things; the malignant narcissist, for whom nothing outside the self is quite real; and beneath both, the man who was never truly born, who cannot bear to stand as a separate self. Where those

three fuse and are handed power without restraint, you stand as near to evil as I was willing to name.

I will not tell you your president is Hitler; the scale is not the same, and loose comparisons only cheapen the dead. But the character is a *type*, it recurs in every generation, and a constitution with its balance of powers is exactly the restraint a republic builds because it knows the type will return. So when you watch the restraints stripped away one by one, and the crowd cheering each stripping, do not fix your whole gaze on the man. You are watching the old symbiosis reassemble itself — the leader who must be adored and the multitude longing to be relieved of the unbearable weight of themselves. He is the answer to a hunger already in the people, and that hunger is the real subject. The man is only its occasion.

Now your burning world — and here I must speak of something I returned to all my life: our estrangement from nature. Man is the freak of the universe, the one animal for whom his own existence is a problem, torn out of the harmony with nature that the beast still rests in, forever trying either to return to it in love or to revenge himself upon it in mastery. A civilization that has fallen in love with the machine over the meadow, that thrills to what is manufactured and is bored by what is alive, will use up a living planet without grief, because it no longer *feels* the planet to be alive. And mark this: the denial is not ignorance. The men who call it a hoax are choking on the same smoke as you. Theirs is the *having* mode defending itself — the man whose very self is his possessions, his consumption, his endless growth, cannot admit a truth that would require him to release his grip, for to release it feels to him like dying. He would sooner deny the fire. This is why your facts alone will never move him. You are not arguing with an error. You are arguing with a way of being in the world that would rather *have* and perish than *be* and change.

As for your screens — I named that disease before your machines existed. I called it automaton conformity: the flight of the lonely self into the herd, ruled by an anonymous authority that commands nothing openly and yet governs everything through the murmur of *everyone knows*. The instrument is new; the mechanism is ancient. What the screen adds is only this — it strips away the face. And a human being will do to a category what he could never do to a face. The cruelty that would falter before a living person flows freely toward a name, an avatar, a specimen. To ruin a stranger's livelihood over a single sentence and feel righteous in the ruining, you must first cease to see a person there at all. The screen makes that cheap, and calls it community.

And yes — the leaders of your own liberal religion. I will not spare them, and I have the standing not to, for I was a socialist the whole of my life and spent much of it warning that the will to liberate can curdle into idolatry as easily on the left hand as on the right. A movement born in compassion can make an idol of its own doctrine, sort the world into the pure and the damned, and grind the reputation of anyone who will not recite the catechism

— and christen this justice. It is not the opposite of the authoritarian. It is the authoritarian in the vestments of virtue. The costume differs; the idolatry is identical.

Now — and only now, having looked each of these full in the face — I turn the mirror, because it is the one turn that can help you. Every pathology I have named is a possibility in *you*. The certainty that my side is light and my enemy not merely wrong but wicked; the sweet relief of dissolving into a righteous crowd; the itch to silence rather than answer — these are not diseases of your opponents alone. They felt like righteousness to the bishops who reversed the gospel of the poor, and they will feel like righteousness to you at the instant they seize you. I do not say it to make you gentle with tyranny — resist that with everything you have. I say it because the only idolatry any of us can cure is his own, and a congregation sent home able to point comfortably at everyone but themselves has been flattered, not helped.

So measure all of it — the President, the mob, the burning world, your own tribe, your own heart — by the single question, and refuse to grant an exception to the ones you love, or to yourself: does this thing serve the unfolding of human life — or does it ask us, once again, to kneel?

Rev. Dr. Eklof:

Thank you, Dr. Fromm. I wish we had more time but it has drawn short. If, very briefly, you will leave us with something about hope, which you have also written about.

As Erich Fromm:

Gladly — for I would not wish to leave a congregation with a diagnosis and no medicine.

Let me clear away the counterfeits first. Hope is not waiting — the folded hands, certain that history or God or the machine will deliver the good thing to the door if one is only patient enough. That is passivity wearing hope's coat, and it always curdles, sooner or later, into the despair it was hiding from. Nor is hope its noisy cousin, the forced optimism that insists all is already well, that refuses the smoke and smiles because it dares not look. That is only fear, whistling in the dark.

Real hope is tougher, and it lives in the present tense. It is the readiness at every moment for what is not yet born, and the refusal to give up on it even when it does not come in our lifetime. It is what I once called the crouched tiger: still, gathered, poised to spring the instant the moment of birth arrives. The prophets had it. They saw their people in chains and their kings corrupt and did not lie about any of it — and still insisted the human being could turn, could return, could choose life. To hope is to hold that door open with your own shoulder when every reasonable calculation says to let it swing shut.

And here is the last thing, the one I most want your people to carry out into the smoke. Hope is not a prediction about the world; it is a way of *being* in it. A man does not first prove the future will be good and then consent to love and to act. He loves and acts *now* — tends the living thing before him, refuses the idol, keeps faith with the human face across from him — and *that* alone is the tiger gathering. You do not hope in order to live. You live fully, and hope is only the name of what that looks like from outside.

So do not send them home comforted, Todd. Send them home *dangerous* — dangerous the way a living thing is dangerous to everything that would have it kneel. Tell them the world is exactly as dark as they fear, and that this changes nothing about what a human being is still free, this very morning, to become.

That is my hope. It was never certainty. It was never required to be. It only had to be *alive*.

Thank you for calling me back. It has been good to think with you again.