



Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts

Volume 17
Issue 4 July 1977

Article 11

7-1-1977

We Suggest

Eleanor Buelke
Western Michigan University

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Recommended Citation

Buelke, E. (1977). We Suggest. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 17 (4).
Retrieved from https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol17/iss4/11

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WE SUGGEST

Eleanor Buelke

Fromm, Erich

To Have Or To Be?

New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1976. Pp. xxiv + 216.

For the third time, a book by Erick Fromm has been selected to be a part of the *World Perspectives* series. This is a series of books dedicated to the thesis that man is constantly in the process of developing a consciousness that can lift the human race above its present fears, ignorance, and feelings of isolation. It attempts to promote deeper understandings of interrelationships between mankind and the universe, the individual and society, and among values shared by all peoples. In this volume, Fromm is responding to a challenge given to the world by Albert Schweitzer when he accepted the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1952. It was then he dared the world to face the situation that:

... Man has become a superman ... But the superman with the superhuman power has not risen to the level of superhuman reason. To the degree to which his power grows he becomes more and more a poor man ...

In an attempt to develop an awareness in his readers of the debilitating destruction of individual well-being and dehumanizing deprivation in the world's socio-economic development and structure, this author discusses and analyzes two basic modes of existence: the mode of *having* and the mode of *being*.

He proceeds on the premise that the respective strengths of these two modes, *having* and *being*, determine the differences between characters of persons, and, also, among types of social character. In persons, the *having* mode is characterized by consideration of everybody and everything, including themselves, as property. In societies, this mode is evident in their orientation toward greed and the importance attached to the possession of things. Contrastingly, the *being* mode means aliveness, relatedness to the world, and change and growth as inherent qualities of the life process, whether experienced by whole societies, or by one person, alone.

Some would argue that alternative life modes are mere differences in philosophy, religious tenets, or sociological beliefs. Fromm has concluded that the hypothesis that life can be better or worse for both individuals and societies, depending upon which mode of existence it is based, is supported by empirical data. In individuals and society today, some observable evidences of the having mode are idiomatic changes in our language, with the growing use of nouns and decreasing use of verbs to express activities;

personal and societal relationships burdened with conflicts and jealousies, antagonism, and strife; increased concern with satisfaction of desires through pleasure-seeking and excitement, rather than through the experience of joy in the process of productive activity; and submission of our work and leisure activities to the rule of "maximal use of time," where time determines the rhythm of life, rather than the rhythm of life determining the use of time.

The author recognizes that both the having and being modes are potentialities of the nature of man, but does not hold that the having mode is unchangeable just by virtue of its being rooted in human nature. Although this dogma appears to determine methods of education and of work in the world of today, this writer claims that human beings also have "an inherent and deeply rooted desire to be; to express our faculties, to be active, to be related to others, to escape the prison cell of selfishness." As evidence for this belief, he cites data collected in experimentation and research in the following areas: animal behavior, neurophysiological activity in nerve cells, infantile behavior, learning behavior, work behavior, and social and political life. Further, he maintains that only a fundamental change from the having mode to the being mode can prevent psychological and economic catastrophe for mankind. Such a change can occur if:

1. People are suffering, and recognize that this is so;
2. People are aware of what is making them suffer;
3. People can see alternative ways to overcome this suffering; and
4. People accept and follow certain norms for living and changes in present life practices.

What does this kind of change mean to the character structure of the individual? It means giving up all forms of having; security and identity of self based on faith in what one is; accepting that life's meaning comes from within; joy through giving and sharing; love and respect for all forms of life; reducing hate and greed; living without idols and illusions; accepting limitation of human existence; being innocent, but not naive; knowing what one knows, and also what one does not know; freedom to be oneself; understanding and cooperating with nature; and happiness in one's ever-growing aliveness, regardless of the stage of one's life.

What are the implications of this kind of fundamental change for society? Continuance of industrial production, without total centralization or technological facism; abandonment of the "free-market" economy; replacement of unlimited growth goals for a selective growth concept; establishment of psychic satisfactions, rather than material gains, as work motivators; simultaneous furtherance of scientific progress and reduction in danger from its practical application; substitution of experience of well-being and joy for the maximum-pleasure drive; provision for individual security, avoiding dependency upon a bureaucracy; and restoration of individual initiation in living, rather than in business.

Such vast changes on a sweeping national and international level are no less staggering in their impact upon life priorities in all countries, for all ages, for both sexes, and in all areas of human existence, than they are

challenging to the minds of caring men and women everywhere. Anything short of the concerted efforts of the best minds of the world to achieve “a new humanistic science of Man” will inevitably lead to inability to sustain a viable society. At present, there seems reasonable chance that monumental changes appropriate to this goal will be implemented. But, when it becomes a matter of life and death, this “reasonable chance” *must* become a “real possibility.”

From discussion in this book, educators may make some inferences which are meaningful in their teaching and learning. In the being mode, the certainty and security of absolute truth give way to the process of human reason as self-affirmation. *To know more deeply* becomes more important than *to have more knowledge*. And, in the classroom, the “instructor” who *has* a curriculum is replaced by the “teacher” who *is* in a daily relationship with students. This significant difference has been noted recently by a well-known speaker and writer who says, “An instructor is only as large as the curriculum; a teacher is as large as life itself.”*

*Dr. Paul Brandwein, in an address, Second General Session, M.R.A.; Grand Rapids, Michigan; March 28, 1977.