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Martin Buber's I and Thou*

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The Lost Art of Connection:

Martin Buber's *I and Thou*

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One of my favorite books is *I and Thou*, written by the Austrian philosopher Martin Buber in 1937 and translated by Walter Kaufmann in 1970. Although often seen as a book on religious ethics, the work relates Buber's stance on the range of ways people treat one another, and how this reflects their view of the world.

According to Buber, we can look at ourselves as "It" or "I" and at others as "It," "You," or "Thou." We can also lose our sense of individuality in the terms "Us," "We" and "Them" though these terms have merit when creating teams, armies, and communities.

Most often, we talk to people as if they are an "It" or an object. We do this to maintain order and a sense of control in our lives. We coach them, work with them, laugh with them, argue with them, and even sleep with them without experiencing them. When they can no longer give us what we need, relationships end.

Although the English translations of Buber's writing substitutes the words "You" for "Thou", thinking of another person as "You" still infers a boundary between us – an inability to fully connect.

If we look at others as "Thou" we are seeing them as beautiful, divine beings. Buber drew an important distinction: the concept of Thou refers to people as beings without bounds, a part of the universe they live in. We don't see God *in* you. We see God *as* you. To say God is in you still separates God from you.

Many primitive cultures (those we often see as poor but they see themselves as rich) describe all creatures and objects as a part of the divine. The Kaffir tribe in Africa greet each other saying, "I see you," meaning I see you fully, as a spiritual being from the inside out. As a result,

we can establish a genuine dialogue that bridges differences in ages, culture, backgrounds, and opinions. As if making every day feel like the Sabbath, we make every interactions feel as if it were a sacred union. From this comes true creativity as we allow others to fearlessly release ourselves and our passions into the world.

For the general population, the importance of Buber's thoughts increases the busier we are, the more time we spend communicating through machines, and the greater our focus on accumulating wealth, power, and possessions. Little time is left for harvesting divine encounters with other humans.

We need to make these connections, however, to be fully actualized beings. We come to know ourselves in the eyes of others, and feel strength and value when someone addresses us and hears our words with full acknowledgment. Additionally, we come to know the full delicious experience of being alive when we fully engage in the present moment, including the people in our space.

In business, the employees who feel listened to, who feel fully valued and significant, perform at their best. The customers who feel acknowledged and cared about declare loyalty and more easily forgive price increases and errors. The best leaders balance their plans for profit and power with actions that honor the needs of the employees, customers and community.

Buber speaks to those coaches whose work with clients goes beyond just achieving focus and order. The coach who is asked to help regenerate a client's "stunted personal center" must build a powerful connection that goes beyond investigation and observing. This coach

acts as a partner on the journey, assisting clients to live fully while they survive. The coach is a guide as the client learns new ways of moving and being in this world. The successful coach must believe in the possibilities available for the client even when the client does not. In relating to the person as Thou, the client feels safe, loved, and honored. The coach, as a result of reciprocity, feels the same. Truth and creativity arise from the power of this union.

It is difficult to describe this relationship since it is more of a feeling than an event. As God is silent and sacred, so is the presence we create together when we become one.

You may logically agree, but why don't these words play out in today's world? For one, viewing people as worthy of our love is scary, whether they are colleagues or clients. We leave ourselves open to experiencing rejection.

Secondly, as we have progressed as human beings, the more we have come to see people as a means to get what we want (for example, status, wealth, love or safety) instead of an end (the relationship for its own sake). We live by status differences, dependencies, judgments, and calculations. Not that we shouldn't take care of ourselves and strive for success, but we do so at the expense of others, instead of partnering with others.

However, a side effect of relating to Thou is the love we feel in the process. It is truly a heart-opening experience. And it is truly a terrifying experience. We feel as if we are losing control. We fear having to look honestly at ourselves. Is it worth the effort? Do we as coaches have the courage to deeply love our clients? Only you can decide.

If you choose to accept this mission, the first step is to work on being present in each glorious moment, searching for the simple beauty that is life. You need to quiet your busy mind and allow yourself to feel life. You need to approach each moment with no memory, to see details and people as if you had never seen them before. As William Blake wrote, "To see the world in a grain of sand and heaven in a wildflower." In this space we, too, become one.

Work on loving life, then move into freely loving people. Choose one person you can relate to as Thou. Repeat this until you are ready to be with your clients, seeing them as Thou and allowing the mystery of the journey together, trusting that their spirit will know what to do. In so doing, your brilliance will shine in spite of "You."

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"To lead is to live dangerously because when leadership counts, when you lead people through difficult change, you challenge what people hold dear – their daily habits, tools, loyalties, and ways of thinking – with nothing more to offer perhaps than a possibility. Moreover, leadership often means exceeding the authority you are given to tackle the challenge at hand. People push back when you disturb the personal and institutional equilibrium they know. And people resist in all kinds of creative and unexpected ways that can get you taken out of the game: pushed aside, undermined, or eliminated. . . .

Yet, we believe that leadership, while perilous, is an enterprise worthy of the costs. Our communities, organizations, and societies need people, from wherever they work and live, to take up the challenges within reach rather than complain about the lack of leadership from on high, hold off until they receive a "call" to action, or wait for their turn in the top job. This has always been true, but may especially be so now, in the post-September 11, 2001 world of uncertainty and vulnerability."

-- Ronald Heifetz and Mary Linsky. *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2002, pp. 2-3.

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