UNDERSTANDING HUMAN DEVELOPMENT*

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There are at least two approaches that can be made in trying to understand a human being.

We can approach him with an eye upon the objective features of his make-up and conduct, the features that can be seen and measured. We do this when we measure his height and weight, test his strength, listen to his pulse, look at his overt behavior, record his language, and take account of physical aspects of his health and care.

We can also approach him from the point of view of inquiring into the subjective or inward aspects of his own individual experience; what kind of awareness does he have of his own existence? What does the world look like from his point of view? What might be his thoughts and feelings? When we study human behavior from this standpoint we are interested in the nature of his awareness of his own existence and the meaning and quality of his sensations, thoughts and feelings from his view.

From an objective point of view, we are interested in knowing that an adolescent has reached the height of six feet. From the subjective point of view we are interested not solely in this statistic but in what it means or might mean to the individual. Objectively, six feet is tall for a 16 year old. Objectively, he is bigger than his classmates and taller than his 14 year old sister. But subjectively, he may perceive himself as too large, as gangly and uncoordinated; he may find that people expect things of him based on his physical size that he doesn't have the social or emotional maturity to deal with.

This subjective aspect of an individual's world constitutes part of what we call the self. When a child is born, he is a fully-formed physical creature but he is not yet a separate self. The self begins to come into being from the time of early infancy, and it is in process of becoming as long as a person lives. All human beings are constantly involved in the process
of learning what they are, who they are and what they might become. This involves a process of discovery of search and often of struggle.

As a child develops, the self which we call his includes a system of ideas and attitudes. It is filtered through many other systems and other people with whom he comes in contact. It involves a process of differentiation. Among the early signs are evidences of what we ordinarily call "self-consciousness" appearing sometimes at about the end of the first half year when a child tries, for example, to hide himself, as it seems, in the presence of strangers. There are signs also of what might be interpreted as a kind of self-awareness when a child during early months of life shows what seems to be "hurt feelings" and also when he obviously seems to make efforts to call attention to himself. It is easy, of course, for an adult to misinterpret such signs and read his own meaning into them.

The development of a child's personal self or personality is influenced in countless ways by the environment in which he lived. An infant's first exposures to the world involves placing his dependent, helpless self in the hands of trustworthy parents, who respond to his needs for nurturance and contact with calm and warmth and provide food that is both easy to take in and digest as well as providing it regularly and in adequate quantities. A Child begins to trust (as Eric Erikson puts it) that big bumbling world out there because those who care for him can be depended upon to meet his needs. That trust can be maintained throughout one's lifetime by the maintenance of warm understanding parental roles, by teachers who see children as individuals and who attempt to meet their social or emotional as well as intellectual needs, by positive social interactions with peers who give and take and by a myriad of other experiences daily life brings. Or, that trust, and therefore one's perception of the world as a place one can depend on to provide one's
needs, to test out one's competencies, can be broken and destroyed by the
catastrophes of death of loved ones, by uncaring or absent parents, by un-
feeling teachers, by rats and heroin and by an environment which never allows
for the meeting of peoples feelings and needs.

The process of interpreting what an experience might represent from the
child's point of view is essential, yet it is easy to be mistaken in it. For
when, by a process of interpretation, we try to understand what a child's
experience might mean from his point of view, we must do so through the medium
of our own experiences. We have no other anchor or reference point, for we
cannot directly experience his experiences, or think his thoughts or feel his
feelings. We draw upon our own feelings when we try to fathom how he might
feel. In doing this we can be very much in error, for instead of accurately
interpreting, we may simply ascribe to him ideas and feelings that do not
reflect his ideas and feelings but simply our own.

The greatest difficulty an adult has in dealing with a child is to view
things from the standpoint of the child. It is so easy for an adult to read
his own thoughts into a child's mind, and to project his own intentions into
what a child does, or to assume, from the child's silence or the seemingly
rambling nature of his behavior, that the child has no thoughts or behavior.

It is also easy to apply our own knowledge of behavior without asking
whether it might be applicable to the particular individual. For, as you
hopefully will see throughout the series of lectures that follow this one,
human behavior although well-charted and understood throughout the childhood
years, is less understood in adulthood and leaves a thousand questions un-
answered when we try to understand older people. You can learn something
about expected development and behavior at various ages, you can see varying
environments, but in order to really understand and plan to work with any
human being you must see how he fits into the matrix of self and the varying environments he has been exposed to. You must be aware for instance of the difference in the impact of loneliness upon the infant and that which loneliness means to the older person. An eight month old left in a hospital and not given extra handling, tenderness and human contact, can die, in the best of medical facilities. Old people, socially isolated, usually don't die physically from lack of human contact. But social isolation, is probably one of the major causes of the psychological deterioration we usually call senility, in old age.

We cannot solve the difficulty involved in understanding the people we work with simply by schooling ourselves in the art of being an objective observer. When a person views an individual with complete objectivity he may be quite accurate in what he sees, but the rub is there is much he will miss. To get a glimpse that is meaningful, in the sense that one can appreciate what is going on in the world of another human being, one has to be a participant observer, not a spectator. The participant observer is one who takes part, one who, to a degree, shares or seeks to share in a common experience. The spectator, on the other hand, is an onlooker who stands by himself, not entering into a relationship and is uninvolved in what he sees. The choice as to whether one will view human beings at any age, as objects or try to see them as those with whom one shares a common humanity, properly depends on the responsibility one has for the person and the role one desires to play. If the choice is to understand from the point of view of a participant rather than spectator then we must safeguard against the danger of misinterpreting another person, child or adult, through the bias of one's own ways of thinking and feeling. The greatest safeguard lies in an effort to understand one's self. To understand another, one must be in a mood to grow in self-understanding, to face one's feelings. Knowledge of oneself determines
to a large degree what one can perceive in others. Such understanding does not mean simply an attempt to gain academic knowledge about anger, fear and other feelings, but to try to understand their significance.

For me, their significance can best be viewed in a framework of human development that sees growth from birth to death; that says that it is natural to seek, to strive, to struggle toward a kind of self-fulfillment. That is, there is a positive forward impetus in growth which represents a kind of seeking and not simply a kind of struggle for riddance, relief and escape. The healthy child, like the healthy adolescent and old person, is constantly involved in a process of self-realization. This does not mean that he does not deal with irritants and cope with frustrations. In the process of living and in the process by which a growing person comes into his own and realized himself there is along the way, considerable frustration and much suffering and pain. The main point is that there is a forward impetus in growth; a growing child seeks to be himself, to discover, to realize his resources for doing, thinking and feeling, for standing independently on his own two feet and also for being deeply involved in interpersonal relationships with others. This forward impetus covers the gamut of human development. For whether it is obvious or not, even the 85 year old continues to seek to be herself, to realize his resources, to stand independent, to feel for others and to need human contact.

So we say that a growing person cannot reach his full development without encountering difficulties and without being hurt. One of the greatest achievements of the mature person is his capacity for compassion, and probably no one can realize compassion unless he himself has suffered. But the mature person is the one who can learn from being hurt, from suffering and therefore feel for others who are experiencing it. The mature person is the person who can see others without prejudice - for those who are prejudiced against each other tend to lose sight of the fact that people in the rejected
group are also human beings with the same sensitiveness, the same fears and grievances, the same desire to be accepted, the same bitter revulsion against being rejected as they themselves possess. As a result of his prejudice against another, a person tends, in effect, to dehumanize this other person, and this means that by the same process and to the same extent he dehumanizes himself. The deeper the prejudice, the less room left for compassion.