

This is the last in a series of three audio tapes called The Forum Presents Conversations with Werner Erhard, Volume 1. This tape is entitled On Relationships.

WERNER

Of all the things I can think of to talk about, relationships have to be the single most unclear and crazy for people.

It's very interesting if you deal with people about what's troubling them, even if there's not much troubling them, there's just a little troubling them, you can't be always certain, but you can be pretty certain that it will involve relationship, love, something like that.

People have more problems about relationship, more problems about love, more problems about that whole arena than almost anything I can think of.

So, it's a very dicey area to talk about.

I mean, I want you to think now of all the books that have been written on relating. And all of the things that have been said about relating. And I want you to make a great big pile of all those things that have ever been said.

First off, I think you can acknowledge it would be an enormous pile. I mean, just the books alone would make an enormous pile. Almost none of which really makes any difference in a relationship.

We're a lot further along in warfare than we are in relationship. I mean, if you go back to the days when warfare was pretty primitive, however relationships were then, they're probably not a lot better off now. So, we've made a lot more progress in warfare than we have in relationships.

So, I want to make a very strong distinction that what people say about being related, what is said about being related, that lives in a different domain than relationship itself like a presence.

So, you need to know something about what are the rules of speaking about relationships in order to have an impact on your relationship.

Now, almost nobody knows those rules because almost nobody pays any attention to those rules. It's not that they're a mystery, it's just that we very, very, very, very rarely live with the challenge, look at the question: how is it that one must speak about relationships in order to have an impact on one's relationships?

So, most people don't know that. Most people don't know anything about that.

So, one of the things that would be really valuable to having a breakthrough in the quality of our relationships, to having relationships that were really satisfying for us, really nurturing to us, really complete for us, would be to learn how to speak about our relationships, how to speak and listen, how to work on our relationships in the realm of speaking and listening and thinking in such a way that actually impacted the relationship.

So, it's kind of like an analogy of a quarterback and a coach.

What a great coach knows, maybe they just know it inherently, but what they have to know is how to speak about throwing a football in such a way that it impacts on a person's ability to throw the football.

See, the coach doesn't help the quarterback to understand the physics of throwing the ball. The coach doesn't even really help the quarterback in understanding what are the steps you need to take to throw the ball. But the coach knows something about speaking, about throwing the ball, so that his speaking shows up like an impact on the quarterback's ability to throw the ball on Sunday.

So, first off, it's very powerful when you come to... I'm going to say this correctly, then I'm going to say it understandably. It's very powerful when you come to be that there's no such thing as relationship.

Now, I'll say it so you can understand. Very powerful when you know that there's no such thing as relationship.

I read a quote by Einstein this morning, wherein he said, "any fool can know something. The power is not in knowing it but understand it." Now, whatever he meant by understanding in that quote is what I'm talking about when I say when you are that there's no such thing as relationship, or when you really know that there's no such thing as relationship, then you know something that will impact on the quality of your relationship.

So, when you first say there's no such thing as relationship, people listening are offended. Because it's like saying there's no such thing as the floor. They know there's such a thing as relationship.

So, I'm questioning that, and I'm inviting you to question that, and I'm promising, and I expect to be held to account for my promises, I'm promising that when you begin to question and look at the possibility that there's really no such thing as a relationship, that that's going to show up as a power for you in relating more effectively.

Now, that doesn't make sense. I mean, it sounds like the statement's at odds with itself. You know, I'm saying when you know there's no such thing as baseball, you're going to be a better baseball player. But I am saying that, and I expect to be held to account for it.

The word which you want to focus on in my statement, in my invitation to be, or know, however you'd like to say it, or understand, or get, that there's no such thing as relationship is the word thing.

Being related is not an objective matter. There is no such thing as being related. It's not like a telephone. It's not like a cup. It's not like a hand. A relationship is not a thing.

And yet I say that without you and I ever having thought the thought, relationships are things, that's who we are. We don't need to think it, because it's who we are. You show up, people show up, like relationships are things.

So let me tell you, if relationship is not a thing, if this possibility turns out to be accurate, if it's true that relationships, there's no such thing as a relationship, and you're showing up, you're being, like a relationship is a thing, it's analogous to treating your automobile like an ox.

I mean, after all, ox and automobiles are both for transportation, right? So if you treat your automobile like an ox, you're going to stick and smack it on the fenders in the back to get it to move, and smack, you know, touch it on the fenders in the front to get it to turn right or left, and you shove hay through the radiator.

If it's true that there's no such thing as a relationship, that a relationship is a pure interpretation, then treating a relationship like a thing would be treating your car like an ox. And your relationship ought to work just about as well as your car would if you took a stick down and hay to get it to run.

And I'll bet that I'm not too far off from the way most people's relationships show up at least a significant portion of the time. They show up like how they ought to show up, analogous to trying to get your car to move with a stick and a bale of hay.

Oh, by the way, by accident, sometimes the car moves when you hit it. I mean, somebody may have gotten in and put the key in and started it while you're sitting on the roof, smacking it with the... and you're real sure that you've got your ox to move.

So, if it's true that a relationship is an interpretation, then there's a lot of stuff you have to deal with very quickly. You have to deal with, yeah, but what about my feelings? And what about the circumstances?

Well, no, I'm not denying that people have feelings. Almost nobody knows what that is. But there seems to be something there that people give the label feelings to. I'm not denying that there aren't circumstances. You know, this happened, and this happened, and this happened, and this happened, and then that happened. And that's why that happened, because this happened, this happened, this happened, and then that happened. So I'm not saying that this didn't happen, this didn't happen, this didn't happen. There are circumstances there. I'm not saying that they're not.

I am saying that the circumstances may not be woven together like you and I think they are. In fact, I'm saying that very strongly. I'm saying that story you tell about your relationship, you know, you say what the relationship is and it sounds like a story. I say that the way you tell that story is like there was an object called a relationship.

And I say that because I see that the story people tell about their relationships is very real to them. The story is the most real thing for them. That's what really happens. But suppose that's only another interpretation. Suppose somebody who doesn't know from stories, who doesn't live

in that reality of stories, looked at your relationship. They might describe your relationship in a totally different way than as a story.

So here's what I'm saying. I'm saying that when your relationship lives for you like a story, that's predicated and reinforces your relationship like an object.

When you can begin to open up the possibility that there's no such thing as a relationship and what's showing up there that you call a relationship is an interpretation you're making. That you've got a certain power to relate that you didn't have before because there's now a certain malleability, a certain plasticity. A certain can-be-moved-around-ness about the relationship when it begins to live for you like an interpretation that you are making, that the other person is making, that your friends are making about your relationship.

Now we all think we're talking about the same thing. And as a matter of fact, you and I think we're speaking because there is a thing to speak about. So we think that there is a relationship and I speak about that thing and you speak about that thing and you might speak slightly differently about it because you're speaking about it from your point of view and I'm speaking about it from my point of view but we're both speaking about the same thing. That's more a relationship as a thing.

Suppose the thing called relationship is a product of my speaking about it and you're speaking about it and them speaking about it and there's no such thing as a relationship. It's what shows up in people's speaking and listening and talking and discussing and naming their feelings and the circumstances.

So, I'm not giving you a new philosophy. I'm inviting you to open up a possibility for yourself. I'm inviting you to open up the possibility of living with the question relationships are not things. Relationships are interpretations and what shows up, what we call a relationship shows up by virtue of people speaking to themselves, of people speaking to other people, of other people speaking about other people speaking to each other. So not like that's true, what I just said but like live with that like a question.

See, what does it mean that the other person is a jerk? What does it mean that the other person is wrong? What does it mean that the other person doesn't understand? What does that mean?

Well, I'll tell you what it is. It's somebody saying the other person's a jerk and somebody listening the other person's a jerk. Maybe the same person is speaking and listening. It's somebody saying, you don't understand me. And the person who's saying, you don't understand me, listening, you don't understand me. And maybe the other person, someone else listening, you don't understand me. And saying, perhaps to themselves, yes I do. And listening, yes I do. But it's all saying. It's all interpretation in the domain of language.

So I'm suggesting, I'm inviting you to live with the possibility that your relationship could be validly construed, could be validly held as an interpretation in the domain of language.

Now, I'm not saying that the other interpretations aren't valid also. I'm not saying that the interpretation your relationship is a thing isn't valid. That's a valid interpretation. It doesn't work, but it's self-consistent. You can produce evidence for it. It can be validated. I suggest that coming from, holding, taking the stand for, that your relationship is really an interpretation will empower you in being able to relate effectively.

So, one of the things that you can be absolutely certain about is that in this realm called relationship, your relationship is going to show up like something missing and something present.

The part that I want to talk about for a moment is the missing part. It's very easy never to be satisfied with your relationship and therefore to live with your relationship and be with your relationship and relate from being dissatisfied all the time. Because no matter how it is, I think that you almost always find something is missing.

And the one thing I can promise you, if you've got moments in your relationship where nothing is missing, the relationship is absolutely complete for you, I promise that shortly that will go away and something will be missing.

So I think you know what I'm talking about when I say that in relationship something is missing. I mean, if you're really honest and you sit there and tell the truth about your relationship, I know all your relationships are great. I'm not talking to people of bad relationships. I'm talking to people of great relationships. But I think that if you sit there very honestly, as great as it is, that it's also clear to you that something is missing. That there's a possibility there that isn't being realized for you. Maybe it was once and now it's missing. Maybe it never was and it's missing. Maybe you're not sure, but it's missing.

So I think people know what I'm talking about, that something's missing.

Now, I say that walking around with even the unspoken notion that something's missing, that is to say, living like something's missing in your relationship is nonsense. Because there's no such thing as something missing.

Have you ever seen something missing? Have you ever seen missing? I mean, it's an oxymoronic statement. *It's the third time I've been able to use that word in my life in the right way.* It's a statement at odds with itself that you've seen something missing. You've seen the thing that's missing. Because if you see the thing that's missing, if it's there, it's not missing, is it? So I say there's no such thing as missing. Yet there is missing. But I say it doesn't exist like a thing. I say that what's missing lives in people's language. I don't mean in the words. When I say language. Music is language.

So it's very interesting. Here's a person dissatisfied with their relationship. Now you know how people are when they're dissatisfied. Trying to make the relationship work. And the dissatisfaction is based on that something's missing. And there's no such thing as something missing. What there is is a possibility for something. Which possibility lives as an interpretation in language. That's very interesting. This missing from which our dissatisfaction is derived lives

in our own speaking and listening, and lives in our own languaging. I don't see very many people working on their own languaging, on their own speaking and listening. They handle their relationship. They work on everything else but that.

So first off, when you begin to know. I don't like the word know. When you begin to be. Because I think that knowing how to ride a bicycle would be like reading a book on riding a bicycle. And being able to ride a bicycle would be like riding a bicycle. So I like the kind of knowing that shows up like being.

So once you are, or if you prefer, once you know, or if you like Einstein's statement, once you understand that what's missing lives as a possibility in languaging. All of a sudden you have an enormous freedom you didn't have before.

See if you are that, nobody needs to tell you what to do. Any more than the coach tells the quarterback what to do about throwing the ball. The quarterback doesn't give a, sorry, the coach doesn't give the quarterback a prescription about how to throw the ball. The coach speaks to the quarterback and the ability to throw the ball on Sunday shows up on Sunday. Like throwing the ball more accurately.

So, I promise, you know I tend to be held to account for my promises, that when you are, that what's missing in your relationship lives really as a possibility created or brought forth in languaging and if you are that, or coming from that, working on making your relationships work, a power to make relationships work will show up when you are working on making relationships work.

Now you notice I didn't say do something and something will work. I didn't promise that. I promise that if you are, that what's missing is really possibility. Not something wrong. Not something bad. Not something stupid. Not something horrible. Not even something not nice. It's just a possibility. And it lives in our languaging. I promise that your ability to relate will be empowered when you are that.

Now hearing that doesn't empower you. Remembering that doesn't empower you. Being that empowers you. Being committed that that's so will empower you. Taking the stand that what's missing in your relationship really exists as possibility and lives in languaging.

See what's missing always has to live in language. What's missing doesn't show up except in language. In fact you wouldn't even know you were missing it if you couldn't language about it. If it showed up by accident you wouldn't miss it because it wouldn't show up as missing.

You know a lot of the things we've discovered have been out here for a long time. The wheel was there for a long time. You know there were round objects with axle like things associated with them for a long time before there was what we call a wheel. See the wheel's got to be missing for a wheel to show up. There has to be the possibility of wheel before you can see a wheel.

I want you to notice that the things we're saying about relationship don't sound much like what you read in books. Don't sound much like what people talk about when they talk about relationship.

I also want you to notice that a quarterback reading the account on Monday of the game he played on Sunday does not show up on the next Sunday as a better quarterback. But if he speaks to the coach on Monday and the coach is any good he'll show up in the game next Sunday as a better quarterback.

There's one way of talking about relationships. It's very interesting and curious and wonderful. And I love to read about the game on Sunday. Even if I was there I'll read about it. Deepens my appreciation. I have a richer interpretation of what happened. He's got some expertise I don't have otherwise he wouldn't be a sports writer. So he sees things and knows things and they're in the article and it's great. But I'll be damned if I can throw the football any better the next Sunday. Nor could the quarterback.

So I'm not saying that all those books aren't interesting. They're very interesting. All that stuff people say about relationships is all very interesting. You just don't see it showing up as a more profound, richer, more powerful, more potent, more nurturing, more satisfying relationship.

I suggest that when relationships don't work for people that they are not relating. That they inherited something and it's all they're doing is being moved around by it.

I'm saying that relationship was here before you showed up. That relationship already existed before you came along. Before I came along. Before any of us came along. I mean any of us that we're now speaking to. So to some degree you and I are puppets dangling on the end of the strings of what we inherited as relationship.

Now I don't know about you but I have a sense that even if the puppet dances nicely there's no satisfaction in it for the puppet. So I say that even if what we inherited is like workable, you know looks good, is right. Even if what we inherited is right. Even if it looks good. And even if we do the dance nicely on the end of these strings that's inherently not satisfying. That being a puppet is inherently not satisfying.

I'm inviting you to question what everybody knows about relationships. I'm inviting you to not know anything about relationships. In fact I'm inviting you to take a stand that you don't know. That you can't tell the difference between what you know and what knows you. What was already there before you ever showed up. What in some disciplines they would say was already in the culture. Was already in the society. Was already in the practices.

So I'm inviting you to live in a question what is being related. I'm not saying don't relate while you're living in the question. Just inviting you to not know. To really live like in an open question. Like to hold your relationship as an open question.

See in this culture we hate questions. We only, we worship answers. The only reason anybody ever asks a question is to get an answer. It may even sound stupid doesn't it? For me to say that

the only reason anybody asks a question is to get an answer. You would say well sure! Why would you ask the question if you didn't want an answer? So I'm saying something stupid. That is to say saying something that the culture in which I live would assess as stupid. Given the culture's track record in relationships doesn't bother me to say stuff that the culture would assess as stupid.

So I'm saying not trying to get an answer to the question what is it to be related? But really living in the open question like living in the possibility. Like living in the question so that something can show up for you surprising. So when you're looking for answers what shows up shows up as an extension of what you already know. When you're just living with the question you know really what is this thing? Or this non-thing that we're talking about when we use the word being related or relationship or relatedness. What is it? Maybe it's nothing like what you already know it is.

So I'm inviting you to live with the question in your relationships. What is this?

Most people live in their relationships with what do I want? I know a lot of people have answered that question fulfilled the want and still something is missing. They're still not satisfied. May not be an important question. In fact, it may be irrelevant. In fact, it may be the question that people use to disempower themselves without knowing it.

I have a recommended alternative question. What is so here? What is so here not like a description not like an explanation but what is so here like what is really present? When I'm what I call relating what's present? Like what's actually there present?

I'm inviting you to live in that question and I promise that there's power in living in that question. That when you don't know and you know that you don't know you are a lot more powerful when either you don't know and you think you know or when you don't know and don't know that you don't know.