

A Half-Fast Walk Through Martin Buber's Thinking

By Dr. W. Craig Gilliam

"I am no philosopher, prophet, or theologian," Buber said at a celebration of his eightieth birthday, "but a person who has seen something and who goes to a window and points to what I have seen.

"Any person who hopes for a teaching from me that is anything other than a pointing of this sort will always be disappointed."

~~Martin Buber

". . .the narrow ridge is the meeting place of the We."

~~Martin Buber

Martin Buber was a leading Jewish thinker and theologian who influenced many Christian theologians and religious philosophers. Buber felt that his work was "atypical" in that it did not fit into any specific academic discipline; it was between them. His work, I and Thou (1958), is often called a philosophy of dialogue. A friend of mine classified it as a classic and one of the greatest works of all time. As I read Buber, I am stirred by his insights into human nature and relationships. Whether you agree that the book is a classic or not, I think most of us can agree that it is a work worth reading and rereading, for some rich nuggets are buried in this classic. This essay offers an overview of some of Buber's rich, helpful thoughts and invites people to a deeper way of being and behaviors.

I and Thou began from experience that focuses on what "is human" in people. It starts with the declaration, "To people, the world is twofold, in accordance with their twofold attitude" (1958). By the term "attitude," Buber means a fundamental position, attitude, or way of being toward others and the world as I-Thou or I-It. These postures are not rigid categories into which various types of people fit; for example, it would be wrong to insist that scientists prefer the I-It posture and that artists prefer the I-Thou posture. Instead, these attitudes are modes of experience that alternate in all people, "not two kinds of people, but two poles of humanity" (1958). People live on this continuum. Although, some lose the ability to see others in an I-Thou way and begin to see all in a chronic I-It way. As such, when this I-It way of seeing and relating becomes chronic, it makes them/us less than human.

Within these poles, the two "I's" are not the same. In the I-It attitude, the "I" holds back, measures, uses, and even controls the other seen as It. This I-It realm originates in our sensations, perceptions, thoughts, emotions, and desires. The I-It relationship is based on a perception of the other and does not encounter the whole being of the other. Instead, we select those characteristics of the person that are relevant to our inquiry, reinforces our bias, and often ignores those qualities of others that offers alternative perceptions. We synthesize what we learn about the other and use concepts and signs to communicate. This attitude is essential for survival, allowing us to share in an objective world. In this way, knowledge is generated, and the environment is predicted. We create a sense of continuity and provide certainty to our lives. I-It is the realm of the

transactional and can focus on using others—their utilitarian value. Here the subject who knows is distinguished from the object that is known. Buber states: “Without It, people cannot live. But he who lives with It alone is not a person” (1958, p. 34). Empathy and compassion are the opposite of I-It. The world of It is set in the context of space and time; however, the I-It attitude does not know the present, only the past or future. It exists only through being bounded by others. People are objects observed, not living entities encountered with our whole being. Instead of in-betweenness, I-It makes subject-object relations.

In contrast, the I-Thou relationship can only be spoken with the whole being, and being spoken brings about its existence. The I-Thou relation has no bounds. It is an incomprehensible threat to the I-It order that holds a human person. It is discontinuous and disruptive. What is essential to Buber is not thinking about the other but directly confronting, confirming, and addressing the other as Thou, which involves immediate contact. We at G&A use the circle in conflict work, for when people look at each other eye to eye and hear each other’s stories, it creates more possibility for a genuine encounter. I believe creating the opportunity for genuine encounters is what Matthew 18: 15 is pointing toward when it instructs those who have been sinned against to “go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone,” and Matthew 5: 23-24 that comments “leave your gift at the altar and go; first, be reconciled to your brother or sister.” These texts are about creating a compassionate, I-Thou space, heart, attitude, that can lead to a genuine encounter. Buber invites us to see the humanity in the other, to hear their stories, and thus to have compassion for one another. In other words, if I do not give others access to my humanity, I cannot get access to theirs. In fact, Buber extends I-Thou beyond simply other people, but includes a way of seeing and encountering nature.

What evolves between two or a group is ineffable. To speak directly to the other invites the subject to realize his/her otherness. It challenges both to break out of the prison of the external object. The "I" affirms itself only in the presence of the Thou. Buber comments, "I become through my relations to the Thou; as I become I, I say Thou" (1958, I and Thou, p. 11). For Buber, "I" is a relation that a thought cannot express because an idea dissolves the relationship. The I, in connection, rediscovers "its original community with the totality of being (Levinas, 1967, p. 138). For Buber, there is a spiritual significance to making social communion and the I-Thou relationship primary. The I-Thou relationship cannot be identified as subjective in that the meeting does not occur in the realm of subjectivity but in the realm of being or the heart/soul. The space between cannot be conceived as a space existing independently of the meeting of I-Thou. The space is inseparable from the adventure in which each human person participates. In the in-between where two meet is where God or the divine happens.

According to Buber, Jesus spoke the unfathomable depths of God’s wisdom in stories and parables. Buber commented that Jesus’ teaching stories are formed from the preserved nucleus of authentic conversations that once took place between Jesus and the disciples.

Maurice Friedman comments that Buber believed that Jesus' uniqueness "lay in the strength, the immediacy, the unconditionality of the "between" (p. 140). His message was that the Kingdom of God is already breaking into the present and that those who really hear the message are called upon to turn and trust. But what was essential about Jesus, according to Buber, is the situation-specific meetings between himself and his friends and enemies, which are embodied in his parables and his life. Buber loved the passage, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in their midst" (Matt. 18:20). Applying Buber's dialogic principles to this saying, the term "gathered" suddenly takes on a new significance. It suggests not just a collective social or economic purpose, but a genuine togetherness, a community of conversations by which persons really meet one another. Through this deep meeting, the spirit of Jesus is thereby recognized in our midst. Buber is naming deep or soulful community.

According to Buber, the human person is both open and hidden. A problem occurs when openness and hiddenness are out of balance. When Buber states that one's whole being must encounter the Thou, he never means this to be some mystical fusion. He believes that Thou teaches you to meet others, hold your ground when you meet them, and maintain self-definition while encountering others and being in a relationship or emerging as a healthy "We". In the language of family systems, this is self-differentiation. Amid the encounter, once the "I" becomes conscious of experience and mindful of listening, the Thou disappears, and the I finds itself in the domain of It. The intense momentary encounter cannot last. Buber describes how our "exalted melancholy (is) that every Thou in our world must become an It" (Buber, 1958, p. 16). The I-Thou is a relationship of actual knowledge because it preserves the integrity of the otherness of the Thou. Commitment is what allows access to otherness. The key to otherness is knowledge through commitment—a meeting of will and grace.

Buber states, "In every sphere in its way, through each process of becoming that is present to us, we look out toward the fringe of the eternal Thou; in each Thou, we address the eternal Thou" (Buber, 1958, p. 6). God, the eternal Thou, is both the supreme partner of the dialogue and the power underlying all the other I-Thou encounters. We cannot know God in Godself. We can only know God as a person because that is how God encounters us. According to Buber, God is both self-revealing and self-concealing. Buber is against any systematic theology that takes away the mystery of God. He refers to the mystery of the I-Thou relation to God or the mystery of the nearness and remoteness of an I-Thou connection with the divine. He seems to offer an image of a God that is both being and becoming. Buber rejected theology that teaches this or that about God; his religious thought gives primacy to the I-Thou relationship with the incomprehensible.

Buber starts from the human experience of faith, which makes him think of revelation in these terms: "That which reveals is that which reveals. That which is is, and nothing more. The eternal source of strength streams, the eternal contact persists, the eternal voice sounds forth. . ." (1958, p. 112). From the reception of revelation, one receives a

presence as power. Revelation is an incomprehensible event. (S)He who is receptive to revelation knows that the I-Thou is confirmed in the present and now.

For Buber, every person wishes to be “confirmed as what s/he is, even as what s/he can become, by people” (1965, p. 182), and we have an innate capacity to confirm our fellow human beings in this way. Our humanity only exists when this capacity unfolds. Here is an essential bridge between Buber’s work and leadership, facilitation, coaching, counseling, pastoral care, and conflict transformation—confirmation of the one with whom one works is a crucial attitude. Through such presence and affirmation, the leader, therapist/counselor, or conflict transformation facilitator attempts to make the other present. To make the other present means to imagine the other concretely and what another person is wishing, feeling, perceiving, or thinking—hopes, dreams, aspirations, fears, and concerns. For Buber, the essential element of genuine dialogue is to experience the other side, which means to imagine the real, which demands “the most intensive stirring of one’s being into the life of the other” (1965, p. 81). Including the other allows one to contact another and remain in touch with oneself.

The dialogical attitude means that the leader, minister, counselor, or conflict transformation facilitator must “walk a narrow ridge.” They do not “rest on the broad upland of a system that includes a series of sure statements about the absolute, but on a narrow, rocky ridge between the gulfs where there is no sureness of expressible knowledge but the certainty of meeting what remains undisclosed” (1965, p. 184). The leader, minister, conflict transformation person, or consultant, who ventures along this narrow ridge holds their perspective, but only in the context of what the other brings, with all the surprises of the moment. The narrow ridge culminates in the I-Thou, which challenges the person to face surprises and seek deviations in the service of co-existence.

The leader, minister, counselor, consultant, or conflict worker does not take security for granted or use theory, ideology, or theology to substitute for the encounter. The challenge is to be fully present in the “nothing else than process without getting lost in the abyss” (1957, p. 94) since theory, ideology, and theology (and I believe statements) can be used as a defense against facing the unknown and the encounter with others. The minister, leader, intervener, or conflict worker must face the certainty that the unknown will always exist. Buber’s concern was with losing sight of the whole person.

Even when an individual refuses to enter a relationship with a Thou because of insecurity, the longing for confirmation remains. In the grip of this difficulty, a person who clings to an I-It relationship may speak of Thou but mean It. Here Buber points out the duality of being and seeming—we may seem to be something other than what we are. A person may seem a unified I and say Thou without entering a relationship with the Thou. Buber believes that we all give into the temptation to possess confirmation of our being while avoiding the risk of a real I-Thou relationship. However, it is essential to differentiate people in whom “being” or “seeming” predominate.

One of the challenges of Buber's work is that while he suggests two basic attitudes or stances in life, I-Thou and I-It, he does not talk a lot about how we move between these two poles. Most of us would prefer being in an I-Thou way toward and with the people we lead. However, sometimes, we are not. We are being and becoming, at least we hope, more I-Thou with ourselves, nature, and one another. The mystery lies between and among us. In the mystery, the I and Thou becomes "We" or a common community having positive impact. The narrow ridge, according to Martin Buber, is the meeting place of the We. From a healthy We derives the common, inspired purpose for which we thrive.

Agree or disagree, you are invited into this conversation.

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