

The Need for a Thou¹

Some years ago I started feeling terribly lonely. It didn't happen in a moment, the process developed over time. I couldn't find a reason for it.

The thing perplexed me. I was studying hard while in college, then got hired in a top consulting firm, had many colleagues I would spend time with in the evenings, was healthy and in a good shape, the list could go on and on. Hey, I even had girlfriends here and there! And I still felt lonely.

Then a guy who I knew from the gym told me to read a book by a guy called Martin Buber. Apparently, he was a Jewish philosopher and a smart guy. The book was called "I and Thou". At first I was discouraged because it was written in such a complicated language. It starts with this:



The world is twofold for man in accordance with his twofold attitude.

The attitude of man is twofold in accordance with the two basic words he can speak.

The basic words are not single words but word pairs.

One basic word is the word pair I-You.

The other basic word is the word-pair I-It; but this basic word is not changed when He or She takes the place of It.

Thus the I of man is also twofold.

For the I of the basic word I-You is different from that in the basic word I-It."

What the author was trying to say is that we are always basically in these two modes of existence: I-Thou or I-It:



When one says You, the I of the word pair I-You is said, too.

When one says It, the I of the word pair is I-It is said, too.

The basic word I-You can only be spoken with one's whole being."

[...]

¹ Martin Buber: I and Thou, Translated by Ronald Gregor Smith, 1952.

Ok, I grasped this. But, why does this matter, I asked myself? I never imagined the book would have the answer to my loneliness, but I continued reading:



There is no I as such but only the I of the basic word I-You and the I of the basic word I-It. When a man says I, he means one or the other.”

Things started to unravel for me. I understood that ever since I was little, I understood myself solely as an individual, as an “I”. Yes, I always wanted to be a good person, work hard, succeed in life, but I always did it merely as an “I”: I studied hard for myself, progressed in my career for myself, exercised for myself, etc. And now, Buber was telling me that I never exist solely as an “I”, but always in relation to either You or an It. I started to unpack the story further. [...]

Buber explained the life I was living:



The life of a human being does not exist merely in the sphere of goal-directed verbs. It does not consist merely of activities that have something for their object.

I perceive something. I feel something. I imagine something. I want something. I sense something. I think something...
...this is the basis of the realm of the It.”

Even though I didn’t do it on purpose, I was living an I-It life. I led a life “in the sphere of goal-directed verbs” treating everything around me as an object. I wanted career progress, I wanted success, even the time I spent with colleagues was mostly for networking and my career advancement. I sank into the realm of I-It, but I needed I-You:




But the realm of You has another basis.

Whoever says You does not have something for his object. [...]


Where You is said there is no something. You has no borders.

Whoever says You does not have something; he has nothing. But he stands in relation. [...] The basic word I-You establishes the world of relation.”


And this was where my problem lied. I never entered a true relationship. I always understood myself as an individual and everyone around me as an object. I acquired, learned, improved, earned, achieved, but never stayed or stood in relation. No, not even with my friends or girlfriends. The book again explained to me why this is so:

 One should not try to dilute the meaning of the relation: relation is reciprocity. [...] When I confront a human being as my You and speak the basic word I-You to him, then he is no thing among things nor does he consist of things. [...] Neighborliness and seamlessness, he is you and fills the firmament. Not as if there was nothing but he; but everything else lives in his light. The basic word I-You can be spoken only with one's whole being. The concentration and fusion into a whole being. The concentration and fusion into a whole being can never be accomplished without me."

Yes, I tried to dilute the meaning of the relation: I never offered reciprocity to the other person. Yes, I have never spoken the basic word I-You with my whole being. I was never fully present. And I was never fully at the disposal of another. I worked to become always better and more independent, but I never understood the truth which Buber put so plainly:

 I require a You to become; becoming I, I say You. All actual life is encounter."

I sought to achieve development, to become who I should be, but without others. I never realized this was not possible. I needed others to become fully myself. Without others, I could never become fully "I". Every "I" needs a "Thou" to discover who we really are. And here was the key to unlocking the meaning of my loneliness: whoever does not live in the basic I-You mode, sinks into loneliness. Man is a "being-with-others" and "for-others". Without others, he loses his life's energy; only with others he can flourish. As Buber would say it:

 Relation is reciprocity. My You acts on me as I act on it. Inscrutably involved, we live in the currents of universal reciprocity."

QUESTIONS FOR A DISCUSSION:

How would you describe the main message of the text?

What was the reason for the main character's loneliness?

Can a person become fully themselves by their own forces (by themselves)? Why or why not?

What is the proper mode of relating to others?