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**Open, Direct, Mutual, Present, Spontaneous—without judgement or agenda:  
Martin Buber's Life of Dialogue**

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We are only hours away from the beginning of the Jewish High Holy Days, which stretch from Rosh Hashanah (the Jewish New Year) to Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement). The ten days in total, starting at sunset tonight, are also known collectively as the Days of Repentance or the Days of Awe. Our proximity to the High Holy Days is an auspicious time to reflect on the life and teachings of the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber for how they may be able to continue to guide us today.

Buber was born in 1878 in Vienna, Austria, and one set of early events had significant resonance across his life: When Buber was three years old, his parents separated ([Mendes-Flohr 1](#)). In particular, he remembered his mother leaving without telling him goodbye, and he was soon sent to live with his paternal grandparents in Ukraine (1-2). (Yes, that would be the same Ukraine that's currently in the news.)

Neither his father nor his grandparents explained to him that his mother had eloped with a Russian officer, and in his own words, he felt “too timid to ask.” After living with his grandparents for quite a few months, he found himself impulsively asking an older girl who lived nearby about his mother. She told him honestly, “No, your mother is not coming back any more.” Some moments we never forget. And almost eight decades later, near the end of his life, Buber shared that, **“Whatever I have learned in the course of my life about the meaning of meeting and dialogue between people springs from that moment when I was four”** (2). I find that

fascinating and moving: that the seeds for a life of cultivating connection in dialogue were planted in a decisive encounter at such a young age by someone willing to be direct and honest with him.

Buber lived with his paternal grandparents for about a decade, and returned home at age fourteen when his father remarried (15). And although his father was a member of a much more liberal Jewish congregation compared to his more orthodox grandparents, Buber's own openness was already remarkable.

As many of you know, my wife is Jewish, and I have had fortunate opportunities to attend many Jewish events, including many *bar* and *bat mitzvahs*. And it is unusual, as you might guess, to hear Christian scriptures quoted at a Jewish coming of age service. And that is quite understandable given the history of Anti-Judaism and Anti-Semitism within Christianity. But when Buber became a *bar mitzvah*, he quoted not only from traditional Jewish sources, but also from the German poet Schiller and the Christian epistle of 1 Corinthians (19).

Buber had a lifelong interest in building bridges through being in conversation with diverse people and sources. He called his approach a “**life of dialogue.**” It can be easy sometimes to go through life on autopilot, but Buber tried to guide himself and others back toward “an engaged response” to our everyday life and to those we meet along the way (42). Now, I will admit that prospect can feel exhausting. (I have an introverted side, and sometimes I don't want to be engaged.) But Buber wasn't telling us to never rest or take care of ourselves. Rather, he's inviting us to notice when we've been shut down for too long (as he was as a young child)—and to open ourselves to the transformation that can happen when we open ourselves to direct, honest dialogue with another person.

And almost four decades after his four-year-old encounter with that neighbor girl, his reflections on these possibilities crystallized most fully in his 1923 book *I and Thou*, which can also be translated as “I and You” (3). For Buber, the ideal is an I-You relationship in which two people are willing to risk being vulnerable with one another as close, long-term friends can do. For Buber, an “I-Thou” dialogue is communication that is “open, direct, mutual, present, spontaneous” without any judgement or agenda (Kramer 202).

More often, however, Buber observed what he called *I-it* relationships in which we treat other people as an object or a thing without allowing ourselves to the full lived reality of who that person is. I should hasten to add that Buber readily grants that neither he nor anyone else can maintain constant “I-Thou” relationships all the time. And even when we have moments of profound, intimate connection, all relationships revert back to a transactional “I-it” at various points (13).

I first read Buber’s book almost twenty years ago, but his fairly simple framework has come back to mind a surprising number of times. I have found it really helpful to notice at various times: Whoa, I just treated that person like an “it” instead of a “you”—or a sacred “Thou.” Or conversely, wow, that person really saw me or let me really see them.

Buber would go further to say that parts of nature, such as a tree, can be a “Thou” if we take the time to really experience a particular plant’s individuality (51). Buber also wrote of a time that a rock unexpectedly—and only fleetingly—became a “Thou” to him.:

On a gloomy morning I walked upon the highway, saw a piece of mica lying there, lifted it up and looked at it for a long time.... And suddenly, when I raised my eyes from it, I realized that **while I looked I had not been conscious of “object” and “subject”; in my looking the mica and “I” had been one**; in my looking I had tasted unity. I looked at it again, but the unity did not return. (119)

I appreciate his honesty that cultivating such “I-Thou” connections is not simple or easy—and that sometimes we stumble backward into them in ways that are not always repeatable.

Indeed, sometimes the connection doesn’t happen despite our best efforts. And there are some fascinating accounts of his public attempts over the years at interfaith dialogue. Some were successful. Other times he would confess afterward that:

There is a boundary beyond which the possibility of [dialogical] encounter ceases and only the reporting of factual information remains. I cannot fight against an opponent who is thoroughly opposed to me, not can I fight against an opponent who stands on a different plane than

I.” (Mendes-Flohr 168-170)

Even Buber, the great champion of “I-Thou” relationships, was willing to admit that it wouldn’t work if the other person was only willing to treat him as an “it” —and not as a dynamic, evolving, complex human being.

I should emphasize as well that Buber’s worldview and actions extended far beyond the interpersonal. When Hitler seized power in Germany, Buber continued to be a “leading voice within the Jewish community of Central Europe.” To limit myself to only one quote from Buber during that period that particularly stood out to me, and that seems especially relevant in our own time of rising authoritarianism, mass shootings, and climate change: addressing the German-Jewish community shortly after Hitler seized power, Buber said: **“The world has become unreliable.... It is up to us to make the world reliable again for children”** (2-3). Because Buber kept speaking out, the Gestapo eventually forbade him at first from lecturing publicly and then from any form of teaching (191-192). And in 1938—at significant personal and financial cost—Buber, his wife, and quite a few of his closest family members left Germany for Palestine (201, 218).

It is also significant to consider that, in regard to Hitler, Buber’s *I-Thou* provides a powerful lens for interpreting Hitler’s autobiographical manifesto *Mein Kampf*. Buber’s primary emphasis was the value of meeting each individual as a unique “you”—as a “Thou” of sacred worth. In contrast, as one philosopher has noted:

Hitler excludes a second-person mode of address. In *Mein Kampf*, there is an *I*, a *we*, and a *they*, but there is no *you* that would allow for an intimate relation. Hitler does not allow himself to be seen in any form of frailty, and he does not obligate himself to anyone else in his or her frailty. He merges himself with a strong, idealized *we* and projects all weakness onto an external *they*.... There is a pure, good “we” that is no peril of being corrupted by “them.”... If only *they* (the evil forces) could be eliminated, *we* would be saved” (Hägglund 122).

On this point, it is significant that in 1939 on the first anniversary of *Kristallnacht* (when the windows were smashed in Jewish-owned buildings across Nazi Germany), Buber published an article in the Tel Aviv daily newspaper titled “They and We.” Part of his

goal was to highlight how different the Nazi worldview was from his own call for more “I and Thou” (Mendes-Flohr 223).

At the same time, Buber was honest that from the time he fled Germany in 1938 and continuing for more than a decade, the German people in many ways became a “*they*” to him. For quite a few years after the end of World War II, he continued to feel unable to return to Germany to speak in front of what he felt had become a “faceless German public.” The shattering betrayal of the Holocaust had left him unable to take the risk of experiencing “them” as an individual “you” much less a “Thou.”

One of the experiences that allowed him to begin to shift internally again occurred in 1951, when the University of Hamburg in Germany awarded him the Goethe prize, named after arguably “the greatest German literary figure of the modern era.” This offer put Buber in the awkward position of having to decide whether to accept the award. On the one hand, he did not want to give the appearance that accepting the award meant all was forgiven. On the other hand, he wanted to support those seeking to shape Germany’s future toward the humanistic tradition that Goethe represented. He ultimately **accepted the award on the condition that the prize money be given to an organization promoting Arab-Jewish understanding.** In one move, he sought to contribute to building bridges across divides in both Germany and Palestine (272).

About a decade later in 1962, Buber also famously spoke out against the execution of Adolf Eichmann, one of the major organizers of the Holocaust. For Buber, this stance had nothing to do with supporting Eichmann and everything to do with his consistent opposition to the death penalty. Buber said that Eichmann

should be made to feel that the Jewish people were not [utterly] exterminated by the Nazis, and that they live on here in Israel. Perhaps he should be put to work on the land—on a kibbutz. Farming the soil of Israel. Seeing young people around him. And realizing every day that we have survived his plans for us. Would not this be the ultimate and most fitting punishment? (318-319)

For Buber it was more important to be true to his conscience than to sacrifice his integrity in a vain attempt to be universally beloved. And although he was beloved by

many, he was also usually respected, even by his critics. Indeed, a few months after Eichmann's execution, David Ben-Gurion, the Prime Minister of Israel, wrote a note on Buber's birthday that included the line, "I honor and oppose you" (319).

Martin Buber died a few years later in 1965 at the age of 87 (321-322). Significantly, in the spirit of his commitment to a "life of dialogue," he left a substantial sum in his will to double the number of "scholarships for Arab students at Hebrew University" (323).

At Buber's funeral, the closing eulogy was delivered by a colleague and friend of many decades whose remembrances includes these words:

We, his friends were troubled by his decision to go to Frankfurt in 1953 to accept the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade. We were not sure the time had come to be in Germany again. Buber went. But he did not touch the money. He donated it to [organizations] working for peace with Arabs. And he was also ready to be virtually alone in his opposition to Eichmann's execution, the stand of a great teacher. (324)

In the spirit of "I and Thou," he concluded the eulogy by addressing Buber as a you: "You were a blessing to us. May your memory be a blessing to us, and a guide to the coming generations. You have done your share..." (324).

Buber's life and teachings live as a reminder, calling me back to the potential that exists in any human-to-human encounter. The choice is ours whether we will choose at any given time to risk opening ourselves to all that can emerge from "open, direct, mutual, present, spontaneous" communication that is without any judgement or agenda.

In that spirit, as contemporary UUs open to drawing wisdom from the world's religions, balanced with the insights of modern science, one of the invitations of this time of year in the Jewish tradition is to practice *forgiveness*, the cultivating of atonement ("at-one-ment"). We are also a little less than a week after the fall equinox, marking the first day of autumn. This coming time of falling leaves is also an auspicious time for experimenting with letting go.

That being said, it is important to be honest about what authentic forgiveness is and isn't. **I'm not talking about cheap forgiveness that makes us into someone's**

**doormat for repeated abuse.** Forgiveness is a practice, not that different from other *practices* like playing the piano, shooting free throws in basketball, or going to the gym. If we consistently practice forgiveness, we can get better at it over time.

The same is true of “un-forgiveness.” We can also get better at holding a grudge over time if that’s what we choose to practice. But as the proverb says, **refusing to forgive someone over a long period of time is like “drinking poison yourself and wishing your enemy would die.”**

One of the most helpful touchstones I have found about forgiveness is from Archbishop Desmond Tutu: The final step of forgiveness is not necessarily the *renewing* of a relationship. Instead it may mean the *releasing* of a relationship. So having learned more about Buber’s life and teaching, I invite you to notice if our service this morning has brought up anything for you. As you think about the practice of forgiveness, what name is on the tip of your tongue? Whose face flashes through your mind? You may not yet be able to fully forgive the person, but in the [words of one meditation teacher](#), perhaps you can open yourself to experiment with the intention of **“I forgive you as much as I can in this moment.”**