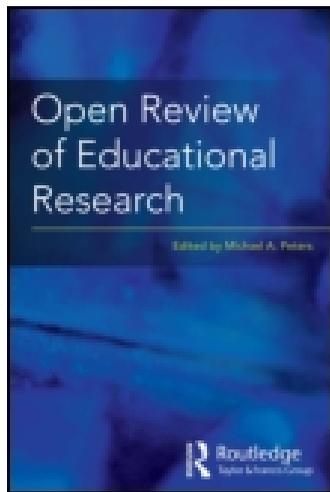


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Publisher: Routledge

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## Open Review of Educational Research

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rrer20>

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Published online: 02 Feb 2015.



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To cite this article: Lynley Tulloch (2015) Fromm's Humanism and Child Poverty: Neoliberal construction of the 'have-not', *Open Review of Educational Research*, 2:1, 94-104, DOI: [10.1080/23265507.2014.989901](https://doi.org/10.1080/23265507.2014.989901)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/23265507.2014.989901>

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# Fromm's Humanism and Child Poverty: Neoliberal construction of the 'have-not'

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## Abstract

*Children are particularly vulnerable to structured inequalities in society. Building on the work of Erich Fromm (1900–1980), this article contends that modern (post)industrial capitalism corrupts the human capacity to operate in the 'being mode'—that is, in altruistic and compassionate ways. Rather, within the individualistic logic of the 'having' mode of existence there are morally empty spaces where children become objectified, separated from caring communities, dominated and measured. The second part of this article will discuss these insights in relation to the significant impact of neoliberal regimes on children's social and physical wellbeing. In particular, it is argued that from the mid-1980s in New Zealand, the restructuring of the welfare state in line with neoliberal ideology has increased the vulnerability of young children to poverty and related issues. The narrow conception of poverty that is integral to the 'having' mode of existence merely serves to justify the ruling ideological neoliberal consensus. It is argued that any genuine attempt at human progress and the elimination of poverty needs to operate outside of this logic.*

Keywords: critical theory, child poverty, neoliberalism, Erich Fromm, global citizenship education

## Introduction

Article 27 of *The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989) provides children with the right to a childhood with an adequate standard of living in which their physical and emotional needs are met (Unicef, 2014). Yet, it would appear that 'the world is falling short of its promise and commitment to ensure that every child enjoys a safe and nurturing childhood' (Minujin, Delamonica, Davidziuk, & Gonzalez, 2006).

As a party to the convention, New Zealand can include itself in this grim projection. Research by Jonathan Boston (2014) indicates that child poverty rates in New Zealand are now much higher than 30 years ago, with a particular dramatic rise in the late 1980s and early 1990s. This may come as a surprise to people who hold the long cherished dream that New Zealand is a great place to bring up children (Boston, 2014). Indeed

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New Zealand's child welfare standards have traditionally been high. For most of last century public policy in New Zealand was concerned to meet the needs of families. In the 1950s New Zealand had one of the highest living standards in the industrialized world (Blaiklock *et al.*, 2002). Keynesian welfare system protected families from the adversity of the market. It included free or subsidized health care for all children, state rental housing and subsidized mortgages. National wage fixing and a focus on full employment were also supportive of families. Significant increase in welfare expenditure from the 1970s was a central feature of these egalitarian policies.

Neoliberal policy reforms in New Zealand however since the 1980s have coincided with growing income inequality and poverty; declines in measures of health status and educational achievement; increases in poor housing, nutrition, and overcrowding. The restructuring of the economy, welfare state and the public sector in line with neoliberal ideology increases the vulnerability of young children to liberally defined indicators of poor wellbeing, including the possibility of abuse and neglect (Blaiklock *et al.*, 2002).

Boston (2014) has demonstrated that poverty is a direct result of economic and social policy change and trends since the late 1980s. This includes a 10–30% decrease in the real value of core benefits, including family assistance programmes, despite a doubling of the number of people on benefits. In addition, policy change has resulted in increases in relative housing costs and, energy costs (Boston, 2014). The end result is the reality that, 'close to 180,000 children' live in very low income families (Boston, 2014, p. 973). Unfortunately the economic and social reforms that took place are structural changes that have lasted (Blaiklock *et al.*, 2002). This has led to a horrific downward spiral of increasing poverty and related social distress for many New Zealand families and children.

New Zealand has now had significant levels of relative child poverty (based on familial income) for more than two decades (Simpson *et al.*, 2014). This article asks the question, 'who have we become that we now live in a society where the youngest and most vulnerable amongst us are not adequately cared for?' To address this I turn to Erich Fromm's account of human propensities: the having mode and the being mode (Fromm, 1997). In *To Have or to Be*, written in 1976, Fromm argues that history offers many variations and possibilities for human existence (Fromm, 1997). The two main possibilities referred to by Fromm are the 'having mode' and the 'being mode'. I will begin this article by briefly describing Fromm's view of the 'having mode', which prevails under market-oriented capitalism and how it's pervasiveness affects our view of children and treatment of them.

### **Erich Fromm: The Having and Being Modes of Existence**

According to Fromm there are two basic human character positions that orient us toward self and world (Fromm, 1997). The 'having' mode is the one that is rooted in the concept of private property. To *have* means to define ones existence and worth in terms of what one owns or possesses. Alternatively, the *being* mode is altruistic in orientation.

According to Fromm (2005), our historical location as individuals in a particular time and place is critical to who we become as humans. He argues that 'we are what we have to be in accordance with the necessities of the society in which we live and therefore for me it is terribly important to analyse the particular structure of any given society, whether it is feudalism or nineteenth century capitalism or twentieth century capitalism'

(Fromm, 1994). Fromm is here suggesting that our character orientation results from socialization into shared psychic attitudes of a particular society. Under (post)industrial capitalism, he argues that the character orientation is one of egoism, sadism and selfishness and that this has destructive consequences in terms of human fulfilment and wellbeing (Funk, 1978).

The character orientation of people toward themselves and the world in (post)industrial capitalist societies is based on possessive and competitive individualism. A central tenet of this character orientation, according to Fromm is egoism. Egoism refers to the desire of unlimited consumption as the basis of all pleasure. This is based on the premise that ‘I am more the more I have’ (Fromm, 1997, p. 5). Under market capitalism, the exploitation of workers, deceiving customers, and destroying competitors are economic behaviours of the having mode of existence. This existence leads to ‘a sick person and thus a sick society’ (Fromm, 1997, p. 5).

Melissa Hackell (2013) provides a good overview of the characteristics of the ‘having mode’ of existence in the context of New Zealand’s neoliberal climate. She writes that the accepted subjectivity of the taxpayer (as opposed to the beneficiary who is considered lazy) is one who has:

the desire to win, to beat out competitors; the need to be disciplined and work hard; the valuing of the rewards of winning in the market; the desire to belong to an exclusive social group (tolerance of elitism); and its corollary a distrust of egalitarianism; the valuing of distinctiveness and desire to obtain social markers of distinctiveness; and the sense of responsibility for members of nuclear family, which is contrasted with the needs of the wider community. (Hackell, 2013, p. 134)

Fromm argues that the character traits of the having mode of existence (such as those described by Hackell, 2013) are pathogenic in nature and do not foster healthy relationships between people. There can be little doubt that any society that tolerates entrenched and persistent poverty is ‘sick’. A healthy social model, would be one based on the human propensity for altruism, compassion and social justice—the ‘being mode’ of existence, which will be touched on in more depth later. Rather social relationships under that having mode of existence are based on exploitation and self-interest. Those in positions of power (such as political leaders) jettison social responsibility, making decisions for their own personal gain. Fromm (1997, p. 8) explains that when political leaders and businesses make decisions based on greed, they are often ‘harmful and dangerous to the community’.

Fromm (1997) notes that capitalism results in inequalities and social distress such as poverty. As we have seen, the character orientation engendered by this kind of society is that of the ‘having mode’; based on selfish pursuit of one own interests, egoism and greed. Fromm (1997) argues that both society and individuals in this situation are ‘sick’, and that we are headed for socio-economic collapse and debilitating individual and social passivity. He calls for a new society, one based on the ‘being’ mode of existence and argues that this requires change at both an individual and structural societal level. The interdependence of the social and the individual is critical to Fromm’s humanism.

However, progressive social change toward a 'being mode of existence' has slipped further from our sights since Fromm wrote *To Have or to Be* (1997). If anything the 'having mode' has only become more entrenched during the last 30 years in conjunction with the ongoing and insidious global turn toward neoliberal political and economic ideas and practices.

A market-oriented society based on consumerism has real implications for the lived realities of children and families. As Illich (1970, p. 46) quips, 'the road to happiness is paved with a consumer index'. Modern debt and poverty are defined in terms of money; poor people are defined as 'deficient' and 'underachieving' causing social polarization and misery (Illich, 1970). As Illich (1970) argues, through our participation in modern institutions we become schooled to accept pre-defined desires and values such as possession of material goods and educational certification as the basis of our very happiness.

In addition, in embracing the liberated individual whose sole purpose in life is to 'have' neoliberalism ignores powerful processes of social exclusion that operate on gendered, cultural, and class divisions (Smith, 2008; Young, 1990).

From the mid-1980s in New Zealand, then, neoliberal reforms have coincided with growing income inequality, disadvantage, poverty and the associated social ills (Humpage, 2011).

The following section will outline some of the implications of the 'having mode' under neoliberalism for social policy.

#### *To Have: The Neoliberal Orientation*

Harvey (2005) argues that since the 1970s, there has been a global turn toward neoliberal political and economic ideas and practices. The neoliberal change in political and social structures experienced by New Zealand since 1984 has been startling. New Zealand has moved from a Keynesian welfare state to a neoliberal post welfare state. As Jesson (1999, p. 61) writes, 'the transformation that New Zealand has undergone has been so extreme that ours could be considered a freak amongst nations, the Kampuchea of the free market, and 1984 could be considered Year Zero'. Jesson (1999) is referring to the Labour Government return to power in 1984 after nine years in opposition which heralded a new era of reform. Unnervingly, despite being located on the liberal left of the political spectrum, the ideologies guiding this reform were based on neoliberal principles.

The correspondence between neoliberal views of human nature and the 'having mode' of existence are marked. Lankshear (2003) notes that in the 'having mode', an unregulated market is regarded as critical to ensuring human actors can compete freely in the marketplace. 'Each person pursuing their own interests within recognized limits in a market of satisfiers (goods and services) that is kept as unregulated as possible is, allegedly, the best guarantee of conditions under which humans can realise life aims' (Lankshear, 2003, p. 56). The *aim*, indeed the very essence of one's life is seen in terms of possessing or 'having', necessitating a view of human nature as driven by material gain (Lankshear, 2003). Under neoliberalism this logic takes an extreme form and calls for deregulation of the market and a limitation of the role of the state to safeguarding individual freedoms and private property (Thorsen, 2010). The fostering of possessive individualism is consistent with the 'having' character orientation and is central to both individuals and society under a neoliberal regime.

Neoliberalism is not a uniform, consistent set of economic and political practices. As a phenomenon it differs across time and place, while holding central tenets such as faith in the market to guide economic and social processes. Larner and Craig (2005) have identified three stages of neoliberalism in New Zealand. From the 1980s (stage one) the state withdrew from many areas of economic production while trying to preserve the welfare and social justice aspirations of a social democracy. During the 1980s, political attention was primarily based on economic policy. On advice from the Treasury, from 1984 there was deregulation of the economy and removal of wage and price freeze. Reduction in taxes for the wealthy was another feature.

In the early 1990s (stage two the punitive phase) extension of marketization process and introduction of neoconservative and authoritarian policies and programmes in the area of social policy. In 1990 the National Party experienced a landslide victory at a point in time when the economy was spiralling deeper into recession. The National government's strategy for growth involved a truncation of the welfare state. Resultant benefit cuts and reforms in education and health signalled a move away from the concept of universal access to social services as a public good (Challies & Murray, 2008). Privatization and 'selling' off public goods such as education, alongside increased competition and 'quasimarkets' in schooling is also a key feature of neoliberal policy (Hill, 2007). By the mid-1990s reports about increasing 'economic inequality and social marginalisation' in the form of 'long term unemployment, housing shortages, poverty—related health issues' generated political debate (Larner, 2000b, p. 248). Stage three came later on in the development of a partnering ethos, which involved discourses of social inclusion and social investment alongside market discourse (Larner & Craig, 2005).

Melissa Hackell (2013) illustrates how political repositioning of major political parties in the late 1990s resulted in the articulation of particular discourses of social justice and fairness with neoliberal ideology. For example, '[t]he National Government ... re-articulated social justice as the proper relation between effort and reward, and cast the beneficiary as an unfair burden on the taxpayer' (Hackell, 2013, p. 136). Neoliberal discourse attempts to neutralize opposition through the ideological construction of the neoliberal subject as a 'tax-payer' and a de-gendered individual with roles and responsibilities in society (Davies, 2005; Hackell, 2013). Social relations are considered solely within the individualistic logic of Fromm's having mode.

It is important to note that neoliberalism is distinctive from previous mainstream liberalism. In this regard it may be contrasted with what Harvey (2005) calls the 'embedded liberalism' of previous liberal approaches such as those based on a Keynesian economics 'Whereas under Keynesian welfarism the state provision of goods and services to a national population was understood as a means of ensuring social well-being, neo-liberalism is associated with the preference for a minimalist state' (Larner, 2000a, p. 5). In many ways, as this paper attempts to demonstrate, neoliberalism seeks to not only erode liberal egalitarian ideals that seek to compensate for the injustices of capitalism, but is inherently conservative and punitive.

As an ideology, welfarism considers the economy in ahistorical and static terms, leaving no room for critique of its underpinning exploitative logic (Young, 1990). Thus the ideology of a welfare state based on Rawlsian principles of equality of opportunity has become manipulated to suit shifting economic contexts and establish a neoliberal consensus,

without ever really challenging particular the characteristic social relations of the 'having orientation' intrinsic to capitalism.

To conclude this section, the reframing of welfare provision in lines with neoliberal thought has led to the formation of a post-welfare in Aotearoa, New Zealand. This is a form of governance that is based on neoliberal rule, which redefines people's economic and political subjectivities on extreme terms. The rise of free-market policies and the privatization of public goods have further undermined the egalitarian drive for equality of opportunity evident in welfarism. Features included the promotion of minimalist state, welfare cutbacks, privatization of public goods, and decentralization of control (Hill, 2007).

### *To 'Have Not': Neoliberal Conceptions of Poverty*

This article has attempted to demonstrate that in the last 30 years there has been a massive restructuring of the welfare state in most advanced industrial nations alongside the establishment of neoliberalism and free-market fundamentalism (Gilbert, 2002). Ideologically, alongside the neoliberal turn, there has been a myopic limitation of how we might conceive of poverty, coupled with deficit views that demonize the poor, and blame them for their own predicament. For those concerned with children and social justice, such as parents, social workers and teachers, the language of the 'having mode', especially when couched in neoliberalism, can be frustratingly narrow.

Neoliberal reforms since the 1980s have obviously not led to an overall improvement in the wellbeing of children, however that may be defined. Rather, there has been a widening of inequality between ethnic and income groups that have left many Maori and Pacific children, and children from one parent and poorer families, relatively worse off (Blaklock *et al.*, 2002).

A political focus on the needs of young children has been minimal, but one initiative has been 'strengthening families' in the mid-1990s. This was focused on better inter-agency support in education, health and social welfare. However, the structural economic and institutional changes under the neoliberal regime mean that disadvantage remains entrenched, and many initiatives such as these merely compensate for rather than challenge the existence of large-scale inequality.

Wendy Lerner's (2000b) excellent discourse analysis of the *Code of Family and Social Responsibility* provides a good example of the punitive and uncaring characteristic of neoliberal policy and practice. Within this document Lerner (2000b) notes the construction of the neoliberal subject. *Toward a Code of Social and Family Responsibility* (Lerner, 2000b) is a public discussion document. Its stated purpose was to 'make it clear how people are expected to meet their responsibilities'. Warner calls this document a 'hybrid assemblage of neoliberal and neoconservative forms of rule'. In this document there is a qualitative shift in the locus of social governance—that is, 'community and family' as opposed to 'society' (Lerner, 2000b).

This document is a response to the deepening crisis of children due to poverty and social inequality in the 1990s. So just who is the subject in the *Code of Social and Family Responsibility*? In Wendy Lerner's (2000b) analysis of this document, the neoliberal subject is a de-gendered individual who has familial roles and responsibilities. The individual is a

familial citizen, and the family is constructed as a solution to state dependency. Furthermore, New Zealanders are constituted as taxpayers rather than social citizens. Citizens are seen as self-responsible and accountable for their own conduct. Individual responsibility is privileged over social responsibility. This has resulted in problems such as unemployment and ill-health being deemed as the result of individual inadequacies and the responsibility of the individual to address (to seek training/education/stay healthy by making prudent choices. The Code refers to the importance of prudent choices to be made to minimize ‘risks’ of ‘children not doing as well as they should’ and ‘low birth weight babies’ (Larner, 2000b, p. 250).

Larner (2000b) notes that stigmatization is evident in the document. For example, unemployment is not a temporary glitch but catalogued together with ‘abuse and neglect of children’ and ‘violent crime’. Beneficiaries are also portrayed as rational economic actors who will choose between welfare and work with the right incentives. The punishment for not minimizing risks and taking self-responsibility is in the form of curfew, benefit withdrawal and ‘community service’ (Larner, 2000b). In brief, neoliberal language rejects social responsibility, and encourages consumer oriented individualism (Davies, 2005).

It is hardly surprising that solutions to child poverty are framed in terms of getting those parents on benefits into employment. In 2002 the Ministry of Social Development reported that ‘the most effective way to achieve a lasting reduction in child poverty rates is to reduce the number of children living in jobless families’ (Human Rights Commission, 2014). More recently, the Expert Advisory Group on Solutions to Child Poverty (EAP) regards parental income (or lack thereof) as the most significant contributor to child poverty (Children’s Commissioner, 2012). The EAP attribute the major cause of poverty in New Zealand to unemployment as a result of lack of educational qualifications, skills or work experience and a downturn in the global economy. The solution, they say, is a ‘vibrant, high skill, high wage economy’. The capitalist market economy itself and its inherently inegalitarian and exploitative features are not targeted. Rather, it seems that EAP are advocating economic growth itself as the solution and business as usual. The ‘having mode’ of being is taken for granted as natural.

One critical tenet of neoliberalism based on Chicago School Monetarism is that of aggregate employment determination whereby free market economies are regarded as automatically adjusting to full employment (Palley, 2004). Thomas Palley (2004) argues that this is due to faith in the market which presumably will not let valuable factors of production such as labour go to waste. By this logic, unemployment would be regarded as a result of not being valuable enough (holding the right skills or qualifications or experience). Accordingly, it would follow that for full employment to occur we just have to ‘fix the people’ by educating them, giving them experience or upskilling. Such an account of unemployment and poverty fails to take into account that processes of social exclusion that operate in a capitalist economy including the devaluing of unpaid work and the production and reproduction of a reserve army of labour.

An illustrative case of this logic is the recent Court of Appeal case between June and July 2008 (*Child Poverty Action Group v Attorney General*) which concerned the discrimination of children from beneficiary families who could not receive the in-work tax credit that is part of the Working For Families Package (Human Rights Commission, 2014).

The court ruled that 'discrimination is justified on the basis of creating a goal of incentivising people into work' (Human Rights Commission, 2014).

Discriminatory policies such as these operate to disadvantage the poor. The background to this case is described well by Nikki Turner (n.d.), Associate Professor at Auckland University who argues that while originating as a child benefit, this package became ring-fenced in a crafty and deceitful way. She writes,

removed from being a benefit for children and turned into an incentive payment for parents to go back to work, and craftily renamed the 'in-work tax credit' (IWTC) to obscure the fact it originated as a child benefit. The result is that any child who has the misfortune to live in a family with adults dependent on a state benefit (where a sole parent is working less than 20 hours a week or a couple less than 30 hours a week) is not allowed this money, which amounts to \$60 a week for one to three children and a further \$15 per child for larger families. This takes no account of family circumstances, recessions, illnesses or general bad luck. (Turner, n.d.)

Boston likewise has found market-liberal assumptions to lack any sense of collective responsibility. He writes,

[e]xamples include the proposition that childrearing is largely, if not exclusively, a parental responsibility; that the state should not interfere in family matters; that people are poor because they waste much of their income on alcohol, tobacco or gambling, or because they are lazy; that the real problem is not a lack of money but poor budgeting; that child poverty would be greatly reduced if some couples had fewer children (or none at all); and that 'throwing money at the problem' is ineffective or even counter-productive. In short, the poor are viewed as irresponsible and wasteful and hence undeserving of greater state support. (Boston, 2014, p. 975)

While poor individuals are constructed as irresponsible in neoliberal discourse, poverty itself is narrowly framed in material terms only. Under a neoliberal regime poverty is dominantly conceived in terms of measurement of income level. This is called the 'monetary approach' to poverty (Scherrer, 2014). Income level is of course important as people experience poverty in terms of material deprivation and the ensuing effects of this. Statistically children living in low income households may not do well in education, health and future earnings. Yet income measurement of individual family is not central to all that constitutes poverty. Indeed, its limits may even have the potential to orient us away from significant aspects of poverty that are critical to its reduction and resolution. Focusing on resolution of poverty in terms of income level and material goods alone is problematic as it is based on the same 'having mode' logic that is causative of social poverty in the first place.

Young (1990), for example, has also argued against a focus mainly on the allocation of material goods (such as income level), and says that this does not address the importance of non-material goods in resolving poverty. He says that even when non-material goods (such as self-respect, power, rights, and decision-making) are considered, it is still within the scope of distribution. In other words, 'rights', 'decisions' and 'self-respect'

are seen in terms of something that we can ‘have’ and not as integral to the way we are oriented to self and society.

Jimmy Scherrer (2014) indicates that policy-makers need to focus on children’s rights and the provision of public services and public goods in addressing poverty—not just on income levels. In addition Scherrer (2014) argues that child poverty advocates need to challenge and reframe the nature of policy dialogue on poverty reduction and social spending to broaden its scope.

## Discussion

Drawing on theories of humans as rational, self-interested actors in society, neoliberalism evokes the good-life on its own terms. This way of life under the ‘having mode’ fosters extreme selfishness in the pursuit of happiness, which is seen in terms of ‘having’ material possessions, experiences and even social identity and status (Fromm, 1993). Failure to live the good-life is regarded as individual failings to make the right choices. While parents are being blamed for their own poor standard of living, children are literally and figuratively speaking, being left out in the cold. How can we resist this morally empty orientation toward children, and build a society based on Fromm’s radical humanistic ethic? (Funk, 1978).

Fromm (2005) argues that social change toward a society based on a radical humanistic ethic has to occur at grass roots level and in the context of everyday life. It requires a challenge to the ideal of consumption as ‘happiness’ and a shift in our understanding of freedom as residing in consumer choice. Established bureaucratic organizations have persuaded individuals that they are free (Fromm, 1993). According to Fromm (1993), one of the most disturbing features of Western liberal democracies is that individuals are not aware of their powerlessness in the face of the enormous bureaucracy of the state and industry. Under the current neoliberal regime this has become even more entrenched as the ideals of individual liberty have become increasingly aligned with a narrow view of the consumer.

Fromm (2005) does not provide a blueprint to ‘break through the having form of existence and to increase the being sector’ (p. 140). However, he does suggest that a radical change to the economic system be determined by the ‘being oriented’ mode of existence. Fromm (1993) argues the first condition to overcome selfishness on an individual level is to develop an awareness of it and its root causes and then to practice unselfish and compassionate acts. As Lankshear (2003) says, Fromm’s work provides us with ‘rich and ready clues as where and how we might practice transformative action within the most ordinary routines of our everyday lives in the pursuit of a better world’ (p. 66).

Fromm (2005) argues that the hope for society in overcoming poverty and other social crises lies in the emergence of a new character structure based on the ‘being mode’. The new ‘human’ is one who ‘will give up all forms of having in order to *fully* “be”’ (Fromm, 2005, p. 139). This requires a rejection of narcissism and an appreciation of the fragility of human existence with its ‘tragic limitations’ (Fromm, 2005, p. 139). For it is only when we see ourselves in others, instead of considering ourselves as bounded individuals, that we can begin to respond to life with compassion.

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