



## I-It and I-Thou, by David Brooks

(Reflections on "I-Thou" by Martin Buber)

I-It relationships come in two varieties.

Some are strictly utilitarian. You're exchanging information in order to do some practical thing, like getting your taxes done.

But other I-It relationships are truncated versions of what should be deep relationships. You're with a friend, colleague, spouse or neighbor, but you're not really bringing your whole self to that encounter. You're fearful, closed or withdrawn – objectifying her, talking at her, offering only a shallow piece of yourself and seeing only the shallow piece of her.

I-Thou relationships, on the other hand, are personal, direct, dialogical – nothing is held back. A Thou relationship exists when two or more people are totally immersed in their situation, when deep calls to deep, when they are offering up themselves and embracing the other in some total, unselfconscious way, when they are involved in – mutual animated describing.

A doctor has an I-It relationship with a patient when he treats him as a machine in need of repair. But Peter DeMarco described an I-Thou relationship in a letter to the doctors and nurses who cared for his dying wife, which was published in The Times:

– How many times did you hug me and console me when I fell to pieces, or ask about Laura's life and the person she was, taking the time to look at her photos or read the things I'd written about her? How many times did you deliver bad news with compassionate words, and sadness in your eyes?

In our culture we use phrases like finding oneself, finding your passion, loving yourself so you can love others. But Buber argued that it's nonsensical to think of the self in isolation. The I only exists in relation to some other.

– The development of the soul in the child is inextricably bound up with that of the longing for the Thou, he wrote. All through life, the self is emerging out of some dialogue, either a cold stifling one or a rich complete one: – All real living is meeting.

You can't intentionally command I-Thou moments into being. You can

only be open to them and provide fertile soil...

Buber described genuine dialogue as a sort of social flow. Teachers and students are learning with each other. An audience and an artist are lost in a performance.

These moments don't last. It is the "exalted melancholy of our fate" that Thou moments always fade back into It moments. But a world has been built during such intense moments. A binding cord has been strengthened. The person who has experienced the Thou has been thickened and comes closer to wholeness.  
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