

# A Path From Me to You: From Objectification to Relation

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## Abstract

At the root of oppression and violence is the reduction of fellow human beings into mere objects. Broken modalities of human engagement continue to rupture our world. Through the lens of the Anthony Ray Hinton story, this paper imagines a path from dehumanization to a humanizing encounter, even with the most unlikely “other.” Drawing from the philosophies of Martin Buber and Simone Weil, I examine what lies at the center of broken modalities of relation and survey the life-giving possibilities that open up to us when we see the other as truly sacred, free from control or ownership. Challenging presumptions of advancement, this paper argues that we cannot transcend human objectification by means of societal progress. Rather, genuine human relationship asks us to be still, content with having nothing but a reverent distance that neither dominates nor abandons but instead stands in loving proximity. With the growing gaps in spectrum identities and the divisions we see in our world, is there a way from the “I” to the “Thou”? This essay surveys a story and dances with voices that illuminate a path from me to you.

There is a path from me to you that I am constantly looking for, so I try to keep clear and still as water does with the moon.<sup>1</sup> - Rumi

Whoever says You does not have something; he has nothing. But he stands in relation.<sup>2</sup> - Martin Buber

To encounter the other is to meet what I do not own and what I can not control. We live from that.<sup>3</sup> - Rowan Williams

It is a horrible thing to be reduced, stripped away of your humanity, and rendered as a thing.

When we place people outside of our shared humanity, outside of “the ranks of those whose life has value,” individually or collectively, nothing “comes more naturally to men than murder.”<sup>4</sup> The tragedies of history, even if mythologized as triumphs, are largely composed of this

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<sup>1</sup> Coleman Barks, *A Year with Rumi: Daily Readings* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006) Scribd Edition, 58.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Kaufmann (New York: Touchstone Books, 1971) Kindle Edition, 55.

<sup>3</sup> Rowan Williams, “Encountering The Other.” St. Martin In The Field. September 24, 2018. Video, <https://tinyurl.com/2g4zr9am>.

<sup>4</sup> Simone Weil, *Selected Essays, 1934-1943*, Trans. Richard Rees (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2015) 174.

dehumanizing action that oppresses both the victim and the oppressor. The dehumanization of one leg of society dehumanizes the entire body.<sup>5</sup> From these broken modalities of encountering the other comes a litany of diseased human engagements: slavery, racism, apartheid, abuse, subjugation, exploitation, and prejudice. In this paper, I want to examine the action of human objectification while imagining paths of healing that can lead us into humanizing relationships with our neighbors. I believe there is a path to the other, *from me to you*. However, to traverse it, we must be still, examine ourselves, our culture, our compulsions, and our ambitions so that we can find the healthy relationship of what Martin Buber calls the “*I and Thou*” and prayerfully journey together toward “The Beloved Community,”<sup>6</sup> which is “the aftermath of nonviolence.”<sup>7</sup>

I want to tell you the story of Anthony Ray Hinton, a black man from Alabama.<sup>8</sup> Because of a racist police force, Anthony spent nearly thirty years (1988-2015) on Alabama’s death row for a crime he did not commit. Eventually, Bryan Stevenson was assigned to his case. Together, they spent sixteen years fighting before winning a unanimous reversal in the U.S. Supreme Court. While on death row, Anthony met Henry Francis Hays, the son of a Klansman whose dad was a Grand Wizard in Alabama. Henry’s father had given him the order to kill the first black man he saw, a nineteen-year-old neurodivergent black male. Henry and his crew convinced him to get in their car, where they stabbed him sixty-five times. But that didn’t satisfy Henry. He got a rope and hung the young man in the street. That still didn’t satisfy Henry, so he took out his knife and cut off the man’s genitals. Anthony didn’t know this until after befriending Henry. But when he found out, he angrily asked, “Henry, why didn’t you tell me?” Henry didn’t answer. Anthony asked himself, “Did it matter who Henry was?” His answer was no. “All I knew was that this was a young kid who needed love and compassion just like anybody else... In order to change someone, *you’ve got to let that person be who they are, or who they think they are.*”

After almost two decades of loving Henry, Anthony helped him see another way. Wildly, both of Henry’s parents died visiting him on death row. Anthony and the other prisoners were there for him and became his family in those moments. Eventually, Henry’s execution date was set (death by electric chair). Henry wrote the warden asking if Anthony could be with him on his execution date, which was allowed. And, for the first time, on the day of his death, Henry and Anthony

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<sup>5</sup> Ellen Vrana, “The Dehumanizing and Demobilizing Aspects of Oppression: James Baldwin’s ‘Notes of a Native Son.’” *The Examined Life*. Accessed June 3, 2023. <https://tinyurl.com/2k3hqxgo>.

<sup>6</sup> A term first coined by theologian Josiah Royce, then popularized by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. <https://tinyurl.com/2m6v63ji>

<sup>7</sup> The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Speech, “The Birth of a New Nation” 1957 <https://tinyurl.com/2me9fshd>

<sup>8</sup> “Tell Me More with Kelly Corrigan.” PBS. June 14, 2022. Video, <https://www.pbs.org/video/anthony-ray-hinton-kmkouy/>.

embraced. Henry's final words, as they strapped him into the electric chair, were, "All my life, I was taught how to hate. My father taught me to hate. My mother taught me to hate. My community taught me to hate. And, for the last 15 years, the very people that they taught me to hate are the ones who have shown me nothing but love. Tonight, as I leave this world, I leave this world now knowing what love feels like." Anthony Ray Hinton concludes, "Then they executed my friend." This story is infused with the transformative grace of Buber's humanizing "I-Thou" and the painful violence of the objectifying "I-It" dynamic. I'd now like to survey these concepts.

The humanization of the other<sup>9</sup> is bound up in the recognition and celebration of their inherent worth, dignity, and uniqueness. It is to echo C.S. Lewis's proclamation that "There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal."<sup>10</sup> It's seeing the other as precisely that: the other, placed at an almost reverent distance, leaving one incapable of owning, possessing, manipulating, or using. Humanizing involves the refusal to reduce a person to a utility or function, an object to be resourced, retained, or controlled. For Buber, whoever enters into the humanizing "I-Thou" has "nothing." This is because they are standing in relation, and relation is somewhat of a paradox in that it becomes the balance of being proximate to someone yet far enough away for both to retain their sense of autonomy, uniqueness, and freedom. Neither are owned nor grasped but are held in loving suspension with one another. The relational equilibrium becomes an orbiting paradox of nearness and distance held together by the attention that suspends thought, "letting it become available, empty and able to be penetrated."<sup>11</sup> Not only is this "the rarest and purest form of generosity,"<sup>12</sup> as Weil says, but I would like to add that this distanced attention is a generative form of hospitality that can open up space for the strange and the Stranger (more on that later). From a Trinitarian orientation, this relational dynamic keeps the pair in the heart of God, for God is not an amalgamate unit but a unity. "There is in God something analogous to 'society.'"<sup>13</sup>

What teeters in the balance, for every generation, in the encounter with the other, is life or death, loving mutuality or violence. The reduction of the other to an "It" is what lies behind acts of aggression, oppression, and subjugation. The "It" becomes the mechanism of dehumanization. From

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<sup>9</sup> In this paper, I will not capitalize the term "other."

<sup>10</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (Sermon), p.1 <https://rebrand.ly/35ad2b>

<sup>11</sup> Simone Weil, *Awaiting God A new translation of Attente de Dieu and Lettre à un Religieux*, trans. Bradley Jersak (Abbotsford, BC: Fresh Wind Press, 2012) Kindle Edition, 25.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>13</sup> Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1979) Kindle Edition, 29.

the U.S. Constitution's Three-Fifths Clause<sup>14</sup>, the Rwandan genocide<sup>15</sup>, and The Holocaust<sup>16</sup>, to the slavery and violence of Ancient Rome<sup>17</sup>, The Spanish Inquisition<sup>18</sup>, and ancient gendercide<sup>19</sup>, the long list of historic dehumanization is seemingly and heartbreakingly inexhaustible. And, no matter what era or modality of violence, the mechanism is always the same: the fabrication of the other as less-than-human. Historically, as the capacity for human power, control, and violence has increased, unprecedented quantities of people were killed by dehumanizing anthropogenic actions.<sup>20</sup> We must ask, what animates these cycles of violence, these broken modalities of objectified encounter? To answer this, the guiding voices of this essay would point back to the desire to "have something" and, once it is had, to control it. In other words, it is the rejection of "standing in relation" to the other in order to transgress, acquire, and manage them. This action desecrates the world by reducing who is human down to sameness.<sup>21</sup>

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks gets right to the root of this phenomenon: "One belief, more than any other, is responsible for the slaughter of individuals on the altars of the great historical ideals. It is the belief that those who do not share my faith or my race or my ideology do not share my humanity."<sup>22</sup> Every form of physical or non-physical violence originates from this epicenter of thought. Once someone's humanity is taken, any disparaging action is believed to be justified, and any move toward the "Thou" seems to be an injustice;

As long as the presence of the relationship endures, this world-wideness cannot be infringed. But as soon as a You becomes an It, the world-wideness of the relationship appears as an injustice against the world, and its exclusiveness as an exclusion of the universe.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> "Thirteen." Thirteen.Org. PBS, Accessed June 5, 2023.

<https://www.thirteen.org/wnet/slavery/experience/legal/docs2.html>

<sup>15</sup> "Commemoration of International Day of Reflection on the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda." unodc.org. United Nations, April 7, 2020. <https://tinyurl.com/2lpksvb2>.

<sup>16</sup> "Introduction to the Holocaust." ushmm.org. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, October 5, 2021. <https://tinyurl.com/y3n4qa5u>.

<sup>17</sup> "Slavery in Ancient Rome." Britishmuseum.org. The British Museum, <https://tinyurl.com/y4rdrdqg>.

<sup>18</sup> "After 200 Years, the Spanish Inquisition Still Exacts Its Toll." The Guardian, <https://tinyurl.com/yz63chfr>.

<sup>19</sup> When the Athenians laid siege to Melos, the city surrendered in the winter. The Athenians executed the men of Melos and enslaved the women and children. <https://tinyurl.com/2njs993f>

<sup>20</sup> Anthropogenic Death Toll Estimates. 2019. Chart. May 16, 2019. The mid-estimated death toll of World War II is nearly 100 million deaths. <https://tinyurl.com/2hrzxbu3>

<sup>21</sup> Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. spoke of "sameness" as an impediment to "oneness." "The Ethical Demands of Integration," Nashville, TN. Dec 27, 1962.

<sup>22</sup> Jonathan Sacks, *The Politics of Hope* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1997) 33.

<sup>23</sup> Buber, *I and Thou*, 125.

Once the You becomes an It, the wideness of plurality is mythologized as injustice and, therefore, in the mind of the I-It dynamic, must be banished. Thus, much of human history is the painstaking tale of trying to craft stability by banishing plurality.<sup>24</sup> Even more complex are how these broken modalities of relation are disguised and glossed over as the rightly developed steps toward societal maturity. Much evil has been enacted under the banner of progress. Paul Kingsnorth describes this as “The Myth of Progress,” where the false narrative that human beings started as ignorant savages and are moving through a series of progressive steps in which, at every point, we get more clever, rich, smarter, healthier, is used to give unbridled license to technology as the vehicle of human flourishing, the good life. He mentions that one of the dangerous things about the story of progress is that “we don’t think it’s a story. We think it’s the truth.”<sup>25</sup> Even with its benefits, technology has too often gotten ahead of us, creating environmental, nuclear, and even existential crises. In 1963, Erich Fromm, a psychoanalyst, humanistic philosopher, and German Jew who fled the Nazi regime, would go on to issue a sobering diagnosis of the human condition embedded in a technological society;

The average person feels insecure, lonely, depressed...they are dimly aware that the meaning of life cannot lie in being nothing but a ‘consumer.’ They could not stand the joylessness and meaninglessness of life were it not for the fact that the system offers them innumerable avenues of escape (television to tranquilizers), which permit them to forget that they are losing all that is valuable in life...We are quickly approaching a society governed by bureaucrats who administer a mass-man, well fed, well taken care of, *dehumanized* and *depressed*. We produce machines that are like men and men who are like machines. That which was the greatest criticism of socialism fifty years ago—that it would lead to uniformity, bureaucratization, centralization, and a soulless materialism—is a reality of today’s capitalism.<sup>26</sup>

Are we gaining (through progress) the world but losing our souls? Fromm points out that even in widespread communication systems, “people are misinformed and indoctrinated rather than informed about political and social reality.”<sup>27</sup> As a most recent example of this, “reality apathy,”<sup>28</sup> a

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<sup>24</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition, Second Edition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018) Scribd Edition, 293. Arendt describes, at length, all the ways in which the perceived “dangers of plurality” are met with dehumanizing outcomes.

<sup>25</sup> “The Myth of Progress.” *Emergence Magazine*. August 22, 2018. <https://emergencemagazine.org/interview/the-myth-of-progress/>.

<sup>26</sup> Erich Fromm, *On Disobedience and Other Essays* (New York: Seabury Press, 1981) 66.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Oscar Schwartz, “You Thought Fake News Was Bad? Deep Fakes Are where Truth Goes to Die.” *The Guardian*. November 12, 2018. <https://tinyurl.com/y6bpu3xu>.

technological phenomenon that scholar Aviv Ovadya has described as constant contact with misinformation, compels people to stop trusting what they see and hear, choosing to regard everything as deception. If the world is being ruptured by people using people to acquire things, treating fellow human beings as objects to possess, consume, and manage, we must ask, is there a path that leads to our healing? In other words, is there a way from me to you that joyfully humanizes rather than depressingly dehumanizes?

I want to return to the account of Anthony Ray Hinton and his friend Henry Hays. Henry was a child of the Ku Klux Klan, a racist, nativist organization fueled partly by bent patriotism and twisted nostalgia but mainly by the broken impulse to *have* and *control* that which they feared to lose.<sup>29</sup> The Klan in the sixties was a revivalist movement of possession. It was an embodiment of Buber's I-It. Anthony Ray Hinton is a fascinating demonstration of the I-You, which does not "have" or "own" but instead stands *still* and *clear* in the relationship, like that rare and pure form of generosity, giving loving attention.

All he knew was that "this was a young kid who needed love and compassion just like anybody else," and "to change someone, you've got to let that person *be* who they are, or who they think they are." He found a path of true encounter in the wilderness of death row. There, he met what he did not own and what he could not control and found *life* in the midst. Like Moses at Horeb, Anthony heard God's summon to approach but also to take off his sandals...not too distant, not too familiar (love, in other words). Whoever loves does not have anything; they have nothing. But, they stand in a beautiful relationship. Love in companionship is always something like that: proximity and distance. "Pure friendship," writes Simone Weil, "simultaneously includes both affection and something like complete indifference."<sup>30</sup> Without this way, says Dietrich Bonhoeffer, we will inject into every community our wish dreams, which will become a direct "hindrance to genuine community."<sup>31</sup> For, "He who loves his dream of a community more than the (Christian) community itself becomes a destroyer of the latter."<sup>32</sup>

Every week in the liturgy, when we say (or sing), "We have not loved our neighbor as ourselves," my heart aches because I know it's true. At every turn, we are immersed in systems,

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<sup>29</sup> Jeff Wallenfelt, "Revival of the Ku Klux Klan." Britannica. Accessed June 20, 2023.

<https://tinyurl.com/2kmz95>.

<sup>30</sup> Weil, *Awaiting God*, 97.

<sup>31</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1978) Kindle Edition, 15.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*.

constructs, and institutions permeated with the fetishization of mastery<sup>33</sup>, this pinnacle of acquisition, possession, and management<sup>34</sup> (control), calling it whatever we may (professionalism, maturity, formation). But in our reaching for mastery, I wonder if we lose the very thing keeping us human: our humility, which not only saves us by the contentedness of *having* nothing but liberates us to follow the One that *became* nothing.<sup>35</sup> There, suspended in cruciform love, is the Human encounter, the *I* bearing witness to *You*, plumbing the depths of what it means not to own or control, loving us where we are in pure relation, opening up a transcendent path of freedom. We are free to do our worst, and He is free to love and forgive us as we are or *think we are*. We are free to rage in our tempests, He is free to whisper, "Peace, be still." And then, inevitably, our wind runs out of breath, exhausted by a love that refuses to dominate nor abandon but instead stands in relation, and "the sea becomes as smooth as glass,"<sup>36</sup> and we finally see the moon.

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<sup>33</sup>Willie James Jennings, *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2020) Kindle Edition, 15. "there is an image of an educated person that propels the curricular, pedagogical, and formational energies of Western education, and especially theological education. That image is of a white self-sufficient man, his self-sufficiency defined by possession, control, and mastery."

<sup>34</sup> Cornel West, "The Musical Vocation in Our Bleak Times." UCLA Herb Alpert School of Music. May 11, 2022. Video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qZ7LKMVCKSg>. West speaks of the "professional-managerial class."

<sup>35</sup> Phil 2:3-7 "in humility value others above yourselves...rather, he made himself nothing"

<sup>36</sup> Eugene Peterson's language for Mk 4.

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