

GETTING TO KNOW REICH

Wilhelm Reich and A. S. Neill

Insight into an extraordinary friendship

James E. Strick



The letters between Wilhelm Reich and A. S. Neill, founder and head of England's famous Summerhill School, are an extraordinary window into the personalities of two giants in their fields.

Neill, who had been in therapy with Reich, considered it had done him more good than years of psychoanalysis. Particularly, he felt that Reich had changed his thinking about how to work with problem children to help get their personal conflicts out of the way of their healthy growth. Reich shared his excitement about new discoveries with Neill, and spoke to him with unique warmth and deep respect. Neill was no "yes man" and could disagree with Reich, and press the argument in ways none of Reich's American students dared. In an era when relationships were sustained by typewritten letters crossing the ocean, their extraordinary lively exchange on everything from education, healthy childhood, marriage and sex life, and politics gives us an insight into the personal process of these two fascinating men.

I begin with a letter in which Reich responds to many things: for one, a claim Neill heard about Reich's new *International Journal of Sex-Economy and Orgone Research*. A psychoanalyst, John Flugel, had said to Neill:

"... I am finding R[eich] most interesting reading. He is certainly an amazing fellow with an astonishingly wide outlook and a most useful power of synthesis. Orgone excites my curiosity a good deal. Walter Frank's article on Veg[e-to-]Therapy I found particularly useful..., though I think he ought to give some credit to [Walter] Cannon who in his book [*The Wisdom of the Body* (1932)] said substantially the same things but some ten years earlier."

Reich's reply on this point was edited out of the published version for brevity. I restore it here from the original in the Reich archives because it conveys his fair-minded attitude about giving cred-

it to others, while retaining a critical eye for the importance of his own unique contributions. But in Reich's tone throughout the letter, we can also read his respect for Neill, especially the latter's knowledge and practical experience in early childhood education. Part of this is reflected in Reich's willingness to adopt a jocular tone, kidding with Neill in a way he doesn't do with his American students – indicating he feels Neill is an equal or peer in many ways, not only a student.

In addition, we see Reich's early enthusiasm for the possibilities of the orgone energy accumulator. Yet Reich cautions, "We alone are responsible for our science" – in other words, we would be totally naïve to expect help from those threatened by it, e.g., the pharmaceutical industry or monopolized medicine.

Finally, we hear where Reich's thinking has arrived in 1942 on the question of how armoring originated. Could there be a more profound question in our age of steadily growing political reaction?

Reich to Neill, 20 July 42 (Roaf, pp. 72-74)

"I suppose that you have received several copies of my book [*The Function of the Orgasm*] meanwhile. I would appreciate it very much if you would let me know how it was received and which suggestions have been made as to its elaboration in the second edition. You will also receive very soon the second edition of the journal which brings some excerpts from your book *The Problem Teacher*. I would like to remind you again how useful it would be to have stories from your school related in our journal. But somehow, I don't seem to be able to penetrate your armor concerning such articles.

I did not hear from you in a long time. I hope that everything is all right there as far as circumstances permit.

Before I left for Maine, I was visited by the vice-director of a New York State Hospital who has read the book, liked it, and suggested that I begin to apply the Orgone on patients of different types at the hospital. I don't know if something will come of it, but if it does, there will be rapid progress. By the way, did you build an Orgone Accumulator for yourself according to my description? I want you to have it. It does a really good job in building up strength and killing bad stuff in the blood. You have only to build a closet to sit in with inner metal lining and an outer wood lining and cotton or wood shavings or sawdust or earth in the space between the two linings. Such a closet can be used to fight colds, sinus troubles, flu, anemia and similar things. It is not dangerous in any way and it really helps. You may trust me, in spite of the fact that I am the inventor.

By the way, when do you come over to New York? It would be a marvelous idea...

P.S. I was just about to mail this letter when I received yours of July 4th. I was very glad to have it. Now to every single important point:



AS Neill and Peter Reich, 1948

***“Now to your questions, which are very significant and important.
You are not right that I am afraid of children.
Children like me very much and I like them.
But I do not know enough about children,
not having worked with them and only knowing them through
the reflection of my work with grown-ups.”***

—Wilhelm Reich

1. I am happy that you like the book. I only wonder why honesty gives one so much stomach ache in the process of production. I guess it's rational cowardice.

2. ... As to Flugel, I think his attitude is fair. I shall find out whether he is right in saying that [physiologist Walter] Cannon said, 'the same things ten years ago.' I don't know when Cannon's book [*The Wisdom of the Body*] appeared. I had it in my hands for the first time about two years ago and reading it I was struck by the fact that neither was sex mentioned at all in connection with the autonomic nervous system, that it impresses us by absence and not being mentioned in the title of the book. And that the sex-economic concept of the unitary function of antithesis and unity at the same time from the highest mental to the deepest biological function was not touched upon. Otherwise, I would have mentioned the book in *The Function of the Orgasm* as I have given credit to every single researcher whom I knew to have helped my own theory along. Besides, Flugel does not seem to realize that the "Urgegensatz" ["Basic Antithesis of Vegetative Life"] was published 1934 and written 1933, that means about 9 years ago. Besides, the sex-economic biology can by no means be compared in its functional concept with any existing physiology. In any case Müller's *Lebensnerven* does not contain an inkling of

our concept of biological pulsation. I studied the second edition of this book 1933 and it would have struck me if Cannon or someone else would have been in the neighborhood of our concept even slightly. So please, convince Flugel of my deep sincerity concerning quoting from others.

3. It is a pity that the *Orgasm* book should be reprinted in England when 3000 copies have been printed here. It would be too nice to have a second edition published soon.

4. You are completely correct in saying that we can rely on no one but ourselves, that we alone are responsible for what happens to our science. Edison would have been a fool to expect the acknowledgement of the electric bulb by the manufacturers of the gas lamps.

5. Please settle all business questions with Wolfe directly, because I have nothing to do with it. You have, of course, my consent, to have published in England whatever you wish, so long as no publisher succeeds in censoring what I have to say.

Please, dear Neill, don't fail to inform me of whatever you happen to hear from Scandinavia. Would you mind to take care of keeping up the connection with our Scandinavian friends through Elsa Backer and the address which I mentioned in the first page of this letter. Send all the books and journals you can also to Switzerland. Further on, they will find their way by themselves.

Now to your questions, which are very significant and important. You are not right that I am afraid of children. Children like me very much and I like them. But I do not know enough about children, not having worked with them and only knowing them through the reflection of my work with grown-ups. Why should I go to child biology if there are such marvelous educators as A. S. Neill, etc. who can apply orgone biophysics to children much better than I could. And b) 'Why Is Man A Moralist?' is being dictated just in these days after many sleepless nights ['The Biological Miscalculation'] and stomach convulsions which filled my wife with fear for my future and the outcome of my brain development. I have once tried to answer this question in my book *Der Einbruch der Sexualmoral* on the basis of the influence which is taken upon the human organism by socio-economic processes. Still, the answer why the human being is a moralist, i.e., afraid of the nature within himself, was unanswered. In *The Function of the Orgasm* some answer is given by working out the function of the pleasure-anxiety which is created by muscular spasms in the pelvis, on the background of historical economic processes. But still the answer is not complete. Maybe man held his breath for the first time in order to choke his orgasmic feelings when the first mother, subjugated for the first time by her husband, who had been subjugated for the first time by his economic chief, in turn for the first time subjugated her child when this child masturbated. That leads up to your question, whether training alone is enough to explain sex repression. I would think yes. No wild stallion needs the assistance of any keeper. The domesticity of animals is entirely a moral training, because the natural sex function is not lived any more according to natural rules, but according to the opinion of man as to when a young horse or a young calf should be born. All things you mention, wrong food, clothing, etc. are in their last meaning nothing but evasion of nature, and of course, there can be no universal orgasmic life if the rest is unnatural. And as to the value of culture 'that makes bombs, poison gas, prisons and politicians,' I believe it is destroying itself and the level of the life of the Trobriands will be back soon – and happily.

Write again, Neill, you are not only the only important European connection, but more than that, you are an honest good friend, and I am proud that you are a member of the Institute."



In another exchange, Neill complains that Reich uses too much technical terminology, and thus puts off many interested people who might actually become supporters. Reich's reply shows that by the time he's established in the U.S., he has become

less interested in attracting followers if they don't have the wherewithal to do a bit of digging and educate themselves in the science that is needed to fully understand the importance of his discoveries. Here is some of that conversation.

Neill to Reich, 28 Apr. 42 (Roaf, p. 65-7)

"My dear Reich, Number 1 of the journal [*International Journal of Sex-Economy and Orgone Research*] has arrived. I must congratulate Wolfe; it is splendid. Some of it is above my head... no layman can grasp words like parasympatheticotonia, but I feel strongly that one need not know anatomy and physiology to grasp the essentials of Vegeto-Therapy. To see them in English when I am unconscious of the language is truly delightful. Reich, the magazine is full of dynamite; it impresses more and more on me what I have long felt – that you are the only successor to Freud. You alone among them all have something new and great... makes me feel quite conceited to have 'discovered' you! ...

If I have any criticism of the journal it is that it is too scientific for the layman, too much written for the specialist. Clever members of my staff read it and fail to grasp the essentials, but when I try to explain, as one who went through the treatment (partly, alas) they begin to understand the words. Your method will succeed only when it by-passes the doctors and gets understood by the ordinary people who will feel its truth without needing a professional knowledge. One psychoanalyst here when I told him about V. T. [vegeto-therapy] said airily: 'There is nothing new about it; it is all in Freud, and the Freudian analysis automatically frees all tensions.' That is the type you want to by-pass, the man with a set system."

Reich to Neill, 19 May 42 (Roaf, pp. 67-69)

"I just received your good letter of April 28th. Wolfe and I know to begin with that the first number of the Journal will not be too easy to be grasped by the layman. But I do not think that we can avoid or that we should avoid the scientific physiological terms. You cannot do without them for they mean definite facts. I also believe that in a true democratic way we should not try to free the layman – a teacher is not quite a layman – from the responsibility to acquire a general knowledge of physiology and biology. For many years I have been trying to see how a better world could set up microscopes and charts about the body functions in public parks, instead of the foolish and useless lotteries they have now. The vegetative function of vagotonia and sympatheticotonia appears very simple if you present it in the form of an opening and closing hand. The opening is the vagotonia and the closing the sympatheticotonia."

One can hear in Reich's thought: This is real science! How can they want it to be easily digestible? Those too lazy to educate themselves a bit about the science, we don't need!

Reich respected Neill's experience, and encouraged him to write articles for the *Journal*. Here he continued:

"I wrote you already to ask you to write an article for the third number of the journal, about

practical experiences with children in the way that only you can write. We shall gladly print it. We would appreciate practical instances of how children behave, especially when they come to the school from unfree environments and how they adjust themselves to self-regulating behavior. This problem is, I believe, the most important of education and will be so in a truly free society.

My book [*The Function of the Orgasm*] is being sent this week to you in many copies. I think that the people who have not gone through the mill will understand the journal better if they have read my book, which, according to people who read it, is very easy to understand in spite of its scientific subject.

I was glad to learn that you changed from pessimism to optimism. You remember that you looked upon me as a kind of utopist when I said that the irrational in society cannot last for ever.”

This is a truly remarkable aspect of Reich, the man. At times when excited about his work, new discoveries, or talented students, Reich could be effusively optimistic. At other times, he foresaw possibly being destroyed by the emotional plague, and could express profound pessimism. Rather than seeing this as a contradiction, it makes more sense as an indicator of what a remarkably *mobile energy system* Reich was. He could “swing very widely” (as he put it) in both directions, without involuntarily clamping down on the mobility.



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