

The Myth of the Win-Win

Ana Levy-Lyons

Nov. 27, 2011

All Souls NYC

There seems to be a trend in product design today where suddenly everything is “dual control.” You have cars where the front seats can each be heated to a different temperature. You have mattresses -- you might have heard Garrison Keillor advertise this -- Comfort Select mattresses where the two sides of the mattress can be adjusted independently to different firmnesses. You have the Toastmaster T2040 Dual Control 4-Slice Toaster so that if you like your toast a little crispier than your breakfast companion does, you can each have your toast just the way you like it. And then, my favorite one of these is the Land’s End dual control electric blanket called the HeatWave, where one half of the blanket can be set at, say, 90 degrees and the other at 83 degrees. Land’s End ran the ad for this on the cover of its catalog a few years back and I saved it because I found it so interesting.

The ad shows a blissful couple in bed under the HeatWave blanket. They’re both smiling, presumably because their electric blanket is exactly the right temperature. They look healthy, clean; their teeth look very white and very straight. (They themselves look very white and very straight.) We don’t know whether they’re married or not because the ring fingers on both of their left hands are hidden. They each have a remote control on their side of the bed so that they can adjust the temperature of their side of the blanket up or down as they please.

If you believe the testimonials you read online, some couples actually credit these kinds of things with saving their marriage! So it may seem like this new rash of dual control products is pretty innocuous-- I mean, what’s not to like? You get to be with your partner *and* have your toast the right crispiness, your mattress the right firmness, and your electric blanket the right temperature. Thanks to technology, no more arguments, no more negotiations.

But if you look more closely at an ad like the Land's End ad there are some things that seem a little strange: For one thing, the two people under the HeatWave blanket aren't touching. In order to be squarely within the zone that has the temperature they want, they need to be at least a foot apart. And they're not really looking at each other either. It's hard to know if they were even actually in bed together when this photo was taken. One of them could easily have been just pasted in after the fact. There's something kind of remote and surreal about this couple, like they're made of wax. They're frozen in their respective HeatWave zones and their temperature preferences have become an invisible boundary between them.

Our gentle Land's End couple has fallen prey to the myth of the win-win. The myth of the win-win is the myth that in a negotiation, both parties should be able to get exactly what they want, with no loss anywhere of any kind. In a relationship – any kind of relationship - the myth of the win-win suggests that you can remain who you were outside of or prior to the relationship. You can mostly do same things you would have done on your own, work the same job, live the same life, down to eating your toast exactly the same way. The myth suggests that both parties in the relationship are fundamentally unchanged.

Martin Buber, the 20th-century theologian who wrote the famous book *I and Thou*, would probably have a good deal to say about products that purport to allow people to remain unchanged in a relationship. *I and Thou* describes two kinds of relationships we humans can have: "I-it" relationships and "I-thou" relationships. I-it is the relationship we have with an object or with a person whom we object-ify – someone we view as purely instrumental. For example, we tend to have I-it relationships with the pizza delivery guy. We rarely enter into a full relationship with him in which we recognize his personhood – he is usually just an instrument of our pizza eating. I-Thou relationships, on the other hand, are relationships in which we fully meet the other person with an open heart, dropping our barriers, recognizing him or her as, not a means, but an end in him- or herself. We allow ourselves to be transformed by the encounter. The key here is that the "I" in the "I-Thou" changes.

Here's how Buber talks about it: "The 'I' of the basic word I-Thou is *different* from that of the basic word I-It. The I of the basic word I-It appears as an ego ... The I of the basic word I-Thou appears as a person ... Egos appear by setting themselves apart from other egos. Persons appear by entering into relation to other persons."

So in other words, when you enter into an I-Thou relationship with another, you recognize him or her as a person and *you yourself become a person in the process.*

When a Black Friday Wal-Mart shopper pepper sprayed her fellow shoppers the other day, I would guess she was in a dark place herself – not recognizing the personhood of others and diminishing her own personhood in the process. Not that the other shoppers were likely much better off, tearing down displays, fighting with one another for the deals. They were all in I-it relationship with one other – the employees were merely instruments of their X-box purchase and the other shoppers merely obstacles. Personhood is a funny thing in this world. It seems that to qualify for personhood these days, your best bet is to be either a corporation or an embryo. But that's a conversation for another time.

Martin Buber was prescient about the prevalence of I-it relationships in the modern world. I think if he knew about the Black Friday mania, he would roll over in his grave! And I think if he were alive today to witness the dual control product craze, he would say this: these products encourage me-it relations by perpetuating the myth of the win-win. And of course the popularity of a product is a bellwether of a culture's basic values.

For an example of how the myth of the win-win plays out with higher stakes, we can look at the entry of women into the workforce over the last fifty years in this country. It used to be the case (and bear with me, I'm going to make some broad generalizations here) that in a traditional heterosexual marriage, the man would have a career and the wife would make adjustments and fit the pieces of her life around his life, staying home with their children so that they had a full-time caregiver. But once feminism hit, there was a growing recognition of an inequity: the wife was often making deep compromises in the life she

wanted to lead while the husband remained more independent and still got to come home every night to a hot meal.

Families that wanted to fix this inequity had two choices: A) the husband could become more like the traditional wife or B) the wife could become more like the traditional husband. Option A suggests more of an I-Thou relationship, where the husband's "I" is transformed by being in relationship with the wife. Option B suggests more of an I-it dynamic, where both the husband and the wife cling to the "I" that they would have been if the relationship didn't exist.

Overwhelmingly as a culture, we have chosen option B. Couples of my generation will split up without a second thought if one wants to take a job or go to school in another city. In many families today, both parents work full-time, kids are cared for by childcare workers and TV sets, meals are pre-packaged, fast food. Now, there are obviously financial reasons for this. But that's not all that's going on. You see it among rich and poor alike.

There's a sense in our culture that neither party in a relationship should have to sacrifice or compromise their personal ambitions or preferences for the sake of the relationship. They should each have exactly the career and life that they want. Self-actualization is the name of the game.

Where women used to do all the compromising, now nobody compromises. Where it used to be only men who got to come home to a hot meal at night, now nobody comes home to a hot meal. So there's the myth of the win-win. There is a hidden cost, and the cost is in the relationship itself.

The myth of the win-win is a myth because in real relationship we *are* changed. In an I-Thou relationship, the "I" is transformed into something entirely new, deeper, richer, even holy. In an I-thou relationship, we relinquish the ego. We relinquish some of our individualism, we relinquish some control, we give up our bounded selves as they *were* in service of the larger self. The "I" has to *expand* to include and participate in another. Think about that. In an I-Thou relationship you can participate in another person. I can participate in you and you can participate in me.

There is a mystical dimension to this that Buber spends most of his book describing. He believed that religious experience is available to us in every interaction. He writes:

When two people relate to each other authentically and humanly, God is the electricity that surges between them. . . .As soon as we touch a Thou, we are touched by a breath of eternal life. . . .When I confront a human being as my Thou and speak the basic word I-Thou to him, then that person is no thing among things nor does he consist of things. He is no longer He or She. . . .a dot in the world grid of space and time. . . . Neighborless and seamless, he is Thou and fills the firmament.

So to Buber, true relationship with another person is a portal to relationship with the divine. This is a Unitarian Universalist definition of God if I've ever heard one. God exists in and through relationship.

So what are we doing when we try to avoid the messier aspects of relationship – the compromises, the discomforts, inconveniences and losses? Jesus was quoted as saying, “What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his soul?” Is it possible that our Land’s End couple is gaining the perfect temperature blanket but losing their souls? Are the Black Friday shoppers gaining an X-box and losing their souls? And what about us? Are there ways in which we trade the infinite depth of relationship for finite ambitions? How do we approach our careers, our families? How do we talk to our co-workers, our children, our next-door neighbors? What are our relationships like with people of ethnic or cultural backgrounds different from our own? Are we falling prey to the myth of the win-win, being opportunistic and running a cost/benefit analysis on the people in our lives?

So if some of us here in this room are maybe feeling a little too married to the particular crispness of our morning toast, maybe we can work towards slowly shifting our relationships in an I-Thou direction. If we have the choice, maybe we can work less and play with our kids more. Have a conversation with the pizza delivery guy. Eat our toast a little overcooked. Let things get messy, even if we don't like it messy. Clean up, even if we don't like it clean. Go easy on our fellow holiday shoppers. “As soon as we touch a Thou,” says Buber, “we are touched by a breath of eternal life.” May each of us be touched by that breath of eternal life. May each of us be a window into communion with the universe. May each of us be changed by one another and experience the depth of joy that unfolds.

