

A LINE ON LIFE

6/13/99

Becoming a Self-Actualizer *

David A. Gershaw, Ph.D.

Last week, we discussed the qualities that Abraham Maslow found typical of people he called **self-actualizers** — people who can live creatively and make full use of their potentials. If you didn't live up to these qualities as well as you wanted, you might want to know how to be more like self-actualizers. What can you do?

Self-actualizing is more difficult than many might imagine. Many people, caught in a struggle for survival or security, never get a chance to develop their potentials fully. Others show little interest in developing these qualities.

There is no magic formula for reaching self-actualization and leading a more creative life. You need to remember that it is a *continuing process*, not a goal or an end point. As such, it requires hard work, patience, and commitment. Here are some of Maslow's recommendations.

1. Be willing to change. Ask yourself, "*Am I living in a way that deeply satisfies me and truly expresses me?*" If not, be prepared to make changes.

2. Take responsibility. Act as if you are *personally responsible* for every aspect of your life. Although this is not completely realistic, it helps you to break the bad habit of blaming others for your own shortcomings. For example, you can't depend on others to give you an education; you need to get it for yourself. (However, this does *not* mean that you make yourself personally responsible for *others*. You can help others to help themselves, but they need to shoulder their own responsibilities.)

3. Examine your motives. Fears of failure, rejection, loneliness, or disagreement with others are a tremendous barrier to personal change. Is most of your behavior directed by a desire for "*safety*" or "*security*"? Self-discovery involves an element of risk. It may be time to test the limits of your needs for safety and security. Try to make your life decisions a choice for growth, not a response to fear or anxiety.

4. Experience honestly and directly. Try to see yourself as others do. Be willing to admit, "*I was wrong.*" Don't engage in wishful thinking. Instead, learn to accept all kinds of information without distorting it to fit your fears or desires.

5. Make use of positive experiences. As a rule, growth-promoting experiences — **peak experiences** — feel good. You can feel unusually alert and alive when expressing yourself through art, music, dance, writing, or athletics. Peak experiences also can take place when you are alone in nature, surrounded by friends, or helping others. Actively repeat activities that cause these feelings.

6. Be prepared to be different. Realize that some of your potentials may put you at odds with others or cultural expectations that are unimportant in your life. Don't automatically judge yourself by the standards of others, but be prepared to be unpopular when your views don't agree with those of others.

7. Get involved. Don't work merely because you "*have to.*" Add meaning to your life by getting personally involved and committed to some higher yearnings for truth, beauty, brotherhood, or meaning. Turn your attention to problems outside of yourself.

8. Slow down. Even though you may want to get involved, try to avoid over-scheduling your time. A certain amount of leisure is essential for developing self-awareness. Time pressures lead to a compulsive reliance on old, ineffective habits.

9. Start a journal. This is a valuable way to promote self-awareness. Record significant events in your daily life along with your thoughts, feelings, fears, desires, frustrations, and dreams. Reread your journal periodically. It is easier to learn from an event after it has "*cooled off*" and you can view it more objectively.

10. Assess your progress. Since self-actualizing is a continuing process, frequently estimate your progress so you can renew your efforts. Boredom is a sign that you need a change. However, a situation is only as "*boring*" as you allow it to be. You can consider it a challenge or an indication that you have not taken responsibility for your own personal growth. Almost any activity (school, job, or relationship) can be fulfilling, if it is approached creatively.

**You cannot accept or love others,
until you can accept and love yourself.**

If you successfully follow these suggestions, what can you expect to happen? You will notice an improvement in the quality of your daily life. You will tend to develop a greater acceptance of yourself and others. Feeling more confident, you will tend to carry out your daily routines with less strain or conflict.

However, these changes will not happen overnight. In addition, your first steps toward self-actualization may be as threatening as they are exhilarating.

For some of you, your fears and anxieties related to safety, love and belonging, or self-esteem may be too great to even attempt self-actualizing. If you want to deal with these fears, the first step in self-actualizing would be seeking the help of a trusted professional — a counselor, clergyman, social worker, psychologist, or psychiatrist. The road to self-knowledge and actualization may be a long and continuous one, but even the longest journey begins with a single step.

* Adapted from Dennis Coon's *Introduction to Psychology: Exploration and Application*, Brooks/Cole Publishing, 1998, pages 539-540.

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