

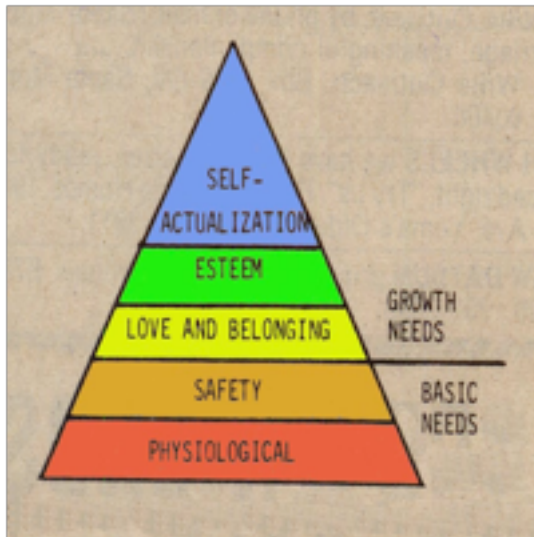
A LINE ON LIFE

4/25/84, Updated 6/28/01

Top of the Pyramid

David A. Gershaw, Ph.D.

What is the ultimate of human motivation? What is humanity's highest need? I'm sure there are many ways these questions can be answered. I will only cover the answer of one man, **Dr. Abraham Maslow**, a psychologist and humanist.



Maslow theorized a **hierarchy of needs** that could be represented by a pyramid, with the most basic motives at the bottom. The most basic needs of all beings are **physiological** — air, food, water, sleep, etceteras. Maslow believed that — until these needs were relatively consistently met — people could not develop to the next level.

The next level involves needs for **safety and security**. This is the need for protection from various threats — floods, lightening, tigers, muggers and so on. Once secure in these **basic needs**, people will seek to satisfy the higher **growth needs**.

The first of the growth needs is **love and belonging** — being part of a circle of friends and family. If this need is relatively satisfied, then people feel free to meet **esteem needs**, like achievement, recognition and self-

respect. Once self-esteem is relatively assured, then — and only then — we can reach the ultimate level, **self-actualization** — the full development of our personal potentials.

However, Maslow believed that many people never reach that ultimate point, because they get stuck at one of the lower levels. Lacking esteem, you may forever seek it. For example, it becomes very important to be addressed with a specific title ("Sir," "Doctor" or "Captain"). You may refuse to explore new areas of life, because they may require that you start again as a low-status beginner.

Likewise, lacking love, you may do almost anything to attempt to get it. Giving extravagant gifts, offering yourself sexually, or making a fool of yourself to entertain others — all these behaviors can be attempts to get the love and belonging you need. While you are striving to meet the lower-level needs, you are unable to work toward self-actualization.

At first, Maslow typified self-actualizing people as those who were recognized as being "*great*" — Albert Einstein, Eleanor Roosevelt and Abraham Lincoln. However, he later realized that housewives, carpenters, clerks or students can also live creatively and make full use of their potentials. Maslow found that his self-actualizers — whether famous or unknown, rich or poor, educated or not — tended to share similar characteristics.

First, **self-actualizers** tend to have a *comfortable acceptance of themselves, others and nature*. They learn to accept their own human nature with all of its shortcomings. They look at the shortcomings of others and the contradictions of human nature with humor and tolerance. Linked with this acceptance is a fellowship with humanity. Actualizers identify deeply with others and with the human situation in general. They tend to develop profound interpersonal relationships marked by deep, loving bonds.

In contrast to many people, actualizers are *spontaneous* and have a *nonhostile sense of humor*. This means that jokes are not made to hurt anyone. In addition, they learn to laugh at themselves and their own human shortcomings.

Self-actualizers seem to have a *constantly renewed appreciation* for the wonders of life. A sunset or a flower is as awe-inspiring the one-thousandth time it is viewed, as it was the first time. This may be linked to the frequent "*peak experiences*" they have. These peaks are marked by feelings of ecstasy, harmony and deep meaning. During these peaks, actualizers feel at one with the universe.

**Self-actualization is a continuing process
rather than a goal that is reached.**

Even though Maslow calls these people self-actualizers, he indicates that they are *never self-actualized*, but merely in the process of *self-actualizing*. Self-actualization is not a condition or place that can be reached. It is the continual process of *expanding from what you are to what you can be*.

It is analogous to a mountain climber. Once a peak is conquered, it offers a vista of new peaks to be climbed. Likewise, once we achieve life goals, they offer new opportunities and challenges to us.

We all have within us the ability to be self-actualizing — to feel calm and safe, to be accepted, loved, loving and alive. Even though we can never reach it, we can always get *closer* to the top of the pyramid.
