



“Maturity and Growth” Part 2

I left off last time discussing Maslow’s hierarchy of needs: specifically I left out discussion of the space in the hierarchy between basic food/safety needs, and self-actualization. Before we investigate this space, let’s touch on self-actualization again. I like to compare this kind of human “becoming” with a seed growing and blossoming into a plant. The seed represents the potentiality of a plant. The plant is unique in every way, but similar to plants of the same species; just like mankind. Planting the seed in a growth-inducing environment will allow the seed to become what it is destined to become: Planting in barren soil inhibits becoming. The impetus for growth is part of the characteristics of the seed. The environment either facilitates or frustrates growth.

In discussing “actualizing” in the Day family, last time I outlined what my kids were doing for work, but I should be more expansive. As you might expect, both Sarah and Kyle are different in many respects. Sarah wakes before the sun comes up, kick-starts her day with a personal workout, client training, and child sitting responsibilities. All of this is executed in accordance with a color-coded schedule, dutifully recorded in her Day-Timer. Kyle wakes up sometime before noon, and heads down to the studio, just in time to patch in sound effects into the mixing console, hopefully before the band arrives. In both cases it works for them, each in their own style, according to their particular and unique “way of being”.

Now I think we are almost ready to look at the middle of the Maslow triangle. Before we do I want to touch on the safety need for a minute, but not in the traditional sense of physical safety. Recall that safety appears at the bottom of the Maslow hierarchy. I want to talk about anxiety as a feeling of being *psychologically* “unsafe”. When we feel anxious, or think we might, we very quickly retreat down the Maslow hierarchy, applying all of our faculties to restoring psychological safety. When this happens, note that we are moving away from self-actualization, in the wrong direction. Hopefully you are thinking about what can be done to generally reduce anxiety for ourselves, and those we care about. I intend to delve into this in **“Maturity and Growth” part 4.**

Let’s now look closely at the middle sections of the Maslow hierarchy; where we find additional basic needs to satiate, prior to moving up to self-actualization. There are actually two levels: love/belonging, and esteem. Let’s take a look at love, in fact two forms of love - unconditional and conditional. So what’s the difference? Isn’t love “love”? Unconditional love is the kind we get with “no strings attached”, no matter what. If I receive unconditional love from family, or perhaps a friend, I know that what I do, or how I behave, in the long run, will not affect my receiving love and affection. Whether I am an academic headed for Harvard, strike out at baseball, forget to do my chores and fold my clothes, I am loved and accepted as me. I might make someone temporarily mad or disappointed with me, but I know I am still loved.



On the other hand, if I am loved conditionally, I must perform according to someone's expectations in order to receive love. Belonging is similar: I want to be included in the group because of who I am uniquely, for me. If I belong conditionally, I must perform according to the values and beliefs of someone else. If I don't conform, I will be excluded. If my belonging or being loved is conditional, I am going to use my senses and awareness to tell me how I am doing in your eyes. If I sense your disapproval, I may use my intellect to calculate my deficiencies according to your standards. Then I will change who I seem to be temporarily, so I can meet with your approval. If I am successful with my sensing, changing, and creating my façade, I will be accepted in accordance with your conditions. I can continue to belong with you and be loved by you.

The problem with conditional love, acceptance, and belonging, is that the conditions change with the social environment: as people change, so must we to meet their conditional approval. We become anxious as we continuously cycle through the sensing, changing, sensing, changing loop. On the other hand, when we are accustomed to unconditional acceptance and love, then we sense in our soul that we are fundamentally good, just as we are. And I mean good in an absolute, not relative sense. This remains true, independent of acceptance and approval by others.

Fritz Perls, the founder of Gestalt Therapy wrote in the "Gestalt Prayer"

I do my thing and you do your thing. I am not in this world to live up to your expectations and you are not in this world to live up to mine.
You are you and I am I. And if by chance we find each other,
It's beautiful. If not, it can't be helped.

I am not going to talk about esteem much, other than to draw a parallel with the word "competence". Chances are good that if we are doing what we well and truly love to do, we will become competent. And if we are adept at something, we feel good about ourselves: Esteem for self follows. As an aside, psychologists Deci and Ryan discuss competence as a precondition for intrinsic, self-motivation, which is something parents and teachers might like to see in teens - no more browbeating or reminding! Teens do because they want to. (See the Teen Encounters Reference – Good Books section on the web)

In the next installment "**Maturity and Growth**" **Part 3**, I want to talk about some of the characteristics of the self-actualized individual, how he feels, and how he keeps operating in this area of the hierarchy, where "you are you, and I am I". In **Part 4** we put it all together, and talk about what we can do as parents, teachers, family members, and friends to contribute to an optimal environment for a full "becoming" of another.