

[Abraham Maslow Happy 100th!](#)

The nagging issues of my life have been (1) do I have the capacity for something grander, and (2) can I really accept my own strange uniqueness. It took a psychologist to help answer those questions. It didn't come through psychotherapy but through adopting, as a mentor, one of America's most esteemed psychologists, Abraham Maslow.

I never met Dr. Maslow, he died in 1970 of a heart attack at age 62. Yet, I have become a student and an admirer. April 1st, 2008 was the 100th anniversary of his birthday. I believe it is fitting to recognize an American giant who, I believe, has extraordinary wisdom for each of us today. I present his answers to questions I believe many would like to ask. All answers are direct quotes from Maslow combined from multiple sources.

QUESTION: In an article in Transpersonal Psychology, you were referred to as "the greatest American psychologist since William James." It seems you would have had a pretty ideal childhood.

DR. MASLOW: "[As a child] I was isolated and unhappy. I grew up in libraries and among books, almost without friends. During all my first twenty years, I was depressed, terribly unhappy, lonely, isolated (and self-rejecting). I was awfully curious to find out why I didn't go insane."

QUESTION: We hear much about change and profess we want change. I understand there was a pivotal event that changed your life's direction.

DR. MASLOW: "One day just after Pearl Harbor, I was driving home and my car was stopped by a poor, pathetic parade. Boy Scouts and old uniforms and a flag and someone playing a flute off-key. As I watched, the tears began to run down my face. I was too old to go into the army. It was at that moment I realized that the rest of my life must be devoted to discovering a psychology for the peace table. That moment changed my whole life. Since then, I've devoted myself to developing a theory of human nature that could be tested by experiment and research. I wanted to prove that humans are capable of something grander than war, prejudice, and hatred."

QUESTION: Your work excited your colleagues who voted you president of the American Psychological Association in 1968. To get a personal insight into what it was like to be in your home, I take the liberty of quoting one of your friends, Warren Bennis, an acclaimed expert in leadership.

WARREN BENNIS: "Abe, with that incredible soft, shy, tentative, and gentle voice making the most outrageous remarks. Breakfast with the Maslow family was intellectual nirvana, good and endless food, good and endless talk, where always I had the distinct feeling of gaining energy, of being lifted off my feet."

QUESTION: Your work has direct application in many fields: education, healthcare, government, the prison system, international relations, and management. I take the liberty of sharing the comments of Peter Drucker, the most recognized management expert in America.

PETER DRUCKER: "[Maslow's work has] had a lasting impact on me. I became an immediate convert--Maslow's evidence is overwhelming. But to date very few people have paid much attention."

DR. MASLOW: "[Yes, I have referred to much of my work as the] "Unnoticed Revolution."

AUTHOR: We would like to change that with the publication of this interview and many others during "Maslow 100."

QUESTION: You broke with the negativity of the Freudian and Behaviorist views to study the most highly-functioning people you could find and then establish a new psychology and way of looking at man. You were on the frontier.

DR. MASLOW: "Somebody has to be the first one through the mine fields. I'm someone who likes plowing new ground, then walking away from it. I get bored easily. For me, the big thrill comes with the discovering. I like to be the first runner in the relay race. I like to pass on the baton to the next person."

QUESTION: And what is the minefield you have been running through?

DR. MASLOW: "We have been selling human nature short throughout the whole of recorded history. the human being is so constructed that he presses toward fuller and fuller being and this means pressing toward what most people would call good values, toward serenity, kindness, courage, honesty, love, unselfishness, and goodness."

QUESTION: This, of course, fits some people, but are you saying the majority?

DR. MASLOW: "In principle at least, most people are capable of self-actualization. all people yearn toward self-actualization or tend toward it. creativeness, spontaneity, selfhood, authenticity, caring for others, being able to love, yearning for truth are embryonic potentialities belonging to his species-membership just as much as are his arms and legs and brain and eyes."

QUESTION: You are best known for your Hierarchy of Needs (physical, safety, love-acceptance, self-esteem, and self-actualization). Though you say we have the capability, you also say very few people are self-actualizing. How do people get stuck on the lower levels of over-providing for their physical needs, being dependent on the opinion of others, etc.?

DR. MASLOW: "We can certainly now assert that at least a reasonable, theoretical, and empirical case has been made for the presence within the human being of a tendency toward, or need for growing in a direction that can be summarized in general as self-actualization, or psychological health. These potentialities are actualized, shaped or stifled mostly [by] culture, family, environment, learning, etc. If this essential core (inner nature) of the person is frustrated, denied or suppressed, sickness results. It seems quite clear that personality problems may sometimes be loud protests against the crushing of one's psychological bones, of one's true inner nature. Intrinsic guilt is the consequence of betrayal of one's own inner nature or self, a turning off the path to self-actualization."

QUESTION: It can be frightening to explore one's own inner nature that you speak of. There is a fear of coming up short.

DR. MASLOW: "We fear to know the fearsome and unsavory aspects of ourselves, but we fear even more to know the godlike in ourselves. It is precisely the god-like in ourselves that we are ambivalent about, fascinated by and fearful of, motivated to and defensive against."

QUESTION: So what does it mean to respond to the god-like self in terms of what I do with my life?

DR. MASLOW: "If you deliberately plan to be less than you are capable of being, then I warn you that you'll be unhappy for the rest of your life. You will be evading your own capacities, your own possibilities. A musician must make music, an artist must paint, a poet must write, if he is to be ultimately at peace with himself. What a man can be, he must be. He must be true to his own nature. This need we may call self-actualization."

QUESTION: Yet there is the fear about being good enough, about being able to make an adequate income, about how people will respond.

DR. MASLOW: "[Self-actualizing people] are in general strongly focused on problems outside themselves. In current terminology they are problem centered rather than ego centered. These individuals customarily have some mission in life, some task to fulfill, some problem outside themselves which enlists much of their energies. This is not necessarily a task that they would prefer to choose for themselves; it may be a task that they feel is their responsibility, duty, or obligation. In general these tasks are nonpersonal or unselfish, concerned rather with the good of mankind in general, or of a nation in general, or of a few individuals in the subject's family. they have a genuine desire to help the human race."

QUESTION: One of my issues has been accepting my own strange uniqueness. How much room for individuality is there in self-actualization?

DR. MASLOW: "[Our self-actualizers] were more completely individualized, more unmistakably themselves than any average control group could possibly be. That is to say, they are simultaneously very much alike and very much unlike each other. They are more completely individual than any group that has ever been described, and yet are also more completely socialized, more identified with humanity than any other group yet described. They are closer to both their specieshood and to their unique individuality."

QUESTION: You have a very optimistic view of men, of women. But as you look at today's society, there are monumental problems. What do you most notice?

DR. MASLOW: "The ultimate disease of our time is valuelessness; second, that this state is more crucially dangerous than ever before in history; and finally, that something can be done about it by man's own rational efforts."

QUESTION: That's a bleak report. Yet you are still an optimist. Why?

DR MASLOW: "If the only tool you have is a hammer, it is tempting to treat everything as if it were a nail. When the philosophy of man (his nature, his goals, his potentialities, his fulfillment) changes, then everything changes."

About the Author

Don L. Wright, Ph.D. is an educator, writer, Maslow student, and entrepreneur. His most current project is developing the course, [Adventure in Being, Meditation: Discovering Divinity](http://www.adventureinbeing.net). Information is at the website: <http://www.adventureinbeing.net>.

Source: <http://www.onlineearnings.net>