

“4-H to Be Fair” by Dennis Perkins – Sunday, 9/17/2023
Reading, Message, and Closing

Reading

Self-Actualization

Abraham Maslow described [the good life](#) as one directed towards self-actualization, the pinnacle need. Self-actualization occurs when you maximize your potential, doing the best that you are capable of doing. Maslow studied individuals whom he believed to be self-actualized, including Abraham Lincoln, Thomas Jefferson, and Albert Einstein, to derive the common characteristics of the self-actualized person. Here is a selection of the most important characteristics, from his book *Motivation and Personality*:

1) Self-actualized people embrace the unknown and the ambiguous.

They are not threatened or afraid of it; instead, they accept it, are comfortable with it and are often attracted by it. They do not cling to the familiar. Maslow quotes Einstein:

"The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious."

2) They accept themselves, together with all their flaws.

She perceives herself as she is, and not as she would prefer herself to be. With a high level of self-acceptance, she lacks defensiveness, pose or artificiality. Eventually, shortcomings come to be seen not as shortcomings at all, but simply as neutral personal characteristics.

3) They prioritize and enjoy the journey, not just the destination.

"[They] often [regard] as ends in themselves many experiences and activities that are, for other people, only means. It is occasionally possible for them to make out of the most trivial and routine activity an intrinsically enjoyable game or dance or play."

4) While they are inherently unconventional, they do not seek to shock or disturb.

Self-actualized people would usually behave in a conventional fashion simply because no great issues are involved or because they know people will be hurt or embarrassed by any other kind of behavior."

5) They are motivated by growth, not by the satisfaction of needs.

While most people are still struggling in the lower rungs of the 'Hierarchy of Needs,' the self-actualized person is focused on personal growth.

6) Self-actualized people have purpose.

"[They 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 or 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."

7) They are not troubled by the small things.

Instead, they focus on the bigger picture. *"They seem never to get so close to the trees that they fail to see the forest. They work within a framework of values that are broad and not petty, universal and not local, and in terms of a century rather than the moment"*

8) Self-actualized people are grateful.

They do not take their blessings for granted, and by doing so, maintain a fresh sense of wonder towards the universe. *"Self-actualizing people have the wonderful capacity to appreciate again and again, freshly and naively, the basic goods of life, with awe, pleasure, wonder, and even ecstasy, however stale these experiences may have become to others."*

9) They share deep relationships with a few, but also feel identification and affection towards the entire human race.

"This devotion exists side by side with a widespread benevolence, affection, and friendliness. These people tend to be kind [and friendly] to almost everyone regardless of class, education, political belief, race, or color."

10) Self-actualized people are humble.

"They are all quite well aware of how little they know in comparison with what could be known and what is known by others."

11) Self-actualized people resist enculturation.

They do not allow themselves to be passively molded by culture -- they deliberate and make their own decisions, selecting what they see as good, and rejecting what they see as bad. Because of their self-decision, self-actualized people have codes of ethics that are individualized and autonomous rather than being dictated by society.

12) Despite all this, self-actualized people are not perfect.

"There are no perfect human beings! Persons can be found who are good, very good indeed, in fact, great.. And yet these very same people can at times be boring, irritating, petulant, selfish, angry, or depressed. To avoid disillusionment with human nature, we must first give up our illusions about it."

Message

I love the fall season in Maine. Nature painting on a canvas of hardwood trees. Cooler nights and crisper air (soon I hope). And fairs. I love fairs. There hasn't been a true farmer on my family tree for 120 years, but, starting in August every year, I'm drawn to Skowhegan, Windsor, Unity for the Common Ground and every now and then to Fryeburg for the big one to end the season.

I could do without the Midways, but everything else just fascinates me. Livestock barns and livestock judging. The town village recreation at Windsor where buildings and occupations and tools and machines from the nineteenth century are on display. Old men (I'm guilty as charged) talking about old times. But my very favorite exhibits are those that contain the displays of the granges and the 4-H clubs. I think of the grange presentations with their canned vegetables, knitting and opened bibles as voices from the past, but the 4-H clubs are youthful.

Begun about 120 years ago 4-H was originally formed to entice farming youth to persuade their parents and grandparents to experiment with new farming equipment and techniques which their elders were hesitant to learn. (Not that much different from today. My granddaughters can do a hundred times more operations with an iPhone than I can. And I'm still suspicious when my car tries to talk to me.)

Although the American farming population has shrunk from 41% of the national workforce in 1900 to less than 2% today, 4-H clubs have continued to draw young people. Their smiling faces fill the exhibits. I appreciate the vitality of this organization, but what first drew me decades ago to the 4-H displays was that ingenious symbol: the green 4-leaf clover and the large white letter H in each leaf.

The first time I saw this symbol I was transfixed. Green was already my favorite color from very early childhood. My child's mind was attracted to the promise of growth contained in that color, I think. Green is composed of the yellow of sunlight and the blue of water, two of the elements essential for life to be sustained and prosper.

I knew the clover was a symbol of good fortune, though the origins of that belief are lost in the mists of time. And the four H's, standing for head, heart, hands and health, seemed particularly meaningful to me. I'll confess that I am susceptible to seeing symbols everywhere, but this one seemed and still seems very powerful to me, conveying important information beyond the agricultural. The original symbol in 1907 was only a three-leaf clover with three H's: Head, Heart and Hands, but three-leaf clovers didn't have the good luck promise of a four-leaf and so the fourth was added with a fourth H: Hustle. This "get-to-work" admonition was quickly changed to the one that stuck: Health.

The 4-H oath conveys what the founders intended with each of the H's:

My Head to clearer thinking (life skill development through informal education)

My Heart to greater loyalty (emotional development and positive relationships with others)

My Hands to larger service (growing compassion and civic responsibility through service to others)

My Health to better living (learning how to make better choices)

Not a bad code for living.

But as usually happens with me, my mind began to burrow into each letter to see what I could find. Are there "Head" people? "Heart" people? "Hands" people? And could there be a "Healthy" balance among the three attributes or, equally, an unhealthy imbalance if one personality bias outweighs the others?

Let's look first at "Head" people (I confess a certain affection for this category of humanity): Head people are on constant lookout for the "meaning" of the things they run across. Their greatest need is the need to understand. Their greatest strength is the ability to distance themselves from the boiling surface of experience and to see patterns and directions that underlie the turmoil. They can clarify for others the confusions of living and suggest answers that others have not seen.

One of their greatest weaknesses, however, is to confuse thinking for doing. Head people can often believe that a task once understood has been already completed. That is why this type of personality is sometimes described by others as living with their “head in the clouds.”

Their other great weakness can be to be unfeeling — incapable of making emotional connection with others. Carried to an extreme this deficiency, when coupled with power, can lead to monstrosity. During WWII Joseph Mengele, Nazi scientist and medical doctor, experimented on Jewish and Roma prisoners in concentration camps. On one night alone he killed 14 pairs of twins so that he could perform comparison autopsies on them. It is said that up to his death Mengele remained mystified why he was being persecuted for “simply pursuing science.”

Next let’s look briefly at “Heart” people. This group of people live to connect with others. Their greatest need is to love and be loved. Their strength is their ability to empathize with nearly everyone they meet. They can be prodigies of service in caring for others. Heart people remember the important events of other people’s lives: birthdays, anniversaries—of weddings and of deaths. They will stay up all night beside the sickbed of a child. Incredible strengths.

But people of the Heart have their own weaknesses as well. By over-empathizing they can sometimes see victims where none exist, or, more accurately, can deprive some who are struggling of the ultimate joy of achievement. As many children can attest, sometimes love smotherers as well as nurturers.

Another weakness of the pure Heart people is that they can be sometimes manipulated by propaganda. Much of the power exhibited in nationalism, in fascism, in racism, is emotion unchecked by reason and misdirected by the unscrupulous. Anyone who sat in front of their computers or TV screens on January 6, 2021, has witnessed the fruits of this awful manipulation of emotion.

Finally, let’s look at the clover leaf of the “Hand”. These folks are—to use the original, if temporary, third H in the 4-H club symbol—the hustlers, the doers. Their greatest need is to see tasks completed. The greatest strength of the Hands people is their willingness to work whenever called upon. Want something done? Call on the people of the Hand to build something, paint something, clean something. If you want something done, they say, just ask a busy person. Heads plan, Hearts desire, but Hands do.

But like the other two personality categories, people of the Hand have their weakness as well. Too often busy-ness can be a substitute for both thought and feeling. An irresponsible heads-down attitude, typified by statements such “I don’t want to think about it” or “It’s not my concern,” can lead in extreme cases to the guards in concentration camps “just following orders” or the cringing absurdity of a Lieutenant Calley explaining the destruction of the Vietnamese village of My Lai and the execution of its villagers by saying, “we had to destroy the village in order to save it.”

So what are we saying here about these common categories of people? These three of the 4 H’s? The answer lies in the 4th leaf, Health. What’s needed for a healthy person, for a healthy society and finally for a healthy world is a balance among all here of these human

characteristics: thought, feeling and action. People of the Head need to expend the effort to be more caring. People of the Heart need to distance themselves at times and be thoughtful about the source and effects of their love. Both Heart and Hand need to work together and act in the world. And finally, those of us who may have just kept our heads down and our hands busy must work to become both more loving and more thoughtful.

We'll hear again Abraham Maslow's description of what he called "self-actualized" people in the Closing Words, but the originators of the beautifully balanced symbol of 4-H may have given us the clue to a self-actualized world a hundred years ago. It lies in the final word of the title of this message, "Fair." Of course it means the fall festival where 4-H exhibits can be enjoyed. And it can mean smooth and pleasant as in weather or complexion. But a third meaning, less commonly known, refers to joining separate parts of a construction together, fairing up a foundation so that the end product is level and the corners exact. And that is the affair this morning: fairing up the parts of the human personality to provide the strongest base for the future.

Closing Words

1. Embrace the unknown or the unclear
2. See ourselves as we are and begin there
3. Treat each day as an experiment and accept its result
4. Dare to be unconventional without being shocking
5. Be motivated by the need to grow more than any other need
6. Find a purpose in our life and pursue it
7. Learn to be unconcerned by trifles
8. Express gratitude and wonder over and over for all the basic goods of life
9. Feel love for a few and deep identification and affection for all others
10. Remain humble
11. Make up our own minds and not be passively molded by the lords of culture
12. Accept our own imperfections so that we can accept the flaws of others

This is the lesson of the 4-H symbol: to balance and rebalance among thinking, doing and feeling. And to realize that each of us is, ultimately, the harvest offering we lay upon the altar of fall.

Go in peace.