

# No Future in the Me Generation

Abraham Maslow, the psychologist who popularized the concept, would be horrified at what people have done

in the name of self-actualization. Like it or not, people must be interested in and responsible for each other.





## By Ruth Armstrong

One outgrowth of the social ferment of the late 1960s and early '70s has been a fascination with humanistic psychology. The notion of self-actualization captured the imagination, if not the understanding, of great numbers of people. The enthusiasm is gratifying, but when any notion is thoughtlessly appropriated, and especially when various misinterpretations gain unquestioning acceptance, there is need for critical appraisal.

Psychologist Abraham Maslow, who popularized the concept of self-actualization, emphasized that only a small fraction of the population can expect to be self-actualized to any degree, and then usually not until middle age or later. Nevertheless, in recent years, there has been a rash of spinoff publications dealing with self-

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actualization. What is needed, say those "experts," is spontaneous, authentic being and appreciation of the moment. One must live fully in the present. One must be completely open to experience and have the security to be autonomous. Above all, one's self-esteem must be unshackled by guilt and anxiety. Although drawn from profound tomes dealing with gestalt, humanistic, existential, and phenomenological psychology, the formula is simple: Incorporate the prescribed traits, and you will be blessed with mental and emo-

tional health. The approach, loosely labeled "third force psychology"—as distinguished from psychoanalysis and behaviorism—enjoys considerable vogue, especially among young people.

Although essentially identifying myself with third-force psychology, I have come to feel that some of its precepts are impractical and misleading, at least as they are popularly understood. I question whether self-actualization is even a viable concept, since individual potential remains always a mystery. It is manifestly impossible for any one person to fulfill capacities in every direction.

### **The Mystique of "Being"**

Most third-force psychologists redefine or amend the term actualization to mean being "fully human," the most one can be in terms of personality development or personhood. Being itself, as distinct from doing, becomes the ultimate good. A casual adoption of that misinterpretation as a rule of life has led some believers up a blind alley.

One cannot go through life simply being; one needs a goal, an avenue of accomplishment, an area of responsibility, or a category of function. The actualizers emphasize meaningful interpersonal relationships, but to separate interaction with others from concrete activity is as arbitrary and impossible as to separate being from doing. They are sides of the same coin.

Development of the person (i.e., "becoming") must be accomplished, therefore, within the context of productive effort. Otherwise the concept of self-actualization *per se* is ambiguous. It is astonishing to note how many would-be disciples are caught in that ambiguity. Burdened with anxiety and guilt that somehow they fail to be sufficiently self-actualized, they flounder among unrealistic guidelines that lead to frustration and despair. How much better to realize that being, like happiness, is a byproduct

of fruitful endeavor in association with others. Such activity does not, however, guarantee fulfillment, since the ongoing quest for fulfillment is really a continuing appetite for life. A completely fulfilled person would be like a sated diner, with a pressing desire only for sleep. Progress would come to a standstill.

Likewise, appreciation of the moment for itself is good, but to live completely in the now is as irrespon-

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sible as to live only in the past or to postpone living until the future. If one is only oriented to the now, motivation is lost, hope is abandoned, and faith becomes unnecessary. The result is a planless existence on a level with the animals. Indeed, the animal analogy is sometimes cited by actualizers as a positive good. For example, a cat is fully cat, and being totally cat, is achieving its ultimate function and purpose. Just so, human beings may achieve humanity by being fully human.

What comes out of that maze of words is chiefly bewilderment. The cat has no awareness nor appreciation of its own cat qualities. Driven primarily by visceral needs, it leads a primitive existence with no understanding of its purpose. In short, it is fully cat because it has no choice. Far from freeing latent qualities of personhood, the cat analogy tends to restrict and debase the human being.

The time-stream gives life much of its essence, its zest, its enthusiasm, its productivity. How much more satisfying are the tasks of today when they are built on past achievements. How much more exciting when they lead to increased skills or new experiences

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tomorrow. People need to appreciate each day and delight in the fragile beauties of every moment. But to live only for the now is defeating, alienating, and self-centered. It leads nowhere, as many have discovered; its promise as the be-all and end-all of existence is hollow and destructive. Witness the bewilderment and disillusion of those who find that sensation is not enough. Where the answer to life is sought only in the immediacy and intensity of the now experience,

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each moment dawns as empty as the last. When there is no commitment to anything that cannot be quickly sensed, there is no promise, no hope. Why hope when there is no future?

"Live for now," says the now generation. "It's all you have." Failing to look beyond the moment, its practitioners become mired in the quicksand of time without meaning, existence without continuity.

### **Contrivance of Authenticity**

Turning to the actualizers' doctrine of authenticity, one finds confusion here, too. By a strange convolution of thought, authenticity has become equated with antisocial behavior. In truth, one is authentic only to the degree that one is in touch with reality.

The farmer appreciatively running loam through his fingers is authentic. So is the mother worrying about her sick child, or the boy grieving over his wounded pet. To be authentic is to experience and express genuine feeling, even anxiety; for an optimum amount of anxiety is stimulating and motivating. One does not prove authenticity by wearing bizarre clothing, parading naked in the street, or spending 24 hours in a marathon encounter group. Such behaviors usual-

ly are masks and roles adopted to impress others or as novel experiences. Too many people have acquired the notion that extravagant or unconventional behavior brands them as authentic. Nothing could be further from the truth, since the very deliberation of such a public performance robs it of its authenticity. When one is in danger and shouts for help, those feelings are authentic; they are real! When one is alone on a clear, sunny day and experiences a sudden sense of well-being, it is an authentic feeling, even though (and perhaps because) no one sees. To strive for authenticity in order to demonstrate how "real" one is defeats the purpose.

Further, one cannot possibly be totally authentic in every situation. To cringe in fear may sometimes be authentic, but it may also mean disaster; perhaps a faked demonstration of strength would be more helpful. To admit to fear is sometimes appropriate; to abandon oneself to it may not be. Wholly spontaneous behavior can be destructive. Reasonable people look to cause and effect, another way of acknowledging the reality of a past and a future.

### **The Overexposure Syndrome**

Openness is another fetish of the actualizers. Problems, they say, will disappear with self-disclosure. Privacy evidently is seen as dangerous to mental health. No longer can secrets be tucked away; they might fester and infect the psyche. Let it all out; open the self and let in the fresh air! But the cult of openness sounds the death knell for the last vestige of good taste. Gone are restraint, forbearance, the courteous oversight, the graceful dodge. The disciplined tongue may no longer be tolerated. Instead, release the primal scream, for to censor is to suppress, and to suppress is to be sick.

Witness the wide-eyed candor of the child, the actualizers urge; adults must recapture that open wonder. In truth, the wide-eyed candor of the

child is childish. It is not manly and it is not womanly; by and large, children are self-centered and thoughtless. Not having experienced the suffering that brings maturity, they cannot identify with others; they cannot perceive another's point of view. A troubled person does not seek the unblinking stare of children, but the quiet assurance and mature understanding of people who weigh their words. Blurted feelings may be honest and open or ill-timed and devastating. Great damage has been done to participants in encounter groups by honest, open, but harrying criticism. Self-disclosure has its place, but as a routine practice it can do much violence.

In therapy, self-disclosure is a thoughtful, deliberate, delicate, and time-consuming process. To invoke an ancient analogy, petals open when they are ready; to force them destroys the flower. The right to privacy must be reestablished and protected. That right is an important part of the regard so highly touted by the actualizers.

### **I'm OK Because I Say I'm OK**

Self-esteem is built on a feeling of worth and strength, and draws on an accumulated store of love and security. The theory that self-interest, self-discovery, self-awareness, and self-evaluation will lead to self-realization and self-esteem is flawed by the emphasis on self. Preoccupation with self leads to the conviction that one is accountable to no one else. If self-esteem (being OK) provides a sense of worth that then generalizes to others, it is healthy. However, the idea that self-esteem is a prerequisite to mental health has done more to increase anxiety than to alleviate it.

In my own counseling experience, I have often seen elaborate self-deception masquerading as self-esteem. A client may protest his or her self-esteem while demonstrating self-hatred. An obsession with esteem augments the need for defense mechanisms. But again, the feeling of self-



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worth is a byproduct of productive, meaningful living, not an act of will. Nor does it mean the elimination of doubt and guilt and anxiety.

It is unpopular but necessary to realize that doubt can be healthy, guilt can be healthy, shame can be healthy. Such feelings as anxiety, mistrust, and inferiority are often realistic. The paranoid schizophrenic who claims to be the Messiah no longer suffers from guilt; it is conveniently projected onto others. The manic psychotic is unfettered by feelings of doubt and inferiority; she can do anything, including flying out the 42nd story window.

The psychopath suffers no anxiety or shame; why should he, when everyone else is his legitimate victim? He is incapable of remorse, a moral moron.

It is rational, even important, to feel guilt when one has harmed another. It is a sick society that condones violence, abuse, and self-centeredness under the guise of looking out for number one. To feel no shame, no remorse, when hostility or negligence has denied another's rights is unhealthy. Freedom from doubt leads to mental stagnation.

On the other hand, there are irrational guilts and irrational doubts. Some feelings of anxiety, mistrust, and inferiority are unwarranted. It is irrational to feel guilty because the sun shines, or because one likes one's job, or because one enjoys good health, or because one is living while one's parents are dead. Ridiculous as those illustrations may sound to the healthy person, countless individuals suffer guilt from just such causes. Burdened with that irrational guilt and consequent feelings of inadequacy, they live unhappy, self-defeating lives. The "kick me" syndrome and the "doormat" complex are all too common. Such people try to put up a good front, but feel anxious because their public faces are a sham. They are caught in a vicious cycle.

In addition, people share a sense of guilt simply because all are imperfect.

Some religious believers may be able to transcend that guilt by accepting love and forgiveness from God and consequently from others. Yet many professing believers cannot accept acceptance and rejoice only in being convicted of their sins. They seem to think that their reasonable doubts somehow diminish God. Such guilt is a conceit, and means the slow demise of whatever dynamic faith an individual might have.

### **Let's All Be Autonomous Together**

Finally, the actualizer cult insists that people must be autonomous, true only to themselves. The ideology of humanistic self-realization demands no loyalty to external codes of morality; rather, the burden shifts to personal integrity. The idea sounds plausible

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in principle but breaks down in practice. One counselee informed me that he now was actualized because he could tell the world to go to hell—that is, the "world" that represents externalized, and therefore unnecessary, controls. He claimed to need no one, which was patent nonsense, because there never was a more dependent, frightened man/child. However, he practiced denial to the point of being unaware of his extreme vulnerability. His concept of actualization did not stop with denying need. He overcompensated by interpreting autonomy as defiance, contempt, arrogance, and ruthless disregard for any existence but his own. Maslow would be horrified.

It may be that actualizers have done great harm by their insistence on autonomy as a way of life. Carried to extremes, it is insidious to any

sense of group loyalty or collective values. While false humility is unwholesome, a deep awareness and acknowledgment of one's debt to others is healthy and necessary. Overdependence and witless conformity have their dangers; but a certain compatibility of action, a shared code of behavior, allows for predictability in human life. People need the confidence to rely on each other, the freedom to go about their business with some degree of security. In a word, people are accountable to each other as well as to themselves.

To some third-force psychologists, autonomy incorporates a dogma of infallibility, asserting that regardless of individual behavior, people must be accepted as they are (or do). If you do not accept me, that is not my problem, it is yours—a distortion of the true meaning of acceptance. By logical extension, one wonders why those same psychologists perceive a need to practice therapy. To accept is not necessarily to endorse or to approve. It is to receive, uphold, affirm with genuine concern, identify or empathize with, share, support.

Total autonomy, then, is an unreal aspiration in an interdependent community. Like it or not, people must be interested in and responsible for each other. Moreover, people become aware of their own qualities by relating to others. In doing with and for each other, they are being. The only question is how best to execute those functions, for each person affects all others in his or her orbit and thus, to some extent, all of society. Sometimes one's autonomous, spontaneous, open, authentic, now-oriented feelings must be inhibited and subordinated to the welfare of the group. That may upset the doctrine of self-actualization (at least as it has been vulgarized), but there is little value in living the moment only for itself, and in actualizing oneself for oneself alone. For a moment is part of all time, and each person is a part of all humanity. ■