

Seeing More Colors

ABRAHAM MASLOW'S GUIDE
TO A RICHER LIFE

Michael S. Lewis, M.D.

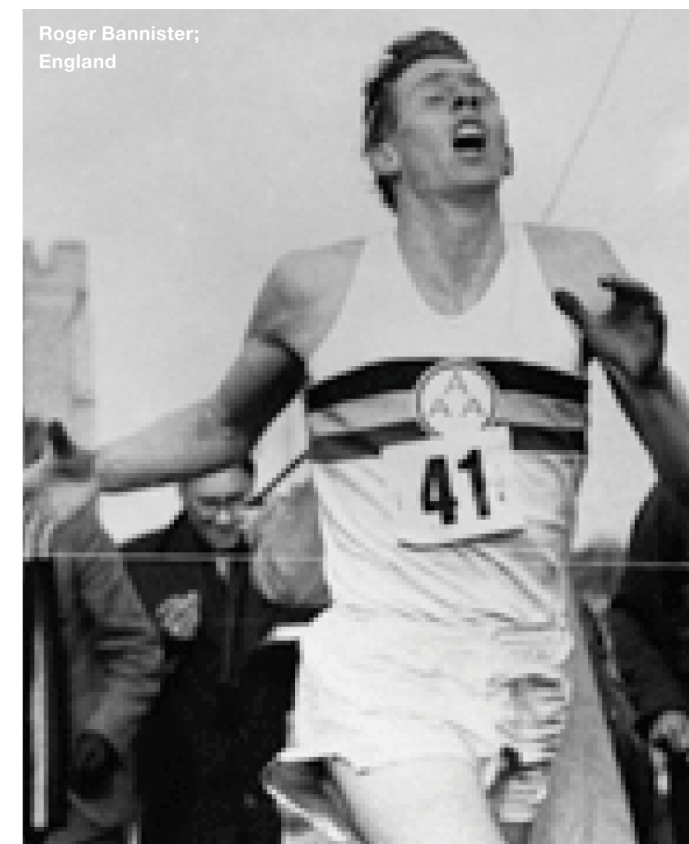
Introduction

A First Rate Soup

Lessons from Abraham Maslow

Roger Bannister breaks the four minute mile

Conditions were far from ideal at Oxford, England's Iffley Road athletic track that day: cold and damp, with a fifteen mph crosswind and gusts nearly double that. Nonetheless, Roger Bannister, a twenty-five-year old university medical student, achieved the impossible: he broke the four-minute mile. Halfway around the world, in hot and humid Houston, Texas, I was an eleven-year old budding track athlete, awestruck at the news. May 6, 1954, was a day I will never forget.



Roger Bannister;
England



Lake Patzcuaro; Mexico



The following Saturday morning, I paid the 9¢ admission fee to watch the race on *News of the World* at a nearby movie theatre. With 200 yards to go, Bannister had a final burst of energy and sprinted to the finish line. He then collapsed, utterly exhausted. With the announcer’s first word, “Three...,” pandemonium broke out among spectators at the race; in the theatre, the crowd cheered just as wildly.

A momentous event had happened, and I was elated. Something shifted inside of me. Though difficult to express, I understood that the possibilities of human achievement had suddenly expanded. When Sir Edmund Hillary reached the summit of Mount Everest and Neil Armstrong walked on the moon, I had a similar powerful reaction.

Fast forward to the early 1960s. Abraham Maslow, a professor of psychology at Brandeis University, where I was an undergraduate, formulated a theory to help explain the accomplishments of people like Roger Bannister.

Maslow postulated that such subjects do not simply accept circumstances that are handed to them. For example, before Roger Bannister, many scientists and physicians had concluded that breaking the four-minute mile barrier was physiologically impossible; astonishingly, within a few weeks of the event, several runners repeated the accomplishment.

Many years after his famous race, when reflecting on breaking the record, Bannister explained, “No longer conscious of my movement, I discovered a new unity with nature. I had found a new source of power and beauty, a source I never dreamt existed.” Maslow studied similar descriptions of extraordinary life occurrences, and coined a term for them, peak experiences. He connected the seemingly unrelated phenomena of peak experiences, awe, wonder, and the idea that thoughts can create reality.

These were electrifying ideas for an insecure eighteen-year old like myself. For many, the high school and college years are a time for questioning, and the search for a meaningful path in life becomes intense. This was certainly true for me; discovering Maslow was, therefore, a salvation. Studying at the forefront of a new approach in psychology was exhilarating. Then, as now, I wondered: if it worked for those who were exceptional, why couldn’t it work for the rest of us?

Maslow’s importance to psychology

Who was Abraham Maslow?

Abraham Maslow’s approach to psychology was simple, yet revolutionary. Instead of focusing on those with mental illness, as Sigmund Freud had done, he studied the emotionally healthiest people in our society. He called these people self-actualized. He concentrated on investigating their goals and actions in work, love, and play.



Before Maslow, Freud dominated the psychological universe with his studies of those with neurotic and psychotic illness. Freud concentrated on the unconscious; Maslow focused on the conscious. Maslow did not disavow Freud’s theories, but instead built upon them. He believed that Freud “sold human nature short,” and that we have “higher ceilings.” Freud concentrated on one’s past. Maslow showed that the future is as important as the past, in terms of ideals, hopes, duties, and unrealized potential.

Just as Freud gained credibility as a scientist because he had been a well-trained neurologist prior to his change of direction to psychoanalysis, so Maslow’s background in animal research and human abnormal psychology was a solid base from which to branch out into a more purely theoretical direction. I maintain that Maslow altered the landscape of how we perceive human nature as much as Freud had done for previous generations.

A few important milestones

- 1908: Abraham Maslow born in Brooklyn, New York.
- 1934: Completes Ph.D. in psychology at University of Wisconsin-Madison, studying with Harry Harlow, the pioneer in animal social behavior, including mother-infant bonding in monkeys.
- 1937–1951: Teaches psychology at Brooklyn College, New York.
- 1941: Publishes Principles of Abnormal Psychology, based on Freud’s theories of psychopathology, with Bela Mittelman.
- 1951–1969: Heads psychology department at Brandeis University.
- 1954: Publishes Motivation and Personality, in which he formulates concepts of a hierarchy of needs, peak experiences, and self-actualization.
- 1970: Dies at age 62 after retiring to California.

Maslow’s importance today

In many ways, these are the best of times: We live longer. We have more access to ideas, information, politics, sports, and the arts. Food, education, services, travel, and material goods are available in remarkable quality and variety. Surrounded by such abundance, why are not more of us in a perpetual state of gratitude? Maslow can help us answer this question.

Maslow’s ideas became the foundation for the movement known as *humanistic psychology*, which serves as a fundamental underpinning to today’s study called *positive psychology*. Martin Seligman popularized the latter phrase in his 1998 address as president of the American Psychological Association, in which he reiterated Maslow’s important emphasis upon increasing our potential.

Echoing Maslow’s ideas, Seligman stated, “For the last half-century, clinical psychology has been consumed by a single topic only—mental illness.” He further pointed out, “Psychology is not just the study of pathology, weakness, and damage; it is also the study of strength and virtue. Treatment is not just fixing what is broken; it is nurturing what is best.”



Hierarchy of needs

Maslow conceptualized a hierarchy of needs on five levels:

- Physiological
- Safety
- Love, affection, and belongingness
- Esteem
- Self-actualization

Mankind’s most basic and powerful needs are for physical survival, including oxygen, food, shelter, and sleep. When these needs are satisfied, the need for safety—particularly, feeling safe in one’s own home—follows.

Once survival and safety needs are met, the needs for love and a feeling of belonging to a group become paramount, since we need to give and receive affection in order to feel part of the human family.

The next level in the hierarchy is the need for self-respect and self-esteem. A stable, high evaluation of oneself, together with the esteem of others, leads to feelings of self-confidence, usefulness, and necessity in the world.

After advancing through this hierarchy of basic needs, one becomes less insecure, anxious, and selfish, and is then in a position to become self-actualized—that is, ready to fulfill one’s potential.

Characteristics of the self-actualized

Nine characteristics described by Maslow enable the self-actualized to lead a more satisfying life. Each is fleshed out in a chapter of this book.

- Shaping reality
- Creativity
- Appreciating the moment
- Autonomy
- Focusing beyond oneself
- Humor
- Human kinship
- Loving and being loved
- A propensity for peak experiences

When reading this book, it is important to keep in mind that each of us has the ability to develop these qualities.



Mt. Everest; Nepal

What self-actualization is not

To some, the term *self-actualization* may suggest a specific state of being or a destination which one reaches, like arriving at the summit of a mountain, accompanied by feelings of serenity, ecstasy, and the transcendence of human problems.

This is not the case. It is important to recognize that self-actualization is a path one hopes to follow rather than a place where one arrives. It is a process of development that does not end.

All of us experience difficulties in everyday life. Emotional traumas and setbacks are common occurrences for each of us. Concerns about health, finances, family and friends, and the future of the planet never evaporate. To me, Maslow may have underemphasized that the journey toward self-actualization has detours and road blocks.

Although many of the individuals mentioned in this book possess laudable qualities, Maslow would not necessarily consider them to be self-actualized. Therefore, rather than discuss specific people, I feel that it is more instructive to look at specific characteristics possessed by the self-actualized that can serve as a guide to living a more rewarding life.

One of the main criticisms of the concept of self-actualization has been that it leads to an overindulgent concern with one's own personal growth and fulfillment. Maslow's response? That the self-actualized focus on people and problems outside of themselves; they do not operate in a vacuum, but always in relation to people and circumstances around them. They are able to balance independence of mind with strong ties to family and friends. They understand that everyone benefits through helping others. Maslow emphasizes that the ultimate expression of one's potential comes not only from personal achievement, but also from the capacity to transcend one's self in the service of others.

Maslow's importance in my life

Since Abraham Maslow has eloquently expressed his theories in several books and in numerous journal articles, and there is no shortage of biographical books, why write another book about him?

First, he was a mentor to me. I had a close personal relationship with him. He was instrumental in my decision to attend medical school. While at Brandeis, he said to me, "Someone is going to make significant contributions in the field. Why shouldn't it be you?"

He continually pushed me to give my best effort. Success, I learned, meant that I would have to work harder than the other people surrounding me. Since reading Annie Dillard’s book, *The Writing Life*, I often think of her description of how an author writes as a metaphor for life. “Aim for the chopping block. If you aim for the wood, you will have nothing. Aim past the wood, and aim through the wood. Aim for the chopping block.” Maslow gave me the impetus to aim past the wood.

Secondly, it’s exciting to be able to express Maslow’s ideas not just in my own words, but also in the words of others, and in my photographic images from all seven continents.

German writer and philosopher Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, upon encountering the works of William Shakespeare, is quoted in *Goethe’s First Taste of Shakespeare* as saying, “When I reached the end of the first play, I stood like one who, blind from birth, finds himself suddenly blessed with sight by a beneficent Providence. In the clearest and most vivid manner I realized that my existence had been infinitely expanded.” It’s an apt description of how I felt upon first encountering Maslow’s work.

His ideas have continued to capture my imagination for almost fifty years, infinitely expanding my own world, and helping me to lead a more enriched life. This book is an attempt to express my gratitude to Abraham Maslow.

Caveats and limitations

You may not react to Maslow—or to my interpretation of his ideas—as Goethe did to Shakespeare. Looking at photographs and reading about ideas are only stepping stones to help guide us on our path.

“*The map is not the territory.*”
—ALFRED KORZBYBSKI

Taking the next step—applying Maslow’s ideas toward one’s life—is a challenge. I certainly do not pretend to have climbed very high on the ladder toward self-actualization.

“*I am struggling every minute to live what I preach.*”
—MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN



Zen garden; USA



Namib Desert; Namibia

In these pages I relate personal episodes of missteps as well as positive experiences. As painter and art teacher Robert Henri writes in *The Art Spirit*, “All any man can do is add his fragment to the whole. What he leaves is stones for others to step on or stones to avoid.”

For me, accounts of “stones to avoid” can sometimes be as instructive as describing positive characteristics of the self-actualized. To illustrate this point, a much-loved family story: A cousin of mine redecorated her house, using expensive wallpaper in her bedroom. Momentarily drawn from the room, she returned to discover her four-year-old daughter, Stephanie, together with her friend, Betsy, drawing on the newly-covered walls with indelible ink. After momentarily losing her southern-belle composure, my cousin regained control and asked her daughter what she was doing. Stephanie replied, “I was showing Betsy what not to do.”

Just the essentials

Twenty years ago, a Chicago friend of mine was about to drive to Texas, my home state. He asked if he could bring anything back for me. I requested some Wolf Brand® chili, along with a case of Pearl beer in longneck bottles. (Those were the days before the discovery of the evils of high cholesterol.) In Texas, he walked up to the checkout counter of a convenience store with a case of Wolf Brand chili, a case of Pearl beer, and, for his own pleasure, a tin of Skoal’s chewing tobacco. The cashier squinted briefly at the order, and in a thick Texan drawl, wryly pronounced, “Just the essentials.”

This is not a book about how to become self-actualized in ten easy steps. At the same time, each story and quotation in this book captured my imagination, changed how I comprehend the world, and would fit my description of “just the essentials.”



Wine jugs; Israel

This book is not directed at those who are faced with significant emotional pain. (In such cases, professional consultation might be helpful.) Instead, it is directed at those coping with life's daily challenges, while knowing that a much greater sense of satisfaction is possible.

Michael Murphy, author of *The Future of the Body: Explorations into the Further Evolution of Human Nature*, states, "Human beings have enormous undeveloped potentials. We stand at the precipice of the next great evolutionary leap, a transformation of consciousness that has the power to change every aspect of our lives."

How can we tap into that transformation of consciousness, that extra power that pushed Roger Bannister to break a four-minute mile? Maslow wrote, "A first-rate soup is better than a second-rate poem," which suggest that each of us can be an artist in our own arena. I contend that Abraham Maslow's ideas can show each of us how to unlock our full potential, leading to a more rewarding life.

"This summer I saw more colors than before."
—VINCENT VAN GOGH

