



Historical Figure: Abraham Maslow

Abraham Maslow is one of the great "hidden" influencers of contemporary thought and culture. Though his name has never achieved "household word" status, many of the *concepts* he developed and promoted are now all but taken for granted by the average person on the street. In particular, his understanding of what it means to be *human* has entered deeply into the popular consciousness, profoundly impacting the way we view *ourselves*. If you've ever been advised to "follow your dreams" or "listen to your inner voices" – if you are inclined to regard education as a fail-safe solution to social problems and human development as a steady upward climb toward godlike greatness – then you have felt the effects of Maslow's writings and teachings.

Abraham H. Maslow, one of the founders and chief proponents of the *humanistic psychology* movement, was born on April 1, 1908 in Brooklyn, New York, the first of seven siblings. His parents, uneducated Jewish immigrants from Russia, understandably stressed the importance of academic achievement as the key to a brighter future, and Abraham, a shy but intelligent boy, was driven hard to succeed in school. In the event, his diligent work as a student laid the foundation for a brilliant career as a researcher and writer. But Maslow always looked back on his childhood as a lonely and unhappy time.

In compliance with his father's wishes, Maslow studied law at the City College of New York (CCNY) for three semesters before transferring to Cornell University. Returning to CCNY, he married his first cousin, Bertha Goodman, and moved west to undertake a course in psychology at the University of Wisconsin. Neither the marriage nor the change in direction pleased his parents, but Abraham forged ahead in spite of their objections. The switch was to prove a significant step into his future – a life-choice from which there would be no turning back.

At the University of Wisconsin Maslow conducted research in primate sexuality and dominance behavior under the guidance of Professor Harry Harlow, earning his B.A. in 1930, his M.A. in 1931, and his Ph.D. in 1934. A year after graduation, he was back in New York, investigating human sexuality at Columbia University with E. L. Thorndike and Alfred Adler, an early disciple of Sigmund Freud.

In 1937 Maslow joined the faculty of Brooklyn College and came under the tutelage of anthropologist Ruth Benedict and Gestalt psychologist Max Wertheimer. This was another crucial turning point in his career; for as Maslow himself tells us, his ideas about "self-actualization" and the "hierarchy of human needs" arose directly out of his profound respect for Benedict and Wertheimer. As he explains it, "[These studies] started out as the

effort of a young intellectual to try to understand two of his teachers whom he loved, adored, and admired, and who were very, very wonderful people."¹

Over the course of time, admiration led to observation, observation to analysis, and analysis to the development of a theory. Based on what he regarded as the "secrets" of Benedict's and Wertheimer's personal success, Maslow drew up a generalized list of the attributes of "self-actualizing people." This list in turn became the nucleus of his definition of psychological health or, as he termed it, "full humanness." Eventually, these concepts provided the impetus for his crusade to establish a more thoroughly *humanistic* approach to psychology.

"Self-actualizers," in Maslow's view, are people who reach for and achieve a maximum degree of their inborn potential by 1) experiencing life vividly, 2) allowing the "true self" to emerge, 3) listening to their "inner voices," 4) focusing on problems outside themselves, 5) making responsible life choices, and 6) consciously preparing for "peak experiences," or "mystical" inward encounters with a "larger reality." All of these activities are directly associated with the higher "being needs" that occupy the upper levels of Maslow's pyramid-shaped "hierarchy of human need." According to the theory, these "being needs" – love, a sense of belonging, self-esteem, and, ultimately, self-actualization – cannot be pursued effectively until the lower needs – food, water, shelter, safety, and security – have been met. In light of this, it's not surprising that the "higher possibilities" of human nature are so infrequently realized: Maslow himself suggested that only about two percent of the world's population ever reach the pinnacle of true "self-actualization."

At this point it has to be said that there is something extremely subjective about Maslow's conclusions and the methods he used to reach them. He himself was keenly aware of his susceptibility to this particular charge. Concerning his observations of Benedict, Wertheimer, and other notable "self-actualizers," he writes, "By ordinary standards of laboratory research ... this simply was not research at all. My generalizations grew out of *my* selection of certain kinds of people. Obviously, other judges are needed."² Henry Geiger, a warm admirer of Maslow, underscores this element of subjectivity when he says, "The core of what Maslow found out about psychology he found out from himself. It is evident from his writing that he studied himself."³

Geiger continues: "Has a scientist any business getting to where he gets by such private or inexplicable means? Maybe; maybe not."⁴ It's a question well worth asking. But ultimately Maslow was undeterred and undaunted by reflections of this nature. "My confidence in my rightness," he said, "is not a scientific datum."⁵

Maslow's selective and highly personal approach to his material may have everything to do with what some have considered the greatest flaw in his thinking: a failure to take serious account of the darker side of man's nature. Having hand-chosen a number of particularly brilliant and accomplished individuals as subjects for his inquiries, it was almost inevitable that he should arrive at what Geiger calls "a fresh and encouraging view of mankind."⁶ As Maslow himself put it, "Human nature is not nearly as bad as it has

been thought to be." Elsewhere he wrote, "The fact is that people are good. Give people affection and security, and they will give affection and be secure in their feelings and behavior."⁷

Following his work at Brooklyn College, Maslow became a professor at Brandeis University, where he chaired the Psychology Department from 1951 to 1969. During this period he was also elected to serve as a Fellow of the Laughlin Institute. He spent his final years in semi-retirement in California and died of a heart attack on June 8, 1970.

¹Abraham Maslow, *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature* (New York: Penguin Compass, 1971), Chapter 3, "Self-actualizing and Beyond," 40-41.

² Ibid., 41.

³ Ibid., Introduction, xv.

⁴ Ibid., Introduction, xix.

⁵ Ibid., 41.

⁶ Ibid., Introduction, xvi.

⁷ Abraham Maslow quotes; from [Brainyquote](#).