

I knew a family growing up who were very religious. They went to church four times a week, were scrupulous about obeying the doctrines and tenets of their church. The men kept their hair cut at a specific length and couldn't wear shorts. The women couldn't cut their hair and had to wear dresses. No TV, no movies, no alcohol, no cigarettes, no card-playing, no college, no marrying outside their faith. They did all these things because they had been taught two things—they'd been taught if they didn't do these things they would go to hell, and they'd been taught that if they did do those things, they would be happy. Except they were never happy. Their father was stern and hard, the children often bullied others, the women were passive and unfulfilled. Though they had devoted their lives to religion, religion served them poorly.

Another family I knew didn't participate in religion, but seemed to me to be deeply spiritual. Because I didn't understand the difference between religion and spirituality, I didn't think of them as spiritual when I was a child, since they didn't participate in religion. But as I reflect on their lives now, they seem to me to have been deeply spiritual, fully awakened, people. They treated one another and others with respect and love. They laughed much. They engaged life fully, and were optimistic and full of hope.

For much of their history, religions told us that following their edicts would make us happy and fulfilled. Then the field of psychology emerged and we began to hear alternative formulas for happiness and fulfillment. Naturally, religion didn't care for these alternative explanations, and psychology and religion became adversarial, which is a shame since they both have something to teach us. Then, in the 1950's and 60's, a very bright man named Abraham Maslow, who, in addition to being a psychologist, also had a deep appreciation for spirituality, began studying human happiness, and identified the specific qualities of what he called self-actualized people. By self-actualized people he meant those people living at the heights of their creativity and capability. I first came across these qualities or characteristics in college, but soon forgot them. But I've rediscovered them, and we've been thinking about them. I've coined another term for self-actualized: awakened souls.

The last time we were together, we talked about how self-actualized people, or those with awakened souls, are reality-centered. They face life honestly and clearly, even when, perhaps especially when, the reality of life is painful or difficult. Today, in light of our upcoming Thanksgiving holiday, I invite us to consider the characteristic of appreciation. Self-actualized people, people with awakened souls, have a fresh, spontaneous sense of appreciation. Appreciation not just for the big things in their lives, but a deep and fruitful appreciation for life's everyday blessings and beauty.

It is easy, after all, to be grateful and appreciative for the big things in our lives. Almost everyone has the capacity for that. Whenever someone wins a gazillion million dollars in a lottery, they're all lit up. You've seen the pictures. Most all of us are excited and, at least initially, appreciative of the big blessings in life—the roofs over our heads, steady employment, good health, loving relationships. But what Maslow noticed about self-actualized people was their capacity for deep gratefulness for the everyday things in life. These are the people who can look at a rose for the millionth time and still marvel at its loveliness. Or listen to a piece of music and be deeply moved by it, though they have it heard it many times before. They appreciate the basic pleasures of life.

Not long ago, I was driving with a man down a state road in New England and the car slowed down and came to stop. I thought his car had broken down. But he didn't seem anxious. He was just looking out across a valley.

“Have you ever seen anything so beautiful?” he said.

The view was certainly pretty, but it wasn't something I would have pulled over for. I would have thought, “That's nice,” then kept on driving, and would have forgotten all about it five minutes later.

“I stop here whenever I'm on this road,” he said.

I asked him how often he drove down this road.

“Every day,” he said. “And I always pull over and look.”

“Every time?”

“Every time.”

He didn't say anything more. He just looked out over this valley. Then after several minutes, he started his car, and off we went.

If Maslow had been in that car, he would have pulled out his chart on self-actualization, and checked off the characteristic *Has a fresh, spontaneous appreciation for the basic pleasures in life.*

Think for a moment of someone you know, you shouldn't mention their name, who never seems to appreciate anything. Now some people are that way because they're immature, they don't yet have the capacity for deep gratefulness, but as they grow older, they'll get better at it. When I was 20, I wasn't grateful for anything. Everything was a burden. But hopefully you grow out of it. No, I'm thinking of people who are old enough to know better, who've had many blessings in life, but never seem grateful for any of them. What's it like to be around people like that? You want to avoid them, don't you? They have a way of weighing others down.

Then think of someone you know who lives in this state of profound gratitude, who is so appreciative of beauty and goodness and has a wonderful knack for seeing them in the most common places. Don't you love being around people like that?

My Grandma Norma was like that, appreciative of little things. I remember when I was visiting her one summer day. She was sitting on their swing underneath a maple tree in their backyard. I asked her what she was looking at and she said she was watching the birds. I was just old enough to be smart-alecky, to be full of myself, and I remember saying to my brother, “It doesn’t take much to entertain her.”

Now let’s think about that. When we say that about someone, we usually mean it in a disparaging way, don’t we? We’re implying someone is simple-minded or unsophisticated. “Doesn’t take much to entertain them.” But I’ve come to believe people who are easily entertained, whose curiosity is easily awoken, who are appreciative of the slightest things, I have come to believe they are not the most simple-minded among us, but the most thoughtful, happy, and wise. I’ve come to believe their appreciation for and wonder in the everyday aspects of life are an indication of deep intelligence and psychological well-being. They are awakened souls.

You know who I want to be? I want to be amazed by and appreciative of the smallest things. I want to be as astounded by the veiny skeleton of a leaf as I am the staggering breadth of the universe. Can we be that way together? Can we be as profoundly grateful for the smallest, slightest blessings as we are the most obvious? “In all things,” the Apostle Paul said, “give thanks.”