

How long after graduation did it take before you wish you had paid more attention to your teachers? I was thinking about that this week. I graduated from college in 1988, where I had taken a number of psychology classes. Because psychology wasn't my major, I memorized the material just long enough to pass the tests, but not enough to let the material soak in. This is why, when you want counseling, you go see Jennifer instead of me.

Then last week I was researching Abraham Maslow's work on *self-actualization* and it was wonderful, just stunning. Maslow identified fifteen characteristics that happy, fulfilled people have in common. I had studied them in college, but didn't store them in the long-term memory part of my brain. I put them in that part of our brains where we store the things we only need to remember for a short while, so just as soon as I passed the test, I forget them. But now I'm rediscovered them. As are, it turns out, lots of other people, who are beginning to appreciate Maslow's work and its contribution to human happiness and spiritual fulfillment. When Maslow first began talking about self-actualization, several of his peers criticized him for being too spiritual, too mystical. You'll remember that psychology and theology didn't get along very well back in the old days. They were antagonistic. But now we're beginning to appreciate the similarities between healthy spirituality and psychological well-being.

Maslow coined this term *self-actualization* and said that when someone was self-actualized they were living at their utmost capacity, at the height of their creativity. In motor talk, they are people who are running on all their cylinders. Their lives are in sync. All the pistons are firing in the right order. We all know what that feels like, because most of us have experienced periods of self-actualization. Some people experience self-actualization more often than other people. The Dalai Lama, no doubt, experiences self-actualization more often than I do, for instance. But we all have moments of it.

What I would like to do, in the months ahead, is invite us to think about the characteristics of self-actualized people. But I would like us to look at it through the lens of the Spirit, since that is how we view the world, so instead of using the term self-actualized, I want to talk instead of having an *awakened soul*. Each week, we'll cover one of Maslow's characteristics and the spiritual dimension or equivalent of it. I'm going to name those now, just so you can begin thinking about them.

People who have awakened souls:

1. Have a clear perception of reality and can tolerate ambiguity.
2. Accept themselves and others.
3. Are natural and spontaneous.
4. When they have problems, they focus on the problem, not themselves.

5. Are comfortable with solitude.
6. Think and act independently, even if it defies cultural norms.
7. Have a spirit of appreciation, even for the basic things in life.
8. Have transcendent moments, or mystical experiences.
9. Have affection and sympathy for others.
10. Their significant relationships are few, but deep.
11. Show respect for all people.
12. Are strongly ethical.
13. Have a sense of humor, but not at the expense of others.
14. Are inventive and creative.
15. Are open to new experiences.

Did you listen carefully to those qualities?

When I think of everything I want for my sons and the people in our meeting, those qualities, those characteristics, come to mind. So as I was reading about them, I asked myself, “Is there anything I can do to help others be this way?” Well, yes, I suppose we can all do things that will point others in the right direction, that will show others the way. However, unless they want to have an awakened soul, there are real limits to what we can do. You can’t make someone be an awakened soul, after all. That’s something we have to want for ourselves. It doesn’t matter how bad someone wants it for us, we must want it for ourselves.

I want to lift off a little pressure from you. Please don't think that being self-actualized, or in our language, having an awakened soul, is a prerequisite for God's love. Don't for a moment believe God loves people more if they have awakened souls. Or that a self-actualized person is more valuable to God than one who isn't. Absolutely not. Because this is all a matter of degrees. There are very few people walking around who have fully awakened souls. It's kind of like baseball. If you hit .500, that's pretty darn good. It might even get you in the Hall of Fame.

Nevertheless, we keep these qualities before us, we keep them at the center of our attention, because we know that even if we do not reach them, we will be happier, better people for having aspired to them.

When I was 18 years, I left home to walk the Appalachian Trail. I didn't make it. But for the three days I tried, I had a ball. There is joy in trying, and happiness even when our highest ideals are not realized.