

One day last month, I was working at my desk and the phone rang. It was a younger man wanting to talk with me, asking if he could come over. We set up a time to meet later in the day, and he came by. It was a warm day, so we went out to our screen house to talk. He was thinking of writing a book and wanted to know if I would publish it.

I explained the difference between writers and publishers, told him I was a writer, not a publisher, then asked what his book would be about.

He said he wasn't sure, but that he could be done with it in a few weeks. He asked again if I would publish it, so he could get the money and buy a house.

I explained again that I wasn't a publisher, and that the chances of his writing one book and being able to buy a house were astronomical, but he didn't seem to understand that.

I've known this young man since he was born, and as we were talking, my heart was breaking for him, because I could tell he really wanted to be able to buy a house and have some measure of financial security, and it was just so elusive. The year before, he'd wanted to open a chain of restaurants, and the year before that, he'd watched *The Apprentice* on television and wanted to be the next Donald Trump.

Because he spends so much of his time dreaming impossible dreams, and devotes no time at all to the possible, to dreams more likely to happen, to reality, he never moves forward.

I have known many people like him. Wives who think their abusive husbands will wake up one day magically transformed. Parents who think their irresponsible grown children will, with one more loan or word of counsel, become wise and mature. Business owners who persist in believing the world will beat a path to their door. Churches so wedded to a dying, non-sensical ideology they cannot perceive any other world view, no matter how obvious. Entire nations so devoted to a political philosophy they are blind to its faults.

Last week, we began thinking about Abraham Maslow and his work on self-actualization. To be self-actualized is to live at our highest capacity, to live at our utmost creativity, to have all the pistons firing in sync. Maslow called this self-actualization, but in this sermon series, I called it having an *awakened soul*. After decades of studying happy, productive, fulfilled people, Abraham Maslow discerned they shared 15 characteristics, one of which was a *clear perception of reality*. By this, he meant they have a high degree of self-understanding, they see themselves as they truly are, and they see the world around them as it is, not as they wish it were. They face the circumstances of life clearly and unflinchingly, especially when those circumstances are difficult or painful.

Why is this important? Because no situation can be changed or improved until the reality of it is acknowledged.

I remember last year when the doctor told me I was pre-diabetic. What did I do? I got depressed, so went to the Dairy Queen and ordered a Blizzard. A large one, because I was really depressed.

Went back to the doctor six months later. He said, "Congratulations, the last time I saw you, you were pre-diabetic. Now you have full-blown diabetes."

I was mystified. I went home to Joan and told her I had diabetes.

"How in the world did that happen?" I asked her.

"You thought you were exempt from the rules of health, so you didn't change your diet," she said. She said a few other things too, but I'm not going to repeat them.

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There are many reasons we don't acknowledge reality.

Sometimes it is too painful. There might be a gaping wound in our lives we feel is too tender to address.

Sometimes we don't acknowledge reality because we're afraid of hurting someone we love, though our honesty might contribute to their well-being.

Sometimes we avoid facing reality because it would mean leaving our religion, or political party, or job, or marriage, or the people with whom we associate.

Sometimes we avoid facing reality because it would mean a change in lifestyle we are unwilling to accept—a new diet, the cessation of a harmful habit, a reduction in spending, even the acceptance of our mortality and our eventual deaths.

I was talking with a man not long ago who mentioned his parents had died the month before.

“Were they in an accident?” I asked.

“No, they ended their lives purposefully.”

They had each been diagnosed with terminal illnesses, had always lived simply, thought it wasteful to use resources prolonging their lives given their age and prognosis. They lived in a state that allowed assisted suicide. They consulted with their children and grandchildren, then a week later gather with their family and friends, expressed their love for each one, then died surrounded by the people they loved.

I asked their son what it was like. “Sad, of course, but also meaningful. Mom and Dad had always taught us how to live, then they taught us how to die, with courage, with love, with acceptance.”

Our willingness and ability to face life and death, head on, to face reality, not only helps *us* in the tough times, it empowers others to do the same. Thus did Jesus say, “Know the truth, face the truth, and let the truth set you free.”