

I have a friend who is gets upset whenever something out of the ordinary happens. When it began to snow this past Thursday, he phoned me from work, yelling about the snow. “Doesn’t it know I have to drive home?”

I said, “Probably not, snow being inanimate and not possessing a brain.”

He’s been like this as long as I’ve known him. When something happens he hasn’t counted on, he falls apart.

Now he’s on Facebook and posts his rants. He rages on about snow, rain, the flu, cloudy days, his children for not doing what he thinks they ought to do, his parents for not doing what he thinks they ought to do, the school system, the government—both state and federal, the Indianapolis Colts. Last Saturday, he was in an absolute tizzy and wanted me to go to Foxborough, Massachusetts and break Tom Brady’s right arm.

If everything goes just as he had hoped and planned, he is fine. But if even the tiniest anomaly, the smallest glitch, occurs, he falls apart. This is how neurotic he is—he lives alone, and has plastic covers on his furniture.

We’ve been talking about the great psychologist Abraham Maslow and his concept of self-actualization, or what we’re calling, people with awakened souls. Maslow was a genius. When all the other psychologists were studying people who were mentally ill, Maslow decided to study people who were mentally well, who lived at their highest capacity and utmost creativity.

He studied people who were happy, who enjoyed life, who loved others and were deeply loved by others. He asked himself, "What do these people have in common?" And he discovered fifteen traits or characteristics. If we acquaint ourselves with those traits, we can cultivate them. We might not be able to master them, but Maslow believed that even the attempt to possess these traits will make us happier, or what he called self-actualized, and what we're calling "being an awakened soul."

Maslow said that one trait of mentally-well people was that they were natural and spontaneous. They are authentic, genuine people, able to roll with the punches, and approach life with a certain flexibility, a certain elasticity. They don't put on airs, they aren't rigid or set in their ways. When the circumstances of life change, they are able to adapt and move forward. They are natural and spontaneous.

Now I've been thinking about this trait for several months. Ever since I first started thinking about Maslow. As I studied each trait or characteristic, I would ask myself why that trait was important. Why are naturalness and spontaneity essential for our happiness? The answer eluded me until last Sunday when Joan and I went up to Methodist Hospital to visit a friend whose father had suddenly and inexplicably collapsed.

As we walked into the waiting room for the Neuro-Critical Care Unit, I thought to myself, “I bet there isn’t one person in this waiting room who last week thought they would have a family member in the Neuro-Critical Care Unit at Methodist Hospital.”

But then there came a stroke, or an aneurysm, or tumor, and here they sat. Just that quickly, their lives changed. It can happen to anyone. Sitting in that waiting room, it occurred to me why spontaneity was so important. Because life is spontaneous. And if you go through life absolutely wedded to one vision, one plan, and are overwhelmed with every deviation or anomaly, you are going to be perpetually miserable, because life is one deviation and anomaly after another. You know it is. Think back to when you were eighteen years-old and just starting your adult life. Think of the vision you had, the life and future you imagined for yourself. Did your life unfold just as you had hoped?

The saddest and angriest I have ever been have been in those moments when the circumstances of life paid no heed to my grand design. That’s why Maslow said if you want to live at your peak, you must first be natural or genuine, and spontaneous, you must learn to roll with the punches, adapt to your changed reality, and move forward with vigor and purpose.

Think about the religious and political leaders in the time of Jesus. Now think about their relationship with Jesus. Think how often he would begin a lesson by saying, “You have heard it said...” It’s almost all of the fifth chapter of Matthew’s gospel, a good portion of Jesus’s sermon on the mount. “You have heard it said...” Now what was Jesus doing there? He was acknowledging his listeners understanding of the world, he was acknowledging their worldview. “You have heard this or that said. You’ve been taught this thing or that thing. You’ve been told this thing or that thing was true.” But then what would Jesus say? Do you remember? He would say, “But I say to you...” Then he would give them a new definition of reality and because they were unable to shift their worldviews and mindsets, they became angry and antagonistic and eventually murderous. And not just the religious folks, but the power brokers, and finally even the common folks. Because they could not or would not adjust to a new world and a new way of living. Our reluctance and refusal to adjust, our inability to be spontaneous, to be elastic, diminishes our lives and the lives of others.

Life is spontaneous. There are 60-90 trillion cells in the average adult body. If even one cell departs from its intended purpose, your life could change dramatically. Life is spontaneous. So be ready. Dreams are a wonderful thing to have, they provide a map on the road of life, but cars have steering wheels, and so should you, for life is full of unexpected detours.