

Now that I have a smartphone, I've been asking people about their favorite apps. App is short for application, and is a program you can download to your phone, often for free, that will provide a specialized service. I have a weather app, for instance, that tells me the weather in Danville, Paoli, and San Antonio, where Sam is stationed. There are tens of thousands of apps, some of whose functions are amazing. There is an app, for instance, that no matter where you are in the world, will tell you where the nearest Dunkin' Donuts is. If that is not proof there is a God, I don't know what is!

So I was talking with a friend the other day and he asked me if I had the Flipboard app. It's an app that compiles the most interesting stories from newspapers and magazines around the globe and downloads them to your smartphone so you can read them. It even allows you to pick the kind of stories you want to read. There are world stories, Europe stories, Africa stories, America stories. All of which I realize can be interesting, but what I was looking for were Danville, Indiana stories. Specifically stories about us and our immediate neighbors. I wanted to read about things that directly affected me right now. The Olympics began last week and I've not paid the slightest bit of attention to them, but I have been absolutely consumed with turning Sam's bedroom into a guest bedroom. I've even gone on my Flipboard app to see if there are guest bedroom stories.

Do you have this tendency, too? Something terrible can happen half a world away and you hear about it and think to yourself, “Wow, I’m glad that didn’t happen to me,” and you go right on. Tsunami in Indonesia, earthquake in Iran, typhoon in Calcutta. Boy, that stinks, but then you go right on and barely think of it anymore. Then *you* get a head cold and it ruins your life. You’re in a rotten mood and you complain to everyone. It’s like the definition of a recession and a depression. A recession is when your neighbor loses his job, a depression is when you lose yours. We take what happens to us much more seriously than what happens to others. Now some of this is hardwired, we can’t escape it. It’s part of the evolutionary baggage of self-preservation.

But, you know you are a self-actualized, soul-awakened person when you begin to focus less upon yourself, and more upon the problems beyond yourself.

Of all the traits of self-actualized people that Abraham Maslow talked about—you’ll remember we’ve been discussing the characteristics of self-actualized or soul-awakened people—this trait of focusing on problems outside of yourself is a little bit different than the other traits we’ve considered. And it is different in this regard: most of the other traits are things we learn as we age. Age and experience are our allies. As we grow older, we are more able to develop these qualities. Time is on our side. It’s one benefit of growing older. If we do it right, we become more self-actualized, more soul-awakened.

But this trait of focusing on problems outside of ourselves might be easier when we are younger and more easily inspired. I remember when Spencer was 12 or 13 and he'd been saving his money for something, I can't remember what, and we went downtown to Circle Center Mall. As we approached the store, a homeless man was sitting on the sidewalk. He looked at Spencer, Spencer looked at him, and then Spencer pulled out his billfold, took out all his money, and gave it to the man.

I walk past homeless people all the time, and when I was younger I took their suffering very personally. I remember being deeply troubled by it. But now I'm accustomed to it. I still feel sorry for homeless people, but I wouldn't spontaneously give them all I had. I tend now to focus on myself and my own needs. This isn't something I'm proud of. It's an honest admission of what I've become. My tendency toward self-focus has increased as I've aged. Now Abraham Maslow would readily admit that self-care is important, but he would hasten to add, "Be careful. Make sure self-care doesn't blind you to the greater problems of humanity."

As some people age, they are able to shed this pre-occupation with self and begin living creatively and generously for others. They address and endeavor to solve significant problems. They devote their remaining years to improving the world. Their arena of concern expands. Then there are other people who, as they age, shrink. Their area of concern dwindles down to self.

The lives of soul-awakened people are always expanding to include others, to care for others.

You know the kind of people I admire most? The people who could be excused for focusing on themselves but choose not to.

The retired teacher who could be excused for resting and relaxing after a long career, but volunteers to tutor children.

The lady who works hard, earns little, but always has room for one more person at her table.

Fathers and mothers, whose days are full of children and work and home care, who can be unswervingly counted upon to lend a hand.

The man fighting cancer, sick with nausea, who drives someone else to the hospital.

The elderly couples who have been married sixty years, who have drank deeply from the cup of marriage and family, who show up and speak up when others are denied the right to marry.

The child who has been treated so unkindly, but in her brokenness becomes a friend to all.

How big is your life? How wide is your reach?