



Montessori, Maslow, *and* Self-Actualization

By David R. Weinberg

What must never be forgotten

by the Montessori teacher, or by any teacher of young children, is that his or her *primary* task, his or her *primary* obligation, his or her *primary* sacred duty is not the teaching of the “three Rs” but that of nurturing the psychological health of the child. Montessori stated it very clearly: “Education must not be understood in the sense of teaching, but of assisting the psychological development of the child” (1965, p. 28). Upon this single sentence rests the entire superstructure of her methodology. And as Montessorians, we can proudly point to this single sentence, this new and cogent definition of education, as her monumental contribution to humanity.

Every element of Montessori methodology is designed for the care of the soul, which for Maria Montessori begins from the moment of birth. This is her description of welcoming the newborn and her advice to us:

He is like a Pilgrim who comes from somewhere far distant, worn out and wounded. . . . The child should be picked up by means of a light, yielding support, like a soft hammock. . . . But the care of the new-born should not be limited to preserving it from death, to isolating it from infection. . . . There are the problems of the “psychic care

of the child” from the very moment of birth. . . . The new-born is not only a body ready to function as a body, but a spiritual embryo with latent psychic capacities. . . . [T]he psychic life of the child needs a defence and an environment analogous to the sheaths and veils that nature has set round the physical embryo. . . (1965, p. 16).

This concern for the soul is laced through all Montessori’s pedagogic writings and is at the core of her “prepared environment.” With the great variety of didactic materials in the classrooms, teacher concerns are sensory motor development, language development, math concepts, and so on. But while these are the direct goals of the materials, Montessori keeps emphasizing the indirect yet profound outcomes of the accompanying spontaneous activity, concentration, and repetition, all of which are powerful internal psychic values. So despite the great profusion of the didactic materials, she reminds her teachers that the “prepared environment” is *not* primarily designed for academic learning, as important as that surely is, but rather designed for psychic health.

The terminology we use for such an education is that of educating the “whole child.” What we really mean, however, is an education for the “whole adult.”

But what does the “whole adult” mean? What goals are we laboring toward? What kind of person are we hop-

ing for? What are the characteristics of such a person?

The eminent psychologist who described the “whole adult” was Abraham Maslow (1908–1970). Maslow used a more technical term, “The Self-Actualized Individual,” and he charted the necessary fulfillment of needs that lead one toward self-actualization. As opposed to Freud and the Freudians, Maslow studied psychologically healthy individuals in order to ascertain the determinants that brought about their state of psychological health.

Maslow’s contribution was as profound and monumental as Maria Montessori’s. Here was a new psychology, bold in its break from traditional thinking. Maslow himself stated its vision and purpose: “Freud supplied to us the sick half of psychology and we must now fill it out with the healthy half” (1999, p. 7). Maslow’s life’s work was filling in the other half. His book *Motivation and Personality* (1954) began a philosophical revolution for psychologists out of which grew humanistic psychology. It changed views of human nature from those of the Freudians and the behaviorists who believe that man is a conditioned or tension-reducing organism to one in which man is motivated from within to realize his full potentialities.

Others worked with the same worldview: the Adlerians, the Rogerians, Goldstein, Horney, Allport, Murray, the Gestalt therapists, the neo-Freudians and post-Freudians, and many others, and the group of theories that developed became known as “third-force psychology.”

In his preface to the second edition of *Toward a Psychology of Being* (a continuation of *Motivation and Personality*), Maslow grew ecstatic, and deservedly so. He wrote:

I must confess that I have come to think of this humanist trend in psychology as a revolution in the truest, oldest sense of the word, the sense in which Galileo, Darwin, Einstein, Freud, and Marx made revolutions, i.e., new ways of perceiving and thinking, new images of man and of society, new conceptions of ethics and of values, new directions in which to move” (1999, p. xxxix).

We see here that Maslow’s humanity mirrors that of Maria Montessori’s. For Maslow, “Freud’s picture of man was clearly unsuitable, leaving out as it did [man’s] aspirations, his realizable hopes, his godlike qualities” (1999, p. 16). And like Montessori, who had visions of a “new man,” a “new society,” and a “new world” (1972), Maslow also had utopian visions of a “Eupsychia” in which all its inhabitants would all be self-actualized—a little like the transcendentalists’ dream of an ideal community (1954, p. 350).

Though Maslow may not have been acquainted with

Montessori’s work, for there is no mention of her that I know of in his writings, I believe he would have warmed to her theories, for there are so many parallels in their thinking. His definition of education is actually the same as hers, using different language: “More positively oriented education concerns itself more with the growth and future self-actualization of the child” (1954, p. 365). What could be closer to Montessori’s definition of education than “assisting the psychological development of the child”?

Maslow, like Montessori, understood the self-constructing phenomena of the child. Montessori wrote: “The human personality forms itself by itself, like the embryo, and the child becomes the creator of the man, the father of the man” (1965, p. 32). Maslow wrote: “We can no longer think of the person as . . . determined only by forces external to the person. The person is . . . his own main determinant. Every person is, in part, ‘his own project’ and makes himself” (1999, p. 214).

There are far too many parallels to document here: on motivation, environment, spontaneous activity, creativity, guiding instincts, etc. But both these scientists poured their creative energies into finding the key to psychologically healthy individuals and their cumulative effect toward creating the Good Society.

As for the determinants that lead to self-actualization, Maslow’s path of fulfilling physiological and psychological needs has been traditionally diagrammed as a pyramid, called The Hierarchy of Needs. At the base of the pyramid are the physiological needs; when these are fulfilled the individual moves up the ladder to satisfy the psychological needs, or “growth needs,” toward self-actualization, at the apex of the pyramid.

Maslow tells us that as a need is satisfied, it largely disappears, and the individual begins new motivation, new focus, to fulfill the next higher need of the pyramid, though it also should be understood that human beings function in less mechanical ways, so that need satisfaction can be fluid, simultaneous, and sometimes regressive.

Biological and Physiological Needs

The basic needs of life, of course, are the biological and physiological needs for air, food, shelter, sleep, and (for the adult) sex. In countries and situations in which poverty and hunger reign, the daily focus, the individual’s focus, can only be on the acquisition of food and shelter. The poverty we see, or should see in those tragic circumstances, is not only human misery, but also human waste of personal achievement, growth, and fulfillment and its effect on the society in which it exists. No doubt, the waste of human talent affects the whole world.

Safety Needs

Safety needs occupy the next rung of the ladder. Here, Maslow's descriptions are pure Montessori theory, especially in her chapter "Orientation through Order" from *The Secret of Childhood*. In this chapter, Montessori relates how the sudden appearance of an umbrella in an infant's room set the infant crying until the baby's mother, "who knew something of a child's psychological symptoms, took the umbrella from the table and carried it out of the room" (1965, p. 51).

Maslow states: "From . . . observations, we may generalize and say that the average child in our society generally prefers a safe, orderly, predictable, organized world, which he can count on. . . ." How descriptive of Montessori theory, and another instance of the "prepared environment" playing a profound psychological role—the role of fulfilling psychic safety needs in addition to its academic role.

When the child's world becomes less and less predictable, from parents quarreling, domestic violence, separation, or divorce, the result may be a lifelong psychological quest for safety at the expense of self-actualization. The need to feel safe can be as dominant and obsessive as the need for food. It can monopolize all of an individual's energies and attention.

We can better understand the safety need from those in whom it has not been fulfilled. In some neurotic adults, especially the obsessive-compulsive, psychologists have observed their fear of the unexpected and the unfamiliar. "The healthy taste for the novel and unknown," says Maslow, "is missing or at a minimum in the average neurotic" (1954, p. 89).

Who can measure the psychological damage to personal growth after towns and villages are destroyed by war, rape, and civil insurrection? Fortunately, in our society, safety needs are in general satisfied, though in our current economic crisis, fears increase for personal safety, job loss, and unemployment, loss of pension and old age security, loss of homes and shelter, each of which can become for some an overwhelming, dominant focus with psychological ramifications.

Belongingness and Love Needs

There is an absolutely beautiful section in Montessori's *Secret of Childhood*, titled "Intelligence of Love," an expression she took from Dante (1965, pp. 104–110). She writes: "The whole labour of life, which fulfils itself subject to its law and brings beings into harmony, reaches consciousness under the form of LOVE" (1965, p. 104).

Montessori speaks of a child's love both of the environment, with its objects that intellectually and spiritually nourish him, and for the adult, who binds him by a "mystical love." She admonishes us because we usually speak

of how parents and teachers love the child, but seldom of how "the child loves the grown-up beyond anything" (1965, p. 107). So that when love is thwarted or denied, Maslow tells us, this need "is the most commonly found core of maladjustment and more severe psychopathology" (1954, p. 89).

An endless cycle of the thwarting of love in the child can begin with the adult's lack of understanding, lack of sensitivity, or lack of what Montessori calls "the intelligence of love." The child, she says, "is disposed to obey the adult, in the very roots of his spirit. Only when the adult asks him to deny the commands of the inner impulse urging him to creation by unalterable rules and laws, does it become impossible for the child to obey." Disobedience begins and adults tend to defend themselves against the child. "The naughtiness and disobedience of the child," she continues, "are the expression of a vital conflict between his creative urge and his love for the grown-up who does not understand him" (1965, p. 106).

In the adult, Maslow lists interesting contrasts between "the love for the Being of another person" which he labels B-love, and "deficiency love, or D-love, which is love need and selfish love." The most interesting contrast in his list is the following: "The truest, most penetrating perception of the other is made possible by B-love. . . . So impressive is this, and so often validated by other people's later experience, that far from accepting the common platitude that love makes people blind, I become more and more inclined to think of the *opposite* as true, namely that non-love makes us blind" (1999, p. 47).

Esteem Needs

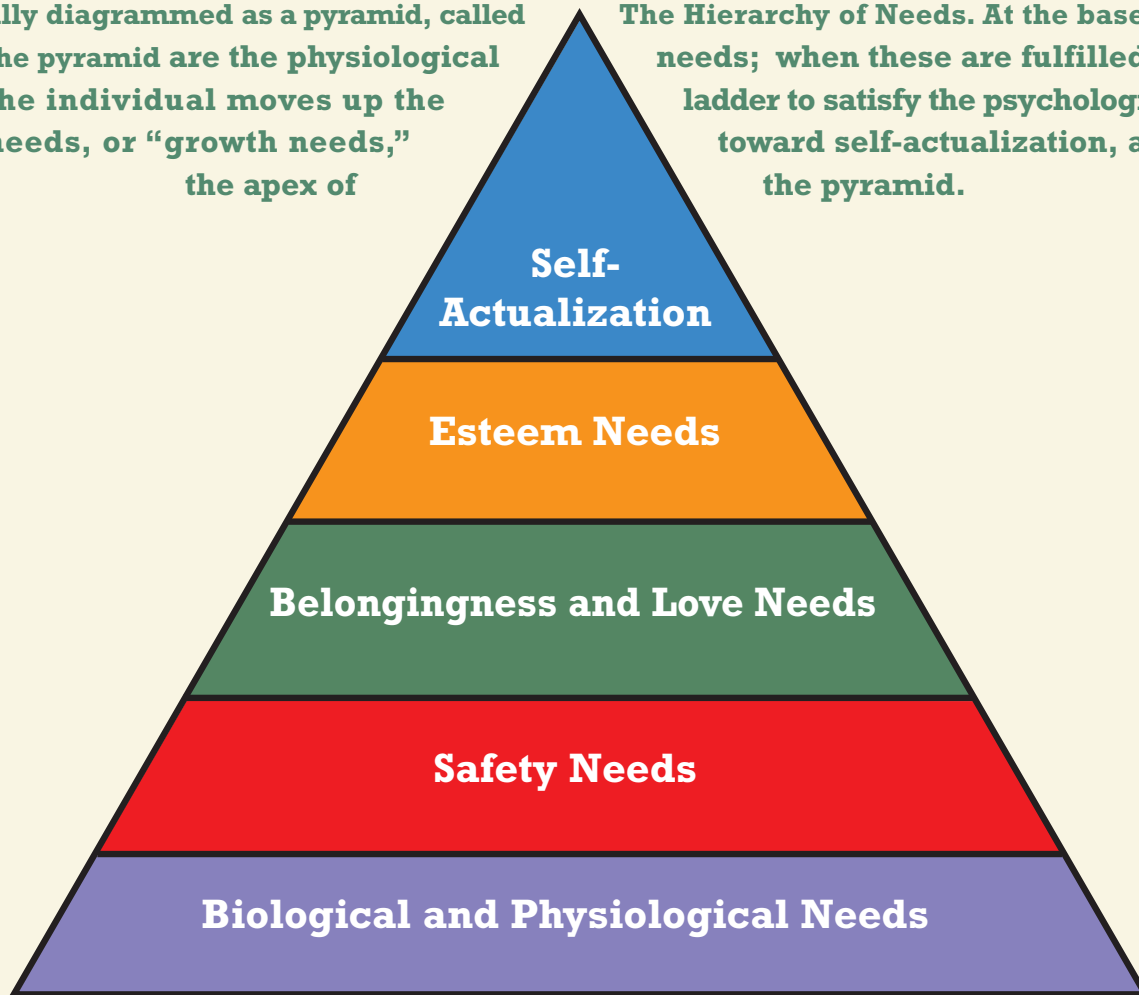
Parents and teachers must realize the importance of self-esteem, self-respect, and esteem from others. Without these come devastating feelings of inferiority and worthlessness. No one can move toward self-actualization harboring such feelings.

As I stated earlier, that "every element of Montessori methodology is designed for the care of the soul," we can turn again to the "prepared environment" for the construction of a firm foundation of self-esteem in the child. For example, while the child is engaged in placing cylinders in the cylinder block, and the teacher is focused on its "primary" purpose of refining the child's perception, the even more important "happening" is that with each insertion by those little hands of a cylinder into an aperture of the block come the internal feelings of "I can," "I'm able," "I am worthy!" Thus, unnoticed, we provide for the incremental building of self-esteem.

Reading Abraham Maslow on this subject, we think we are reading a Montessori text:

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The Hierarchy of Needs. At the base of needs; when these are fulfilled ladder to satisfy the psychological toward self-actualization, at the pyramid.



The healthily spontaneous child, in his spontaneity, from within out, in response to his own inner Being, reaches out to the environment in wonder, interest, and expresses whatever skills he has. . . . If he can choose these experiences which are validated by the experience of delight, then he can return to the experience, repeat it, savor it to the point of repletion, satiation or boredom. . . . Such experiences not only mean moving on, but have a feedback effect on the Self, in feeling certainty, . . . capability, mastery, self-trust, self-esteem. (1999, p. 65)

Self-Actualization

Self-actualization is a very rich and multifaceted subject, on which Maslow expended much labor to illuminate. Here I shall try to give only its broadest outlines.

A complete definition of self-actualization is difficult, but in its simplest terms, we can say that self-actualizing people have psychological health. That is, they have ful-

filled physiological needs and psychological or "growth needs," and can (1) begin fully living one's "real self," (2) labor toward fulfilling one's life mission and potential, and (3) conduct themselves with the character and characteristics of a fully mature human being.

First, living one's "real self" means being psychologically free. This takes many forms. It means acceptance of one's self and one's shortcomings without guilt, shame, or anxiety. It means living with zest. Maslow describes self-actualizing people who:

tend to be good and lusty animals, hearty in their appetites and enjoying themselves mightily without regret or shame or apology. They seem to have a uniformly good appetite for food; they seem to sleep well; they seem to enjoy their sexual lives without unnecessary inhibition. . . .

With this freedom comes also spontaneity. "Their behavior

is marked by simplicity and naturalness, and lacks artificiality or straining for effect" (1954, p. 207).

Secondly, fulfilling one's life's mission is what Maslow calls "problem centering." "Our subjects," he writes, "are in general strongly focused on problems outside themselves. . . ." They are not "ego centered" as generally insecure people are, and they usually have a life mission. And there is even a deeper characteristic to problem centering. Maslow found these individuals "concerned with basic issues and eternal questions of the type we have learned to call philosophical or ethical . . ." and as a result they "impart a certain serenity and lack of worry over immediate concerns that make life easier not only for themselves but for all who are associated with them" (1954, pp. 211–212).

Thirdly, the character and characteristics of fully mature human beings are perhaps the most important aspects of self-actualization. It seems that the quality of life on this planet, except for natural disasters, depends almost entirely on the character of human beings who inhabit it, from the small kind or unkind gestures of everyday living to the enormous consequences of ethical or unethical acts by political leaders.

Maria Montessori understood this deeply. In the preface to her book *Education and Peace*, she wrote: "An extremely important social task lies before us: actuating man's value, allowing him to attain the maximum development of his energies, truly preparing him to bring about a different form of human society on a higher plane" (1972, p. xiv).

What are the characteristics of the self-actualized? Maslow employed a German word invented by Alfred Adler, another of the important third-force psychologists. The word is *gemeinschaftsgefühl*, which Maslow says

is the only one available that well describes the flavor of the feelings for mankind expressed by self-actualizing subjects. They have for human beings in general a deep feeling of identification, sympathy, and affection. . . . Because of this, they have a genuine desire to help the human race. (1954, p. 217)

We might call this their democratic characteristics. This *gemeinschaftsgefühl* spills over into other democratic traits. Maslow found his self-actualizing subjects to be "friendly with anyone of suitable character regardless of class, education, political belief, race, or color" (1954, p. 220).

Related to this characteristic are their perceptions of right and wrong. "They rarely showed in their day-to-day living the chaos, the confusion, the inconsistency, or conflict that are so common in the average person's ethical dealings. . . . These individuals are strongly ethical, they have definite moral standards . . ." (1954, p. 220).

In addition, they show great indignation at injustice and are intolerant of dishonesty, cruelty, and hypocrisy. Perhaps these are the more important character traits of the fully mature.

In their daily lives, the self-actualized exhibit some interesting qualities. One of the more endearing is that they exhibit a non-hostile sense of humor. That is, they do not laugh at others' expense or make people laugh by diminishing another person. Their humor is rather sophisticated and philosophical; they poke fun at the human race, not at individuals.

In daily pursuits, although they may not exhibit the genius of a Mozart or a Michelangelo, they appear to be very creative. It seems to Maslow that this stems from their having retained the naïve creativeness of children; whatever they do is done with spirit and joy.

Among all Maslow's lengthy works on this subject, I believe this is his best description:

Self-actualizing people have a wonderful capacity to appreciate again and again, freshly and naively, the basic goods of life, with awe, pleasure, wonder, and even ecstasy, however stale these experiences may have become to others. Thus for such a person, any sunset may be as beautiful as the first one, any flower may be of breath-taking loveliness, even after he has seen a million flowers. The thousandth baby he sees is just as miraculous a product as the first one he saw. He remains as convinced of his luck in marriage thirty years after his marriage and is as surprised by his wife's beauty when she is sixty as he was forty years before. For such people, even the casual workaday, moment-to-moment business of living can be thrilling, exciting, and ecstatic. . . ." (1954, p. 214).

Maslow declared this ecstasy as a phenomenon that can happen to anyone, but in self-actualizing individuals seems to happen more frequently and more intensely. This phenomenon is called "peak experiences" or "moments of highest happiness and fulfillment." They result from

the parental experience, the mystic or oceanic or nature experience, the aesthetic perception, the creative moment, the therapeutic or intellectual insight, the orgasmic experience, certain forms of athletic fulfillment . . . It is felt to be so valuable an experience, so great a revelation, that even to attempt to justify it takes away from its dignity and worth. (1959, p. 43)

Conclusion

It is in the nature of the human being to strive toward self-actualization: toward a healthy psyche, toward psychological serenity, toward personal fulfillment. This is the

new vision and understanding of man that Maslow and the third-force psychologists gave us. It becomes derailed when basic needs are not fulfilled. Even for those who are fortunate to have their needs fulfilled, it is still always a work in progress. Human psychological health is difficult to measure exactly. Being “self-actualized” is an ideal state, perhaps unattainable, like any other ideal state. Certainly self-actualizing individuals are not saints and have imperfections, as do all human beings.

But what is most important for teachers and parents of young children is their duty to foster self-actualization. Abraham Maslow and Maria Montessori both understood that the totality of a child’s environment, meaning things visible and invisible, concrete and abstract, must offer the raw materials for fulfilling needs. The child will spontaneously absorb those raw materials for his or her unique growth.

Collectively, through self-actualized children, society will follow, because these children “have led loving lives, have loved and been loved. Furthermore, they are *now* loving people” (1954, p. 347).

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