

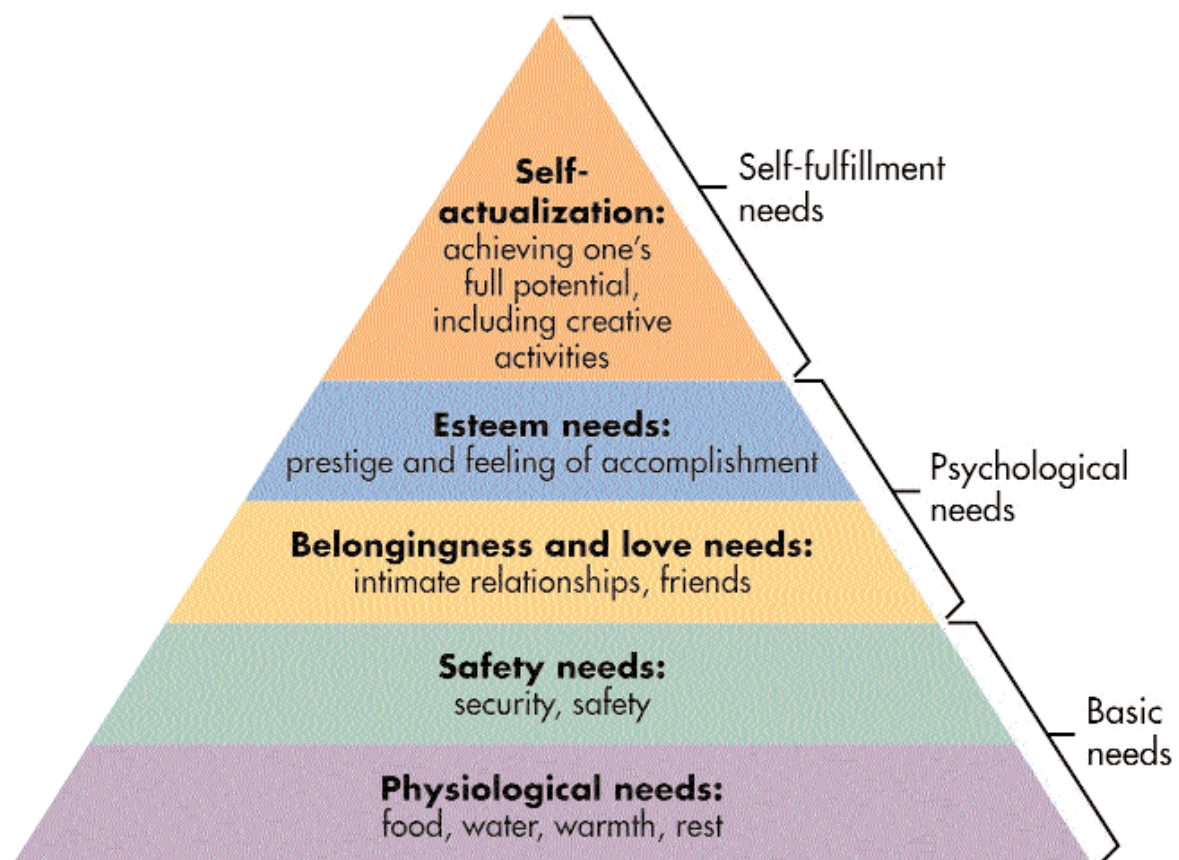
Maslow Had It Wrong

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By Lenny Cacchio

LEE'S SUMMIT, Mo—Among the great insights into human development is the framework known as The Hierarchy of Needs. Developed by psychologist Abraham Maslow, it's a theory that attempts to describe a hierarchy of needs that we must be progressing through in order to reach our full potential.

His Hierarchy of Needs can be illustrated like this:



According to his theory, the basic needs, which are those at the bottom of the pyramid, must be fulfilled first before a person can begin the journey toward self-actualization, which we can think of as reaching your full potential as a moral and productive human being.

By way of illustration, if you were lost in the woods, your first concern would not be prestige in the eyes of your peers. You would be more interested in finding food and water. Your second concern might be to find shelter.

Maslow's insights are worth studying, but I am going to be so bold as to disagree with the eminent professor in a few particulars, and I'm going to illustrate it by way of a not so fictitious example.

Recently someone told me about an institution of higher learning that has as a point of pride something that seems to have dropped out of vogue these last few decades. I'm declining to reveal name of the institution in question because I have not been able to verify for certain what I have been told, so for the time being we'll refer to the university as Classic University, or CU.

Supposedly CU advertises a high dropout rate (I'm told it's nearly 50 percent) as a point of pride. It might be puzzling why the school would think this is a good thing, but in my opinion this could be the best favor they can offer their current and prospective students.

This school's specialty is one of the creative arts, and it is not an inexpensive place to get an education. The program is rigorous, and it is not just because of the course of study.

Their honest and what some might take as brutal critiquing of student performance is viewed as a necessary part of the educational experience. Notice! Critiquing is honest, which can sometimes in our world be viewed as brutal.

This might not be the politically correct way to run an institution in these days of the Participation Trophy.

But I would submit that this not only helps the talented students stretch higher (and thus get the most out of their education dollar), and it can also help the lesser talented to see that maybe their \$50,000-per-year education investment might provide a better return on capital in another field.

For those who are mediocre at best, is it fair to them if the teacher worries about building up their self-esteem while at the same time knowing that their gifts lie in a different direction and that the path they are on will never allow them to become self-actualized?

Should they continue to be stroked when what they really need is some guidance that will allow them to find their own unique gifts, talents, and abilities that will set them on their correct path to achieve their full potential?

I believe this school, if it practices what I have been told it does, is Old School in the best sense of the word. The short-term disappointment of the failed students is a small price to endure given the decades of frustration and financial failure that follow from an education where stroking one's self-esteem is more important than achieving excellence.

It is here that I want to point out a flaw in Maslow's insightful theory.

Is it too much to say that Dr. Maslow had it backwards on at least two of the levels on his pyramid?

Let me posit this: Having esteem for oneself does not necessarily lead to success. But success most often will lead to self-esteem.

Getting it backwards gets us where we are, and sadly where we too often are is a boatload of mediocrity. We have college graduates with high debt and little marketable talent.

Guiding a student toward a path that recognizes a person's real talents is a surer way to build a person's confidence. False praise raises unrealistic expectations.

One last thing about Maslow's hierarchy, and I believe this is something he would agree with. Self-actualization is a nice thing. Striving toward one's full potential is a worthy objective and maybe even an obligation to ourselves and our Creator.

But it is not the ultimate goal. Perhaps the need to consider is transcendence. We as human beings are drawn toward causes and ideas that are bigger than ourselves. Self-esteem and self-actualization are just that: about the self.

If you want to truly reach your potential, your focus will be beyond yourself. It will be something bigger and more meaningful, something that will motivate you for a cause greater than yourself.

In my case, my transcendent purpose is bound in my faith and the better world that this faith promises. That "better world" is not off in some distant dimension somewhere, but it is this world that we inhabit that is to finally be made right.

It's what Jesus meant when he prayed "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Given the brokenness of this world, it's my job now to sow as many mustard seeds for that Kingdom as I can.

What is your transcendent dream?