

WHAT I REALLY NEED?

Abraham Maslow was an American psychologist who lived between 1908 and 1954. He is well known for elucidating his “hierarchy of needs.” He claimed we all have needs beginning with the basic physiological ones of food, drink, shelter. Then our needs ascend in the areas of safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-realization. At first he thought you had to have the lower need fulfilled before rising to the next level. Later he wasn’t sure whether or not you could possibly need a higher level without having attained the lower.

I don’t claim to be scientific or psychological. But I see a lot of needy people in our society. I see individualism, loneliness, isolation, suicide, distrust of institutions, smaller families and lack of intimacy. What I see lacking in many people’s lives are three needs for identity, meaning and belonging. There may be others but these stand out.

My identity is very basic. I must know who I am. One learns that really knowing and accepting self-knowledge, really knowing who I am, takes a lifetime. It certainly helps to be on the path to really being content with myself even though I know I am changing and growing. Saint Francis of Assisi used to pray nightly, “Who are you God? Who am I God?” In our contemporary society, there seems to be a sense of disconnection. Saint Francis relied on God to know himself. What is basic bottom-line is really knowing and accepting that I am a son or daughter of a loving God. I am a human being made in God’s image. All human beings, as well as all of creation deserve my respect as fellow beings on this planet. Other aspects of my being qualify who I am and helps me to know myself. I am an American, a white male, born into a particular family and ethnic group, a priest, a monk, a supporter of local sports teams. All these add to my self-knowledge but do not make me better or higher than anyone who is different. I believe, as a Christian, that Jesus Christ has spelled out for me what being a human being is to be. We are made for love, for relationships, to help each other.

It has become a real chore to know and accept who I am. We have become unmoored from our roots. We became separated from the natural world and failed to learn our place along with animals, plants and all creation. We have been sold a mishmash of artificial needs through our capitalistic system of consumerism. And, worst of all, we have lost our oneness with the Supreme Being

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who dwells in me, around me, beyond me. Technology has led us to believe we can do everything without such a Higher Power.

Along with identity, I believe we have a basic need for meaning. What does my life mean? What is the meaning of this created world which seems to be rebelling against us at the present time in earthquakes, floods, and natural disasters? What is the meaning of suffering in my life? Why am I so lonely? Is it because I have tried “do it my way?” Have we lost family, community, neighborhood? My own perspective is that Jesus Christ, following his whole Jewish tradition, makes some sense of joy and sorrow, life and death, though suffering and resurrection.

Identity and meaning find a place in our need to belong. This may be the real need, the finding of our life’s meaning through relationships. “No Man is an island” the poet once said. Even an introvert needs relationships in prayer, reading, connections with others. The first in priority, if not in time, is our acceptance of a Higher Power who guides, loves, supports me even when seemingly absent. This relationship indicates our acceptance and respect of all other creatures, especially human beings, whether our family or immigrants. Relationships include all of nature, all that exists whether animate or inanimate. When we are in relationship to all these sources we are in relation to ourselves and accept our place in the cosmos.

Relationships must be nurtured. Prayer, reading, community help us in our relation to God. Quiet presence to nature helps us in our relation to creation. Association with groups, churches, interest groups helps us to relate, not only to those with whom we meet and gather, but all people. We are made to help and be of service to others in need, especially the most humanly neediest. (Jesus called them “least of my brethren.” This sounds normal and common sensible but much of it is countercultural to the dominant consciousness of our culture. We shy away from relationships because we may be afraid of intimacy and vulnerability or have been talked into low self-image because of powers such as consumerism which says that we are only as good as worthy in accordance to what we own and possess.

Centuries ago the wise Greek philosopher, Sophocles, had this sign over his front door, “Know yourself” (Gnose auton). This remains top advice for all of us. Knowing and accepting who we are, which means good, created images of a

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loving, relational God. Are you working at it? You can share with me at joycet@glastonburyabbey.org.

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Please note that I do not speak on behalf of Glastonbury Abbey, the Archdiocese of Boston or the Catholic Church, though I hope my faith is in harmony with all these. Any error in judgment should be credited to me and not anyone else.