

WAYNE DYER

AND THE MANTLE OF MASLOW

L. Michael Hall, Ph.D.

In 1984 when I read *The Sky's the Limit*, a 1980 book by Wayne Dyer, I had no idea that Dyer was attempting to pick up the Mantle of Maslow and run with the Self-Actualization Psychology that Maslow invented. Yet I should have. Re-reading the book recently I found that it was there in black-and-white. But somehow I didn't see that in 1984. I suppose that since I wasn't interested in that at that time, I didn't see it. At that time, I didn't know that was even significant. But my ignorance of all of that created a blindness in me at that time!

Today, however, I'm a bit more conscious of things. So in July of 2007 I so happened to pick up the book and suddenly noticed something. Wayne Dyer had dedicated that book to the memory of Abraham H. Maslow —“the original pathfinder in the study of man's potential for greatness.” So I had no choice. I had to sit down and re-read the entire book! And guess what? The whole book is an attempt by Dyer to pick up on many of the key themes of Maslow and to give it his particular energy, focus, and twist.

“When we look at humanity's potentials for living in peace, harmony, productivity, even joy, and then look at the world as it is, the comparison is pathetic. ... Each person on this planet is inherently, intrinsically capable of attaining 'dizzying heights' of happiness and fulfillment.” (xv)

“Dr. Abraham Maslow, who devoted a large portion of his life to the study of what he called 'self-actualization,' or the very highest levels of being available to humanity. Maslow described the qualities that distinguish self-actualized people from others in an effort to create what he called a Psychology of Being. I have adopted or adapted a number of Maslow's 'self-actualized' qualities in putting together my picture of the No-Limit person, and have dedicated this book to his memory because of my tremendous admiration for his pioneering spirit.” (xvii)

Dyer reviews how Maslow wanted to look at humanity (human nature) from an entirely new perspective, namely, by studying the great achievers and learning from their examples. But just as soon as he acknowledges Maslow, Dyer then seems to have a compulsion to differ from him! That's what then led to some of the mistakes that I think he made. First, thinking that he was simplifying Maslow's language, Dyer introduces two phrases. “The NEZ person is the No

Erroneous Zones person” [from his book on the *Erroneous Zones*] and the No-Limit person describe the greatness that Maslow discovered in the self-actualizers that he studied.”

So if you think that “self-actualization” was a tough phrase, Dyer introduces “the NEZ” and “the No-Limit person”—as if *that* helps! Somehow this strikes me as a case of refusing to stand on the shoulders of the giant and trying to invent one’s own vocabulary instead of starting with what had already been developed.

And yet Dyer was on to something:

“You cannot become a No-Limit person without having eliminated your erroneous zones, and if you have eliminated them, if you are a NEZ person, you are already on the way to ... creating a life of full freedom for yourself.” (xvi)

Now as a cognitive psychologist, he knew the power of cognitive distortions and how they create limitations and so *leash* people to hurt, trauma, difficulties, etc. But then Dyer did something in his book that I have seen so many times. In order to distinguish himself from Maslow and create his own name— *he actually misrepresented Maslow*. He wrote some things about Maslow’s position that are simply *not* true.

“According to Maslow, such people [those who are masers of their own emotional worlds] are few and far between, but they *do exist*. Maslow thought that the self-actualized person ... *had to be rare* on our planet. He believed, in effect, that ‘many are called but few are chosen’; that only a *special breed of person* could attain what I have called *total mastery* of life.” (14)

“Maslow implies that being ‘completely evolved’ is reserved for a very special category of elite people.” (16)

Now having read and re-read Maslow’s works several times I can tell you that *none of that is true! Not at all*. When I first read that paragraph I was literally shocked at the level of misrepresentation. In all of my readings of Maslow’s five books on Self-Actualization and his hundreds of articles, and his other book on the Science of Psychology, Maslow never said anything like that.

In fact, Maslow argued strongly that *every person* has the possibility of self-actualizing. He framed it as what is within every person as part of our normal development.

“Self-actualization, the coming to full development and actuality of the potentialities of the organism, is more akin to growth and maturation than it is to habit formation or association via reward.” (1954 / 1970, p. 233)

“Every baby has possibilities for self-actualization but most get it knocked out of them. I think of the self-actualizing man not as an ordinary man with something added but rather as *the ordinary man with nothing taken away*. The average man is a human being with dampened and inhibited powers.”

Now Dyer tries to distinguish himself by writing the following:

“I firmly believe that each person who resides on this planet has the innate capability to

live his life in a rewarding and spontaneously exciting way. Anyone can rid himself of self-defeating thinking and behavior and grow into a human being who lives fully day by day. In sum, a high level of mental and physical health is available for anyone who is willing to go after it, and no one has any better chance of becoming more self-actualized or more fully functioning than anyone else.” (16)

Yet that is precisely what Maslow was after. Here is Maslow’s statements in his own words: “Self-actualization, full humanness, the development of the biologically based nature of man and therefore is empirically normative for the whole species rather than for particular times and places.” (1968, p. vi)

“*Self-actualization is not a lack or deficiency.* It is intrinsic growth of what is already in the organism, of what is the organize itself. They have no aim or goal, non-purposive. They were not elaborated for the sake of need gratification.” (134)

Self-Actualization is the tendency of every human being ... to make real his or her full potential, to become everything that he or she can be. The self-actualizing person is the true human species-type .. not a normal person with something added, but a normal person with nothing taken away.

Where he may have misunderstood this is from this quotation from Maslow.

“Self-actualizing people, those who have come to a high level of maturation, health, and self-fulfillment, have so much to teach us that sometimes they seem almost like a different breed of human beings.” (1968, 71)

“Maturity, or self-actualization, from this point of view, means to transcend the deficiency needs. This state can be described then as meta-motivated. Self-actualization is easy in principle, in practice it rarely happens, by my criteria, certainly in less than 1% of the adult population.” (204)

So while Dyer seemed to have been attempting to pick up Maslow’s mantle and carry on the work, by changing the terminology that Maslow developed and even mis-understanding or mis-representing Maslow perhaps that’s why Dyer has *not* been recognized as connected with Maslow.

Now in *The Sky’s the Limit* he did play off of many of Maslow’s themes:

- The art of living now. Living in the moment and being present *now*. (19)
- The art of being in contact with life now and completely engaged in it. He quoted Maslow on the Japanese term *muga* “the state in which you are doing whatever you are doing with a total wholeheartedness.” (25)
- Transcending time in that engagement (28)
- Creatively involved in your life (32)
- Tolerating ambiguity (38)
- Transcending dichotomizing (41, 84)
- Transcending culture and enculturation (fifty-five)

- Accepting personal choice in life (81)
- Thinking and operating holistically (88, 106)
- Freshness of appreciation (93)
- Transcending gender limitations (9five)
- Transcending the work/ play dichotomy (112)
- Fully accept the lower needs (“be a good animal”) (130, 217)
- Recover childlike curiosity and learning (170)
- Develop your own internal “locus of control” (218)
- Welcome and cultivate your creativity (232)
- Find and trust your inner voice (236, 240)
- Respect your higher needs (chapter 7, pp 259. And yet in this chapter, he does not mention or quote Maslow once. He also mixed up lower and higher needs making me wonder how carefully he read Maslow in the first place.
- Overcoming the fear of greatness (308)
- Viewing all of life as sacred (311)

What I appreciate that Dyer did achieve was the he add the dimension of *meaning* to the self-actualizing process that Maslow missed (274, chapter 8 “Cultivating a Sense of Purpose and Meaning, 293).

“The most important ingredient in the feeling of having personal meaning is the *attitude* that you bring to anything that you elect to do. But if you are simply going along with the routine of your life, performing duties that you find distasteful and having internal feelings of emptiness, then you have a huge void to fill.” (294)

“The importance of having a sense of meaning cannot be over-emphasized.” “You can make the decision to live meaningfully each and every day for the simple reason that it will make you a happier, more effective and, most importantly, contented human being.” (296, 300)

“See yourself as someone who can change the world, who is informed and who really counts, and you’ll also develop a sense of inner purpose as well.” (320)

Weaknesses

Here is something that I find it so strange. If we begin with a new paradigm shift such as the one Maslow initiated where we look on the “bright side” of human nature and look for potentialities rather than limitations and problems, some people seem to be unable to leave it at that. They then have to turn the bright side into something so divine, so incredible, so fabulous that they soon start using phrases like “limitless potentials.”

“Nothing can be more important to me or to us than the legacy of ... the belief in the limitless potential of human beings...” (xix)

“It means being in awe of your humanity and your limitless potential as a human being.” (2)

Limitless? Really? No limits at all? No constraints? And, of course, when people *over-sell*

something in this way, they end up undermining the value and good that they set out to add. Dyer also turns this into his theme “No-Limit thinking is perhaps the highest art of which the human being is capable.” Now we’re into something very different, a kind of new age belief that seems to not be able to accept human nature in all of its fallibilities, weaknesses, and limitations.

Summary

From what I can discern in Dr. Wayne Dyer’s works, I think that really did intend to carry on the pioneering work of Abraham Maslow. And I think he could have picked up Maslow’s mantle back in 1980 and carried on the work. But that didn’t happen. Dyer made a name for himself with his books and trainings and from what I can tell, never returned to the writings of Maslow to attempt to carry on that work.

Dyer’s trilogy of books — *Your Erroneous Zones*, *Pulling Your Own Strings*, and *The Sky’s the Limit* seems to me to have both popularized some of Maslow’s works as well as add the needed cognitive-semantic emphasis that Maslow missed. In that, Dyer could have been a key leader in reviving the Human Potential Movement at that time and carried on the self-actualization psychology that Maslow initiated, but in the end, he did not.

Quotes from Wayne Dyer

“Being alive in the present is the most powerful antidote to emotional turmoil or depression ever invented, and the ability to live in the present is essential an attitudinal skill which has to be cultivated during the course of your everyday life.” (32)

“As a human being, you were built to think for yourself. Your mind is going to rebel with anxiety, your emotions will be ruled by the weight of mental chains, if you don’t allow yourself the freedom to think up to your full, limitless capacity.” (37)