

THE PLATEAU EXPERIENCE AND THE POST-MORTEM LIFE: ABRAHAM H. MASLOW'S UNFINISHED THEORY

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On Monday, June 8, 1970, Abraham Harold Maslow was outdoors by the poolside of his home in Menlo Park, California. Following his cardiologist's orders, Maslow noted the time on his stopwatch and began to jog slowly in place. His wife Bertha was relaxing a few feet away. Suddenly, Maslow collapsed without a sound. By the time his wife rushed to his side, he was already dead of a massive heart attack. Maslow was sixty-two years old at the time—a distinguished psychologist and key theoretician of humanistic and transpersonal psychology still in the midst of a productive career.'

Maslow had a pre-existing heart condition, the result of a heart attack about nineteen months earlier, and had been advised that it would take two to three years for his heart to rebuild itself. Until then, he would be at high risk for another, possibly fatal, heart attack, and his doctors told him he would have to live very carefully. At least as much as his enthusiasm for living permitted, he did set forth to live carefully and savored the days. Maslow began searching for a philosophical context to deal with the possibility of dying very soon. Difficult as it is to face the possibility of one's own end, he felt he had come to a point at which he could transcend his fear of death. Maslow made public statements to this effect in his last two conference presentations (Krippner, 1972; International Study Project, 1972). In his last major address, given three months prior to his death in 1970, Maslow (International Study Project, 1972) made the following poignant statement:

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It's quite clear that we are always suffering from this cloud that hangs over us, the fear of death. If you can transcend the fear of death, which is possible---if I could now assure you of a dignified death instead of an undignified one, of a gracious, reconciled, philosophical death ... your life today, at this moment, would change. And the rest of your life would change. Every moment would change. I think we can teach this transcending of the ego (p. 53).

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Maslow shared publicly what he had *learned* in becoming reconciled with his own death. He felt strongly that he had been given a reprieve. If he experienced any feelings of fear, Maslow apparently "preferred to keep them to himself and not upset others" (Hoffman, 1988, p. 327). Maslow often expressed his gratitude for still being alive, and declared more than once that the time left to him was "a bonus" (Harris, 1970; Krippner, 1972). During an interview a few months after his heart attack in 1968, Maslow described the attitude that he had adopted:

My attitude toward life changed. The word I use for it now is the post-mortem life. I could just as easily have died, so that my living constitutes a kind of an extra, a bonus. . . . I might just as well live as if I had already died... , Every single moment of every single day is transformed because the pervasive undercurrent-the fear of removed (Harris, 1970, p. 16).

Maslow spoke on this theme of gratitude for the present moment several times before he died. He also expressed the belief that other people might have this experience of gratitude for life if they could be near death and then suddenly have a reprieve (Hoffman, 1988; Krippner, 1972; International Study Project, 1972). At one conference (Krippner, 1972), Maslow stated that a good description of this experience of a reprieve from death and its influence on one's attitude toward life could be found in Arthur Koestler's autobiographical account of the period he spent in Spain. Koestler had a confrontation with death in Spain during the Civil War. After being apprehended on suspicion of being a communist, and awaiting execution before a firing squad the next morning, Koestler managed to fall asleep while in his prison cell. Koestler "woke up in an ecstasy, partly because of the fact he was to be executed. He saw for the first time how blue the sky was" (Krippner, 1972, p. 119).

Maslow speculated that a reprieve from death might be responsible for a dramatic shift in an individual's patterns of daily life. In his own case, for example, he felt that he had worked too hard prior to his heart attack.

Since [my] heart attack, so many people-and I myself-[have been] thinking of how hard I worked and why I didn't take it easier.... No question of my sense of responsibility for years, of duty, a kind of messianic quality, as if *only* I were available to bring the message (reported in Hoffman, 1988, p, 309).

After the heart attack, Maslow canceled all speaking engagements, including his forthcoming Presidential address to the American Psychological Association. Fatigued much of the time, he wrote little except in his journals, which had become increasingly important to him. Although the workload reduction was necessary at first because of his medical condition, later Maslow reported that the experience of being near to death had brought about a shift in his values that contributed to his choosing to continue working less: "The dominance hierarchy, the competition, the competitiveness and glory, certainly become foolish.... " (Krippner, 1972, p. 119). He also discovered a shift in awareness—one that became a distinctive experience of transcendence. It was this transcendent state of consciousness that Maslow came to call the "plateau experience" (Maslow, 1970).

Maslow did not provide a succinct characterization of the plateau experience, but the following characterization appeared in the glossary of Hoffman's (1988) biography and can serve as a preliminary guide:

[It is] a serene and calm, rather than intensely emotional, response to what we experience as miraculous or awesome. The high plateau always has a noetic and cognitive element, unlike the peak experience, which can be merely emotional; it is also far more volitional than the peak experience; for example, a mother who sits quietly gazing at her baby playing on the floor beside her (p. 340).

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In the two conferences he addressed in the final months before his death, Maslow devoted attention to the plateau experience and related themes. Given this interest, it is evident that he would have continued studying this phenomenon had he not succumbed to a fatal heart attack. Unfortunately, following his death, the concept of the plateau experience fell into relative obscurity.'

Nevertheless, the heightened state of awareness that Maslow chose to call the plateau experience holds interest not only as a topic in its own right, but also because it may contribute to a greater understanding of a psychology of transpersonal consciousness, development, and insight.

Maslow's investigation of the plateau experience was part of his larger, ongoing interest in exploring "the farther reaches of human nature" (Maslow, 1971), which, towards the end of his life, increasingly focused on a transpersonal dimension.

THE PLATEAU EXPERIENCE

The concept of the plateau experience is related not only to Maslow's personal development, but also to his evolving research

interests and the emergence of the transpersonal psychology movement (Maslow, 1971, 1979).

Despite the broad scope of humanistic psychology in the late 1960s, and Maslow's leading role in its development, he eventually came to question its theoretical comprehensiveness. During his studies of the peak experience---the most ecstatic, joyous, happiest, blissful moment in one's life (Maslow, 1971, pp. 174, 175)- he also had come across reports of transcendent experiences and expanded states of consciousness beyond conventional ego boundaries (Maslow, 1970). This led him to the study of mysticism and transcendence (Roberts, 1978). He observed that individuals who had experienced transcendent forms of the peak experience valued them as the most important part of their lives (Maslow, 1970). Many of these peak experiences he categorized as transcendent states of consciousness.

Partly because of Maslow's increased skepticism that humanistic psychological theory could adequately explain transcendent states-increasingly common experiences in society at large because of the rise of consciousness altering techniques in the 1960s-he became convinced that humanistic psychology was only a transitional psychology. In the Preface to the second edition of his book, *Toward a Psychology of Being* (1968), Maslow stated, "I consider Humanistic, Third Force Psychology to be transitional, a preparation for a still 'higher' Fourth Psychology, transpersonal, transhuman, centered in the cosmos rather than in human needs and interest, going beyond humanness, identity, self-actualization, and the like" (p. iii). Perhaps Maslow's interests also changed because his increasing age and maturity lent greater urgency to his perception of a need for a psychology more attuned to spiritual development (Shapiro, 1994). Whether it was the result of his new perspective on the peak experience, or growing reservations about the scope of humanistic psychology, or insights related to his personal development and age, Maslow's views about optimal human potential had clearly expanded in the late 1960s to recognize the significance of transcendent experiences and the need for a broader, transpersonal psychology.

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Anthony Sutich, editor of the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*- a key founder of the humanistic psychology movement along with Maslow-also had begun to feel dissatisfied with the apparently limited scope of humanistic psychology in the late 1960s. He came to believe that the prevailing theory of self-actualization in humanistic psychology no longer appeared comprehensive enough. This came as something of a surprise to him for he had originally thought that self-actualization "was a very large conceptual 'umbrella' and that it would be several generations before a larger one would be necessary" (Sutich, 1976b, p. 7).

At this time, public and professional interest in the psychology of consciousness and transpersonal experience was also growing. A variety of consciousness-altering techniques, such as biofeedback, psychedelics, and meditation, were being experienced by an increasing number of lay people and mental health professionals. This led to an interest among some researchers to expand the field of psychological inquiry to include the study of optimal psychological health and well-being (Maslow, 1971; Walsh & Vaughan, 1980), including transpersonal states of consciousness.

Maslow, Sutich, and others also saw at this time a need to recognize and integrate classical Asian psychology traditions such as Zen Buddhism, Taoist philosophy, and Yoga, into psychological theory and practice (Walsh & Vaughan, 1980). As Walsh and Vaughan (1980) noted, the experiences and states of mind described by the Asian psychology traditions appeared to represent an essential part of human nature that needed to be taken into account in any psychological theory attempting to delineate a model of the whole person.

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From the Peak to the Plateau Experience

Prior to his work on transpersonal experience, Maslow began to perceive various limitations in the concept of the peak experience. He came to recognize that satisfaction can be found not only in the more emotionally charged forms of the peak experience (e.g., music, sex, or dancing), but also in the toil of everyday living (Maslow, 1962). He felt that there is something inappropriate about removing oneself from everyday life to seek peak experiences, such as by joining group workshops and encounter groups—then very much in vogue within the humanistic psychology movement (Maslow, 1979). He did not oppose experiential encounters in principle, but he viewed them only as techniques for personal development, rather than as a way of life, which some advocates apparently took them to be (Maslow, 1979). Moreover, he noted that experiential techniques did not necessarily contribute to the progress of those who seek transcendent states of consciousness (Maslow, 1979). Another characteristic limitation he pointed to was that, "Peaks come unexpectedly, suddenly they happen to us. You can't count on them. And, hunting them is a little like hunting happiness. It's best not done directly" (Maslow, 1962, p. 4).

Although Maslow continued to regard the peak experience as a transient glimpse of mystical states, he came to believe that the cultivation of peak experiences can obstruct the manifestation of a more enduring faculty of mystical awareness (Maslow, 1970). Because the peak experience only provides a transient glimpse of transcendence, rather than a sustained experience, and because

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peak experiences are frequently fortuitous, Maslow argued that to continuously seek after the excitement of peak experiences can result in neglecting paths that lead to more sustained transcendent experience---paths which demand "time, work, discipline, study, [and] commitment" to attain (Maslow, 1970, p. xvi),

In his study of the nature of transcendent states of consciousness, Maslow also found it desirable to introduce the notion of a state of serenity--or relaxation and awareness of the present moment--as a key element in the process of spiritual self-development (Krippner, 1972; Maslow, 1970, 1979). In his last two years, Maslow began to modify his view of optimal states of consciousness to reflect that this new element of serenity is essential for a more lasting experience of transcendence to occur. Thus, in sharp contrast to the element of excitability so characteristic of the peak experience, serenity became a distinctive component of what he came to call the plateau experience.

Maslow intended to make a more comprehensive study of the plateau experience as well as other, related experiences of transcendence at a future date, stating that "there is much more to say about these states" (Maslow, 1970, p. xvii), In *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature*, he wrote: "This is a very brief anticipation of a more detailed study of 'plateau experiences' ... which I hope to write soon" (Maslow, 1971, p. 348). Unfortunately, Maslow succumbed before such a follow-up study could be realized. A reconstruction of Maslow's comments concerning the plateau experience, in various sources, follows.

Maslow believed that if an investigation is to be valuable it must touch on some "enduring human problem" (International Study Project, 1972, p. 20). He claimed that individuals capable of having transcendent experiences lived potentially fuller and healthier lives than the majority of humanity because the former were able to transcend everyday frustrations and conflicts and were less driven by neurotic tendencies (Maslow, 1971). He also insisted that the plateau experience was a transcendent state of consciousness attainable by others, and offered encouragement to those who would undertake to develop it: "If you've gone through this experience, you can be more in the here and now than with all the spiritual exercises there are. It's just a kind of spontaneous exercise in hanging on to the moment, because the moment is precious" (Krippner, 1972, p. 119).

Maslow was sixty-two years old when he attended the Council Grove conference in Council Grove, Kansas, April 13-17, 1970 (Krippner, 1972). Maslow died in June of 1970, only two months after the conference took place. Perhaps he had intimations of his

own death at the time of the conference, for Maslow had known since the December, 1968 heart attack that he was at high risk for another, possibly fatal, one (Hoffman, 1988).

Peak versus Plateau Experiences

At the Council Grove conference, Maslow reported that one effect of growing older was that peak experiences became less intense and less frequent for him (Krippner, 1972, p. 113). From discussions with other people his age, Maslow felt that they, too, experienced a diminution of peak experiences, which led him to attribute an important role to the aging process in the production of peak experiences. Because he believed that peak experiences can produce turmoil in the autonomic nervous system, Maslow wondered if his body could tolerate them further, and speculated that a decrease in the frequency of peak experiences may be "nature's way of protecting the body" (Krippner, 1972, p. 113). Maslow had personal reason for concern: at this point in his life, the medical condition stemming from his heart attack required him to adopt a curtailed lifestyle and activity level. Another reason Maslow suggested why fewer and less intense peak experiences occur with age was that a sense of novelty and newness decreases with experience and aging (Krippner, 1972, p. 113).

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Although the frequency of peak experiences may diminish with the aging process, the plateau experience may be fostered. It has certain characteristics of the peak experience, such as awe and aesthetic perception. Although these elements are present in both experiences, the plateau phenomenon allows a lengthier, though less intense experience of them. Maslow compared the peak experience to a sexual orgasm, in which there is a progression of phases from increasing energy and arousal to a peak and climax, to decreasing energy and depletion. The peak experience's ascent to a lofty height, and subsequent descent, is not characteristic of the plateau experience. Although less climactic, the plateau experience has the capability of enduring longer.

Maslow also found that a plateau experience can be induced more voluntarily than a peak experience, e.g., it might be induced by going to an art museum or a meadow. Another difference was that, unlike the peak experience which is often triggered fortuitously or accidentally, access to the plateau experience could be taught. Indeed, Maslow claimed it would be possible to "hold classes in miraculousness" (Krippner, 1972, p. 114).

Witnessing

As his peak experiences became less frequent with age, and his general level of emotional turbulence diminished, Maslow reported that something else happened, which he described as a "precipitation" (Krippner, 1972, p. 113) of insights gathered from his life experiences. He described this quality as a compression of many experiences, such as reading, listening to music, participating in conversation, and he defined it as "essentially cognitive" (Krippner, 1972, p. 115). This cognitive quality also distinguishes the plateau experience from the peak experience. For example, unlike a peak experience, which can be felt to originate within the individual, and is emotionally gripping, the plateau experience can represent a witnessing of aspects of the environment which are external to oneself and a perception of previously unnoticed attributes of the environment. Maslow believed that this cognitive dimension of the plateau experience enables one to perceive the world as miraculous because it liberates the perceiver from reducing the world to the "concrete, ... to the behavioral, not limited only to the here and now. You know, if you get stuck in the here and now, that's a reduction" (Krippner, 1972, p. 115). To Maslow, accepting the miraculous as ordinary meant that one perceives "the poignancy and the preciousness and the beauty of things, but not to make a big deal out of it because it's happening every hour, you know, all the time" (Krippner, 1972, p. 114).

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Mortality

Reflecting on his confrontation with death, Maslow referred twice in his presentation to his life after surviving the heart attack as "the post-mortem life." Discussing his own heart attack experience, he said: "My heart attack brought about a real confrontation with death. Ever since then, I've been living what I've been calling to myself 'the post-mortem life.' I've already gone through the process of dying" (Krippner, 1972, p. 119). Maslow felt a sense of gratitude for surviving his illness and thought that this feeling continued to enhance the quality of his day-to-day experiences.

Later on in the Council Grove presentation, Maslow suggested that his confrontation with death also had other effects. For example, he reported that the experience of having a reprieve from death made life afterwards appear much more vivid and precious. Maslow explained this impression by using the ocean surf as a metaphor. He contrasted the surf's eternal quality with the briefness of the human lifespan, and suggested that this metaphor illustrates the witnessing quality of the plateau experience which allows the simultaneous perception of the eternal and the temporal. In his talk (described by

Hoffman [1988] as moving to the audience) Maslow stated that his reaction to the surf was of sadness in one sense, but appreciation in another: "It seems to me that the surf is more beautiful to me now than it used to be, and more touching.... In thinking of the surf, I realize that I am mortal, and the surf is not" (Krippner, 1972, p. 117). Thus, Maslow observed that although witnessing eternity is a compelling and moving experience, it is also accompanied by a fear of the witnessing because it reminds one of mortality. The beauty of witnessing eternity has an inevitable mixture of both happiness and sadness.

A member of the audience asked if in order for a plateau experience to occur, one has to be unconcerned about whether or not one is going to live or die in the next minute. He related an incident about a visit to a nursing home whose residents were struggling with the problem of facing death. This visit led him to conclude that two directions could be taken in response to the problem of managing one's feelings about mortality: widening the scope of one's consciousness or narrowing it. Maslow responded only indirectly, but the context of his remarks suggests that widening the scope of one's consciousness was the more desirable choice.

Maslow had stated that the plateau experience enables one to accomplish this state of being "in the here and now" without spiritual exercises, and that this state becomes easier to understand when working with the dying. He mentioned his own heart attack as an example of a confrontation with death, which was followed not only by physical recovery, but by greater self-understanding and a sense of expanded consciousness. Although the plateau experience is partly inspired by the knowledge of one's own mortality-and this can be frightening-it also makes the experience poignant:

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The plateau experience is paradoxical because of the mixture of permanence and mortality, you see. You feel sorry for yourself and sad over the passingness of things, while at the very same moment you're more poignantly enjoying the things that other people ignore (Maslow, in Krippner, 1972, p. 119).

Maslow speculated that if it were possible to give people an experience of death, followed by a reprieve, they might enjoy life more. Hoffman (1988) relates that Maslow was developing exercises to facilitate experiencing the plateau state of consciousness. One of these exercises, which Maslow mentioned in the presentation, was to look at a person one sees all the time, such as a spouse or other family member or a friend, and "make believe that ... he or she is going to die soon" (Hoffman, 1988, p. 331).

Mysticism

There are many terms for mystical experience, such as cosmic consciousness, *kensho*, oceanic feeling, *nirvana*, *samadhi*, *satori*, and unitive consciousness, but these experiences have in common the idea that truth can be reached through contemplative practices or other means than conventional sense information. Also, mystical experiences typically imply an identification with nature or the universe as a whole (Goldenson, 1984). Maslow explicitly compared the plateau experience to mystical experiencing because of the quality of witnessing. One of the terms he used to describe the plateau experience was "unitive consciousness" (Krippner, 1972, p. 113), a term also used to describe mystical experience.

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Maslow considered the plateau experience to be "the way in which the world looks if the mystic experience really takes" (Krippner, 1972, p. 115), and he characterized true mystical experiences as having the quality of permitting one to go about one's business as usual, such as paying the bills or running a store or a monastery. Thus Maslow did not consider the practical and the mystical qualities of the plateau experience to be inconsistent with each other; indeed, he drew attention to the mystics who went about their business after having mystical revelations.

Maslow also stated that a shifting of values about "what's basic and what's not basic" (Krippner, 1972, p. 119) tends to follow a plateau experience. He noted that these claims have been described in many literatures of the world, and should not be considered esoteric or mysterious (Krippner, 1972, p. 115).

Serenity

Although Maslow described certain qualities of the plateau experience as miraculous, he considered the experience to retain a sense of the ordinary. Despite a witnessing of attributes of the environment that had previously been unnoticed, the renewed vision can be accepted casually. In this respect, Maslow compared the plateau experience to the Zen experience: "There is nothing excepted and nothing special, but one lives in a world of miracles all the time. There is a paradox because it is miraculous and yet it doesn't produce an autonomic burst" (Krippner, 1972, p. 113). Maslow's explicit comparison of plateau experiencing with Zen experiencing implies he considered that serene feelings accompany perceptions of miraculousness.

During his conference presentation at Council Grove, Maslow emphasized the need to bring calmness into one's psychological

state-that we need the serene as well as the poignantly emotional, and he called attention to the plateau experience as an example of serenity. He speculated that one day the plateau experience would be observable, and hence measurable. He mentioned using psychophysiological instruments to measure it and thought that eventually instrumentation would prove useful as a means to promote the development of serenity. He was interested also in the possibility of teaching the specific qualities of the plateau experience, such as serenity, peacefulness, and calm.

Social Applications

By 1970, Maslow was having concerns about how some of his theory and ideas were being understood. In the Preface to *Religions, Values, and Peak Experiences* (1970), he expressed his concern that his thesis might lead to "over-extreme, dangerous, and one-sided uses" of his ideas (p. xi). He warned that experiential methods not tempered by intellect and by rationality can be harmful. Maslow thought that his own research on the peak experience had indirectly contributed to such a problem, and he explicitly warned that progress should not be confused with any single experience: "I wish to ... correct the tendency of some to identify experiences of transcendence as only dramatic, orgasmic, transient, 'peaky,' like a moment on the top of Mount Everest" (p. xvi).

Although he was emphatic about the possibility of progress through the practice of spiritual disciplines, he felt that too many aspirants were trying to bypass the maturation and hard work necessary for authentic progress in self-understanding and self-realization. He suggested that peak experience states are relevant to the transpersonal dimension, but that achieving a "life of transcendence" tends to be a lifelong effort (Maslow, 1970, p. xvi). Maslow cited the plateau experience as an example of a transcendent life, and described it as a "high plateau, where one can stay 'turned on'" (Maslow, 1970, p. xvi).

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Comparing the plateau experience to the peak experience, Maslow suggested that there is more of an element of surprise and of disbelief in the peak experience, and more of the sense of having such an experience for the first time. By contrast, the plateau experience allows a lengthier experience of the qualities of surprise and disbelief, although a less intense one. The less intense plateau experience, Maslow suggested, is more often experienced as pure enjoyment and happiness:

. . . as in a mother sitting quietly looking, by the hour, at her baby playing, and marveling, wondering, philosophizing not quite believ-

ing, She can experience this as a very pleasant, continuing, contemplative experience rather than as something akin to a climactic explosion which then ends (Maslow, 1970, p. xv),

Maslow also stated that one can learn to see in this way almost at will; therefore, it is more voluntary than the peak experience. He added that maturing and aging, which he believed foster plateau experiencing, also entails some loss of first-timeness, novelty, surprise, or sheer unpreparedness.

As in the Council Grove presentation, Maslow claimed in the Preface to *Religions, Values and Peak Experiences* (1970) that the plateau experience almost always has a noetic or cognitive element, and that it "becomes a witnessing, an appreciating ... which can, however, have a quality of casualness and of lounging about" (p. xiv). The plateau experience differs from the peak experience in this regard because it (the peak experience) does not always have a cognitive component and can be exclusively emotional.

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The Preface (1970) also suggested the metaphor of the surf as an example of plateau experience witnessing because it allows a simultaneous perception of the eternal and the temporal. Older people, making their peace with death, are more apt to be profoundly touched with sadness and tears at the contrast between their own mortality and the eternal quality of what sets off the experience: Maslow described the contrast as a "sweet sadness" (Maslow, 1970, p. xv). This contrast can make what is being witnessed far more poignant and precious: "The surf will be here forever and you will soon be gone. So hang on to it, appreciate it, be fully conscious of it. Be grateful for it. You are lucky" (Maslow, 1970, p. xv).

The Effects of the "Post-mortem" Life

In his publications about the plateau experience, Maslow frequently stated that wisdom and understanding separates the perception of the adult from that of the child (Krippner, 1972; Maslow, 1970). In an address given in March 1970 at the University of California, Los Angeles, he developed this theme further, stating that the sophistication that lends richness to perception may become more apparent as one grows older (International Study Project, 1972). In his address, he stated:

What happens, then, as you grow older is (I have a name for everything) called the plateau experience... The illuminative aspects---the knowledge aspects the sacralizing of the world---new become very easy and can be turned on and turned off just as I please. And this is a payoff of a kind. If life goes well for you and if you use yourself well, you may

confidently expect to have a better and better subjective life the older you get (p, 54).

Thus the rich cognitions engendered by the aging process may, for some, add to the appreciation of one's environment.

After returning from the hospital following his heart attack in December of 1968, Maslow relied more on journal writings because his medical condition left him little energy for other activities (Hoffman, 1988). In a letter written to Anthony Sutich while he was recuperating he said,

I'm coming along nicely, although so so slowly. I don't have a hell of a lot of energy yet, but enough for living the kind of life that I would want to live even if I had a great deal of energy. I certainly have done a lot of reading and writing - anyway in my journals (Sutich, 1976a, p. 176).

Maslow's reference to living the kind of life he would want to live, even if he had more energy, was interpreted by Sutich (1976a) as a beginning indication of Maslow's views about the plateau experience (Krippner, 1972). Statements by Sutich (1976a) suggest that there may have been a link between Maslow's "post-mortem" attitude and his selection of writing projects and writing style.

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Hoffman (1988) states that prior to his heart attack Maslow had frequently felt torn between writing in a rigorous, predominantly scholarly and scientific fashion, and composing in a more informal style of expression, as he had often done for some time. Given his poor health, Maslow might have felt justified in continuing with an informal composition style for that reason alone, but apparently he felt justified on other grounds as well, i.e., his productivity and the new perspective given him by his brush with mortality that engendered the plateau experience.

In an interview with George Harris, the editor of *Psychology Today*, Maslow described the effect of his "post-mortem" life on his attitudes about working for the sake of future goals: "I am living an end-life where everything ought to be an end in itself, where I shouldn't waste any time preparing for the future, or occupying myself with means to later ends" (Harris, 1970, p, 16). It appears that he savored the days that followed his nearly fatal heart attack. On a typical day at the Saga corporation office where he worked, Maslow frequently visited colleagues for long conversations, dictated notes for various works in progress, and departed for home after lunch (Hoffman, 1988).

Maslow's plateau experience research differed from his previous research on the peak experience-and perhaps from most of his other research-in one conspicuous way: the plateau experience syndrome Maslow described was apparently drawn almost entirely from personal familiarity with the subject. This was a sharp contrast to his previous research on the peak experience in which he had surveyed hundreds of people and produced a composite picture of the peak experience. No one subject in the peak experience studies necessarily reported the full constellation of peak experience characteristics, as Maslow (1968, 1971) pointed out. He conceived of the research methodology on the peak experience as a selecting, sharpening, and ordering of data into a composite picture. It consisted

... not so much in the usual gathering of specific and discrete facts as in the slow development of a global or holistic impression of the sort that we form of our friends and acquaintances. It was rarely possible to set up a situation, to ask pointed questions, or to do any testing with my older subjects . . . Contacts were fortuitous and of the ordinary social sort. Friends and relatives were questioned where this was possible (Maslow, 1954, p. 203).

*Maslow's
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By the time Maslow wrote about the plateau experience, however, he had ceased to conduct research even of this inductive variety, although he was apparently interested in having more traditional empirical data for the plateau experience collected by others (Krippner, 1972).

Maslow's Post-mortem Life and Need Hierarchy Theory

Does death-awareness produce the transcendent, transpersonal, trans-human? [3/28/1970] (Maslow, 1979, p. 1260).

Last night discussed it with Harry and tied it in with his father's death, my hospital "death" and what I've been calling my "post-mortem life." ... Again, I thought *Of* the possibility *that* whole SA [self-actualization] syndrome *might* be simply a reconciliation with death [7/16/1969] (Maslow, 1979, p. 923).

I still wonder that maybe what I've called SA has reconciliation with mortality as a sine qua non [3/28/1970] (Maslow, 1979, p. 1260).

The inner core of human nature, Maslow (1970) argued, consists of urges and instinct-like propensities that create basic needs within each person. If these basic needs are not fulfilled, frustration and sickness result. The first and most basic needs are physiological and are related to survival. If the physiological needs are not

satisfied, all other needs are temporarily pushed aside. Once basic physiological needs are fulfilled, higher needs can emerge.

The quality of awareness changes with fulfillment of lower needs. When lower needs are not met and a deficit threatens, an "emergency apparatus goes into action" ordinarily [3/28/1970] (Maslow, 1979, p. 1261). If the deficits are not fulfilled, they exert a negative influence so that higher needs cease to be felt.

The fulfillment of lower needs, on the other hand, allows one to turn attention away from unfulfilled lower needs toward a peaceful and detached consideration of one's environment, which Maslow considered a necessary attribute of self-actualization (Maslow, 1968).

Because self-actualizing people ordinarily do not have to abstract need-gratifying qualities nor see the person as a tool, it is much more possible for them to take a non-valuing, non-judging, non-interfering, non-condemning attitude toward others, a desirelessness, a "choiceless awareness." This permits much clearer and insightful perception and understanding of what is there (p, 41).

Fulfillment of needs and accompanying changes **in** the quality of awareness were primary assumptions of Maslow's theory.

As Maslow (1979) noted, however, his experience of a post-mortem life was difficult to reconcile with these assumptions. The first level of Maslow's need hierarchy scale posited survival as the most prepotent human need, yet a threat to Maslow's own survival had apparently engendered a higher awareness **in** the form of his post-mortem life. Survival of a near fatal coronary attack had generated experiences of gratitude for the present moment, and even imbued each moment with a sense of miraculousness. Maslow characterized this quality of miraculousness as essential to plateau experience awareness (Krippner, 1972). In short, Maslow considered that an *enhanced* capacity for awareness was available to him rather than a diminished one-s-despite a threat to his survival and a sharply curtailed life expectancy.

*needs
and
quality
of
awareness*

Maslow speculated about this apparent theoretical paradox, commenting that he found the capacity to enjoy his post-mortem life "puzzling" [3/28/1970] (Maslow, 1979, p. 1261). The specific assumption that Maslow had come to question was that transcendent states can occur only after lower hierarchy needs are satisfied. More recently, critics such as Daniels (1988) and Rowan (1987) have also questioned this assumption.

Maslow had modified his need hierarchy theory to make a place for transcendent states of awareness at the top of the need hierarchy

roughly two years before the occurrence of his heart attack, although his interest in transcendent states of consciousness had been evident much earlier (Hoffman, 1988). During this reformulation of his need hierarchy theory two years before his coronary attack, Maslow changed the theory to include at its topmost rank the need for transcendence. Before discussing Maslow's reexamination of his theory subsequent to his post-mortem life experience, it will be useful to describe the place for transcendent experience he made in his need hierarchy theory two years earlier.

In Maslow's need hierarchy theory, after the most primary need of physiological survival is fulfilled, additional needs of security, affiliation, and self-esteem arise. At the top of the hierarchy, Maslow placed the need for self-actualization, or actualization of one's full potential.

In ascending this hierarchy, motivations shift from strong to subtle and from expressions of deficiency to expressions of sufficiency. At the top of the hierarchy, a desire for self-actualization arises with the emergence of a need to know, to satisfy one's curiosity, to understand the perplexities of life and a need for meaningful work, for responsibility, for creativity, and for appreciation of beauty (Maslow, 1987).

*transcendence
of
one's
nature
as a
need*

Roughly two years before his heart attack, Maslow indicated that another need beyond these needs exists, one centered on experience of what he designated as transcendent states of consciousness (Maslow, 1971). The desire to transcend one's nature was as much an aspect of human nature as lower needs, and the denial of this ultimate need might be as harmful as the denial of one's lower needs (Maslow, 1971).

Psychic Economy of Scarcity

Maslow considered that for most individuals a threat of deprivation is keenly felt. "For most people, happiness is a state of striving for and hoping for something that is now lacking the psychic economy of scarcity" [3/28/1970] (Maslow, 1979, p. 1261). The term "psychic economy of scarcity" was used by Maslow to describe the motivation to fulfill needs of survival, security, affiliation, and self-esteem, i.e., needs below the level of self-actualization.

Psychic Economy of Plenty

As a life condition posing a threat of ultimate deprivation, Maslow's post-mortem life apparently fit the category of a psychic

economy of scarcity. As described previously, Maslow's acknowledgment of his post-mortem life, however, had caused him to doubt whether a "psychic economy of scarcity" accounted for the frame of mind occasioned by his post-mortem life, since a sense of the preciousness of every experience had emerged for him rather than a sense of striving. He therefore reasoned that *enhanced consciousness* can also result from scarcity or deprivation if certain psychological conditions are present (Maslow, 1979). He coined a new phrase, "psychic economy of plenty" [3/28/1970] (Maslow, 1979, p. 1261), to describe how a state of enhanced consciousness could occur despite a threat to survival.

*enhanced
consciousness
and a
threat
to
survival*

[The] phrase for SA [self-actualization] , .. is the psychic economy of plenty. That's weird-that I should be enabled to perceive, accept, & enjoy the eternity & preciousness of the non-me world just because I became aware of my own mortality [3/28/1970] (Maslow, 1979, p. 1261).

Maslow speculated that this concept of a psychic economy of plenty could be a modification of his theory of self-actualization:

Maybe self-actualization, .. is an economy of surplus and of plenty in contrast with the scarcity-economy of the psyche of most people.. ,. How to relate it [post-mortem life] to the psychic economies of surplus wealth on the one hand and scarcity on the other? [3/28/1970] (Maslow, 1979, p. 1261).

Transcendence and Self-Actualization

Maslow labeled needs at the level of self-actualization as higher needs (Maslow, 1971). Self-actualizers are generally motivated more by these higher needs, e.g., for creativity, appreciation of beauty, transcendence (Maslow, 1971). In these higher needs, Maslow saw a drive for modes of experiencing and being that differed in character as well as rank from lower need motivations (Maslow, 1971, 1979). In extreme cases, he speculated, a higher need might become the prime motivation for a self-actualized individual, superseding the more common egocentric desires for self-esteem, possessions, etc. (Maslow, 1971). In making a place for transcendence within this topmost rank of his need hierarchy theory (Maslow, 1971), Maslow posited that a specific type of self-actualized individual with strong motivation could pursue transcendent experience.

The second issue of the *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* included an article by Maslow entitled "Theory Z" (1969), in which he delineated twenty-four differences between self-actualized individuals who are capable of transcendent experience and self-actualized individuals who are not capable of transcendent experience.

In the character of self-actualized individuals striving for transcendence, Maslow believed that he observed a drive for modes of experiencing that was no longer subtle and easily repressed, as had been the case when lower needs were dominant, and before a need for transcendent experience had found full expression. For these individuals a need for transcendent states might supersede lower need motivations (Maslow, 1971).

*two
pre-conditions
for
transcendence*

He also speculated that if these individuals had had their lower needs met at some point in the past, their higher needs might be more likely to function independently of their lower needs. He reasoned that these individuals would differ from those who had never had their lower needs met, and that they would view the threat of a deficit, even a deficit associated with survival, with more equanimity (Maslow, 1971, 1979). Despite threats to security they would still behave as though transcendence was their most important motivation. In Maslow's psychic economy terms, these individuals benefitted from a psychic economy of plenty rather than a psychic economy of scarcity, even though their environments might pose a threat of scarcity. In short, Maslow speculated that perhaps two conditions must be satisfied for transcendence to occur: first, having a primary motivation toward transcendent experience, and second, having had lower needs met, at least prior to the onset of a low need emergency.

In answer to the question he raised in his journals: "Does death-awareness produce the transcendent, transpersonal, transhuman?" [3/28/1970] (Maslow, 1979, p. 1261) Maslow's answer was therefore apparently affirmative-but only for those already self-actualized and strongly motivated toward transcendent experiencing.

It also appears that Maslow may have considered himself among the latter:

I wonder what would happen to my whole psychology and philosophy if I were in a concentration camp or were doomed to die soon. I don't think my report of the world would change much.... As a matter of fact, I *am* doomed to die-maybe soon-what with the possibility of heart surgery. Or without collateral circulation, a heart attack would very likely kill me. So what does this have to do with my report on human nature? Might not one person, even with very bad luck, recognize the beauty of life for others than himself? Yes, I think so [2/25/1970] (Maslow, 1979, p. 1238).

Since his treatment of the issue was speculative, and appeared only in his journal entries, it is difficult to know if Maslow intended to add the psychic economy vocabulary to tenets of his need hierarchy theory more formally. Whatever his exact intentions, the journal speculations describe some preconditions Maslow considered necessary for a sustained experience of transcendence.

Miraculousness and the Post-Mortem Life

Maslow's label for his post-coronary life-post-mortem life was intended to convey the feeling of temporariness that was so characteristic during this period of his life (Krippner, 1972). To Maslow, any life after his heart attack was valuable (Harris, 1970, p, 16).

He addressed this mixture of temporariness and appreciativeness explicitly at the Council Grove conference when he said: "You feel sorry for yourself and sad over the passingness of things, while at the very same moment you're more poignantly enjoying the things that other people ignore" (Krippner;1972,p. 119).

The mixture of appreciativeness and sadness also figured in the description of his attitude toward living with a sense of temporariness that he gave in one of his last public interviews, in February of 1970:

One very important aspect of the post-mortem life is that everything gets doubly precious, gets piercingly important. You get stabbed by things, by flowers and by babies and by beautiful things-just the very act of living, of walking and breathing and eating and having friends and chatting. Everything seems to look more beautiful rather than less, and one gets the much-intensified sense of miracles (Harris, 1970, p. 16).

*a
sense
of
temporariness*

Maslow apparently maintained his sense of miraculousness and special appreciation until his death.

CONCLUSION

Distressed by the societal problems emerging from the turmoil of the late 1960s and by what he perceived as a widening pattern of human aggression in world affairs, Maslow believed that humanistically oriented social sciences were vital to a coherent and effective approach to ameliorating societal problems (Maslow, 1969a). His journals reflect that he had felt an urgency about this task before his heart attack:

I was saying to someone who chided me ... for having worked so hard [before the heart attack], and I asked him in turn "Supposing you had discovered a cure for cancer? Would you fuss about your body or about personal danger, or about your heart?" [6/22/1969](Maslow, 1979,p. 921).

Hoffman (1988) notes that some of Maslow's closest friends felt that perhaps his one personal flaw was a sense of grandiosity, which sometimes took expression as a sense of great personal mission to change the human condition. Hoffman (1988) quoted

Maslow's friend, Frank Manuel, in this regard, who recalled that Maslow "had a messiah complex, but he never sought to impose it on others" (in Hoffinan, 1988, p. 211). The following private reflection by Maslow was written after his near fatal coronary attack:

The work seems to go on right through periods of unhappiness. Maybe even *more* of it, because then I cut out movies, visits, auto driving, picnics, etc. The only recourse then, in my sadness, is to plunge *into* work even more, Have more or less given up novels, science fiction, working with students, non-professional reading of *any* kind; have given up newspaper subscription [for] ... a couple of months, TV, political reading to the extent that I can force myself to. Less schmoozing with local friends and acquaintances. Practically no music, no plays, less and less museums. My walks are very business like and efficient, although I may yet do Audubon walks again in the fall (not sure). I turn more and more into my thinking and writing, using reading almost entirely as stimulus to thinking and writing (including files and journals), more away from the world, especially when home life makes me unhappy, more and more a thinking and writing machine [8/131 1969] (Maslow, 1979, p. 924).

*an
apparent
change
of
view*

Maslow's reflection on his work habits was written relatively early in his "post-mortem" life period. His views apparently changed afterward; in his public statements during the latter part of his "post-mortem" period (i.e., the last few months of his life), he stated publicly on several occasions that he no longer felt the enormous sense of responsibility he had felt previously.

Commenting on Maslow's post-mortem life period Anthony Sutich-Maslow's close friend and collaborator in establishing the fields of both humanistic psychology and transpersonal psychology-noted that Maslow had frequently mentioned that he felt little further need for communicating the message of psychology's relevance to societal issues (Sutich, 1976a). And in one of his last public interviews Maslow also indicated a lack of desire for promoting this message (Harris, 1970). Speaking about the effects of his acute awareness of his mortality on his decision to de-emphasize the professional aspects of his life, Maslow stated:

I had really spent myself, This was the best I could do, and here was not only a good time to die but I was even willing to die. . . . It was what David M. Levy called the "completion of the act." It was like a good ending, a good close. I think actors and dramatists have that sense of the right moment for a good ending, with a phenomenological sense of good completion-that there was nothing more you could add.... Partly this was entirely personal and internal and just a matter of feeling good about myself (Harris, 1970, p. 16).

Maslow gave talks to audiences in the last few months of his life, but here, too, he was apparently less driven by a sense of personal

responsibility for solving difficult and perplexing issues than had been the case before his near fatal coronary attack. Maslow spoke candidly in his journals of deliberately putting down the burden of being an authority:

I realized after all these lectures [lectures given in Antioch, Columbus, Palo Alto, and Council Grove]-some to large crowds-that I could be casual and easy about them and didn't get tensed up as I did over the precoronary lectures in San Francisco. My analysis is that I felt the great weight of responsibility and authority on my shoulders, of being pontifical, of responding with tension to the almost-adoration, poems written for me, to the submissiveness and dependence. I had to weigh my words so goddamn carefully-and felt the responsibility of being the authority so heavily that it threw me into tension and exhaustion. Like the old business of being *expected* confidently to hit a home run every time at bat, to produce revelations, peak experiences, conversions, to be a Messiah-and then of course the whole thing introjected so that I got to feel the necessity of hitting a home run each time I opened my mouth, of every single time having the biggest ejaculation in the world-in a word, of performing up to *their* expectations, of living up to *their* image. This was made worse when the adoration was greater, ... the fee higher, the crowd larger, the expectations greater.

But apparently now that I've become "post-mortem" and also can take more casually being the authority and not let it get me, I seem able to be as relaxed before a crowd as before some friends. I don't have to *try* to be perfect, Messianic, or weighty. I can be casual and improvise. It works well [4/29/1970] (Maslow, 1979, p. 1305-06).

It is likely that one reason for this shift could have been his growing concern about his health. His physician was not alone in offering him advice: a number of journal entries indicate that Maslow's friends and acquaintances had offered similar suggestions.

Another reason that Maslow's sense of personal responsibility for societal problems might have changed was that he hoped others would take up the burden by continuing his work. He wrote in his journals that if he lived long enough he would structure his work more systematically for those who would take it up, but he apparently felt secure that his work would survive even if he did not live much longer. Maslow even felt pleased with his level of productivity and thought that his informal style had been good enough to accomplish the limited goal of leaving a record for others to work with:

*others
to
take
up
the
burden*

If I live long enough, I'll structure them [notes on various topics] into a system of human nature and society. But if I don't, others will for sure, even though I don't know when. I don't know of any young man myself who is that good and capable, *that* perceptive and committed. But he or they now exist, I'm sure. Perhaps they're 18 years old, or 10, or 25. But they're there someplace. And they'll get the point. ... So I'll consider

my major duty done and be content to be a preparer a forerunner and
relax and loaf as soon as I get strong enough to travel {6/22/1969}
(Maslow, 1979, p. 922),

It is apparent from journal entries and public statements made during the latter part of his post-mortem life that his changing views about the value of serenity influenced his conclusions about the plateau experience and prompted him to offer it as an alternate experience to the peak experience. His writings during this period of his life show that Maslow regarded a state of serenity, of relaxation, and awareness of the present moment as a key to spiritual self-development (Krippner, 1972; Maslow, 1970a, 1979).

a
key
to
spiritual
self-development

Whatever changes prompted his increased valuing of serenity during the post-mortem life, this change also corresponded apparently with a sharpened perception of transcendent aspects of existence (Krippner, 1972; Maslow, 1979).⁴ Our impression is that in the journal entries of this period Maslow tugged at the ideas of his previous work and tried to get them to emerge more clearly in the light of his knowledge about transcendent experience. His journal entries seem to reflect an internal dialog about the dynamics of transcendent experience. Unfortunately, he did not have the necessary time to accomplish his next goal of providing a systematic restructuring of his work in the realm of transpersonal psychology. At his death, however, this new field of inquiry had been launched and others were already carrying forward its exploration and development.

NOTES

¹Unless otherwise noted, biographical details of this period in Maslow's life have been drawn from Edward Hoffman's biography of Maslow, *The Right to Be Human* (1988). Hoffman's biography is the most comprehensive available.

²Just a few months prior to his heart attack, Maslow had been elected President of the American Psychological Association, a singular honor in his profession.

³The first mention of the plateau experience is contained in a personal journal entry dated April 16th, 1969 (Maslow, 1979). The first published mention of the plateau experience was a very brief reference to it in an article published by Maslow (1969a) in the *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*. Maslow gave a public presentation on the topic at the University of California, Los Angeles, in March of 1970 (International Study Project, 1972). The first thorough exposition of the idea was not realized until April, 1970, when Maslow addressed a conference on the plateau experience (Krippner, 1972).

⁴Maslow's medical condition manifested physical symptoms, e.g. frequent chest pains, that occurred over a prolonged period of time and served as reminders to him of his mortality, as he himself reported (Maslow, 1979). The possibility that a medical condition such as Maslow's might influence a spiritual transformation has received little attention in the transpersonal psychology literature.

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