

The task now, in my view, is to pursue what we in the humanistic community have just begun to prioritize—the melding of Maslow’s breadth of psychological inquiry with existentialism’s depth. The result of this synthesis just might be what our forebears envisioned: an enduring science of humanity.

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Abraham Maslow: A Biographer’s Reflections

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Psychological and social thinkers are often mistakenly viewed as inhabiting a historical vacuum. This error seems especially prevalent when such individuals are no longer alive, for they can neither rebut their detractors nor correct their exponents. Sometimes, too, influential historical figures are attacked anachronistically: faulted absurdly for neglecting issues that did not loom significantly in their lifetimes or that fell to obscurity soon after their deaths.

Perhaps more than other major psychological thinker, such has been the case with Abraham Maslow. In celebrating Maslow’s work and legacy this centennial year, it is therefore important to highlight his life milieu and zeitgeist. As his biographer, I consider it impossible to fully understand Maslow’s intellectual interests, concerns, and self-mission without viewing his life against the backdrop of his era. Due to space limitations for this piece, I am obliged to offer my observations in abbreviated style.

Early Life and Upbringing

Abraham Maslow was the son of poor Russian-Jewish immigrants who came to the United States in the early 1900s. Like millions of their

coreligionists from Eastern Europe, they sought to escape Czarist persecution and secure a better life economically for their families. His parents settled in New York City, where he attended public schools in a multiethnic, working-class neighborhood. Abe's hard-working parents were nonreligious, and his father, owning a small business, leaned toward socialism.

In all of these respects, Abe Maslow's youthful experience was extremely typical for those of his background, and they inexorably shaped his worldview. I speak from both personal as well as historical knowledge, for my father came from precisely the same immigrant background and even attended the same high-school (Brooklyn's Boys High School) as did Abe Maslow just a few years earlier. The intellectual concerns common to idealistic youngsters from this background were overcoming religious and ethnic prejudices to create a world based on economic justice and universal education.

Those with literary ambitions—such as Saul Bellow—chose to become novelists, whereas those with a more technical bent were drawn to scientific careers such as sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset, economist Milton Friedman, mathematician Norbert Weiner, psychiatrist Robert J. Lifton, and biologist Jonas Salk. Certainly, these brilliant thinkers—all children of European-Jewish immigrants—differed in their specific interests and political allegiances, but they shared a bedrock faith in education (as an impartial, “pure” entity) for social and world betterment. This viewpoint remained vital to Maslow throughout his life.

Psychological Training

When Maslow decided on a psychology career, he was initially drawn to behaviorism. Although its American founder John B. Watson eventually left academia for advertising after a sex scandal, he attracted countless young adherents like Maslow for his bold attacks on “unscientific parenting” and broad claims that his approach could forge a new society rooted in science rather than on outdated mores and values. Although Maslow repudiated behaviorism quickly enough, he retained a strong loyalty to positivism throughout his life—as some humanistic psychologists have cogently observed.

In this sense, though Maslow was criticized as too soft scientifically by American *uber* empiricists, he shared their belief in measurability and data as the ultimate determinant of human truth. Perhaps for this reason, he found it difficult to accept religious experience as valid unless placed in a positivistic framework. Temperamentally, Maslow was thus far more comfortable with the practical, socially oriented approach of Alfred Adler—whom he knew personally in the mid- to late-1930s—than with the

inward-looking perspective favored by Jung and his cohorts such as Erich Neumann. Maslow conducted his doctoral dissertation at the University of Wisconsin to verify Adler's conception of social dominance, and in a very real sense, Maslow can be seen as an Adlerian drawn primarily to issues of growth and achievement rather than family dynamics. An interesting finding is that the young Rollo May was also personally influenced by Adler, but went on to address existential issues of identity and relationship.

World War II and Higher Motivation

As Maslow often reminisced, the advent of World War II permanently changed his intellectual focus. As a 33-year-old father with two children in 1941, he was ineligible for the military draft. But the horrors of mass warfare gave him a sense of urgency. He later wrote,

One day just after Pearl Harbor, I was driving home and my car was stopped by a poor, pathetic parade . . . As I watched, the tears began to run down my face. I felt we didn't understand—not Hitler, nor the Germans, nor Stalin, nor the Communists. We didn't understand any of them. I felt that if we could understand any of them, then we could make progress. I had a vision of a peace table, with people sitting around it and talking about human nature and hatred and war and peace and brotherhood . . . It was at that moment that I realized that the rest of my life must be devoted to discovering a psychology for the peace table. That moment changed my whole life. (Hoffman, 1999, p. 137)

This epiphany led to Maslow's groundbreaking studies of self-actualizing people—beginning with his two favorite mentors: Max Wertheimer and Ruth Benedict. His seminal “hierarchy of inborn needs” model appeared in the mid-1940s. More than a decade would pass before Maslow began formally presenting the specific qualities he found among self-actualizers, including their frequent peak experiences, attraction for creative work, and yearnings for world betterment.

Had World War II not occurred, it seems eminently possible that Maslow would have been content to continue his research—certainly both innovative and controversial at the time—concerning emotional security (akin to self-esteem) and its relation to sexual attitudes and behaviors. Yet intriguingly, underlying Maslow's interest in both sexually active individuals and self-actualizers can be seen a fascination with the socially *dominant*: those popularly dubbed today as “alpha” males and females, whom Maslow in late career called “aggridants.”

Mystics and Entrepreneurs

Maslow is rightfully praised for revitalizing religious psychology in a way no American academician had done since the days of William James. Yet it is important to note that Maslow ultimately felt more comfortable studying entrepreneurs and business organizations than mystics, sages, and exalted states of consciousness. Indeed, this predilection explains the intellectual route Maslow took in his final years—and it may well have been due to the zeitgeist. Why? Because American culture in the 1960s increasingly came to associate mysticism with hedonism in a way that he abhorred. The hippies not only dismayed Maslow; they disgusted him.

Although it does not appear to be a conscious decision as evidenced from his journals, Maslow swiftly withdrew from anything that seemed even remotely tinged with the “pop mysticism” that would morph into the New Age movement soon after his death in 1970. Unfortunately, this withdrawal essentially ended Maslow’s study of peak experiences and transcendent inner states. Had American culture never passed through its “drug and hippy” phase, it seems likely that Maslow would have devoted his final years to understanding epiphanies, peaks, revelations, transformative moments, and related compelling phenomena.

Instead, Maslow accelerated his involvement with corporate entrepreneurs like Andy Kay of Non-Linear Systems and Bill Laughlin of Saga Foods. It was not for financial gain, for Maslow had always preferred a simple lifestyle—not even once traveling abroad. Rather, it was because they genuinely conformed to his sense of humanity’s “best” and “highest” people: hardworking, creative, innovative, achievement oriented, and concerned with world improvement. It is not surprising that Maslow sharply criticized Eastern monks and monasticism in general as “selfish.” He often revealed that his ethical ideal was the Hasidic *zaddik* or the Buddhist *bodhisattva*—who are actively “in the world” to raise the common good.

After a near-fatal heart attack in 1967, Maslow felt that his remaining life would be brief. He regarded himself as a psychological pioneer, broadly exploring new territories of human experience that later investigators would map in detail. By accurately seeing the contours of his intellectually tumultuous life, we are better equipped to create the maps that our world today needs to fulfill our individual and social potential.

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Abraham Maslow: A Brief Reminiscence

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Abe Maslow and Tony Sutich founded the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* (*JHP*), and its first issue was spring 1961. Miles Vich became editor and continued until I became editor in 1971. In 1973, I turned *JHP* into a quarterly. My final issue was in fall 2005, concluding 35 years as editor.

Throughout my editorship, I told people that I edited *JHP* for Abe Maslow, Tony Sutich, Rollo May, Carl Rogers, Charlotte Buhler, and other founders, not for the passing parade of New Age hipsters that unfortunately came to dominate the Association for Humanistic Psychology for decades. It was my deliberate intention to preserve the intellectual rigor of humanistic psychology when it veered toward flakiness with the rise of the New Age movement in the United States.

When Sirhan Sirhan killed Robert Kennedy in 1968, I talked with Abe Maslow about how someone should write an article about Sirhan as a person to explore the forces and motivations that led him to his act, so he would not just be dismissed as an inhuman monster. Abe insisted that I was the person who must write this. Thus, encouraged, I did, and the result was published as a chapter in a book (Greening, 1972).

When UCLA was offering its programs in sensitivity training, Abe expressed to me an interest in sitting in on a session. I invited him to the group I was cofacilitating, and somewhat to our dismay, Abe talked a lot as “the professor” rather than merging as a participant. When challenged by the group, he forthrightly confessed that at his age, he was simply more interested in his own ideas and feelings than those of others. Abe was a passionate visionary, and we were grateful to learn from him and be inspired by his dedication to making psychology humanistic.