

Column: “The pleasures of Aging Gracefully”



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By the time this Article is published, I will be 59.

When I was young, I envied the unhurried grace of elderly people walking slowly on the road, and I believed that the calm engendered by rich life experience was its source. I am now old enough to realize that I was wrong. The graceful gaits of the elderly do not represent a preference for calm behavior; rather, they are simply a consequence of loss of leg strength and the resultant inability to walk fast.

As we get older, the deterioration of physical ability is inevitable. After our physical abilities reach their peak in our 20s and 30s - although this varies from one person to another - all we can do is to slow down the deterioration. This physical ability curve may be observed in all human beings except for exceptional cases such as suicide, war, accidents, etc.

On the other hand, the spiritual growth curve does not seem to necessarily be linked with age.

The following pyramid-shaped figure illustrates the concept of the “hierarchy of needs” explained in the self-actualization theory of American psychologist Abraham Maslow. The pyramid consists of “physiological needs,” “safety needs,” “love and belonging needs,” “esteem needs,” and “self-actualization needs” with basic needs at the base.

Once “physiological needs,” the fundamental biological requirements for human survival, and “safety needs,” which relate to physical and economic safety, etc., are satisfied, “love and belonging needs” are said to emerge. “Love and belonging needs” involve a desire to be accepted and loved by others. People with unmet needs of this type tend to suffer from loneliness, social anxiety, and clinical depression.

The “esteem needs” involve a desire to be appreciated and respected by others. These needs may be divided into two levels. Low-level “esteem needs” relate to the need to be respected by others and therefore result in the pursuit of higher social status, greater income, and better reputations. High-level “esteem needs” relate to self-esteem; in other words, accepting and respecting yourself the way you are. People with unmet needs of this sort tend to suffer from inferiority complexes and weakness.

However, even if the above-mentioned four types of needs are met, we will not be truly satisfied. We have a desire to make full use of our abilities and potential. These are called “self-actualization needs.”

Some rank the four types of needs from “physiological needs” to “esteem needs” as “deficiency needs,” and the remaining stage as “being needs.” “Deficiency needs” are different in nature from “being needs”, as they must be met in order to live a healthy life, while “being needs” - the pursuit of self improvement - do not cause problems if they are left unmet. How-

ever, in some cases, the fulfillment of “being needs” could enable a person to endure a situation in which “deficiency needs” are unmet. Beyond “self-actualization,” there is a stage called “self-transcendence.”

Spiritual growth is deeply connected with the pursuit of the satisfaction of “deficiency needs” and “being needs,” and especially with efforts to achieve “self-actualization.”

All of us want to be accepted, appreciated, and loved by others. Some people spend most of their lives seeking to satisfy these needs. Most have to face the end of their days feeling dissatisfied. Such situations would seem to indicate insufficient spiritual growth. Those who have found and devoted themselves to the pursuit and accomplishment of their purposes and life missions live radiant lives. Such people usually have positive attitudes and warm, gentle personalities, creating a kind, caring atmosphere. They accept others the way they accept themselves, and they speak in a way that energizes others.

However, not all of us can clearly recognize the purposes and missions of our lives. For most of us, life is a journey along which we search for the purpose and meaning of life. This “self-exploration journey” seems to continue until the very end of our lives. During this journey, we experience many things and grow spiritually one step at a time. This means that every person has his or her own unique spiritual growth curve. The spiritual growth curve of a person who cannot progress beyond the level of “deficiency needs” will stop growing at a low level, while the growth curve of a person who pursues “self-actualization” will rise sharply.

On the premise that the comprehensive growth curve of a person can be drawn based on the aggregate of his/her physical ability and spiritual growth curves, it is understandable that the level of spiritual growth has a great influence on the comprehensive power of each individual. A person with insufficient spiritual growth would be distressed by the deterioration of his/her physical abilities due to aging and would consequently lose hope. This may be described as “aging ungracefully.” On the other hand, a person who keeps growing spiritually will be able to apply life experiences to the development of his/her character. Such a person will be able to accept everything with pleasure and appreciation and keep pursuing his or her dreams without losing hope. This may be described as “aging gracefully.”

Hopefully, we can all age gracefully.

