Transitioning from Success to Significance: The Pursuit

With his landmark book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, renowned business author Stephen R. Covey shared his blueprint for robust, comprehensive personal development. Though Covey's primary intended audience was that of eager and open business professionals, his principles could be appropriately applied to life generally, supporting any and all individuals who endeavor to lead a life of greater productivity and prosperity.

Within his *Habits*, a particularly vital piece of Covey's wisdom is his adaptation of psychologist Abraham Maslow's theory of human motivation, often called and popularly known as “the hierarchy of needs.”

Maslow postulated that human needs and motivations are arranged in a hierarchy, requiring the most fundamental needs be met before achieving desires of a higher level. Maslow's ordering of personal needs begins with the physiological, like food, drink, and clothing; followed by needs of safety, which are then succeeded by social needs, which are in turn followed by esteem-centered needs. The highest-level and final need of the human person, according to Maslow, is that of self-actualization for which the psychologist had these words: “What a man can be, he must be.”

All people, Maslow granted, are capable and desire to ascend the hierarchy.

Similarly, Covey adopted Maslow's belief that a human person evolves or goes through stages of maturation along the way to achieving what he believed to be the final stage, self-significance. In fact, according to Covey, Maslow revised his own hierarchy later in life and pointed to a new highest plane in his hierarchy, self-transcendence, or living for a purpose greater than one's self. The idea is this: a
healthy human life has a few requirements including food and shelter and sleep, but also belonging and respect and, ultimately, meaning.

Meanwhile, Covey’s description of needs for the ideal professional, reflecting Maslow’s model for the human psyche, traces a similar path of ascendency along the road to personal fulfillment. Covey begins with a base need of survival, followed by the need for stability. After one has achieved a reasonable level of stability, the freedom to attain success materializes, and then significance.

Fr. Robert Spitzer, S.J. has also contributed to the idea of happiness/fulfillment as an escalatory function in his book *Healing the Culture*. Spitzer breaks down happiness into both internal and external desires.

Informed by the work of Maslow, Covey, and Spitzer, I understand that many people, even with success already in hand, continue to desire for something beyond. The graphic below reflects my conception of the graduating levels of personal contentment. One collects increasing returns on contentment in the lowest level of survival and stability, yet only to a point. These desires cannot fulfill completely and will deliver diminishing returns past a certain point. The same goes for success, with impressive job titles and other accolades able to satisfy to a particular extent before they do not provide any further satisfaction. As Maslow and his intellectual successors have observed, the human person can continue to desire something that reverberates with deeper personal values. This is the desire for significance, to contribute to something beyond oneself.

Because this is intended to be a series of editorials rather than a more exhaustive text on the topic, I will begin by stating some assumptions rather than building them out.
A first assumption is that people possess desires that are uniquely human, desires separate from our animal nature. That is, as human beings we are not completely fulfilled or contented in only satisfying our physical and emotional needs, but naturally continue to desire something greater than these. This is why Maslow includes self-actualization as a psychological human need. No dog seeks self-actualization, but people often desire to be their best selves. This is also why the most fulfilled often cite purpose and mission as essential elements to their happiness. A second assumption is that it is human nature to seek fulfillment through sublime virtues such as truth, beauty, goodness, justice, and love. A third and final assumption is as humans, we are wired to be happy—an essential difference between people and our animal brethren. As testament to this common aim, in America, the pursuit of happiness is considered a fundamental right.

But what is happiness? That’s a bit harder to answer concisely as the exact ingredients are respective to the person, but as reported by Maslow and others, true happiness is multi-faceted, with meaning generally agreed upon as an important component.

Because we are wired for happiness and existential contentment, we will use the resources available to us to have it, especially our faculty for rationality. Because we are reasonable we are able to seek and, hopefully, to find the reason for our individual existences, our life’s purpose. This idea of a life’s purpose coincides with Maslow’s revised highest-plane of self-transcendence, or living for a cause greater than one’s self, and will be the topic of the next editorial in this series.