

*Slouching Toward Self-Actualization*

A Segmented Essay  
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“Life comes before literature, as the material always comes before the work.  
The hills are full of marble before the world blooms with statues.”

~Phillip Brooks, *Literature and Life*~

## I.

The professor spoke with authority to a room of graduate social work students. We bowed our heads toward spiral notebooks and scrawled notes about Maslow’s Hierarchy.

“What a man *can* be, he *must* be,” wrote Abraham Maslow. The psychologist believed each of us is able to be “everything that one is capable of becoming.” In order to self-actualize, one simply needs to climb from the bottom rung of food-shelter-sex, to safety, to love-and-belonging, to esteem-by-family-and-community. Upon traversing all these, the existential traveler may ascend to self-actualization.

I raised my hand. “Excuse me, sir,” I said. “Do you *really* think self-actualization is possible? I mean, when you think about it, only a handful of people have made it that far—Jesus, of course, and Gandhi, and Martin Luther King, and Abraham Lincoln . . . I mean, do you really expect us to self-actualize our clients, when what they need most is food, safe shelter, a support system and sanity?”

The professor answered my question the only way one should answer a rhetorical question—with silence. Likely, he thought about the psychology of the young woman who had questioned the logic of his claim: “this one is conflicted, emotionally constricted, has unresolved anger issues.”

In the intervening years, between graduate school and the present, I have thought many times about the professor’s claim that we should all aspire to self-

actualization. I have walked the miles between “coming-of-age” to “coming of aging.” I have donned several identities: social worker, mother, writer—often, all three at once. I have been unable to assemble the puzzle of my full identity. Isn’t it necessary for me to decide *who I am* in order to become “more of what I am”?

Self-actualization is like the Appalachian Trail—many start, but few finish. And, there are so many hardships along the way— food shortages, sore feet, loneliness, and bears. Many ascend to the trailhead, but few will make it to Maine.

## II.

*Make a difference, lift the poor from deprivation, give voices to the voiceless, hear real stories stranger than fiction.* The latter is the less lofty goal of social work, but it is the truest. People’s lives are dramatic, shadowy, strange and triumphant.

A distraught husband shot his wife, my client, and buried her by the reservoir, then turned himself in to the police. Their orphan wandered and wondered. All I could do was listen.

A single mom’s boyfriend disciplined her two-year old daughter by holding the child in a scalding bathtub. The third-degree burns formed a belt-line across her waist— a recognizable pattern of abuse. Social Services removed the child from her home; the abuser roamed freely. The single mother asked, “Who is punished here?” All I could do was listen.

A man suffering schizophrenia poured gasoline over his head and lit a match. The devil made him do it. Anti-psychotic medicines silenced the devil, but the delusions spoke loudly still. He believed the television news was about him. “Don’t you see?” he insisted. “They are talking about me!” All I could do was listen.

Batman wore his utility belt. The garbage men were a conspiracy; the Angel Gabriel told him so. “Does the Angel Gabriel talk to you often?” I asked. “Oh yes!” he replied expansively. Batman lives in a world of angels, clandestine plots and superhuman powers—sleeping by night, and dreaming by day.

What might I do for people whose intractable misfortunes seem impossible to survive? How might I understand the genuine gratitude of a family whose home was destroyed by fire? “Don’t worry about us,” the mother said to me, “We’ll be fine. We are alive.”

The world is backwards. The teacher learns from the student— “Don’t just do something. Stand there.”

### III.

I celebrated my first pregnancy, for several weeks.

“You either have twins or a cyst,” the doctor said. The ultrasound showed a healthy ten-week fetus as well as a tumor on my ovary, as big as a navel orange.

“We will wait for surgery until the genitalia form, at thirteen weeks gestation,” the doctor said.

I imagined a little hermaphrodite child or no child at all. After leaving the ultrasound, I walked down the long corridor of University Hospital, sobbing hot tears that seemed not to come from my eyes, but my chest.

The operating room might as well have been Dodger Stadium. The bright lights glared and the crowd assembled— several nurses, one obstetrician, a surgeon, two anesthesiologists, and one pathologist who made a cameo appearance carrying something resembling a Tupperware lunch bucket.

Would the heroic surgeon be able to remove the invader without taking the ovary? Would the villainous cyst be benign or malignant? Would the fetus tolerate the procedure? Would the patient?

“You can’t have general anesthetic,” the surgeon explained. “You are pregnant.” I would have a spinal block, which means I would be awake for the procedure.

“You can’t have Valium for the anxiety,” the surgeon explained. “You are pregnant.”

“You’ll feel pressure, but you should not feel pain,” the surgeon explained. “Tell me if you feel pain.”

“The spinal block might make it hard to breathe,” the anesthesiologist said. “Tell me if you’re having trouble breathing; I might need to intubate you,” he said. I cringed at the thought of the plastic tubing they would insert down my trachea. I promised to breathe.

As the surgeon sliced my abdomen, the anesthesiologist narrated the story of his migration from Beirut, to a residency in Cairo, to this University of Iowa Hospital operating room, where my American lungs relied on his Lebanese expertise.

A green curtain hung between the surgeons and my upper torso. “Is the curtain there so I don’t have to watch?” I asked.

Dr. Beirut laughed. And said, “No, the draping is the sterile field. It protects you from infection.” Just then, I felt what the surgeon had referred to as “pressure.” Hands pushed against my insides, searching with diligent fingers. I was an empty shell, stuffed and stretched. Like a polyfill toy on a child’s bed.

“Breathe slowly,” the anesthesiologist warned. He spoke fluent English accented by hyper-enunciated consonants and a foreign lyricism that would have been charming, if I had not thought I was dying.

“Okay,” he said in a hushed voice, “Looks like they’ve got it.” His interpretation of the action of my surgery resembled the whispered play-by-play of televised golf tournaments that I often watched with my parents. *And, here comes Nicklaus now, approaching the eighteenth green.*

“It’s out!” he announced.

*And Nicklaus makes the putt!*

“Wow! I haven’t seen one this big since I left Cairo.” He drew a circle-in-the-air with his hands to demonstrate the size of my amazing neoplasm. “It’s as big as a grapefruit! Do you want to see it?”

“Absolutely not.”

The pathologist loaded his neon-red lunch bucket, to transport the specimen to his laboratory.

“It looks benign,” the surgeon said as he embroidered and stapled my abdomen. Your baby will probably be fine.”

“We’ll be able to give you a narcotic for the pain, even though you are pregnant,” he said. Through the stupor created by exhaustion and morphine, I heard the recovery room nurse talking to the floor nurse. “This one’s got a lot of spunk,” she said.

I muttered, “I am becoming Real.”

## IV.

Tracy was a tall blonde woman of pure Norwegian ancestry, a physical therapist on a Burn Center where I was social worker. We shared a youthful energy for life, as well as daily acquaintance with pain and death in a place where random accidents were the rule. Houses burned. Grain elevators exploded. Chemicals leaked. Scalding water and grease splattered and splashed. Electricity zapped. Victims asked “Why me?” and “What now?” We had no answers to “Why me?” but we became experts on “What now?”

As a physical therapist and a friend, Tracy was willful, bossy and fiercely loyal. You could imagine her in a Viking helmet, standing at the helm of a ship, her flaxen hair blowing about as she issued orders to her crew. Scandinavian stoicism helped her conduct the rigors of motion on reluctant patients whose tender scars contracted like brittle rubber bands across joints, on knees and elbows, shoulders and neck.

“Straighten your arm as far as you can.”

“But, it hurts,” the patient would object.

“No pain, no gain.”

“How can you be so mean?”

“It is not my job to be popular.”

Tracy kept a punching bag in her office; it was a multi-purpose stress-reliever. You could punch it or hug it. She bent spoons to relieve the gathering tension that

comes from intentionally causing pain. She endured. Among her friends and colleagues Tracy often quipped, “Life’s a bitch and then you die.”

And then she did.

Within months of the Inflammatory Breast Cancer diagnosis, Tracy lost her hair and was too weak to work. One day while I visited her, she opened a thin hardback book and read out-loud her favorite passage from *The Velveteen Rabbit* by Margery Williams. The wise old Skin Horse tells the Velveteen Rabbit how toys become real:

Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don’t matter at all, because once you are Real you can’t be ugly, except to people who don’t understand.

Tracy and our burn patients taught me about Real, which means spending less time asking “why me?” than on contemplating “what now?”

## V.

My daughters do not believe in the concept of my youth. They cannot imagine their mother in a headscarf, hoop earrings, overalls and earth shoes. I do not tell them how I danced to the rhythms of live bands, and performed the funky chicken to the cheers of my more inhibited friends. “Yes,” I might say, “I asked the same existential questions you seem to be asking. ‘Why am I here? What is my destiny?’”

In the 1970’s, I found answers in *The Prophet* by Kahlil Gibran. His poem, “On Children,” reflected my parents’ shortcomings, with these immortal words: “You may give them your love but not your thoughts. For they have their own thoughts.”



Gibran wrote, “You may strive to be like them, but seek not to make them like you. You are the bows from which your children as living arrows are sent forth.”

Twenty-five years later, my yellowed copy of *The Prophet* fell from a bookshelf, hitting me in the head. I was no longer in the market for the meaning of life. Instead, I was reading a book titled, *How to Talk so Your Child Will Listen (and listen so your child will talk)*. I had become the archer from which my “children as living arrows are sent forth.” It was not so easy to be a stable bow “full of gladness” as my arrows hit targets at which I had not aimed.

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My vacuum cleaner choked on a foreign object in the grotto beneath my teenage daughter’s mattress. There, I found used tissues, crumpled homework, loose change, dirty socks and the belt Susanna had insisted was lost forever. I also discovered a book wrapped in brown paper. Its pages were dog-eared and its binding was broken. Was this the 21<sup>st</sup> century equivalent of *The Prophet*? Still kneeling on the floor, I opened the book to a chapter titled “Spells and Incantations,” and moved quickly to “What the Wiccan believes” and “Our Mother, the Goddess.”

Holding the guide to Wicca in my hands, I paced, motioned the sign-of-the cross, and said aloud, “Holy Mother of Christ Almighty, my daughter is a witch. Help me out here!”

I waited for a sign. No sign came, but a moment of clarity. I had been praying to a Holy Trinity. I had directly addressed a Mother Goddess. Could I genuinely condemn Wicca?

“But Mom, it’s not my book! Sarah gave it to me, and I don’t really believe in that stuff . . . not really.” This conditional apology she followed with a rebuttal.

“Besides, what do you know about it?”

“Why exactly, would I want to know *anything* about it?” I said. Nevertheless, I agreed to learn more about what I defined as “witchcraft.” I logged on to [www.wiccan.com](http://www.wiccan.com).

I agreed with part of my daughter’s defense of Wicca – its guiding philosophy is, “Do no wrong,” and “Yes, Catholicism does contain ritual ceremonies and incantations,” and “Yes, if you must assign a gender to God, it is fine to see Her as female,” and, “Okay, I’ll agree that Wicca is not inherently evil.”

I shuddered at the words I had spoken.

## VI.

My daughter Liz said, “Mom. Why is your skin blotchy? Why do the veins on your hands stick out so far?” I laughed and said, “I am becoming Real.” She looked at me blankly, not having been patient enough to sit through the story of the *Velveteen Rabbit*.

I am a cliché of aging. I have creaky knees, age spots, laugh lines and “natural highlights” in my dark brown hair. The skin of my upper arms waves when I do. None of this bothers me. What troubles me is the acceleration of time – the growing up and the letting go. My parents are now spirit people. My daughters are flesh and spirit, traversing the two worlds where child and woman meet. They are the new toys in the house – with fresh skin stretched taut over curvy frames. Their eyes sparkle with possibility.

Dr. C is a psychologist and my spiritual director. He helps me with the rigors of becoming Real. He is my gray-haired bearded guru with a ponytail, who serves herbal tea, then waits for me to speak. He is very comfortable with silence – what psychotherapists call the “pregnant pause.” One could easily mediate or do a ritual dance in Dr. C’s office, where Native American artifacts decorate the walls, and dim lighting casts soothing shadows.

*I know it hurts, but stretch. No pain, no gain.*

“We all have shadow selves,” he says. Dr. C is a Jungian, which means he believes in the soul, religion, dreams and the unconscious self. He does not wish to fix me; I am who I am. He is a seeker, not a soothsayer. He is my Skin Horse.

I speak about my recent acquaintance with grief, an experience hard to describe but you know it when you feel it. I tell him how I sob spontaneous hot tears at images, smells and sounds that remind me of my parents— the sight of fall leaves, the sound of Nat King Cole, the hush of televised golf tournaments, and the memory of vodka martinis—“very dry, no fruit.”

Dr. C and I talk about the value of suffering, why bad things happen, and how we can make sense of the unexpected. He says everyone has a destiny. Fate is what happens. How you react to random life events determines your destiny.

“I’m not in any real rush to get to my destiny,” I joke. I am whistling in the dark. *Is there a monster under my bed? Something scary just around the corner? Do I really want to know my shadow self?*

When I am silent, Dr. Cunningham waits. There is no rush. The words will come. He knows what Tracy and the Skin Horse knew: “[Real] doesn’t happen all at once. You become. It takes a long time.”

The social worker tries to repair broken lives. The mother guides and protects the child. The writer attempts to capture life on paper. Failing to receive the blessing of the muse, the writer’s words falter. The social worker cannot reverse the hurt. Children are living arrows flying in a direction they determine. Fate we do not choose.

At the door of Dr. C’s office, hangs a plaque: “Vocatus atque non vocatus, Deus adent.” Translated from the Latin this means “Beckoned or not beckoned, god(s) will be present.”

## VII.

There is solace for the traveler on the self-actualization trail. Though few of us will complete the hike, there is consolation for the journeyer. Maslow believed that it is possible for everyone on the trail to have “peak experiences,” — moments of clarity, awe and self-awareness, when we suddenly understand why we exist.

My peak moments are not confined to visions of beauty, when the sun sets scarlet over the tops of trees or a sudden rain shower creates a rainbow at mid-day. My peak moments have most often occurred when my feet are sore from slouching along the rocky path, when the path digresses into territory I do not recognize, and when a bear consumes my food. My “peak moments” come when I am so weary that I cannot walk another step.

But I do.

