

Podcast #18 – More Than Bread and Butter (14 ½ minutes)

Common sense tells us that unless and until someone's basic survival needs are met—you know, basic needs for food, water, and shelter—that other motivations and needs involving love, creativity, self-determination, and recognition are sort of, well, they're sort of irrelevant. The psychologist, Abraham Maslow made this common sense into a famous "pyramid," with survival needs at the base, and non-survival needs like belonging, self-esteem, and self-actualization forming successive layers as you move up the pyramid---Maslow initially argued, following common sense, that a person can't turn to the satisfaction of higher-order needs until lower order ones are sufficiently met.

So that's just common sense, right?

Except that in this case, *common sense is just plain wrong*. The fact of the matter is that non-economic needs for recognition, meaning, relationships, and agency can be and are every bit as powerful as survival needs. I mean, the truth here is hiding in plain sight. A terrorist commits suicide for the sake of Allah, an African-American marcher sits down in front of Bull Connor's dogs. A marine risks his life for his buddy; a parent does the

same for a child. People give up higher salaries all the time to stay in organizations in which they're given recognition and in which their work has meaning. Many studies published in the Harvard Business Review have correlated the success of a company with how much that company engages its employees above and beyond compensation. This isn't some airy fairy new age psychology I'm talking about here.

I want to talk about the fierce urgency of these non-economic, non-survival needs and make the argument that it makes no sense to prioritize one over another, specifically, that it is wrong to prioritize survival or economic needs over all others. Instead we have to look at people as a whole package of needs, *including* survival needs.—all of which are animating us all the time.

So, let me start by saying that one of most important non-survival, non-economic needs people have is a need for meaning. What's a need for meaning, you ask? Well, it's a need for significance, a need to transcend one's individual ego, to contribute and connect with something bigger than the self. Austrian psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor, Victor Frankl, put it this way: "*Those who have a **why** to live can bear with almost any **how**'.*"

Consider this: great oratory –you know, Winston Churchill, Martin Luther King, Barack Obama—makes political use of our longing for some experience of collective purpose, inviting us into something bigger, something transcendent. You see this need activated on a picket line at the beginning of a strike. Spiritual communities, including some of the mega-churches, elicit and satisfy the need for meaning. It's no wonder that Pastor Rick Warren's book "The Purpose Driven Life" has sold more than 30 million copies.

In the private sector, in survey after survey, people list items like the ability to do something that matters as vital dimensions of workplace engagement. Such factors are correlated with mental health, reduced turnover, and greater productivity. And speaking of meaning and purpose at the workplace, who wasn't moved by the sacrifice and heroism shown by the Japanese workers who remained at their damaged nuclear power plants in Fukushima, risking their lives as an expression of their commitment to their jobs, communities and country. Or consider the heroism of firefighters who rushed up the stairs at the World Trade Center on September 11, a sacrifice having nothing to do with money or narrow self-interest.

Finally, consider the ways that people express their longing to be connected to something bigger than the self in their families and their creative endeavors. The investment in children contains many different longings, but one important one is a wish to ensure a better future for the next generation. This aim is so powerful that it makes tolerable almost any degree of sacrifice and deprivation. A Chinese proverb goes, "If you want happiness for a lifetime, help the next generation." Namely, gratify your need for meaning. And, finally-- of course-- how many artists do you think have a longing, an ambition, to create something that will last, something for posterity. Again, the need for meaning.

When the need for meaning is frustrated, people get cynical. People who aren't engaged in meaningful work get burned out. And people who can't see any connection between their current efforts and a future, well, they just get depressed.

Now, a second non-survival need is the need for relationships. And I don't think I need to argue too much for the centrality of this need, of the absolutely crucial psycho-physiological need to be connected to other people. We're born with the need and capacity for it and when we

don't get it, when we're disconnected, we get depressed and we get physically ill. In fact, survival probably depends on satisfying relationship needs. Illness and even death were at one time common in orphanages. It took militant psychologists who were studying attachment to show that if these children were picked up, played with, and listened to more, they would stop getting so sick. Attachment is necessary for life.

And one of the most important sources of suffering, in fact, in our culture involves the breakdown of communities and the social isolation and loneliness that results. The appeal of everything from labor unions, to women's groups, to Tea Party conservative groups, to the Elks Club for God's sakes, is that they provide a way to satisfy our human need for connectedness.

The need for relationships is not some soft need. Every day we see children opting to stay with parents who harm and abuse them rather than risk giving up the attachment. In fact, some of the worst traumas that I as a psychotherapist see in my practice do not involve violence but, instead, involve severe neglect, emotional absence, and/ or an emotionally

un-empathic and cold parent. Without secure relationships, all hell breaks loose in the human heart.

Finally, let me say this about the importance of relationships. In her book, *A Paradise Built in Hell*, Rebecca Solnit argues that natural disasters open up powerful channels for the experience of belonging, community, and meaning. As she describes and explores disaster after disaster, she finds that ordinary people are uplifted by the call to care for each other, an experience that is exhilarating as much as the objective situation is tragic.

A third basic and urgent human need is the need for recognition. By recognition I mean the experience of being seen and understood as unique and special. All people—everyone—needs to be seen as unique and special. Self-esteem is the result. If it's not met people become insecure or depressed. Recognition is like fuel and the absence of it brings one's engagement with the world to a dead stop. In addition, when it's not there, people come to feel that there's something wrong with their even needing it to begin with.

Babies need to be seen. Children need to be praised. Adults need to feel special in the eyes of their partners and in the eyes of friends. People at work need to have their efforts,

their contribution recognized. There are even “recognition consultants,” ---if you can believe that—that help organizations figure out how to properly and regularly offer recognition to the people who work there.

If you don't get enough recognition growing up, you can't, then, give it very easily. One patient of mine remembered that she was expected to get A's and when she brought one home, she barely got a pat on the back. Another told me that he had 5 siblings and so it was unusual for his mother to even notice that he WENT to school. Both patients, as children, grew up feeling insecure about whether they were particularly loveable.

Recognition is about specialness. We all know that generic praise doesn't mean that much, right? When praise is really specific to you, it counts. You feel that you MATTER enough to someone to notice. I was at a rally not long ago of hotel workers who had just gone out on strike in San Francisco. The speaker said something like this: “The hotel owners treat you like dirt, but the fact is that they need you. You are the backbone of San Francisco's hotel industry and the hotels are the backbone of the hospitality industry, and the hospitality industry is essential to the City's health. Without you, San

Francisco would be Fresno (a much smaller, economically depressed Calif. City).

Oh, and speaking of social movements. If you study the ways that our own civil rights movement was grounded in the life of the black church...you quickly see that that church was, if anything, a recognition-based culture. Standing committees, work groups, frequent social activities. Participation in the life of the church was extremely high—no accident, right?

Finally, consider this study. A research firm called The Jackson Organization studied 200,000 employees in the private sector. They concluded that companies that effectively appreciated employees' value enjoyed a return on equity and assets 3 times higher than companies that didn't. The jury is no longer out about the relative importance of recognition and money. Both are crucial. Organizations that provide little recognition have to pay employees a lot of money.

A fourth and final need I'll mention is the need for agency. Agency in this regard means 2 things: first, it means creativity. And, secondly, it means a feeling of being in control. Together one might think of a need for agency as a need to have a voice.

We know a lot about our need to see that we have an influence on the world around us. Even a young child needs to



know that he or she can elicit a reaction in others. If such a child can't impact the environment, he or she dampens whatever passion, curiosity, and liveliness was there to begin with.

Agency, then, is related to lofty ideals of self-determination, autonomy and freedom. It's what a teacher means when telling a student, "I want to hear *your voice* in this essay" and it's what a political movement means when insists that women or people of color need a voice in decision-making.

And, interestingly, agency even has an effect on the brain. When laboratory rats are raised to have control over food or over the cessation of a noxious stimuli, their brain cells grow faster and establish new connections much faster than rats that don't have such control. And we all know about Martin Seligman's studies of *learned helplessness*—a condition in which animals (and people) give up if they can't see the ways that their own efforts and actions can affect or change their environments. Under such conditions, people become depressed, passive, and apathetic.

People who are deprived of healthy agency are likely to express agency in destructive ways. If people can't exercise self-determination by saying yes to the life they want to lead,

thy will more than likely exercise the power to say no. If they can't shape the direction of events around them, they unconscious may try to obstruct them, much like a toddler who is, in fact, relatively helpless, but whose "nay-saying " can wreak havoc on his or her parents' lives.

And, finally, I have seen over and over again, that many people grow up and live their lives unable to express any sort of creativity, believing in fact that they have none to express but who then, when given the opportunity, are absolutely consumed with the pleasures and satisfactions of doing so.

In closing, I think that it's clear that people need more than bread and butter. They need to be connected to others, to have a sense of meaning and purpose, including in their work, to feel appreciated and seen as special for who they are, and to have a sense that they have a right to a voice in their private and public lives. I guess you could say that all of these are type of hunger, even if the thing they seek isn't bread and it isn't butter.