

Donald Anders-Richards

'Finny' - Portrait of a Self-Actualizing Teenager?

MASLOW AND HUMAN GROWTH

Towards the end of the summer term, a young teacher on secondment to read for an M.Ed. degree came to see me. He was particularly interested in Rogerian educational approaches and wished to discuss what for him was a vital question in his thinking and research. He said that he was profoundly impressed by Rogers and his belief in the need to develop empathy, congruence and positive regard in people, as well as feeling himself aligned with notions of human potential and human resource development in the field of humanistic psychology. *But* - could I help him in trying to say how it all worked out? Into what sort of foundation discipline or analysis could these views be placed? He was about to write his dissertation - what *rigour* could be applied to create a product which would be an articulate and defensible account worthy of scrutiny by 'academics'?

As this preamble is simply to put my objective in writing this article into some sort of perspective, I do not propose to suggest any answers to these questions - readers will no doubt reach their own conclusions! I can say however, that one of my first lines of approach was the thought that it might well be others, within the field of humanistic psychology who had articulated Rogerian principles in a developed and coherent framework. So I went again to Abraham Maslow and re-read his classic *Motivation and Personality* (written incredibly in 1954 though my text is the 2nd. Edition of 1970). Very early on I found positive evidence that I was on the right track, for he writes:-

When we posit the concept of gratification health (or happiness health) we implicitly align ourselves thereby with those writers, Goldstein, Jung, Adler, Angyal, Horney, Fromm, May, Buhler, Rogers and increasingly, others who postulate some positive growth tendency in the organism which, from within, drives it to fuller development (op.cit. p.68).

The particular stimulus for this article though, lay some distance on where Maslow gives an account of his decision to try and isolate the characteristics of self-actualizing persons using historical figures, contemporary figures, and hopefully, 'figures created by novelists or dramatists' (op.cit. p.150). It seems, sadly, that this latter approach was a non-starter, for he goes on to say:-

. . . but none were found that were usable in our culture and our time (in itself a thought-provoking finding) (Ibid).

A SEPARATE PEACE

Now it also happened that the very week I met my student, on the evening of Tuesday 20th. July, BBC 2 presented the first public screening in England of the film *A separate Peace* - a direction by Larry Peerce of John Knowles' cult classic wartime

novel. The story is set in an exclusive American private school, named Devon, in New England during the years 1942-44. Two 16 year-old boys, Finny (Phineas) the exceptional natural athlete, and Gene, the intellectual, are room-mates. Despite the war and its pervading influence on the school in many subtle ways, the boys are happy in their exclusive friendship. They are inseparable, a mutual admiration society of two. Finny, although an unconscious extrovert, is the dominant partner, though this too is in large measure unconscious, stemming from what he is rather than from any intentional act of will. Gene, beneath this outward happiness, hides a deep, subconscious resentment of Finny. Suddenly one day, he convinces himself that his closest friend, with his constant demands on his time and attention, is deliberately trying to sabotage his scholastic career. This conviction grows over the months following, although he does not take any action, or change in his acceptance of Finny's leadership. Then equally suddenly, he discovers that he was wrong all the time, and that Finny is completely innocent (v. infra p.7). There follows one of the most chilling passages in the book in which Gene, as the two boys walk towards the river for what has become the nightly ritual of the 'Super Suicide Society of the Summer Session', a jump into the water from a tall tree, mentally explores his reactions to this discovery :-

I said nothing, my mind exploring the new dimensions of isolation around me. Any fear I had ever had of the tree was nothing besides this. It wasn't my neck but my understanding which was menaced. He (Finny) had never been jealous of me for a second. Now I knew that there was not and never could have been rivalry between us. I was not of the same quality as he. I couldn't stand this (A Separate Peace. Secker and Warburg 1959 p.65).

Finny suggests this time that they both climb the tree and jump into the river together. Gene listlessly agrees, and in a momentary fit of fury as they stand on the branch about to jump, jounces the tree causing Finny to fall and break his leg. From this point on the story moves to a tragic close as some six months later, Finny dies of heart-stoppage under the anaesthetic, as his leg is being set in the school infirmary following a second break.

PERSONALITY: UNIQUE OR DEVELOPED?

Such is the novel's basic plot. It is rich in psychological nuance, and there is much more to its presentation than its ability to bring to mind in readers' reminiscences of their own school days, particularly if these were spent in boarding school. However it is the characterization of Finny as what I believe to be a model of a self-actualizing figure in literature, that I propose to examine. Maslow notes in his Preface to *Motivation and Personality* that he has confined the concept 'very definitely' to older people, as by his criteria, self-actualization does not occur in young people. He states:-

In our culture at least, youngsters have not yet achieved identity, or autonomy, nor have they had time enough to experience an enduring, loyal, post-romantic love relationship, nor have they generally found their calling, the altar upon which to offer themselves. Nor have they worked out their own system of values; nor have they had experience enough (responsibility

for others, tragedy, failure, achievement, success) to shed perfectionist illusions and become realistic; nor have they generally made their peace with death; nor have they learned how to be patient; nor have they learned enough about evil in themselves and others to be compassionate; nor have they had time to become post-ambivalent about parents and elders, power and authority; nor have they generally become knowledgeable and educated enough to open the possibility of becoming wise; nor have they generally acquired enough courage to be unpopular, to be unashamed about being openly virtuous etc (op.cit. p.xx).

Nevertheless, Maslow maintains that it is reasonable to speak of 'good-growth-towards-self-actualization' as a meaningful and researchable concept at any age. What I find fascinating and provocative in *A Separate Peace*, is the portrait of Finny as an intrinsically *natural* 'good animal' (this latter is a fundamental concept in Maslow's psychological analysis of human beings), having almost no need for growth in those aspects of development towards self-actualization which Maslow goes on to identify. He simply *is* such a person. Gene focusses this in the school setting:-

The Devon faculty had never before experienced a student who combined a calm ignorance of the rules with a winning urge to be good, who seemed to love the school truly and deeply, and never more than when he was breaking the regulations, a model boy who was most comfortable in the truant's corner. The faculty threw up its hands over Phineas, and so loosened its grip on all of us (op.cit. p.23).

Or when Finny has got away with wearing a pink shirt, and using the school tie as a belt at the Headmaster's tea, somehow both surviving staff disapproval and ingenuously turning it in his favour:-

We left the party, both of us feeling fine. I laughed along with Finny, my best friend, and also unique; able to get away with anything at all. And not because he was a conniver either; I was sure of that. He got away with everything because of the extraordinary kind of person he was. It was quite a compliment to me, as a matter of fact, to have such a person choose me for his best friend (op.cit. p.29).

MASLOW AND KNOWLES: SIMILAR OR DISPARATE VIEWS?

This position then of a unique self-actualizer does not of course challenge Maslow's analysis. We are given no facts about Finny's background or upbringing which might have helped identify satisfactory needs gratification at an earlier age and thus support Maslow's account in this respect (op.cit. Chapter 5 - The Role of Basic Need Gratification in Psychological Theory' pp.59ff.) Certainly Maslow places considerable positive emphasis on the *childlike*, note, not *childish* perceptions and responses of self-actualizing adults (op.cit. p.158) and he does not deny that instant self-actualization, although extremely rare, does happen (op.cit. p.257). Knowles could not be said to be claiming either instant self-actualization or perfectability in the case

of Finny of course. So, what is the outcome when Maslow's criteria and Knowles' open, authentic adolescent are compared? It would be too large a task to isolate all the possible factors in Maslow's analysis in relation to Finny. I shall simply extrapolate some of the chief elements and leave readers to judge for themselves if a case is made in answer to the question which forms the title of this article - 'Finny: Portrait of a Self-Actualizing Teenager?'.

A. More efficient perception of reality and more comfortable relations with it (Maslow op.cit. pp. 153ff).

An unusual ability to detect the spurious, the fake, the dishonest in personality and to judge people correctly and efficiently, is posited here. Maslow uses Herbert Read's phrase 'the innocent eye' to summarise this element. (op.cit. p.154).

In the account of the pink shirt and tie-belt incident, Finny is asked to explain his appearance in class. He is able to discuss it with the Master, somehow revealing his acceptance of a contravention of rule, yet at the same time assessing that he will not be punished, for the Master himself does not really believe in the validity of the 'offence' or the need for punishment. Gene says of this encounter:-

When the sternest of the Summer Session Masters, old Mr. Patch-Withers came up to him after history class and asked about it, I watched his drawn but pink face become pinker with amusement as Finny politely explained the meaning of the shirt. It was hypnotism (op.cit. p.25).

B. Acceptance of self, others, nature (Maslow op.cit. pp.155ff).

This is the essence of Maslow's 'good animal' view of man - an ability to enjoy life and human functioning in all its forms without regret or shame.

This approach is so characteristic of the portrayal of Finny that it is difficult to pull out any single definitive example. On an illicit trip to the beach with Gene:-

The Ocean, throwing up sun-sprays across some nearby rocks was winter cold. This kind of sunshine and ocean, with the accumulating roar of the surf and the salty, adventurous, flirting wind from the sea, always intoxicated Phineas. He was everywhere, he enjoyed himself hugely, he laughed aloud at passing seagulls. And he did everything he could think of for me (op.cit. p.50).

In self-analysis too, Finny shows himself quite clearly conscious of his own lack of academic ability. In a discussion of their respective qualities, he says to Gene:-

'Me'? He smiled faintly. 'listen, I could study for ever and I'd never break C. But it's different for you, you're good. You really are' (op.cit. p.64).

Even with the knowledge that sports are finished for him after the fall from the tree, Finny is able to reorientate his physical drive. He calls Gene at school from his home in Boston where he is convalescing - Gene recalls:-

So to Phineas I said, 'I'm too busy for sports' and he went into his incoherent groans and jumbles of words, and I thought the issue was settled until at the end he said, 'Listen, pal, if I can't play sports, you're going to play them for me', and I lost part of myself to him then, and a soaring sense of freedom revealed that this must have been my purpose from the first; to become a part of Phineas (op.cit. p.95).

I offer no comment on the significance of this last statement as an indication of Gene's self-analysis and psychological need.

C. Spontaneity; simplicity; naturalness (Maslow op.cit. pp. 157ff).

Maslow quotes Fromm's conclusions as conveying the essence of this element - that the average, normal, well-adjusted person has not the slightest idea of what he is, of what he wants, of what his own opinions are (op.cit. p.159).

Thus of Finny when he has finished explaining to the Headmaster why he and Gene have missed dinner as a result of first their 'suicide' jump and then a wrestling match with each other:-

Everything he said was true and sincere; Finny always said what he happened to be thinking, and if this stunned people he was surprised (op.cit. p.22).

And in his physical movement itself:-

Phineas just walked serenely on, or rather flowed on, rolling forward in his white sneakers with such unthinkable unity of movement that 'walk' didn't describe it (op.cit. p.16).

Then too at a crucial point in their relationship, Gene discovers that Finny is not, as he had previously thought, trying to compete in school academic work by distracting him from his studying for the next day's examination. For the first time he savagely demurs at Finny's request to accompany him for the tree jump, on the grounds that he has to revise for the exam. Finny is completely mystified at this response and Gene explains. Finny then says:-

'Don't go. What the hell, it's only a game. I didn't know you needed to study . . . I didn't think you ever did. I thought it just came to you.' It seemed that he had made some sort of parallel between my studies and his sports. He probably thought anything you were good at came without effort. He didn't know yet that he was unique' (op.cit. p.63).

D. Problem centering (Maslow op.cit. pp.159ff).

Self-actualizers are, according to Maslow, problem-centred rather than ego-centred, they tend not to worry over immediate concerns, and what 'tasks' they accept are often done for the good of others and to provide for what they see as others' needs.

In such a frame of reference Finny one evening instigates the fateful dialogue with Gene which results in the latter forming the inaccurate understanding that his best friend is, after all, a jealous rival of his own academic prowess. Though he later finds he was wrong about Finny, he has to admit that the analysis of him which Finny makes is correct:-

'You work too hard', Finny said . . . 'You want to be head of the class . . . and be the boy wonder of the school. I know you'.

Gene protests, but in the end is forced to concede:-

'Anyway', I grudgingly added, 'somebody's got to be head of the class' (op.cit. p.55).

Autonomy; will; active agents (Maslow op.cit. pp.162).

In these elements are indicated the relative independence shown by self-actualizers of their physical and social environment, and of the good opinions, status, rewards, prestige bestowed on them by others.

A particularly striking example in *A Separate Peace* relating to Finny's physical prowess, is the occasion when, in a quite unpremeditated attempt, he breaks a school swimming record with only Gene there as witness. Afterwards he tells Gene:-

' . . . I just wanted to see if I could do it. Now I know. But I don't want to do it in public . . . It's just between you and me. Don't say anything about it, to . . . anyone' (op.cit. p.47).

Gene is thunderstruck at the idea of a record being broken and nobody being told about it. Another indication, this time of Finny's ability to express his authentic feelings, comes later on during their trip to the beach (v. supra p.6). After an exhausting day's cycling and swimming they settle down to sleep in the sand-dunes overnight. Finny, as usual, offers Gene a night-time monologue:-

'I hope you're having a pretty good time here. I know I kind of dragged you away at the point of a gun, but after all you can't come to the shore with just anybody and you can't come by yourself, and at this teenage period in life the proper person is your best pal'. He hesitated and then added, 'which is what you are', and there was silence on this dune.

Gene accurately interprets the strength of Finny's feelings, and his congruence in expressing them, but he is unable to respond himself - an ominous indication of things to come:-

It was a courageous thing to say. Exposing a sincere emotion nakedly like that at the Devon School was the next thing to suicide. I should have told him then that he was my best friend also and rounded off what he had said. I started to; I nearly did. But something held me back. Perhaps I was stopped

by that level of feeling deeper than thought, which contains the truth (op.cit. p.52).

F. Gemeinschaftsgefühl (Maslow op.cit. pp.165ff).

Maslow chooses an Alderian word here which describes the deep feeling of identity, sympathy and affection which self-actualizing subjects have for human beings in general, and for the clarity with which they see things others do not.

It is in his life-style and beliefs that Finny displays this characteristic. In the discussion of the boys' absence from dinner already mentioned (v. supra p.7) in which Finny carries the day with the Headmaster:-

. . . Finny pressed his advantage. Not because he wanted to be forgiven for missing the meal - that didn't interest him at all, he might have rather enjoyed the punishment if it was done in some novel or unknown way. He pressed his advantage because he saw that Mr. Prud'homme was pleased, won over in spite of himself. The Master was slipping from his official position momentarily, and it was just possible, if Phineas pressed hard enough, that there might be a flow of simple, unregulated friendliness between them, and such flows were one of Finny's reasons for living (op.cit. p.21).

Then in the swimming pool prior to his attempt to break the swimming record, Finny expresses astonishment that it has stood all the time they have been at Devon. Gene assesses this response:-

It was an insult to the class, and Finny had tremendous loyalty to the class, as he did to any group he belonged to, beginning with him and me and radiating outward past the limits of humanity towards spirits and clouds and stars (op.cit. p.45).

G. Interpersonal relations (Maslow op.cit. pp.166f)

This specific element follows on from the Gemeinschaftsgefühl described above, and speaks for itself. Much of what I have quoted already illustrates Finny's easy command of relationships. One of the specific factors within the area which Maslow isolates, is the ability of such a self-actualizer to attract others - admirers, friends, disciples or even worshippers. The following accounts of Finny put these elements into context:-

There were three others with us - Phineas in those days almost always moved in groups the size of a hockey team . . . (op.cit. p.12).

Although he was rarely conscious of it, Phineas was always being watched, like the weaker. Up the field, the others at badminton sensed a shift in the wind, their voices carried down to us, calling us. When we didn't come, they began gradually to come down to us (op.cit. p.38).

Right from the start, it was clear that none had ever been better adapted to a

sport than Finny was to blitzball . . . It was good that Finny could shine at it. He could also shine at many other things, with people for instance, the others in our dormitory, the faculty; in fact if you stopped to think about it, Finny could shine with everyone, he attracted everyone he met. I was glad of that too. Naturally. He was my room-mate and my best friend (op.cit. p.42).

Finny and I went along the Broadwalk in our sneakers and white slacks. Finny in a light blue poloshirt and I in a T-shirt. I noticed that people were looking fixedly at him, so I took a look myself to see why. His skin radiated a reddish copper glow of tan, his brown hair had been a little bleached by the sun, and I noticed that the tan made his eyes shine with a cool blue-green fire. 'Everybody's staring at you', he suddenly said to me. 'It's because of that movie-star tan you picked up this afternoon . . . showing off again' (op.cit. p.51).

H. Peak experience and Creativeness (Maslow op.cit. pps. 164ff & 170f).

I have combined these two elements because I believe they are in fact frequently complementary to each other. Peak experience describes any experience in which there is a loss of self, or transcendence of it in either a material or religious sense, or both. Creativeness is a universal characteristic of Maslow's subjects and is centred in the retention of that unspoiled creative potential which all individuals have at birth (something distinct though from) so-called 'native' talent) and which they generally tend to lose as a result of enculturation. Maslow emphasises the inseparability of this element from most of the others described - the creativeness is not so much a specific endowment as a higher level ability to reveal greater freshness, penetration, and efficiency of perception which seems to other more limited people, creative (op.cit. p.171).

Finny is continuously creative - take 'blitzball' for instance which:-

. . . was the surprise of the summer. Everybody played it; I believe a form of it is still popular at Devon. But nobody can be playing it as it was played by Phineas. He had unconsciously invented a game which brought his own athletic gifts to their highest pitch (op.cit. p.41).

Furthermore, the way Finny plays the game undoubtedly provides a peak experience for him:-

The odds were tremendously against the ball carrier, so that Phineas was driven to exceed himself practically every day when he carried the ball. To escape the wolf pack which all the other players became he created reverses and deceptions and acts of sheer mass hypnotism which were so extraordinary that they surprised even him; after some of these plays I would notice him chuckling quietly to himself, in a kind of happy disbelief (op.cit. p.41).

In similar vein, Finny, with his leg still in a cast, organises an illegal dormitory 'winter

Olympics' in miniature in the local public park. All twenty boys involved indulge in a wild cider-spiced afternoon's play which, paradoxically, is the 'separate peace' of the book's title. They are intoxicated only slightly by the cider, more by their own exuberance, and as for Finny, he is inspired:-

... to climb onto the Prize table and with only one leg to create a droll dance among the prizes, springing and spinning from one bare patch to another, clearly missing Hazel Brewster's hair, never marring by a mis-step the pictures of Betty Grable. Under the influence not I know of the hardest cider but of his own inner joy at life for a moment as it should be, as it was meant to be in his nature, Phineas recaptured that magic gift for existing primarily in space, one foot conceding briefly to gravity its rights before spinning him off again into the air. It was the wildest demonstration of himself in the kind of world he loved; it was his choreography of peace (op.cit. p.155).

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'Finny' - Portrait of a Self-Actualizing Teenager -
Continuation

CONCLUSION

I wonder then, if Maslow would have accepted this analysis of Finny as a self-actualizer; or at very least as illustrating 'good-growth-towards-self-actualization'? If so, then here *is* a concrete example in the literature - an authentic 'figure created by a novelist'. I believe that I have presented in this article a claim which it would be hard to deny, but I ask myself if I have interpreted Finny's personality and character accurately. The answer to this question I am content to leave with individual readers who will find *A Separate Peace* a book which offers many insights for analysis and exploration in humanistic psychology. And I have offered little more than hints with regard to the personality and character of Gene - though it is *his* story, told fifteen years later when he returns to his old school. It is certainly a book not to be missed by anyone with youngsters, or in a wider sense receptive to any opportunity to deepen their own perceptions of themselves and others in human relationship terms.

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MENTAL HEALTH EDUCATION IN THE COMMUNITY

A one-day workshop has been arranged on Wednesday, 17th November, for members of MIND's Local Associations and for others involved in providing information or education for members of the public on mental health issues. It will be held at the Thomas Coram Foundation, Brunswick Square, London WC1 and should also be particularly relevant to Community Health Councils, Social Services and hospital staff with an interest in community development and teachers working with social studies classes.