

LESSONS FROM THE PEAK-EXPERIENCES¹

ABRAHAM H. MASLOW²

Brandeis University

What I'm going to talk about tonight is an excursion into the psychology of health, or of the human being at his best. It's a report from the road, of a job not yet done—a kind of commando raid into the unknown in which I have left my scientific flanks very much exposed. This is a warning to those of you who like neatly finished tasks. This is far from finished.

When I started to explore the psychology of health, I picked out the finest, healthiest people, the best specimens of mankind I could find, and studied them to see what they were like. They were *very* different, startlingly different in some ways from the average. The biologist was right who announced that he had found the missing link between the anthropoids apes and civilized man. "It's *us*!"

I learned many lessons from these people. But one in particular is our concern now. I found that these individuals tended to report having had something like mystic experiences, moments of great awe, moments of the most intense happiness or even rapture, ecstasy or bliss (because the word happiness can be too weak to describe this experience).

These moments were of pure, positive happiness when all doubts, all fears, all inhibitions, all tensions, all weaknesses, were left behind. Now self consciousness was lost. All separateness and distance from the world disappeared as they felt *one* with the world, fused with it, really belonging in it and to it, instead of being outside looking in. (One subject said, for instance, "I felt like a member of a family, not like an orphan.")

Perhaps most important of all, however, was the report in these experiences of the feeling that they had really seen the ultimate truth, the essence of things, the secret of life, as if veils had been pulled aside. Alan Watts has described this feeling as, "This is *it*!", as if you had finally gotten there, as if ordinary life was a striving and a straining to get someplace and this was the arrival, this was *Being There*; the end of straining and of striving, the achievement of the desire and the hope, the fulfillment of the longing and the yearning. Everyone knows how it feels to want something and not know what. These mystic experiences feel like the ultimate satisfaction of vague, unsatisfied yearnings. They are like a sudden

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² Andrew E. Kay Visiting Fellow (May 1961-January 1962) at Western Behavioral Sciences Institute, La Jolla, California.

stepping into heaven; like the miracle achieved, like perfection finally attained.³

But here I had already learned something new. The little that I had ever read about mystic experiences tied them in with religion, with visions of the supernatural. And, like most scientists, I had sniffed at them in disbelief and considered it all nonsense, maybe hallucinations, maybe hysteria—almost surely pathological.

But the people telling me or writing about these experiences were not such people—they were the healthiest people! That was one thing learned! And I may add that it taught me something about the limitations of the small (not the big) orthodox scientist who won't recognize as knowledge, or as reality, any information that doesn't fit into the already existent science. ("I am the master of this college; what I know not is not knowledge.")

These experiences mostly had nothing to do with religion—at least in the ordinary supernaturalistic sense. They came from the great moments of love and sex, from the great esthetic moments (particularly of music), from the bursts of creativeness and the creative furore (the great inspiration), from great moments of insight and of discovery, from women giving natural birth to babies—or just from loving them, from moments of fusion with nature (in a forest, on a seashore, mountains, etc.), from certain athletic experiences, e.g., skindiving, from dancing, etc.

The second big lesson learned was that this was a *natural*, not a *supernatural* experience; and I gave up the name "mystic" experience and started calling them peak-experiences. They can be studied scientifically. (I have started to do this.) They are within reach of human knowledge, not eternal mysteries. They are in the world, not *out* of the world. They belong not only to priests but to all mankind. They are no longer questions of faith but are wide open to human inquisitiveness and to human knowledge. Observe also the implication of naturalistic usages for the words "revelation," "heaven," "salvation," etc. The history of the sciences has been of one science after another carving a chunk for itself out of the jurisdiction of religion. It seems to be happening again here. Or to put this all another way, peak-experiences can be considered to be *truly* religious experiences in the best and most profound, most universal, and most humanistic sense of that word. It may turn out that pulling religion into the realm of science will have been the most important consequence of this line of work.

The next big lesson learned was that peak-experiences are far more common than I had ever expected: they were *not* confined to healthy people. These peak-experiences occurred also in average and even in psychologically sick people. As a matter of fact, I now suspect they occur in practically everybody although without being recognized or accepted for what they are.

³ "If a man could pass through paradise in a dream, and have a flower presented to him as a pledge that his soul had really been there, and if he found that flower in his hand when he awoke, ay, what then!" Coleridge.

Think for a minute how crazy this is in its implications. It's taken a long time for it to soak in on me. *Practically everybody reports peak-experiences if approached and questioned and encouraged in the right way. Also I've learned that just talking about it, as I'm doing now, seems to release from the depths all sorts of secret memories of peaks never revealed to anyone before, not even to oneself perhaps.* Why are we so shy about them? If something wonderful happens to us, why do we conceal it? Someone pointed out once, "Some people are scared to die; but some are scared to live." Maybe this is it.

There is considerable overlap between the characteristics of peak-experiences and the characteristics of psychological health (more integrated, more alive, more individual, less inhibited, less anxious, etc.) so I have been tempted to call the peak-experience a transient or temporary episode of self-actualization or health. If this *guess* turns out to be correct, it is like saying almost everyone, even the sickest people, can be psychologically healthy part of the time.

Still another lesson that by now I'm very sure of: peak-experiences come from *many, many* sources and to every kind of person. My list of sources seems to keep on getting longer and longer as I go on with these explorations. Sometimes I am tempted to think that almost any situation where perfection can be attained, or hope fulfilled, or perfect gratification reached, or where everything has gone smoothly, can produce in some people, at some times, a peak-experience. These can be very humble areas of life or of the workaday world; or the situation may have been repeated a thousand times before without producing a peak-experience.

"If your everyday life seems poor to you," wrote Rilke in his *Letters to a Young Poet*, "do not accuse it; accuse yourself, tell yourself you are not poet enough to summon up its riches, since for the creator there is no poverty and no poor or unimportant place."

For instance, a young mother scurrying around her kitchen and getting breakfast for her husband and young children. The sun was streaming in, the children clean and nicely dressed, were chattering as they ate. The husband was casually playing with the children; but as she looked at them she was suddenly so overwhelmed with their beauty and her great love for them, and her feeling of good fortune, that she went into a peak-experience. (This reminds me of my surprise at getting such reports from women. The surprise taught me how much we had masculinized all this.)

A young man working his way through medical school by drumming in a jazz band reported years later, that in all his drumming he had three peaks when he suddenly felt like a great drummer and his performance was perfect.

A hostess after a dinner party where everything had gone perfectly and it had been a fine evening, said good-bye to her last guest, sat down in a chair, looked around at the mess, and went into a peak of great happiness and exhilaration.

Milder peaks have come after a good dinner with good friends as a man sat smoking a fine cigar, or in a woman after she had done

a really good cleaning up in her kitchen and it shone and sparkled and looked perfect.

Thus it is clear that there are many paths to these experiences of rapture. They are not necessarily fancy or occult or arcane or esoteric. They don't necessarily take years of training or study. They are not restricted to far-out people, i.e., to monks, saints, or yogis, Zen Buddhists, orientals, or people in any special state of grace. It is not something that happens in the Far East, in special places, or to specially trained or chosen people. It's available in the midst of life to everyday people in everyday occupations. This is a clear support for the writers on Zen and their concept of "nothing special."

Now another generalization which I'm fairly sure of by now. No matter what the source of the peak-experience, all peak-experiences seem to overlap, to tend to be alike. I can't say they're identical—they're not. But they're much *closer* to being identical than I had ever dreamed. It was a startling thing for me to hear a mother describing her ecstatic feelings during the birth of her one child and using some of the same words and phrases that I had read in the writings of St. Theresa of Avila, or Meister Eckhardt, or in Japanese or Hindu descriptions of *satori* or *samadhi* experiences. (Aldous Huxley makes this same point in his "Perennial Philosophy.")

I haven't done this very carefully yet—these are so far only pilot or preliminary explorations—but I do feel safe in generalizing all peak-experiences to some extent. *The stimuli are very different; the subjective experience tends to be similar.* Or to say it in another way: our *kicks* are the same; we just get them from different paths, perhaps even from rock and roll, drug addiction and alcohol in less strong people. I feel more sure of this after reading in the literatures of mystic experiences, cosmic consciousness, oceanic experiences, esthetic experiences, creative experiences, love experiences, parental experiences, sexual experiences, and insight experiences. They all overlap; they approach similarity and even identity.

One main benefit I've gotten from this discovery, and that we all may get, is that it will help us to understand each other better. If a mathematician and a poet use similar words in describing their peak-experiences from a successful poem and a successful mathematical proof, maybe they're more alike subjectively than we have thought. I can make such parallels between a high school athlete running to a touchdown, a business man describing his feelings over plans for a perfect fig canning factory, a college student catching on to the Adagio movements of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. I feel men can learn more about women's inner life (and vice versa) if they learn about the things that give them their highest satisfaction and feelings of creativeness. For instance, college girls significantly more often than college boys report their high moments to come from *being loved*. The boys significantly more often get their happiest moments from success, conquest, achievement, winning. This finding conforms both to common sense knowledge and to clinical experience.

If our inner experiences of happiness are very similar no matter what stimulates them and no matter how different the people these experiences happen to (that is, if our insides are more like each other than our outside) then this may furnish us a way of being more sympathetic and understanding with people who are very different from ourselves; athletes and intellectuals, women and men, adults and children, etc. An artist and a housewife are not 1000 miles apart. In some moments they speak a common language, have common experiences, and live in the same world.

Can you bring about these experiences at will? No! Or almost entirely no! In general we are "Surprised by Joy," to use the title of C. S. Lewis's book on just this question. Peaks come unexpectedly, suddenly they *happen* to us. You can't count on them. And, hunting them is a little like hunting happiness. It's best not done directly. It comes as a by-product—an epiphenomenon, for instance, of doing a fine job at a worthy task you can identify with.

Of course we can make it more likely, or less likely, out of our experiences in the past. Some fortunate people can almost always have a peak-experience in sex. Some can count on certain pieces of music, or certain favorite activities like dancing or skindiving. But none of these is ever *guaranteed* to bring on a peak-experience. The most propitious frame of mind for "receiving" them is one of receptivity, almost a kind of passivity, or trust, or surrender, a Taoistic attitude of letting things happen without interfering or butting in. You have to be able to give up pride, will, dominance, being at the wheel, being in charge. You have to be able to relax and let it happen.

I think this will do for you what it did for me—renew my interest in Taoism and the lessons it has to teach. So also for Zen. (On the whole, I can say that my findings conform more with the Zen and Tao philosophies than with any of the religious mysticisms.)

I'm very sure now that the ineffability of such experiences has been overstated. It is possible to talk about them, to describe them, and to communicate them. I do it all the time now that I've learned how. "Ineffable" really means "not communicable by rational, logical, abstract, verbal, analytic, sensible language." The peak-experience can be described and communicated fairly well if: (1) you both have had such experiences yourselves, and (2) if you are able to talk in poetic or rhapsodic language, to let yourself be archaic in Jung's sense, to think-feel in a metaphorical or primary process way—or what Heinz Werner has called physiognomical language.

It's true the psyche is alone, encapsulated—cut off from all else—and for two such isolated psyches to communicate across the great chasm between them seems like a miracle. Well, the miracle happens.

What is the relation between the peak and the peaker? is my next question. Already it seems evident to me that there is some kind of dynamic isomorphism at work, some kind of mutual and parallel feedback or reverberation between the characteristics of the perceiver and of the perceived world so that they tend to influence each other.

To put it very briefly, the perceiver has to be worthy of the percept. Or better said, they must deserve each other like well-married or badly-married couples. Kindness can *really* be perceived only by a kind man. A psychopathic personality will never be able to understand kindness, conscience, morality, or guilt since he himself lacks them entirely. But the person who is good, true, and beautiful is more able to perceive these in the world outside—or the more unified and integrated we are, the more capable we are of perceiving unity in the world.

But there is also an effect in the other direction. The more integrated the world, or the more beautiful or just, the more the world tends to make the perceiver more integrated, or beautiful or just, etc. Seeking out the highest values in the world to look at helps to produce or strengthen them in us. For instance, an experimenter we did at Brandeis University proved that in a beautiful room, people's faces look more alive and alert and higher in well-being, than they do in an ugly room. Or to put it another way, peak-experiences are more apt to come to nicer people, and they are more likely to happen to a particular person the better world conditions are.

This position needs many more examples to make it clear. I intend to write about this at greater length. It's a very important point.

In the peak-experiences, the "is" and the "ought" merge with each other instead of being different or contradictory. The perception is that what *is*, *ought* to be just that way. What *is* is just fine. This raises so many difficult questions that I don't want to make too much of it at this point, beyond recording that it *does* happen.

Finally, one finding that contradicts some of the mystics, especially of the East: I found all peak-experiences to be transient experiences—temporary not permanent. Some of the effects or after-effects may be permanent but the high moment itself is not.

Problems and Puzzles

Peak-experiences have been highly therapeutic for some people; and for others, a whole outlook on life has been changed forever by some great moment of insight or inspiration or conversion. This is easy to understand. It's like having been in Heaven for a moment and then remembering it in the dull moments of ordinary life. One person said characteristically, "I know life *can* be beautiful and good, and that life can be worth living; and I try to remember that when I need it during the grim days." One woman after natural child birth, still breathless with the wonder of it said to her husband, "This has never happened to anyone before!" Another one, recalling, the same experience said, "Once I was a queen, the most perfect queen of the earth." A man recalled his experience of awe from being in a wartime convoy at night with no lights. He melted into the whole vast universe and was not separate from all its beauty. A man recalled a burst of exuberance going over into sheer crazy, childish joy as he cavorted in the water like a fish, all alone so that he could yell out his great happiness at being so perfectly physical.

And, of course, good and beautiful sex under the right circumstances is *often* reported to have this sort of effect.

It is easy to understand how such beautiful experiences should leave therapeutic effects, ennobling and beautifying effects, on the character, on the life outlook, on the way the world looks, on the way that the husband looks, or the baby. What is difficult to understand is why so often this does *not* happen. Practically *every*-one can be brought to realize he has been through such experiences. Why is it, then, that human beings are such a feeble lot, so full of jealousy, of fear, of hostility, of sheer misery? *This* is what I can't figure out.

One clue may come from a current investigation some of us are making on "Peakers" and "Non-Peakers;" i.e., the ones who reject or deny or suppress their peak-experiences, or who are afraid of them. It is our hunch that the peaks will do no good when they are rejected in this way.

At first it was our thought that some people simply didn't have peaks. But, as I said above, we found out later that it's much more probable that the non-peakers have them but repress or misinterpret them, or—for whatever reason—reject them and therefore don't use them.

Some of the reasons for such rejection so far found are: (1) a strict Marxian attitude, as with Simone de Beauvoir, who was persuaded that this was a weakness, a sickness (also Arthur Koestler). A Marxist should be "tough." Why Freud rejected his is anybody's guess; perhaps (2) his 19th century mechanistic-scientific attitude, perhaps (3) his pessimistic character. Among my various subjects I have found both causes at work sometimes. In others I have found (4) a narrowly rationalistic attitude which I considered a defense against being flooded by emotion, by irrationality, by loss of control, by illogical tenderness, by dangerous femininity, or by the fear of insanity. One sees such attitudes more often in engineers, in mathematicians, in analytic philosophers, in bookkeepers and accountants, and generally in obsessional people.

The effects of refusing to recognize peak-experiences must be many. We are now trying to work them out.

One thing I have already learned is that authoritative approval lifts the lid off these experiences for many people. For instance, whenever I lecture to my classes or other groups about these peaks, obviously in an approving way, it always happens that many peak-experiences come into consciousness in my audience, or are "remembered" for the first time; or—as I prefer to think today—emerge out of chaotic, unorganized preconscious experience to be given a name, to be paid attention to, to stand out as figures against the background. In a word, people then "realize" or "understand" what's been happening to them. Many of you who are now listening to me will find this to be so. It's a very close parallel to the emergence of sexual feelings at puberty. But this time, Daddy says it's all right.

A recent subject has taught me something else that may be relevant

here; namely that it is possible to have a peak experience as the woman did in child birth, without recognizing that this is like other peak-experiences—that they all have the same structure. Perhaps this is a reason for lack of therapeutic transfer of peaks, a reason why sometimes they have no generalized effects. For instance, the woman finally realized that her feelings when her husband had once made her feel needed and important to him were very much like her feelings while giving birth, and also like the great gush of motherliness and love when confronted by an orphaned child. Now she can generalize the experiences and use them throughout life, not just in one isolated corner of it.

This work is also beginning to shed some light on an old puzzle noted by many religious writers—especially by those who have written about conversion, like William James or Begbie, as well as many of the old mystics. They implied often that it was *necessary* to go through a “dark night of the soul,” to hit bottom—to experience despair as a prerequisite to the mystic ecstasy. I get the feeling from some of this writing that it is as if human will, pride, and arrogance first have to express themselves to the fullest. After will and pride have been proven to yield only total misery, the person in the depths may *then* be able to surrender, to yield, to become humble, to bow his head and bend his knee; to offer himself on the altar; and to say “not my will, but thine be done.” I should stress that this is not *only* a religious phenomenon; something of the same sort can happen to the alcoholic, to the psychotic, to the female in her struggle with the male, or to the youngster in his struggle with his parent.

The trouble with this problem has been, I now think, that it can take *either* a healthy or a sick form. For instance, this whole scheme works not only for religious conversion or mystic experience, but also for sexuality. It's very easy to pick out sexual elements in mystical literature and you can see how a sex-denying religious would have to reject anything of the sort, and how a debunker like H. L. Mencken would snicker out loud at the whole business. For *all* people for whom sex and religion (in the “higher” life) didn't mix, this was a dilemma they got hung up on. Well, *this* part of the problem is certainly no problem any longer, at least not for those who think sex (or love-sex at least) is a wonderful and beautiful thing, and who are perfectly willing to think of it as one of the gates to Heaven.

But there are other problems. Pride can easily be a sick thing, but so also can the *lack* of pride be, i.e., masochism. It looks as if human beings must be able *both* to affirm themselves (to be stubborn, stiff necked, vigilant, alert, dominant, aggressive, self-confident, etc.) and *also* to be able to trust, to relax and be receptive and Taoistic, to let things happen without interfering, to be humble and surrender. For instance, we now know that *both* in proper sequence are necessary for creativeness, for good thinking and thecrizing, for interpersonal relations, and certainly for sexual relationships. It seems true that females have to be extra good at

trusting and yielding and males at asserting and affirming, but both must be able to do both.

We have seen that so far as the peaks are concerned, apparently most of them are receptive phenomena. They invade the person and he must be able to *let* them. He can't force them, grasp them, or command them. Will power is useless; so is striving and straining. What's necessary is to be able to let go, to let things happen. I can give you some very homely examples to show what I mean. It was Angyal who told me that, in his experience, really obsessional people couldn't "float" in the water. They just couldn't let go, or be non-controlling. To float you must trust the water. Fight it and down you go. The same is true for urination, defecation, going to sleep, relaxing, etc. All these involve an ability to let go, to let things happen. Will power only interferes. In this same sense it begins to look as if the intrusion of will power may inhibit peak-experiences.

A final word on this point. "Letting go," "trusting," and the like does not necessarily mean a "dark night of the soul," or "black despair," or breaking down of pride or being forced to one's knees. Healthy pride goes very nicely with healthy receptivity. It is *un*-healthy pride only that has to be "broken".

This, by the way, is another point of difference between mystic experience and these peak-experiences.

I have elsewhere pointed out an unsolved problem, that peak-experiences make some people more alert, excited, "high," while others relax, grow quiet, and more serene. I don't know what this difference means, or where it comes from. Perhaps the latter means more complete gratification than the former. Perhaps it doesn't. I have run across at least one subject who gets tension headaches from peak experiences, especially esthetic ones. She reports stiffness, tension, and great excitement in which she gets very talkative. The headache is not unpleasant and she doesn't avoid it but rather goes looking for more. This headache goes together with other more usual reports. For instance, I quote, "the world looks nice and I feel friendlier. I have a feeling of hopefulness (which is not usual for me). These are the moments when I *know* what I want—sure, less doubt; I'm more efficient and make faster decisions, less confusion. I know better what I want—what I like. I feel not only more hopeful but more understanding and compassionate," etc. etc.

The questions I asked were about the moments of rapture, of greater happiness. They, therefore, observed the well-known fact that tragedy, pain, and confrontation with death all may produce the same cognitive or therapeutic effects in people with sufficient courage and strength. So also the fusion of happiness with sadness—of laughter's closeness to tears—have to be investigated. I was told often enough of the tears that came with tremendous happiness (e.g., weeping at the happy wedding) or with the triumph of justice (e.g., tears at the happy ending), or the lump rising in the throat (e.g., at the peak of an especially beautiful dance performance), or the chills, goose flesh, shivering—and in one case—even incipient nausea,

at musical peaks. These questions call for intensive and extensive investigation.

The study of peak-experiences inevitably brings up a very difficult problem that must occupy psychology for the next century. This is what some of the old mystics and some theologians called the "Unitive Consciousness" and by other names as well. The problem as the religionists phrased it was how to live a godly life in an ungodly world, how to live under the aspect of eternity, how to keep the vision of perfection in an imperfect world, how to remember truth, goodness, and beauty in the midst of falsehood, evil, and ugliness. In the past, all sorts of people left the world behind in order to achieve this vision, e.g., immured themselves in monasteries, or lived ascetic lives, etc. And many have tried to subdue the flesh, the body, the appetites out of the mistaken belief that these contradicted the eternal, the perfect, the divine, the realm of Being.

But think! Peak-experiences can very meaningfully be assimilated to—or even replace—the immature concepts in which Heaven is like a country club in some specific place, perhaps above the clouds. In peaks, the nature of Being itself is often perceived nakedly and the eternal values then seem to be attributes of reality itself, or to say it another way, Heaven is all around us, always available in principle, ready to step into for a few minutes. It's anywhere—in the kitchen or the factory, or on a basketball court—*anyplace* where perfection can happen, where means become ends or where a job is done right. The Unitive Life is more possible than was ever dreamed of, and one thing is very clear—research will bring it closer and make it more available.

One last word. It must by now be obvious to those who are familiar with the literature of mystical experiences that these peak-experiences are very much like them, and overlap them but are not identical with them. What their true relationship is, I do not know. My best guess is that they are different in degree but not in kind. The total mystical experience, as classically described, is more or less approached by greater or lesser peak-experiences.