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ENCOUNTERING THE ABC's OF SELF

by Alice Hoskins

It very likely has been some time since you have thought about your early encounters with the A B C's. Just for the fun of it, let your mind wander back to the days when you were a "little tyke" and think about the many ways in which you were exposed to the alphabet.

I remember alphabet soup. Lunch certainly was fun, particularly when I got the bowl of soup that had all of the letters in it! And then, there was the alphabet song. Learning the sequence of the alphabet would have been a rather tedious task without the assistance of that "merry little melody". Also, I can't imagine how I would have learned to read without the readiness provided through hearing rhymes such as "A is for apple, B is for ball, C is for cat, But that's not all".

Becoming acquainted with the A B C's is one of a child's first major educational encounters. The significance of this encounter is inherent in the fact that the alphabet plays a crucial role in the communication process for it is the key link in the chain of events that lead to the decoding of the printed page. The printed page, in turn, serves as a primary means by which the ideas of the mind are related. Therefore, it is through the reading process that we can communicate, learn, and encounter the wisdom and thoughts of others.

Consider Abraham Lincoln. Though he had very little opportunity for formal education, he did have an appetite for learning. Lincoln sought to quench this hunger and thus became a life-long student of the printed page.

Reading is a fantastic means of acquiring knowledge — its resources seem unlimited! However, reading is much more than a product. Reading is

also a process in that it provides an opportunity to encompass the realities of human existence, to explore the depths of our inner being and to examine the complex network of experiences that influence our behavior.

Reading, just like eating, helps us to grow. While eating a balanced diet provides us with the vitamins essential for healthy physical growth, reading supplies the cognitive nutrients which are vital to the development of intellectual growth. For example, who of us would neglect to give our bodies the nourishment necessary for physical maintenance and growth? I dare say that none of us would! Yet we often neglect an equally important nourishment — that which feeds our psychological self and helps us to grow internally as a person.

The growth progression from childhood to adulthood brings about many changes. For example, alphabet soup, alphabet songs, and alphabet stories lose the significance they held in childhood. However, I would like to suggest that, even now, the A B C's can have relevance from a different perspective. For me, this perspective shifts the prime focus from conceptualizing the functional aspects of the alphabet to a focus that employs it as an instrument to relate the words that bring meaning and expression to the feelings of our inner being. Thus, the association format changes from apple, ball, and cat to words such as actualization, behavior, and competence. Let's briefly consider some thoughts on these A B C's of self.

The quest for self understanding is a complex phenomenon. Yet the human being seems to be driven either consciously or unconsciously, directly or indirectly, with the desire to know more about his inner being, namely

that which we call the self. To be a fully-functioning or a "total" person seems to necessitate a vision which encompasses internal meaning as well as external reality. Otherwise, our personalities remain one-dimensional and lack the completeness which enables us to be all that we really can be.

The pursuit of understanding one's self requires an active attempt toward actualization. In his book, *Motivation and Personality* (p. 46), Maslow refers to self-actualization as "man's desire for self-fulfillment, namely, to the tendency for him to become actualized in what he is potentially". This seems to suggest that there is within each one of us an attempt to become everything that we think we are capable of becoming.

The behavior of each individual is an outward display of a complex set of internal forces and feeling states. The beauty of behavior is that it is unique and is constantly displaying the process of "becoming". Rogers, in his book *On Becoming A Person* (pp. 108, 122), points out that "it appears that the goal the individual most wishes to achieve, the end which he knowingly and unknowingly pursues, is to become himself". Therefore, in the quest to fully understand one's self, a person must be willing to engage in the on-going dynamics of personal growth rather than to merely exist as a product of external conditions over which he has little control. Rogers, for example, views personal growth as a "fluid process, not a fixed and static entity; a flowing river of change, not a block of solid material; a continually changing constellation of potentialities, not a fixed quantity of traits".

Inherent in the concept of self-

actualization is the desire to become all that a person is capable of becoming. An important outgrowth of this process relates to the idea of being competent.

For me, as I expect is true for many others, the feeling of being competent is a rewarding one. When I am able to succeed at a task, whether it be one that requires great courage or one that simply "takes a little know-how," I feel terrific! As I look at my underlying motivation for being competent, it seems to stem from the desire to succeed. This, in turn, leads to good feelings — feelings which say "I'm okay".

Being competent leads to being confident and having confidence in one's abilities is a positive feeling. Each time a person is able to find satisfaction in succeeding, he gains confidence in his capabilities. This confidence strengthens the existing foundation of successes and becomes a springboard for going on to new experiences. New experiences, in turn, provide the opportunities to enrich existing competencies as well as develop new ones.

To be actively involved in actualizing one's self, understanding one's behavior, and developing competencies is an exciting, challenging and rewarding experience. Although there are many ways to acquire knowledge and gain understanding about the self, the printed page serves as one of the richest resources available to us. Therefore, reading ourselves as well as kindling in others the desire to read can be an exceptionally valuable investment which can reap life-long intellectual psychological dividends!

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