NAME: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ PERIOD: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

THE NEED TO BE NEEDED

Posted on February 27, 2014 by steveroseblog

*“Those who have a ‘why’ to live, can bear with almost any ‘how’.”
― Viktor E. Frankl, Man’s Search for Meaning*

What is the most basic human need? Maslow’s famous hierarchy of needs has been a popular answer to this question. Beyond the basic physiological requirements of nutrition and sleep, Maslow held that a sense of safety and security is our most basic need. I argue that this is simply not the case; rather, Individuals may flourish in the most dangerous and unforgiving environments; likewise, those in the safest and most secure environments may experience a great deal of despair. If a sense of safety and security is not the most fundamental human need, what is? I believe the answer is the need to be needed.

What is this need to be needed? It is an individual’s sense of significance; the feeling that they have a community, group, or individual that needs them. This sense of self-worth can also be called ‘self-esteem’. Although the concept of self-esteem has gained somewhat of a bad reputation in academia since the rise of its use in the self-help genre, research suggests that lower levels of self-esteem leads to higher levels of suicidal ideation.

Maslow’s hierarchy is controversial since it is not based on empirical findings. Although this is the case, a study with data from 123 countries found that Maslow’s constructs do correlate to life-satisfaction. The interesting part of the research is that they found individuals were able to achieve the highest levels of the pyramid without having satisfied the lowest levels, suggesting individuals in poorer conditions with regard to safety and security are still able to achieve high levels of life-satisfaction if the social needs of love, belonging, respect, as well as autonomy and self-esteem are met.

My own sense that self-esteem is more important than a sense of safety and security comes from analyzing several war-memoirs and conducting qualitative interviews with combat veterans about their experiences transitioning to civilian life.

Many soldiers in combat flourish while knowing they could be killed at any moment. Sebastian Junger, in his book *War*, writes: “It’s as if there was an intoxicating effect to group inclusion that more than compensated for the dangers the group had to face.” Individuals in the combat unit rely on one another to fulfill a specific duty. Each person experiences the highest degree of being needed, their role being essential to the success of a mission.

Compare the high degree of being needed within a combat unit to the prospects facing a recent veteran. The new veteran transitions to a civilian environment that is by far much safer, but often fails to provide them with a sense being needed. Rather than flourishing, many begin a downward spiral into despair and suicidal ideation. As stated in a previous post, “War is Hell, Civilian Life is Worse.” Besides the lack of job prospects in general, employers often fail to recognize how a veteran’s skills can be valuable in a civilian role, and veterans may experience difficulties translating their professional military experience in an interview for a civilian position.

Although this may often be the case with veterans – especially with those who experienced the highest levels of combat – this is not the fate of all. Those who flourish are those who find a new purpose. Some find it in family obligations, meaningful employment, or humanitarian assistance programs like Team Rubicon.

The sense that one is needed is more important than the struggles one must face. As stated in the beginning: “Those who have a ‘why’ to live, can bear with almost any ‘how’.” The ‘why’ comes with feeling a sense of obligation, feeling needed, and contributing to a cause outside oneself. No matter the harshness of a condition, individuals flourish if their need to be needed is satisfied.