

19 January 2025

Embracing Our Weird: A Weird Way to Think about Self-Actualization

Mark 8:27-38

Five hundred years ago, the rules of society were set by “the authorities.” Laws were whatever kings and emperors said they were. Moral rules were whatever had been commanded by God, or at least by the Church, which was basically the same thing. Even social rules – things like gender roles or the orders and ranks of society – were understood to have been decreed by God. We were all part of a pre-ordained divine chain of being. But then, around the year 1500, things changed dramatically. The Protestant Reformation shattered the view of God as a single authority. People now worshiped their own group’s version of God. Then the Enlightenment changed the ways that governments and societies were run. Puritans in England made Parliament, not their kings, their primary authority. Then those tax-dodgers in the American colonies rid of kings entirely, and a few years later the French did the same thing, but more emphatically. In this new order, rules were not handed down by authorities from above but were legislated by society itself. Laws were made by representatives of the people. Even morality was no longer necessarily seen as coming from God. Right and wrong wasn’t just about, “What does the Church say?” but rather “What will bring the greatest good to the greatest number of people?” We all were seen as part of a great, rational “Social Compact,” for mutual benefit.

And now we seem to be embarked on another new order. Just in the past fifty or sixty years, we have shifted to a different primary authority. Now that ultimate authority is not God, not even the good of society. Now the ultimate authority is within ourselves. You see, just as people five hundred years ago rejected the tyranny of kings, emperors, and priests, people today are rejecting the tyranny of society and its expectations. “Why should I be the person society tells me I should be? Why should I follow somebody else’s rules? I need to be true to *myself*.” Some of you are familiar with psychologist Abraham Maslow’s “Hierarchy of Needs.” It’s presented as a pyramid, with basic needs for food and shelter at the base, followed by needs for family, community, belonging, and so on going up until you reach the pinnacle of the pyramid, which Maslow calls, “Self-actualization.” Whether this is what Maslow meant or not, this implies that ultimate goal is to become the unique individual self that you are. The philosopher Charles Taylor calls this new order the “Age of Authenticity,” because in it we are all seeking above all to discover and become our *authentic* selves.

Now in a bit I’m going to talk about some of the problems with this new order, but we should start by noting how much good has come from it. Women can now say, “No, I don’t want to be a housewife or a secretary or an elementary school teacher just because I’m female. I want to be an engineer, an astronaut, the president (Well, presidential *candidate* anyway.) Children, too, can choose their own path. If they don’t *want* to stay on and run the family business like their father and grandfather, can say “That’s not who I am,” and follow other dreams. Queer people of every type have been allowed at last to come out of the closet that society had shut them into. So, yes, there really is such a thing as the tyranny of society, and in this Age of Authenticity many have been empowered to say, “I’m going to be myself, whatever society thinks.” That’s good. But for all that, the creed of self-actualization does seem a bit in tension with some of what Jesus taught. We read from the Gospel of Mark, chapter 8, verses 27-38.

²⁷Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, ‘Who do people say that I am?’²⁸And they answered him, ‘John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.’²⁹He asked them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Peter answered him, ‘You are the Messiah.’³⁰And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

³¹Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. ³²He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, ‘Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.’

³⁴He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ³⁵For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. ³⁶For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? ³⁷Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? ³⁸Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.’

In this story, the disciples finally figure out that Jesus is the Messiah, the long-awaited anointed one, but as soon as that has sunk in, Jesus starts teaching them that as the Messiah, he is going to be rejected, beaten, and killed. Peter takes him aside: “Hush, Master. You can’t mean that. That’s not what a Messiah does.” To this Jesus angrily replies, “No, you hush, Peter. That’s exactly what I mean. And furthermore, you are all heading toward the same humiliation. “If you want to be my follower, you need to *deny yourself*.” What? “You must *take up your cross*.” Remember that in Jesus’ time the cross was not neck jewelry; it represented death. *Deny yourself and be prepared to die*. Then Jesus adds, *For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it*.

That’s weird. That can’t be right. That seems to be saying that in order to live, you must let go of your own life. In order to find yourself, you must give yourself away. See what I mean? It doesn’t make sense. And it certainly doesn’t sound like the values of the Age of Authenticity. Doesn’t Jesus *want* us to be self-actualized?

Let me come back to that. For now, let’s look at a different question: in our new age, the age of seeking our own authentic selves above all else, how’s self-actualization going? Maslow’s pyramid suggests that it’s the pinnacle of human flourishing, the final step toward individual completeness. So, we doing pretty good there? Feeling pretty complete in our society, are we? Not remarkably, no. US suicide rates are up 37% in the past twenty years, particularly among men and teenaged boys. But at least women and girls are doing okay? Right? A survey of high schoolers in 2023 showed that 50% of high school girls say that they feel “persistently sad or hopeless.”

I don’t want to be simplistic. The rampant depression and loneliness and spiking suicide rates of our society have a lot of different sources, but certainly one of them is the extent to which we have embraced the idea that our primary responsibility is to ourselves. That’s been a disaster. It turns out that it’s hard to tell a difference between “seeking your own authentic self” and “being a self-absorbed jerk.” This isn’t a new thing. There have always been self-centered people – literally, all of us, at least sometimes – but the Age of Authenticity has made

self-absorption a virtue, even an article of faith. The multi-billion-dollar self-help and wellness industry reminds us daily that our job is to become our best selves, to seek our true selves, to achieve our self-actualization. Or here's the new one I've started hearing: *self-optimization*, as if we were computer programs who needed to be tweaked so as to increase our productivity.

This new mindset has even invaded the church. You may have heard this: "Jesus said to love our neighbors as ourselves, which means that before we can love others, we first have to love ourselves." Please, don't say that. It's bollocks. Can anyone seriously think that's what Jesus meant? That the man who in Mark 8 says, "To follow me, you have to deny yourself" really meant to say, "First you need to focus on yourself; after that, you can turn your attention to others"? No. Besides that, it objectively doesn't work! Here's my question for anyone who's trying to love themselves first, before loving others: When is enough? When will you have loved yourself sufficiently that you can move on? And the answer, of course, is never. There's always another way to "love" yourself. There will always be another upgrade required for your optimization. Even worse, the longer you try to love yourself, the harder it gets, because – maybe you've noticed this – people who love only themselves are not very lovable. It becomes a downward spiral: self-centeredness leads to self-loathing, which leads to more self-centeredness, and so on. Pity the poor Narcissists. No one despises them more than they despise themselves.

Let's go back to our scripture. Yes, Jesus wants us to be self-actualized, in the sense of becoming who we truly are. And yes, that might mean rejecting the expectations of our society. Jesus did. He refused to be the Messiah that society expected, and he called his disciples to leave their families and their family businesses to follow him. Jesus definitely wants us to discover our unique selves, apart from social expectations; he has a different recipe for how to go about it. Different and counter-intuitive and frankly weird. Are you ready? Stop trying to build up yourself; you will only make yourself smaller. Stop focusing on yourself; you will only become more like everyone else. Stop seeking yourself; you will only become harder to find. Instead, give *yourself* away. Place others' needs before your own. Try to comfort others rather than seek their comfort for yourself; try to understand others, rather than demand that they understand you; love others, and stop demanding their love. (Is this starting to sound familiar? It's all in St Francis' prayer that we used as our Call to Worship. St Francis got it.) And in the end, if you do all this, an amazing thing happens. In giving yourself away, you grow. In putting others' needs first, you find contentment. In emptying yourself, you become full and whole.

I know. It's weird. But since we have daily evidence all around us that desperately seeking our own best selves does *not* work, maybe we could give it a try.

* * *

Professor of Islamic Studies Shadi Hamid writes: "As we enter another January, the familiar rhythm begins anew: gym memberships surge, productivity apps are downloaded en masse, and social media overflows with ambitious resolutions. This ritual of self-optimization has become so normalized that we rarely pause to examine its underlying assumptions about what it means to live a good life. There's something almost desperate about our collective faith in optimization, as if we believe that with enough data points and carefully calibrated goals, we might finally crack the code of human flourishing." Hamid offers an alternative resolution, which he borrows from New England Puritan preacher Jonathan Edwards – and, by the way, *there's* an interesting collaboration. He suggests this resolution: "Today I shall live the way that I shall wish I had lived

when I come to my death.” That’s worth thinking about, but Jesus is more straightforward: “Stop looking for yourself. Follow me.”