

## **The Good Life and the Fully Functioning Person (1953)**

I have gradually come to one negative conclusion about the good life. It seems to me that the good life is not any fixed state. It is not, in my estimation, a state of virtue, or contentment, or nirvana, or happiness. It is not a condition in which the individual is adjusted or fulfilled or actualized. To use psychological terms, it is not a state of drive-reduction, or tension-reduction, or homeostasis.

The good life is a *process*, not a state of being.

It is a direction not a destination.

The direction which constitutes the good life is that which is selected by the total organism, when there is psychological freedom to move in any direction.

This organismically selected direction seems to have certain discernible qualities which appear to be the same in a wide variety of unique individuals.

The good life, from the point of view of my experience, is the process of movement in a direction which the human organism selects when it is inwardly free to move in any direction, and the general qualities of this selected direction appear to have a certain universality.

### **The Characteristics of the Process**

#### **1 - An Increasing Openness to Experience**

In the first place, the process seems to involve an increasing openness to experience. It is the polar opposite of defensiveness.

If a person could be fully open to his experience, every stimulus - whether originating within the organism or in the environment - would be freely relayed through the nervous system without being distorted by any defensive mechanism.

Thus, one aspect of this process which I am naming "the good life" appears to be a movement away from the pole of defensiveness toward the pole of openness to experience. The individual is becoming more able to listen to himself, to experience what is going on within himself. He is more open to his feelings of fear and discouragement and pain. He is also more open to his feelings of courage, and tenderness, and awe.

#### **2 - Increasingly Existential Living**

A second characteristic of the process which for me is the good life, is that it involves an increasingly tendency to live fully in each moment.

I believe it would be evident that for the person who was fully open to his new experience, completely without defensiveness, each moment would be new.

One way of expressing the fluidity which is present in such existential living is to say that the self and personality emerge *from* experience rather than experience being translated or twisted to fit pre-conceived self-structure. It means that one becomes a participant in and an observer of the ongoing process of organismic experience, rather than being in control of it. It means a maximum of adaptability, a discovery of structure *in* experience, a flowing, changing organization of self and personality.

It involves discovering the structure of experience in the process of living the experience.

### 3 - An Increasing Trust in His Organism

Still another characteristic of the person who is living the process of the good life appears to be an increasing trust in his organism as a means of arriving at the most satisfying behavior in each existential situation.

The person who is fully open to his experience would have access to all of the available data in the situation, on which to base his behavior; the social demands, his own complex and possibly conflicting needs, his memories of similar situations, his perception of the uniqueness of this situation, etc. etc. The data would be very complex indeed. But he could permit his total organism, his consciousness participating, to consider each stimulus, need, and demand, its relative intensity and importance, and out of this complex weighing and balancing, discover that course of action which would come closest to satisfying all his needs in the situation.

#### **The Process of Functioning More Fully**

I should like to draw together these three threads describing the process of the good life into a more coherent picture. It appears that the person who is psychologically free moves in the direction of becoming a more fully functioning person.

He is more able to live fully in and with each and all of his feelings and reactions. He makes increasing use of all his organic equipment to sense, as accurately as possible, the existential situation within and without. He makes use of all of the information his nervous system can thus supply, using it in awareness, but recognizing that his total organism may be, and often is, wiser than his awareness. He is more able to permit his total organism to function freely in all its complexity in selecting, from the multitude of possibilities, that behavior which in this moment of time will be most generally and genuinely satisfying. He is able to put more trust in his organism in this functioning, not because it is infallible, but because he can be fully open to the consequences of each of his actions and correct them if they prove to be less than satisfying.

He is more able to experience all of his feelings, and is less afraid of any of his feelings; he is his own sifter of evidence, and is more open to evidence from all sources; he is completely engaged in the process of being and becoming himself, and thus discovers that he is soundly and realistically social; he lives more completely in this moment, but learns that this is the soundest living for all time. He is becoming a more fully functioning organism, and because of the awareness of himself which flows freely in and through his experience, he is becoming a more fully functioning person.