

APPENDIX A

Reflections on Louis Armstrong by a Humanistic Psychologist

My father died a month ago. My mother is moving to Los Angeles. This morning I rented her an apartment. Driving along Sunset Boulevard on the way back to my office I heard on the radio the news of Louis Armstrong's death. The station then played 'Potato Head Blues' and I got tears in my eyes. A few blocks further on I spotted a black hitchhiker. I picked him up, asked him where he was going, and drove in silence until I let him off. Was Armstrong anything to him? I'll never know—I couldn't find a way to ask. I was afraid that sharp young black would scorn my dated taste, or see me as a patronizing white sentimentalizing over a has-been.

Back at my office I did a marriage counseling session with a black couple, the husband a musician. Focusing on the now of their relationship, I forgot my feelings about Armstrong. The rest of my day passed busily.

At home tonight my wife asked me to babysit while she went to a Rosary for a friend who died over the weekend. Reminded of death, my thoughts turned to Armstrong again, and I felt the need to pay my respects. I put on my Hot Seven records, and wondered how many others were doing the same around the world. With 'West End Blues' it all came back...all the excitement and warmth, and the gratitude for what he'd meant to me. Stifling as an only child in a Wasp family, I listened to his music to keep sane. Maybe he saved my life—I had so few outlets that I'd begun making bombs in the basement. Earlier I'd tried the trumpet and failed. Armstrong expressed the feelings I couldn't, and put me in touch with ones I didn't know I had. I was so straight that I only played hookey once in my life—to go hear him play a matinee show. It wasn't the Hot Seven, and his clowning turned me off, but the fire was there.

The last time I heard him play was in Las Vegas in 1968, on my honeymoon with my third wife. Twenty years of my life and his had gone by—he was on his third marriage too. Not much of his fire was left—he still clowned, and faked his way through with a few notes. I remember the drummer Danny Barcelona, because he was young, alive, and on his way up, and because Armstrong warmly acknowledged his succession. Now I've succeeded my father, and the world goes on with new musicians.

What has all this got to do with humanistic psychology? A great deal I would like to believe. Armstrong broke old structures and opened the way for growth. He learned from, and then overthrew the King (Oliver). The close ensemble playing of the New Orleans tradition had a beauty and integration. Armstrong grew within it, and outgrew it. His self-actualizing drive made him seek new freedom, and his solos

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built upon and eventually left behind the old form. He ran all the risks of narcissistic individualism and sloppy romanticism. His greatness was that for so long he was able to combine power and love, discipline and wildness, autonomy and relatedness, self-assertion and humility.

The creative tension and mutual dependency between the individual and the group is perhaps never so intense as in a jazz combo. Few can make it work for long periods; Armstrong moved to superficial 'solutions'. Humanistic psychology is trying to transcend old structures, and create new synergies between individuals and groups. As in the history of jazz, excesses will occur, and creativity will be clouded with ego trips on the one hand, and corny 'arrangements' on the other. But the evolution of culture keeps happening.

Armstrong was born in 1900, the year Freud published *Die Traumdeutung*. In 1927, the year the Hot Seven recordings were made, Freud published *The Ego and the Id*, and Maslow was studying psychology at the University of Wisconsin. A lot has happened in music and psychology since then. Sometimes it seems like the peaks achieved by past geniuses will never be surpassed. Armstrong was at least partly right when he said at age 70, after listening to one of his early recorded trumpet solos, 'Ain't nobody played like it since, and can't nobody play nothing like it now.' But new creators and new forms do arise. Although Freud, Maslow and Armstrong are now dead, they left plenty for us to build upon.

++Tom Greening
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