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The question of the place of values in our lives is an eternal question. It is a

question that is never completely resolved because, with values, there are forever the events of each new day that continually pose a test of our values and priorities. Values, in this sense, are ongoing questions that keep getting raised again and again, because life itself forces us to make decisions, and to take a stand moment-by-moment, day-by-day, week-by-week and year-by-year. In this regard, when people say they already have the right values, that various values and questions they create in us are somehow only relevant in the past, they're clearly either dead, or not paying attention. Each day is a kind of provocation to ask ourselves what it is that is really important, what is the position I should take, what is it I should do or not do and other such musings? Questions of this kind reoccur simply because our freedom and will is not frozen into place, but is constantly in use, and thus requires our ongoing exercise of personal and unavoidable judgment.

In the present moment, we appear to be living in a seemingly bizarre instant of human history where we find people and organizations prominently proclaiming their values and virtues, so as to reassure us that they want what we want, and care about the things we care about such that we are asked to see them as legitimate and trustworthy. This public ritual of "virtue claiming" seems almost almost promiscuous in its self promotion and absence of any irony whatsoever. These days it has become commonplace that all sorts of people are announcing how virtuous they are, how good their values and missions are, and in fact, there are even places where people declare themselves unabashedly to be "centres of excellence".

At another time in history such conduct would have been considered at the very least boasting, and would certainly be thought to reflect a kind of moral conceit. This kind of self-intoxication with one's own virtue may often be so persuasive that its effect, even on the self declared virtuous, is largely delusional. Perhaps most disturbing is that the listeners may themselves not detect anything untoward in all of this, as they may have become numbed to all manner of grandiose exaggerations and claims from people and organizations alike. Once something reaches this normative and institutionalized stage, it is apparent that a culture has been established rather than that this is some curious anomaly.

The people that are paying closer attention may well find that, in fact, we do not live in perfect times, that much of what is written and said cannot be believed and that we are all being constantly manipulated to somebody's advantage. In fact, we are as surrounded by deception today as we ever were, and it should not surprise us to find that we can easily lose our way. So, invariably the questions arise as to "what is the real truth, the real bottom line, the secure foundation we should seek for ourselves and trust in? This is a deep challenge for thoughtful people, because there really are so many ways to lose your way and so many claims as to what that way should be.

In this regard, when it comes to matters like values, "core" assumptions and

pivotal theories, it must be recognized that these are, at their essence, irreducible abstractions. They occur on the metaphysical level of existence, yet suffuse and permeate the foundations of all that we consider “real”. They are not a physical thing, and yet they are very, very concrete in how they can effect us. In this respect, decisions taken at a metaphysical level are real decisions and do have real consequences. While we may prefer to think of abstractions as a kind of irrelevant mental indulgence, we cannot ultimately afford to do that. We eventually recognize that the values decisions that we take are not empty of meaning. They do have effects on ourselves and other people, and therefore the constant scrutiny of our decisions is very important, given both their consequentiality, and the inescapable frailties and imperfections of all people.

His Holiness, the Dalai Lama is often quoted as saying that all beings seek happiness, and that all beings should be supported to achieve happiness. Of course, these teachings are oriented to remind us that we are capable of happiness but also that we are capable of creating happiness in others. In this regard, a faithful Buddhist that would follow such teachings would be concerned not solely about their own happiness, but often about the happiness of others. In these teachings, the happiness and state of well-being of other is very important. There are elements in Tibetan Buddhism of a practice where people devote their lives to absorbing the sufferings of others so that these persons might be happy. This kind of devotion to others is premised on a perceived link between each of us as being one of another. We are profoundly connected to each other and the happiness of all cannot be resolved solely by the happiness of one.

In this regard, these teachings really go to the question of is it really possible for people to have life and to have good life? This, of course, is not just a Buddhist question, but rather a universal question for all human beings. “What is the good life?”, “how does one find or create such a life?”, and “how does one thrive in life?” are all questions that require of us that we choose a path and follow it. It is also true that in following a path we influence the path that is possible for others to follow. If we are correct about the answer to a question such as “how is it that we could thrive and have a good life?”, then of course we are naturally going to pursue those directions. We are going to follow these and try to draw closer to the path they outline.

If we have chosen wisely, then one of the signs will be that we will live, and we will live well, and that others will live and live well. Of course, it is possible that we could choose poorly, and we are well aware of so many of the stories of people, including our own, that have lived in decisions and life pathways that were ultimately life-denying rather than life-giving. These are decisions of individuals, but they are also decisions of communities and of society. They can often be decisions that ended up hurting and harming people rather than giving them life and giving them the things that they need that are positive and good.

So, as we live we constantly put this kind of question in front of us. Is this

decision I/we have taken, the strategy I/we have adopted, a life-giving strategy, or am I/we now part of the instrumentation of both harm to others and harm to myself? Since we are capable of both, the conscientious and ethical “path-maker” will normally try to embody a position or stance in life that shows promise of being “life-giving”. Naturally, some might not see the question this way, but they would have to concede that many others do see the matter that way.

It is a very interesting time to think about what is or is not “life-giving”. We are in the wake of yet another war, and the question of whether war has a justifiable place in resolving human difficulties has yet again agonized people throughout the world, including many people who have chosen in favor of war: Is the deliberate killing of others life-giving? Is this the way we do this “life-giving” thing? By taking life? Or is the sacrifice of life justifiable if the ends of the war are honorable? And is peace the only optimal context for the true liberation of people, and proper relations amongst people? Of course, such questions are not abstract questions, because depending on how one has answered these, one has invariably supported one approach over another.

A similar question might be whether force and its use to impose a solution is uplifting of human dignity, or a selective and seductive confusion that brings its own misleading exhilaration? If force could be confused with “real” potency, then there is always the question of what is ultimately and enduringly potent and fecund in the way we settle troublesome matters amongst people. Such choices are often taken in the heat of formidable passions, and we often do not ask ourselves, at the time, whether the right decision has been taken. It is often enough, at a given moment, that a decision “feels” right, and that others seem to be taking a similar direction. Yet, both individually and collectively, in looking back at such moments, we often are aghast at what was not properly considered in our actions. For this reason, it is important to see that profoundly life-defining decisions are taken, not only through our intellect, but also through our passions.

It is commonplace that people with disabilities are referred to as “vulnerable” people. Most certainly, as individual human beings, they each have their own innate range of vulnerabilities and, in addition to these, they have a great many that are simply added on or enhanced by the kind of community that they are in. Obviously, to be disabled is not solely a matter of one's impairments, it is also a question of how the world around you sees you, thinks about you, relates to you and so on. In this regard, people can be “made vulnerable”, just as they can be “made less vulnerable”. This can be seen in the example of whether people with disabilities are accepted or rejected as being people like everybody else. The difference in how this question gets resolved will arise from the values and paths that our communities shape for themselves, and the degree that these cultural and personal choices favor the well being and interests of people with disabilities.

In reality, it would be unwise to think that people with disabilities are

exclusively “vulnerable” people, because that would suggest that other people are not themselves vulnerable. In fact, *all* people are vulnerable people, though not identically so. The English word vulnerability comes from the Latin word “vulnus” which means a wound, and the verb “to wound” is “vulnare”. Consequently, if you are vulnerable, it means you are able to be wounded. If we were to use that as the test for the universal character of human nature, then all human beings vulnerable as we are able to be wounded. More to the point, even with all of the benefits of social, political and economic advantage, all human beings are ultimately vulnerable, notwithstanding the appearance to the contrary.

One of the more alluring, but nonetheless deceptive longings we might have, would be that of wanting to be invulnerable. In other words, to achieve a state or condition in life whereby we cannot be wounded. This is the desire to be like a God, and somehow reside above the common sufferings, and often appalling weaknesses and experiences of human life itself. Inevitably, even the most well-defended people, who seek to fashion themselves in this way, will find, of course, that they are ultimately vulnerable. This is because we are not gods, though the illusion of this invincibility and invulnerability may temporarily prevail.

All regimes, empires and potentates will one day pass, as will the regimes of the “regime changers” pass in due course. In this way, there will always be a regime mightier than another. No matter how mighty one is, there will always be people or powers who can someday undo that mightiness. Might often creates a sense of invulnerability, an intoxication with force and power that does not really reduce vulnerability at all, because in the end we never entirely escape the reality that we can be wounded, even if this has not yet transpired. We begin life as vulnerable, and end it the same way. It is an integral part of our human nature, and cannot be transcended.

If you do not hold out for the invulnerability as the response to vulnerability, what do you do? As Tom Shakespeare, and many, many, others have repeatedly highlighted, we are not islands unto ourselves. In this respect, the way forward cannot be in creating for ourselves an island of invulnerability, but rather we must return to the fact that we are together in our mutual vulnerability, and in this togetherness of weakness, frailty and suffering, find a way forward. This provokes the question as to what are the life-giving assumptions that help us recognize and support togetherness within the human community? For most of us, it will be in this community that we will or will not be safe. To escape human community, go to one's island, to retreat from humanity is not possible for any of us. We are here in life, saturated in our vulnerabilities, and we must find the right way to live with such a condition.

So paradoxically, it is in embracing weakness and vulnerability that we can

discover our shared humanity, not in retreating from it or seeking some refuge from vulnerability. So, oddly, we have to go deeper into vulnerability to do that, to find our way forward. In this task, there are fortunately life-giving principles we can turn to and share with each other. The examples that will be given here are not all that might have been cited, but they will serve to make the point that a “life giving” path is available to us, despite the profound depths of our weakness and insufficiency. Conceivably, these helpful principles could serve as the core anchors for many decisions and strategies.

The truth of the matter is that, even when we enunciate or aspire to principles of this kind, we rarely systematically live them. One of the difficulties to sort out with ourselves, and other people, is whether we actually mean what we say, or whether our utterances are a facade. Should we just listen for the words themselves, or should we also listen for the unspoken caveats, that may be more meaningful, simply because we are afraid to say them. We may be surprised to discover that underneath our claimed principles may rest our “real” operating principles. We are disillusioned when we discover that the “real” person in ourselves and others is not the one we had assumed, but this simply underlines the difficulties in not only keeping life giving principles clear, but also discerning when they are lived with integrity.

When we look at the wounding done to people in our world, it begs the question of whether some of us are making the wrong decisions along the way. Could some of this damage to people and communities have been prevented, had we been clearer about what are “life giving” directions rather than destructive” life denying” choices? Is it conceivable that there may be shared decisions, and lived social policy that we are simply not as yet willing to recognize for what it really is? It is an instructive reminder, in this regard, that many slave owners claimed something to the effect that “my slaves are happy slaves”. If we listen carefully, we can hear such self-exonerations every day, as few of us are free from contradictions between that which we aspire to, and that which we actually live. In a similar way, it is equally important to see that, no matter how mistaken the road was that was taken, there is always present to us the possibility of choosing a “life-giving” path.

Certainly, one of these principles would be that we are asked to recognise the one-ness of all beings. To return to something that his holiness the Dalai Lama was urging upon us, it means no human being is the “other”. With the creation and institutionalization of any person or group as being “the other”, we also simultaneously create the “not I”, the “not me”. This naturally leads to the separating out of people into various gradations of humanity, with the more socially distant of the people being accorded less value and worth.

When we allow ourselves the assumption that others are fundamentally not me, not I, we give strength to their ability to do the same to us. When we can say that they are re not human like me, then they, of course, can do that in return, and decide that we are not human like them. When we do this, we

help create the conditions where we can unwittingly grow a garden of mutual

dehumanization(s), by not seeing that the humanity of others is the same humanity as our own. Once this denying of parts or all of our humanity becomes routine, then a compounding legacy of hurt develops that get bound up in a cycle of each denial of humanity becoming a cause or justification for a retribution to a prior dehumanization. Each subsequent dehumanization facilitates the next dehumanization, whilst each dehumanization, in turn, takes its particular and inevitable toll, depending upon which part of people's humanity is under assault. This toll is inevitable, because human beings simply do not thrive when their humanity is diminished. This cycle, or spiral into deeper dehumanization, is only avoidable if people's humanity is strengthened, valued and edified rather than lessened and it highlights how important it is have a sense of what leads to "life-giving" consequences.

Witnessing such chains of accumulating harm naturally gets us to wonder where it all begins. It would seem that it begins when we deny that others are not as fully human as we are. As long as we go down the road of creating a devalued "other", we are also making the conditions for ourselves to also become the devalued "other", and sooner or later this consequence will manifest. My humanity as a person cannot be expected to flourish by asking for the diminishment of the humanity of others, since it places us in opposition to our own humanity. With the principle that we are one in our shared humanity, we also share some responsibility for the upholding of each other's humanity. Though it may seem mystical and obscure when it involves people we do not even know, in the choices we make, the wounding of one is the wounding of all, since we are all deeply dependent on the common root essence of our humanness. We can turn away from that potentiality, but the fact of the matter is when we wound even one person, we open the door for the wounding of ourselves. When we begin to justify wounding, it then has increased legitimacy for its eventual application to everyone.

The principle of the one-ness of underlying humanity may seem naive or wishful because when we look at people who are wounded, we see that many "wounders" seem to both get away with it, and may even seem to be deeply rewarded by their victimization of others. Clearly, many people seem to escape responsibility and consequences for their actions. In this world, it often looks like the oppressors are having a great day. This perception may be more apparent than real. If we look more deeply, we can often see that this principle of shared humanity may be profoundly redemptive when examined in a different light. It begins with the recognition that we are more likely to act humanely when we feel a shared commitment to respecting humanity. It is precisely at the point when the ethic of shared humanity is abandoned that we begin to hurt each other. Similarly, when we can see and appreciate the humanity of others we find it somewhat easier to try not to hurt. However, when we are oblivious, do not care or are unconcerned about others, it is possible to hurt, and to do so without remorse.

It is precisely when we go back to seeing each other as brothers and sisters

that we are in the best position to heal, as well as to thrive ourselves. In this way, we are brought to a fundamental decision that we have to make. Are we going to participate in the alienating of our “brothers and sisters”, or are we going to choose the path of upholding their worth and dignity as people? Whether these “brothers and sisters” are people with disabilities or some other group may not matter, as the basis for the ethic of embracing “life-giving” ethics rests not on the specific identity of people but on their sharing of our humanity. When we begin to forget that they have exactly the same humanity as ourselves, we are doing the same thing in reverse, by beginning or continuing the process of their diminishment. In contrast, when we act on the principle of the irreducible life giving entitlement of all people, we provide the best conditions for their fulfillment, and also for our own. After all, what can be more life-giving and societally enabling, than to be thought of as deserving as much of life as anyone else? Such a conclusion could not be better as a good and nourishing starting point. This is what is meant by a life-giving decision or assumption, that it leads to a fuller and richer life for those to whom it is applied.

You can see the advantages of this principle in the example of the establishment of institutionalized rejection and segregation. Many people have said or heard that disabled people should be segregated “with their own kind”. It is a theory that guides how a lot of people with disabilities are organized and managed, and would help explain where and with whom and they are put by others. In this respect, it is important to properly comprehend *involuntary* segregation as being something imposed on people. Ironically, it can sometimes even be disability advocates themselves that make the case for the special-ness and exceptionality of people with disabilities. This is usually intended as a way of enabling people with disabilities to discover and act in common cause and solidarity, but it may inadvertently help create a justification for weakening the ties that bind people with disabilities to their fellow human beings who do not presently have a noticeable disability.

The judgment that is at issue is the assertion that “their own kind” is *only* people with disabilities. It is a very profound decision to say that “your kind” is only people with disabilities, because it is equally possible to say that “your kind” is actually all of “human-kind”. If you are humankind, then you are “with” all of us, you are not just with a certain class of people, and that there is no need for you to be pulled out of the mainstream, set aside and so on. This decision as to how “who you are” gets defined is very important as a starting point for how we organize ourselves as a community. Whenever we let a principle take hold that severs the ties of people to a common humanity, then we in reality creating two different “humanities”. Inevitably, then there will follow a war of humanities in which the central question becomes deciding which is the “real” humanity. Predictably, it creates the prospect that one humanity will be favoured over another. It is not hard to see where this can lead. We see that the gas chambers will be reserved for the “less human”. The “less human” are, of course, the “other”, the people who lose this battle of

which humanity is important. We can only have the gas chambers when we

have two humanities or multiple humanities, not an irreducible humanity of all human beings.

This principle is in some ways not trivial, but it keeps cropping up in the both tiniest of decisions as well as the biggest. It is also a bit more complicated than that. There is a kind of intriguing contradiction embodied in this first principle. The contradictions come from the fact, that while we are all human beings, there is also a very marvelous uniqueness in each and every human life. While we do share a common humanity, we also enjoy the awesome gift that lies within it. This is the irreplaceable dignity of personhood. We are not simply an indiscriminate generalized chunk of humanity. We are also distinct and unique human beings. It is a strange paradox. We are so much the same at our core, and yet clearly each person varies from all others. The fact that we have personhood is an extraordinary cosmic marvel in its own way.

When you think about it, we have a mostly common DNA heritage, yet at the same time, there is a manifest and tremendous uniqueness of the DNA of each person. There seems to be a reason, expressed in biology, that reveals that the universe has deliberately provided for a distinct individual human identity, right alongside a kind of common human identity. In this sense, when we deny the factuality of personhood we are staring something in the face that is profoundly important. As important as uniqueness is, it is constantly ignored and even imperiled in so many of the things we do. If you think about the careless stereotypes we often indulge about both ourselves and others, we often strip this uniqueness away. When we fail to seek out and uphold the distinctiveness and diversity of each person, we are committing a kind of act of violence to human identity in the process because we are destroying persons and personhood and yet it should be the common endowment of all people.

Whenever we resist the temptation to know a book by its cover, in other words to just see people in terms of stereotypes, we have done something very, very wrong when it comes to upholding the endowment of person and personhood. Underneath the surface categories of how we identify people, there is a person that needs to be known, discovered, respected, engaged and running away from that reality is not going to be life-giving. It will be life-denying. Every time we damage the personhood of people we are taking that bit more out of life that could have been there. In a sense we are capable at any point of being both "life denying" and "life-giving". Each choice is consequential. On the positive side, whenever we do recognize people as being unique, we help add to the life giving component and potentiality of our beings. Similarly when we fail to see the fullness of people we may be adding to their burdens.

Of course, people with disabilities are not at all just their disability. To even refer to them as "people with disabilities" is to create an identity that, in itself, is problematic. It is not that they don't have a disability but is that all there is to know about them or even the most important thing to start with?

When we allow such an identity to dominate, the person that is under

that will never arise and take their place. The social role consequences of making disability the core of identity risks subjugating the other dimensions of personhood to the single feature that they happen to live with an impairment of some kind.

You might think that this is unduly splitting hairs or an abstraction of philosophy. Nonetheless, we can see with other features of human identity that are allowed to become unduly life defining, such as skin colour, religion or heritage, we have all lived to see what has come from that. When blond hair and blue eyes are seen as the defining and desirable part of who people are, the those without these will undoubtedly be affected negatively. All of these are instances of avoiding this principle of not relating to people through stereotypes, but being willing to relate to them just as they are in their own unique and fallible personhood. If not, we go into a world where we are simply going to organise things on the basis of stereotypes, with all the damage that comes from such judgments.

Of course, it is not enough that you just be noticed as a person. It would be useful to be noticed, but that alone would not be enough. It is really when one's personhood gets to grow and develop in a life-giving way is when we find ourselves in relationships with people. It is in relationships that the otherness disappears. Relationship is the vehicle for turning ourselves from strangers into people who know each other. To be known and understood and related to as another valued human being is part of the process of humanization. When we choose not to know, relate to or have our lives intersect with other people's, we may be in a process of unconsciously creating separate classes of humanness. Relationship makes it possible for us to discover that in fact we are both unique and the same at the very same time.

We let people into our lives and they let us into their lives. This does not require us all personally to try to relate to all the billions of people on the planet. That is simply impractical. It does suggest in regards to the people we do encounter, that maybe we should be thoughtful about what this means in terms of our obligations in these relationships? It is clear that while a relationship can be beneficial, it is also true that relationships done badly can be the pathway for hurting people. The placing of all relationships on a kind of existential pedestal is dangerous, because we do not then see the relationship can also be the means of violence, and not always the means of liberation. In this sense, it is through relationship that be wound, damage and oppress. Equally, it is through relationship we undo the damaging, the hurting and the oppressing.

Relationship can be what I call "right relationship", an ethic intrinsic to Buddhism as well as other religions. This principle is important. "Right relationship" means not only that we have a relationship with others, but moreso that we are in an ethical or moral relationship with them. In this

regard, in our relating to others, people have something due to them by way of

a way of an entitlement that they be treated well. This kind of relationship means we have to ask ourselves questions about what is the ethical foundation of the way we relate. For instance, it is striking how many people with disabilities and their families are afraid of services; afraid of challenging professional authority, afraid that if they did challenge that there would be punishment and retribution. This is astonishing, because I see it show itself all over the world. I see people afraid of the very organisations that say they exist for them. This indicates that the relationship between many services and the people they serve has deteriorated to such an extent they might well live in fear, and maybe are terrorized by people in authority to the extent that they come to believe that the people in the services would do bad things to them.

It may not matter what the actual truth is concerning such fears, since the relationship has already deteriorated into fear, and fear is a sign that the relationship should be improved. You would never say it is a “right relationship” when people are fearful. Fear and distrust are signs that someone has not been working at getting the relationship “right”. When human beings thrive is when they can live without fear, when they can relax and trust, and put their guard down. Fear sucks up so much energy into defending one's self that that energy is not available for positive things. We must work at our fears, find ways to get past them because fear is a failure of relationship in this sense, and the relationship is repairable.

Many people might think of “right relationship” as something that happens principally at the level of personal action and reaction. Even so, it is important to see that “right relationship” also occurs on the collective, formal, structural level of society, not just the relationship we have with persons, but also the relationships we have that are institutionalized as roles and places in society. For instance, the relationship between classes, or between organisations and people, or governments and the populous are all real and consequential, I even though they seem impersonal and formal. “Right relationship” has a bearing on the character of the social order, the roles in society and the good or harm that flow from these. It is reasonable to ask whether they too are fair, just and ethical. In this respect, we are always involved in “right relationship” problems of a societal kind, not merely those of a personal/intimate sort.

Apartheid is an example of a failed “right relationship” at a societal level as is slavery, corporate exploitation of the innocent and infanticide. These and other malevolent ethics set up relationships destructive to a vast number of people as these become institutionalized into the life of our communities. We have our own “apartheids” because of the way we have set up certain relationships. When we can look critically at the character of our societal relationships, we can begin to change them for the better. The very fact that we persistently ignore so much of what people with disabilities and their families are trying to tell us, is itself a failure of “right relationship”. We see, time and again, instances of depersonalization, dehumanization, disempowerment conducted at the level of organisations and systems

that have presumed and claimed an ethical relationship but have not earned it

or worked for it. In many parts of the world, organizations unilaterally declare that they are in “partnership” with people, yet the people themselves are who unaware that they are in partnership. I am sure some might ask, “How can there be partnership, when we have not even been introduced or had a dialogue? The organization is announcing an intimacy and reciprocity that it has not earned. One only freely consents to partnership having been offered something and agreeing to it. It is a quite different matter for one side to presume and announce partnership all by itself. This subtle distinction is important to look at from a “right relationship” point of view, and question whether this is at all ethical.

However, even at that bigger level, these unethical and wrong relationships are actually enforced daily by people who cooperate with them. We as ordinary people are the daily authorizers of harmful conduct by upholding wrong relationships. We all are doing this to some extent, and we have to look at the way in which we help keep an unethical social, political and economic order in place by being its enforcers. The disenfranchisement of people is because of a collapse of honour about “right relationship”. These institutional ethical failings are not accidental, as many people have to cooperate with them. In every destructive political and moral regime they discover when they go in afterwards, that many people will say something to the effect that “I was just following orders, or it was not me, it was someone else.” I wonder what the truth is. In this regime we are part of, what is our own personal part in it? Conscientious people wonder, both to themselves and often publicly what are we not taking responsibility for that we have clearly been a part of.

In a positive sense, it is desirable to have “right relationship” but you need more than just a good ethical foundation. It is a good thing in itself, but people do not get up in the morning and say “I would like something ethical”. When you think of life-giving, what people want when they get up is a life that they can look forward to. They want something more than that simply everything is honorable, as important as this may be. They want to be related to, to have relationships, share their lives, be part of the human community. The absence of relationships of this kind should give us pause. Why is it that life is not being shared? Why is it that so many people do not want to share their lives with others? The net result of a failure to share life is to deny life to those who need it. Part of this reveals itself as a lack of social inclusion, and another part is revealed in the lack of deeply personal life sharing between people with disabilities and their fellow human beings .

When people with disabilities are shut out from the possibility of life sharing, it means a great deal of life and living is not available to them. It also means what they offer as unique people to life is also lost. In this way, life sharing is crucially important. It is natural for people to bond with other people and to share their lives and souls and hearts and spirits and actions. It creates the intertwining of life that is so much of what life is for all of us. When that's missing, even though people outwardly might be legally cared for, something

is still not quite right. We live in a time when we are quite prepared to share

our taxes, laws, professionals, organisations and systems. We gladly commit to have rented strangers appear on our behalf in the lives of others. However, we are far more reluctant to share the personal side of us. Why is there not the giving of this more personal kind? Where is the giving of our groups, clubs, persons? Why is that held back in favour of giving only formal things to people in need? We will give money but we will not give ourselves. When we do give of ourselves, life sharing becomes possible. This is good for us and for others. In this way, we are defying ourselves as much as denying others, in our holding back of our desire to open up our lives to people.

It is not that all of relationships are always a good thing. I am reminded that Jean Vanier said that living in community, and sharing your life with other people is “a continuous act of forgiveness”. In other words, his vision of being with people was not romantic. His vision of being with people is that it could easily involve its own miseries. In meeting people you meet yourself. In this sense, no wonder people avoid relationship. It is painful. You get to meet yourself, and possibly loathe parts of yourself in the process. It is not just always that you fall in love with yourself or others that justifies life sharing and intentional inclusive community. Being with other people is difficult, but it is also the food and nourishment of life. You cannot just have the nourishments, and not have the pain and vulnerability and difficulties that continually are uncovered in our nature when we share in each others lives.

We have to do both. We have to have life sharing, but we also have to meet people as they are. We cannot dress them up to be the people we would like to meet and be with. We have to meet them as they are and we are. When we only meet the people we want to meet, the people we do not want to meet we will never meet. We have closed ourselves off from them and ultimately we have closed ourselves off from our own potential. So this is why we have to ask ourselves occasionally: “Are we closing ourselves off?” Could we be more open? Perhaps we should recognize that some day will want someone to be open to us. Why are we not now open to them?

Going back to the principle of common humanity we can see that there is another life principle worth reflecting on. It is that people need to find and live their passion, dreams and life purposes. This is part of being a person, one's life purpose and dream is not the same as someone else. One's life passions are not the same as other persons', and it is important that each human being be able to figure the questions out for themselves as to what are their life passions and purposes. We can assist each other to find our life purposes, missions, passions and joys in life, and each soul, each person has a destiny in this regard, and to support the search for this is very, very important.

In this sense, it is important to not waste even one life. The wasting the life of a person with a disability is a crime against humanity, as each life is precious and constitutes, in its own way a vibrant part of our common human heritage. Each life is special and was created for a purpose. Each life is irreplaceable,

and we cannot go around wasting those lives, or we set the stage for the

wasting of our own lives. In this sense, we are bound with an obligation that no life be wasted, because of the transcendental importance of each and every person and all of their qualities. We need not take up this obligation, but that does not mean that this will not have consequences.

If we were to embrace such an insight, we would have to really rethink much of what we do. There are many people with disabilities whose potential has been wasted because the conditions for unlocking that potential have failed to be created. Seen another way, what does it mean when we have opportunities and someone else does not? We find we re back to “right relationship” and the kinds of obligations to one another that come with it

What such a principle does illustrate that it is always possible to do something. Were it not so, then all of what has been said so far would be irrelevant and pointless. We need to see the importance of the life giving decisions that we can take personally. I have illustrated here decisions that you can literally take home with you and consider in regards to your own engagement of this life-giving versus life-denying ethic and the strategies that flow from it. The first decision or action is whether there really are life giving strategies. If they actually exist, then it does create a burden upon us to search for these life-giving strategies. If they exist, then it creates the sense that maybe we should look for them. Maybe we should expect ourselves to search for them because it is only in the searching for them that we will find them. It is in looking for life-giving strategies that we find them. When we are not interested in life-giving strategies, how can they be revealed to us? The beginning of all of this is the decision: “Am I really searching for life-giving strategies?” If it is your decision that you are, chances are you will find them, because that decision will position you to do precisely that.

The second decision is that finding them is not enough. We often know something about life-giving strategies, but they must be chosen, pursued, upheld and then sustained in order to bring about their fullest value. In this sense, what is the good of having life-giving strategies when you do not use them as they should be used? By deliberately making decisions that one’s decision is to uphold “life giving” strategies a great deal about your world will change dramatically. In choosing life you resolve where you stand and how you will live in regards to others. This is not only about how I will live but just as much about how I will be.

In siding with what is “life giving”, we will have to “get off the fence” which is quite difficult. Through the centuries people have always complained about people who were lukewarm as they sensed that many great accomplishments in life required something greater from us. In this respect, giving life-giving strategies the priority they deserve, helps us become more fully alive ourselves.

There is a third decision which is that you've got to face the question of

whether or not you are going to abandon life-denying strategies. In other words, are you going to disassociate yourself from them, untangle yourself from life-denying practices, alliances and ways of behaving, and decide which side you are on? We cannot expect to have it both ways. We cannot choose the ignoring of people's value and worth and choose giving life at the same time. You must choose against the hurting and work to reduce the sufferings that come with the wounding. This is a decision; not choosing just *for* things but choosing against them as well if this is what is needed. This is the question of integrity about avoiding life-denying kinds of actions.

Having done that, it makes it then possible to at least try to be as clear as possible. Interestingly enough, a fourth decision emerges which begins with the decision to have made all those hard decisions, but to go further and take a subsequent decision to not be "right". When we decide we are "right", often it is only us that we allow to come to the party of the virtuous. To not be "right" but to have made a right decision is itself a crucial decision. Because as long as we are "not right" then we can still learn; we can still be educated. It is when we think we are "right" that the learning stops. Making a decision not to be "right" is an important decision. It is a decision to seek the right way while still being open to being further educated about what is "right". When we are all still consciously a little wrong, it is possible to keep having a conversation, but when we are right, there is no room for any more learning. Moral conceit is not life giving, whereas ethical humility enables, nourishes and educates in edifying ways.

Lastly, there is a decision that we need to make to accept as deeply as we can that it is very hard to choose life. It is very hard to do it consistently. It can be quite discouraging, and yet we can still do well at it if we are properly prepared for what it requires. Nonetheless, we are more likely to keep going and persevere, and try to be good at this, if we do not do it alone. All the studies done on social support, tend to show that people with social support do better in virtually every way, simply because people are there with them. While we can think of this in individualistic terms as to what am I going to do and what are my personal choices in regards to life giving strategies, we can think of it also in supportive and collective terms.

Why not seek out other people who are also struggling to find the right way forward and support them? In many ways that is what conferences such as these have been; a chance for support for people who are seeking a better and a righter way forward. We are pilgrims trying to find the right orientation to life and its promise. Think about life-giving not only in terms of what I am going to do, but also consider what am I doing to help others with their struggle on this question? You will find what's given will come back to you, you will be supported when it is hard and difficult because you recognise that as each of us struggles, each of us will be relieved by the assistance we can give to each other.

This was not a technology presentation, nor a twelve point plan of how to get your bearings. This was meant to be a reflection on very important questions of personal judgment, because lives may hang in the balance, including your own. As we make these decisions to either uphold or diminish life, we are bringing about reverberations outward from ourselves into the world. Those reverberations have consequences. Are we going to choose a life giving reverberation or one that is not quite that? Of course, we cannot always know for sure. That is why we need to think about it from time to time; particularly when we hear the stories we've been hearing throughout this conference, We have been given much to think about that is life giving, and this should inspire us. Thank you.