

Personal Fulfillment, Values and The Role of Supportive Communities

Michael J. Kendrick

There is a profound difference between having a life in the community and flourishing as a human being, though this distinction is rarely examined closely. Unfortunately, efforts to include people with disabilities in the community have not gone far enough to overcome the segregation and isolation that people with disabilities often experience.

Clearly, physical presence in the community does not necessarily mean people with disabilities are of the community. In practice, it was assumed that a person with a disability would obtain “some kind of life” for themselves within the community. Although, on balance, even “some kind of life” would be strikingly better than the impoverished lives lived in segregated lifestyles and locations. However, we have moved on from this original point and are now in a better state to recognize that settling for this standard of “some kind of life” is much less than what could potentially be true for people with disabilities.

In reality, we have come to understand that the full humanity and potential of people with disabilities cannot possibly be realized if we continue to accept a much too superficial understanding of what might be captured by the word “fulfillment.” For centuries, countless millions of human beings, have sought to understand and achieve what is often called “the good life.” This vast collective experience of deep philosophical, spiritual and existential exploration is striking in its universal recognition of suffering, unhappiness and joy as essential elements of the human experience. Yet, the links between this great odyssey and the lives of people with disabilities are rarely overtly made, though at many levels the people who love and deeply know a person who lives with a disability often have considerable insight into their search for personal happiness and fulfillment.

The current Dalai Lama, amongst many others, holds the following premise to be true: *all beings want to be happy and fulfilled*. Not surprisingly, he does not make a distinction between this or that human being, but instead starts with the belief that all human beings without exception have a

hunger to be fulfilled. Moreover, it is built deeply into our nature to yearn for fulfillment and this hunger cannot be transcended. Notably, he and many others do not make an exception for people with disabilities. In other words, their essential humanity is fully intact.

Irrespective of society’s undue preoccupation with people’s impairment at the expense of their deeper and irreducible identity as a unique and valued human being, we gain an invaluable insight whenever we look past the surface to the deeply evolved human being that may rest behind the various impairments that so many of us now or someday will live with.

However, it is not simply any life in the community that will bring fulfillment, but rather the life that is the best fit with one’s purpose(s) in life as well as needs and dreams. Personal fulfillment is deeply linked to one’s uniqueness as an individual and it is important that the starting point for personal fulfillment begins with the individual and her aims and needs in life. The notion that each individual is here for a reason and her life is important is incredibly empowering. Embracing this notion not only allows one’s unique purpose to be sought out, discovered and pursued, it also leads to the revelation of the potential, gifts and contributions that may be intrinsic to that person. By recognizing at the outset that something vital is lost when a life is wasted, we become better stewards of promoting human potential. This is especially possible if the right mix of opportunities and support are there to discern and nourish the presence and contribution of each human being, including those who live with a disability.

Though we may be tempted to focus on contribution as solely what one does in life, it can also be that contribution is achieved by being who you are and remaining true to yourself. If we can blend both “being” and “doing” as complementary pathways to a person having a distinct presence in the world we come closer to what not only “having a life” might be, but more importantly having the right life. Though we may not know the source of a person’s life, we can see that all lives and personhood are an emanation from a source. By respecting the principle that each life has purpose and value we are better prepared to see the distinctiveness of a person and the ever present sense of possibility in anyone’s life, so that when addressed properly, anyone can realize fulfillment.

The ultimate answers to people’s lives do not rest with others, but instead arise from the seemingly instinctive directions in a person that we often call “life purposes” or “calling.” People are clearly free to ignore and thwart these deep promptings in their lives and may quite readily opt to

ignore their life potentials and conceivable contributions. Nonetheless, these may still play some role, large or small in what they do with their lives. A driving force in one's life can still be present and decisive even when it is being steadfastly resisted. This is why it is sensible to give such life purposes the attention they deserve as they are central to a person's identity irrespective of whether this person fully embraces this indemnity or shows some level of resistance.

A meaningful and fulfilling life may not necessarily require that everything work out well or that the right choice be made or that one's choices are in line with the others might think. Far too many people seem outwardly successful, but inwardly are deeply discontented with their lives. Paradoxically, many who have seemingly failed spectacularly in their lives might still be happier than those whose lives have been more conventional and somehow safer because they have somehow stayed true to themselves, their potential and their ultimate life purposes.

We may be easily fooled by taking such a complex and profound existential question as personal fulfillment and equating it simplistically with vague verbal proxies for a good life captured by the ever appealing but not very illuminating slogans of the day such as:

Community Self-determined
Individualized
Empowered Person-centered
 Socially Inclusive *Connectedness*
 Independence **LIBERATION**
 Relationships **Belonging**

and so on. As valuable as these mantras may be for building common purpose, social movements and change, they may at the same time mislead us and the eventual good use of our energies if they take our attention away for any time from the intensely specific detail of the lives and identity of actual people. The way forward for personal fulfillment is always highly personal, as is the unhappiness, joys, and sufferings of life.

At the same time, we are not at all alone in our search for personal fulfillment, nor is it irrelevant or incidental as to the part that others might play in our lives. Though this may range from being trivial or pivotal in our lives, any person we encounter can have effects on our life and its potential, just as we ourselves may be a help or a hindrance to others. So, for people with disabilities, like everyone else, it deeply matters what kind of community life we make. Should we place little value on their lives, then it should not

surprise us that they are rejected, aborted, excluded and even reviled. Similarly, if we are genuinely and enduringly interested in the people we may know who live with a disability and what each would specifically like to do with their lives, we can most certainly decide to be a help more than a hindrance.

This highlights the link of interdependence and coexistence that both binds and enables the capacity of people to find good lives for themselves. Our lives spill into each others in countless ways that can be both damaging and nurturing depending upon the underlying value choices that they represent. Broadly put, how we live our lives can be either life giving or life denying in the lives of others. It is clearly helpful that we be mindful of the impact of our presence in the lives of others and be responsible enough to alter it when we discover that we oppress and mistreat others through our own way of being who we are.

It is also true that we are connected to others quite impersonally and remotely through the shared range of institutions of our community and societies. Nonetheless, our deepest values and spiritual character will manifest through these more formal media much as they do in everyday life and personal action. If our messages and conduct in these formal realms are destructive or enabling for the lives of people with disabilities, the consequences will be just as real as it would be with personal actions. Consequently, there is obvious scope for both personal and community decisions around personal and shared values and what the content of these could or should be. How we come to answer these questions will define the character of our shared community and institutional lives including the lives of people with disabilities.

There is a decided link between what we place importance on and what the tenor and effect on our lives will be. When we are preoccupied with ourselves, there is little time and energy available for others. When we take the time to know others better, we are more likely to understand and appreciate each other better. Whether or not we can always be aware of this connection it will still be at work as all of our lives intersect in many ways in an ecology of connections that are full of moral and other meanings. With each specific meaning will come related consequences. It is therefore quite reasonable to look for the ways in which shared and collective values and decisions may propel communities in directions which are facilitative and enabling of the kind of personal fulfillments sought by people with disabilities keeping a close watch on those choices that have the potential to thwart such ends.

To make this point clearer it would be useful to think of several typical domains of life that are normally important for people with disabilities who are seeking a good life. These could include employment, having a home of one's own, exercising autonomy and having valued roles within community. Today we have communities and states in which over two thirds of people with disabilities are working independently in the community, yet in many other states the numbers are half of this or lower. Similarly, there are many people with significant disabilities who today either rent or own their own home and are quite reasonably well supported in their independent lifestyles. Yet, we also have countless numbers of people still in institutional programs or in what may often be called "mini-institutional" settings. This gap between what we can do when we put our mind (and values) to it and what happens to people whose lives are caught up in regressive services and the philosophies that guide them, is striking in how it plays out in people's lives.

It is also notable, in regards to people being empowered to exercise their personal autonomy in terms of the decisions in their lives, that wherever there have been efforts taken to reduce the oppression of people with disabilities by strengthening their role as decision-maker in their own lives, there has inevitably been distinct progress. At the same time, many people with disabilities are deprived of their autonomy every day by others who seem to have no apparent awareness of the degree to which they control and dominate the lives of people with disabilities. This occurs through not being attentive to the will of the person with a disability or allowing the preferences of support personnel to come before that of the individual with a disability.

If we look at the absolutely historically unprecedented degree to which people with disabilities have taken on valued social roles of all kinds in the past several generations, we can see that it does make a difference if the surrounding society is agreeable and supportive of change. People with disabilities have taken on valued roles in virtually all aspects of community life and it is hard to find areas in which there has not been progress. Nonetheless, there are certainly ample examples of this progress not being translated into opportunities for many other people with disabilities despite all of the advances happening around them.

What these contrasts point to are several key links between the potential for personal fulfillment for people with disabilities and the supportive nature or not of the communities around them.

Even in the presence of communities that have not been universally supportive, there have been those who have taken actively worked to bring many elements of their communities along with them in envisioning and actualizing all manner of helpful opportunities for people with disabilities to get good lives for themselves.

It is also true that it has not been necessary to have everyone on board at the outset in order to pioneer many important advances. People who have shown leadership have simply created and enlisted as much support and good will as they could muster as they pursued improved life opportunities for people with disabilities. This kind of "make your breaks" approach is most certainly cumulative and incremental, but it does highlight that "beach heads" can be forged and enlarged and that waiting for the masses to move into supportive positions is neither needed nor particularly helpful given that a small number of good examples are a good beginning providing that the leadership is sustained.

Another key is that communities are not fixed in their character for all time or much of the progress cited here would never have happened. In fact, what is important to recognize is that this progress came about because of the combination of a willingness to lead by a small number of people combined with a positive vision for a better life that persisted over time. Where community comes into the equation is through the voluntary agreement of possibly countless citizens that favor a better life for people with disabilities and were prepared to support it to some degree or another. In other words, they were persuaded rather than compelled to act. When one considers that the rate of employment of people with disabilities went up gradually, one employer and one business at a time, it becomes clearer that communities can and do change and sometimes this is for the better if there is sustained and convincing leadership present.

It is also likely that the presence of committed visionary leaders, acting both individually and in alliance with other leaders, will serve as a catalyst to bring out the "good" in many others. Such goodness may be latent and it is the vision of the leaders that helps well motivated people to see how they can play a useful role and potentially make a positive difference. As such, pro social views grow they will in turn create role models for others, thereby establishing, person-by-person and network-by-network, many mini environments within community where hospitality and supportiveness to persons with disabilities is more likely to flourish.

Given the preceding, it is important that the link between vision, leadership, and the building of supportive communities promote the potential of people with disabilities enabling them to lead fulfilling lives not to be ignored or underexploited. Much will rest on whether people commit themselves to be proactive about what values make for a supportive community as well as what actions give practical meaning and consequence to these values. The quality of many people's lives will be affected by our negligence or conscientiousness in both embodying and modeling supportive values and by encouraging others to do the same.

Though we need not be our brother's keeper, nor take on other obligations that might benefit others, it could well be beneficial and constructive if we did so. Committed action guided by a positive vision for how people with disabilities

could have strengthened opportunities for getting themselves the kinds of lives that would be personally fulfilling. Even having this intention could add to the supportiveness of ourselves and community and acting upon it could have even more impact. Many have said that attempting to be of service to others, however modestly, is also linked to our own fulfillment in life and may bring with it blessings in many unexpected ways. This is not in itself a reason to consciously try to be an enabling presence in community, but it does point to the good that is strengthened in all of us by the decision to be part of the process of enabling others to be happy.

Michael J. Kendrick, PhD consults internationally through Kendrick Consulting Intl. For more information about this article please contact Michael at kendrickconsult@attglobal.com or www.kendrickconsulting.org.



*“Be the change
you wish to see in the world.”*
-Gandhi

**Get involved,
Take action,
Speak out.**

Go to
www.tash.org
or contact the Central Office at
(202) 540-9020
to find out what you can do.