

The Empowering Value Of “Life-Giving” Assumptions About People

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The Importance Of Humility In Appraising Our Values

It is normal enough for most people to believe that their personal values are in the proper place and that they usually behave in a virtuous and blame-free way. Frequently, people tend to see the need for others to improve in this regard long before they recognize their own shortcomings. Naturally, if we become too smug and complacent in our view of ourselves it puts in place a very significant barrier to moving ahead. Yet, we live in a time when individuals, agencies, governments and many other bodies are awash in self-congratulatory proclamations. “Politically correct” speech and thought is everywhere evident, and this compounds the difficulty of undertaking a more genuine search for the authenticity of our actual lived values.

It is simply too easy and reassuring to our self-esteem to uncritically presume we are blameless in our values and motivations, thereby depriving us of the growth and wisdom that comes with seeing ourselves as we really are, complete with shortcomings, limitations and the many layered falseness and ambiguity that is present in all people. These need not halt our progress towards some increased measure of virtue and coherency, as it is the facing of ourselves that we ultimately gain ground. However, this kind of personal scrupulousness does require both courage and humility. While such traits are seen in individuals of substance and character, it is all the more rare to witness these in our social institutions. The tendency of organizations to revert to a kind of “regression to the mean” tends to blunt the kinds of penetrating truths that are needed for progress.

Seeing The Present Difficulties Of People With Disabilities In The Larger Context Of Human Struggle Itself

This event, like so many others, is dedicated in part to finding ways to make progress for people with disabilities. It is always a sign of hope when people sincerely come together to take stock, to correct past errors, and to dedicate themselves to future progress. Such an effort is often fruitful, though the inspiration to follow through with our resolves may need to be strengthened many times

before we get to where we want things to be. Keeping perspective is always difficult, and it is often useful to see what we are doing from a larger or fresh vantage point. So, we will first begin here with a small digression into the more general question of human well-being before we turn our attention solely to the struggles of people with disabilities, their families and friends. People with disabilities are very much part of the larger human predicament, and it is always best to not segregate them even more, by overlooking the full significance of this. We all share the same intrinsic humanity, and can only realize its fullest potential when we refuse to ever relinquish the brother and sisterhood of our common human family.

The Personal And Societal Capacity To Do Harm

It is frequently the case that the most important things in life are often the most simple. It is evident that the lives of people are surprisingly fragile and easy to damage. We are all too familiar with the many ways in which people can be hurt and degraded. It is natural that we should search for ways in which people can be treated better. As His Holiness the Dalai Lama, and countless others have pointed out, we all long for happiness for ourselves and usually for others as well. Yet, it is easy to see that such happiness is elusive, even when we mean well. It is easy to lose one's way and to find oneself doing things that harm ourselves or other people. It is often when we make such missteps that we come to realize that there are greater truths about living that ought not to be violated. With time, a measure of wisdom about such truths can come to be a greater part of us.

It is also true that whole societies can lose their way and, in the process, cause great damage to the people involved. The twentieth century has had far too many examples of avoidable pain and suffering inflicted upon humanity, for us to believe that such a problem no longer confronts "modern" people. This patterned harm can become deeply ingrained into the way of life of a nation or people and endure for centuries in its spiritual and moral life. All societies have the potential to make collective choices that are more beneficial for people, as well as choices that are

proportionately more harmful. What guides our choices, both personally and collectively, consequently plays a very crucial role in shaping the eventual outcomes for people's lives. For this reason we must be careful to continuously look deeply into the beliefs and attitudes that lay hidden and obscured beneath everyday life. These deeply held orientations or perspectives are rarely entirely conscious, but they are nonetheless quite central to how we live our lives and the things we value.

It is commonly the case that we can do harm even when we think we are doing what is right. Our good intentions and positive beliefs about ourselves are not always a good guide to whether we are actually behaving well. Often, our errors are only clear to us in retrospect, when it may be too late. The same is true of our communities and societies. The capacity to cause harm to people is much too rarely appreciated in time to prevent its occurrence, though this is much clearer once the damage is already done. Even so, we often want to deny that we are part of something harmful for ourselves and others, as it hurts us to think that both we and our communities are not always good. Yet, it may be precisely this denial or repression of our capacity to create harm that leaves us unable to be as good as we might otherwise be.

The Ever Present Potential To Choose “Life-Giving” Values

It is important to carefully appreciate that human beings respond positively to having their humanity well treated. They also suffer greatly when this respect for their humanity and well-being is absent. When human beings thrive, we can properly say that there must be some active ingredient present that is fuelling such a result. Such an ingredient is “life giving”. In a similar way, we can also say that when people and their humanity are degraded and abused, they will suffer unnecessarily. Such conditions might be thought of as being oppressive of people or “life-denying”. If we are to meaningfully use the language of empowerment and liberation of people, we must seek to make choices that are “life-giving” more than they are “life-denying”. This begins with recognizing that these choices always exist, and always have consequences.

In much the same way, we could think of our social environments, both small and large, as being a kind of cultural “brew” in which conditions are created that produce effects on people’s lives that are either largely beneficial, mixed, or not, as the case may be. We can properly infer from the observed results that something must be at work to create these results or outcomes. Consequently, the actual conditions of people’s lives can often be the “net result” indicators that reveal whether we have chosen wisely by way of life-giving directions or not. In a similar way, we can gain crucial instruction from the lives of oppressed people as to what might have been choices for such environments and lives that would have been more “life-giving”.

In much the same way that we can do harm, it is also obvious that there is much good in all of us, and our communities, that can be mobilized for people’s benefit. There is no doubt that a sincere desire to live lives where what is good guides our actions can eventually produce wholesome results for people. Yet, most people are frequently a little unsure of what is ultimately good for them, quite apart from what might benefit others. Even where they hold strong personal values, they may be reluctant to act in a way in which they impose these on others. They may prefer that people be as free as possible to make their own choices about what is, or is not, to be valued. Nonetheless, even with such restraint, it is still possible to do harm if one has chosen one’s values poorly.

Irrespective of these concerns, it is clear that some values seem to have an enhancing effect on our lives and the lives of others. Consequently, it is helpful to occasionally spend some time reflecting on what seems to make life better for people and what does not. Put another way, knowing what enriches life and what diminishes it, helps give guidance to what might be the best choices to follow. The more we emphasize the “right” things the more human life and its potentials are strengthened. For this reason, people have searched and struggled for ages for what constitutes the “good life” with the hope that by focussing on one direction versus another they will meet with more success for their own lives and the lives of others.

The Dilemma Of Finding Shared Community Values

In one sense, it is tempting to conclude that answering the question of what constitutes the “good life” is impossible, as it is all a matter of personal perspective and thus forever out of reach that we could ever find enough consensus to act usefully together as a community. Such a view is quite limiting, as it is often possible for people to achieve a great deal by way of treating others well even when the community is irretrievably divided on important questions of how people should be treated. If our choices are sound, they will bear at least some fruit even in the context of a conflicted and uncertain community. Human life appears to respond to its proper care and nurture even in overall conditions that are otherwise inhospitable. This suggests that there may well be values that are “life-giving” even when immersed in situations that pull people in other directions. “Life-giving” values may co-exist with and compete with “life-denying” values in society.

We can be guided in this quest for “life-giving” directions quite easily in our personal lives by referring to the religion or philosophies that individually appeal to us, and submitting, to whatever degree suits us, to their directions. It is much more difficult to resolve this as a community, since developing shared values is not always easy when people are free to choose their own sense of what is important or not. Nonetheless, providing we respect this necessary prerogative of people, it may be possible to both satisfy our own personal values and find some measure of support and convergence with the values of others. Such alliances are always uneasy, and to hope to ever escape such fundamental ambiguity is utopian. Communities always hold ambivalences, much as do individuals.

The Crucial Effect Of Assumptions And Their Resulting Social Perceptions Of People’s Lives

In the question of the actual vision we hold about the what is possible in the lives of our fellow citizens, will rest the basis of much of what our communities will permit or enable people to do

with their lives. There is no doubt that each and every one of us is shaped by our community's view of us. We often resist the imposition of such perceptions, but we rarely are unaffected by them. What we expect of our lives is hugely influenced by what others have indicated is possible for our life. So, whether we notice it or not, the attitudes and choices being made by us collectively and individually will have some kind of shaping effect on other people's lives. Frequently, this effect is relentlessly ongoing, significantly invisible to us, and unquestioned much of the time. We are not solely a product of our social conditioning but we are nevertheless deeply marked by it.

If we carefully consider the phenomenon of institutionalised social devaluation we can see that the roles and expectations that are held for devalued people can be quite oppressive. For people held hostage in such devalued social roles throughout human history, including the present, there is no doubt that their poor treatment is deeply linked to how their communities perceived or perceive them. Gypsies, minorities, foreigners, people of lower classes, people of reviled religious and ethnic groups, people with unusual traits or conditions, poor people, racially distinct people, people with unpopular views, politics or philosophies, all have much to teach us about “life-giving” and “life-denying” value choices.

People such as these, as well as other categories of socially devalued people and groups, share in common the visibly harmful results of being seen by their community in a largely negative, and thus “life-denying” light. Such negative perceptions feed low expectations for their lives, that even the affected people themselves may come to believe are inescapable or even deserved. This is what some social scientists often refer to as the “internalisation of oppression” into the psyche of the victims themselves. If everyone treats you as lacking value and worth, is it no surprise that you come to believe this about yourself? Such is the terrible power of belief in depriving people of the true potential of their lives.

Nurturing Liberating and “Life-Giving” Orientations To People; Particularly Those At Risk Of Social Devaluation

Fortunately, there are “life-giving” values, perceptions and social conditions. These have sustained countless people down through the ages and we can turn to them for some guidance in the present. We do not need to start entirely afresh in this regard, as we are merely one generation that has come after so many others, and thus can build on what has been passed on to us. It is true that we must make our own choices, but this need not occur in a vacuum of possibilities. The question of both what constitutes the “good life” and what sustains it are intertwined and not easily summarized. Nevertheless, it is important to do what one can to clarify what might be “life-giving”. Gratefully, for people in the field of disability, there seem to be some rather more obvious elements of this, that many people have similarly and repeatedly defined, that can serve as a useful consensus and starting point. For sake of brevity, only ten of these “life-giving” value choices are described here, but they are nonetheless important, even though so much else of value might usefully be added.

a) Recognizing The Irreducible Humanity And Dignity Of People; No Matter What Their Impairments

It is a tragedy, witnessed again and again, that people with disabilities are not seen as being fully human. Our sense of what constitutes humanness seems to be unduly influenced by the loss or reduction of some kinds of functioning. These diminishments are taken as a marker as to whether we are fully human. When the humanity of people is not seen as equivalent to that of others, it commonly means that the person will be treated “less well” in accord with whatever sense of humanity is no longer seen as being present. Yet, should our level of functioning be used this way to define our humanity? If we listen to the advice of those who have lived through experiences of being seen as “sub-human”, there is no dispute. Their advice is clearly that our humanity transcends our bodily and mental functioning, and is not at all altered by the ups and downs of personal functioning, since it rests on another plane.

We are as human when we are doing poorly as when we are doing well. Thus, the “life-giving” value choice is to be ever more

rigorous in upholding the humanity of people whose functioning is impaired, as it is they who are most at risk of having their humanity be equated with their limitations, and their human potential to be equated with their deficits. Were they to be seen as being as richly human, in all the respects that the most proficient of people routinely expect as their due, then the bounty of what can be enjoyed in life would still be held out for them, rather than being mistakenly withdrawn just because there are limits on their functioning. We must be exceedingly careful whenever people with disabilities are asked to accept and live lives that are clearly so deprived when compared to what most people expect for their lives. Better that we aim for a way of life in which their turn at the table of life's opportunities comes early and often.

b) That People Be Accorded "Personhood" Unreservedly

It is certainly the case that the attribution of "personhood" is deeply linked to the more overarching question of the perception of whether people are fully human. In this sense, a person's "personhood" may be jettisoned based on whether they are cast into the role of sub-human. Such is the power of this perception. People with disabilities frequently have their identity as unique human beings so deeply neglected, that they become like objects devoid of individual identity. They are often equated largely with their impairment, their service "client" status, or even their "otherness". They are mentally associated with all others that share similar superficial expressions of a supposedly shared and defining identity. Their true identity is not allowed to exist or express itself. They become not Diana, Marcel or Maria, but rather simply a "them", like all other people who carry their particular label of disability.

If this tendency is to be rejected and overturned in a "life-giving" way, it is important that we be exceedingly intent on searching out the actual person that can be so shrouded and ignored behind these obliterating stereotypes. Personhood is an amazing and routinely revolutionary dynamic of our humanity that is not at all bound by such limiting perceptions. This is quickly revealed whenever anyone genuinely seeks out and affirms the unique human

personality that is inborn and at work at all times in people, no matter what seems to be their outward state. This identity is often starving for the “life-giving” attention that comes when one’s personhood is properly recognized, valued and nourished. One’s “personhood” is not at all assured by something as gimmicky as an ostensibly “person-centred” plan or other such contrivances. It is only assured when the person themselves are deeply honoured as a matter of daily experience.

c) The Dignity Of Human Will And Freedom

It is not the birthright of human beings to become enslaved. The social relations that produce bondage, involuntary servitude and domination of people are creations of communities and the choices they make that exploit others. People with disabilities are all too often deprived of the opportunity to express their will, freedom and autonomy, even when such expressions are comparatively modest in comparison with what most people accept as usual levels and types of choice and autonomy. It is not a matter of whether people get to make a choice “here or there” at the whim of their “keepers”, but rather a more fundamental question of whether their more transcendent human capacity and desire to author their own existence is honoured to the degree it should.

If there is to be a “life-giving” choice to be made that will enable people to find some measure of their own way forward in life, it must certainly begin with the positive presumption that this “will and decision” feature of life is just as important to people who live with disabilities as it is anyone else. Too often, people withhold this from people with disabilities on the presumption that the person cannot manage such an aspect of life given their impairments, or they presume that the person, by right of their disability, lacks some basic wisdom that their controllers and “keepers” have more abundantly. However, these concerns would be better addressed by supporting people and leaving their freedom and will intact, than by enslaving them to the non-negotiable will of those who have the upper hand when it comes to control. Domination is not liberation. However, walking alongside or “with” people is a promising beginning to sharing power and authority.

d) Justice Is A Birthright Of All Human Beings

While it may seem a bit unusual to think about something like justice as being “life-giving”, it may be clearer when we look at how “life-denying” it can be when one has to live with unfairness. Being treated without respect to justice and fairness is undoubtedly oppressive, and typically results in harm to the person or group and their well-being. We have often turned a blind eye to crimes and violations against people, because it has suited our interests to not have to deal with the embarrassing difficulties genuine justice would bring. Thus, injustice may have had many allies entrenched in the order of things, though such alliances are normally deeply disguised, usually behind facades that serve to put the best face or appearance on what is actually going on. People with disabilities have had a long struggle to get their rights and other claims for justice respected, so it is difficult to believe that such transgressions have been a mere anomaly. More ominous is the possibility that there is a link between the mistreatment of people with disabilities and various advantages accruing to others in community.

Nevertheless, the violation of people’s rights and the denial to them by law, practice and custom of fairness can only be overcome by the upholding of justice itself. This occurs best when there is only one rule or law for everyone and people with disabilities are seen as falling under its strictures and protections as much as anyone else. Justice of this kind is not solely embedded in law, it is also very dependent on the incorruptibility of people to place as much worth on the claims and interests of people with disabilities as are expected by all people. This sense of justice is a feature more of the actual character of people than the written words of formal covenants and laws. So, real justice arrives one decent and fair human being at a time.

e) People Will Thrive Best When The Fullness Of Community Is Available To Them

People with disabilities have continuously found themselves at the edges of community life more than in the main flow of it. This has been helped by our pattern of organized segregation. Often this segregation is managed by the service system into benignly imaged versions of “special this” or “special that”. “Special”, even in these outwardly pious programs, nevertheless means living apart from the heart of community. Some people even claim that people with disabilities are “meant” to be apart, almost giving their social rejection and resulting exclusion some kind of mystical justification. However, we have been lucky enough to see that this setting apart is not at all necessary, and that people with disabilities do just fine in the community, once they are properly supported to make the most of their socially integrative opportunities. Similarly, the community is inevitably enriched by respectful contact with those they used to shun, as each artificial barrier to acceptance and understanding is gradually overturned.

What is greatly “life-giving” is when people see that community life is where “life” is at its fullest and people with disabilities ought to be deeply embedded in it, as might suit them as individuals, and enjoying its benefits. This need not mean that people expect that “community life” is somehow without its own sufferings and limitations. Rather, no matter what the harshness of community life, people with disabilities ought to be living amongst their fellow human beings and sharing the hardships along with the virtues of life in any community. It also means that one is not done with the process when one is physically present in communities. There still remains the question of whether one is socially part of communities and, more importantly, whether one occupies valued social roles or is left to languish within community in oppressive and devalued social roles.

f) Growth Is Ever Possible And Brings Greater Life

It is in the nature of life that life goes on. Each new day can bring new vistas and possibilities that enrich and expand us, even when these are difficult and contrary to our preferences. When our days are “wasted” by avoidable tedium, routine or low expectations it is easy for people to become trapped in lives that do not reflect their true potential or hunger for life. This can happen to anyone, and persons with disabilities are especially vulnerable, because so many people tend to underestimate their potential. Yet, time and again, people with disabilities who have been casually written off as lacking the capacity for growth, learning, advancement and even adventure, have proven such prognostications to be utterly without merit.

No one really knows what any person is truly capable of, and there can never be certainty as to the directions people might take in their lives. “Growth” is a very evident, but quite mysterious capacity of all people, that spills out and over the artificial walls we try to constrain it in. Growth is even more than this, it is also a sign of the very essence of the dynamism of life itself, and can be occurring for people even in the last rush towards the body’s death. Growth is not unduly constrained by disability, as its roots are in the fullness of their humanity, not merely in the way they must function. If we are to honour the “life-giving” principle we must always be alert for the potential of growth, and the things that could be done to facilitate its expression. It is never a settled matter, though we seem to create patterns and lifestyles that “pretend” otherwise. Better that we not fear growth, but befriend it as a welcome part of life.

g) Life Is Irreplaceable And Is Not To Be Taken From People

At various times in our history we have deprived whole peoples of their lives. It matters not whether only one life is taken or many, as each person deprived of their life by death, or a slow facilitation of it, cannot ever regain their lives. A life lost is a life extinguished with great finality. There are no halfway measures in death, though life itself can be short-changed by “death inducing”

attitudes, beliefs and practices. People with disabilities have paid with diminished lives, and even death itself, at the hands of our communities and ideologies. Many still resist the birth of such persons, and argue for the desirability of their death often suggesting it would be a merciful end to a life not worth living. After all, if one equates the “good life” with no hardship, limitation and suffering whatsoever, then many people will not be able to live very long at all.

Taking the life of another, even in those reasonably few instances where the person is seeking such an end, cannot be equated with “life-giving” assumptions, since extinguishing life hardly enriches that life. It merely ends it. It is better that we ask deeper questions as to what would bring people to believe that life is not worth living. In this you can eventually see the handiwork of profound cultural messages about socially devalued people that render their lives valueless, even to themselves. If we are to uphold life we must be certain that genuinely “life-giving” messages surround people’s lives, or surely many will see no point in life when one must live with a disability.

h) People Are Meant For Relationship And Love

It is a considerable part of being human that we are capable of relationship, love and intimacy. Such needs are hardly trivial or incidental and at the heart of human existence. Yet it is easy enough to generally favour these elements of life and yet not see how they equally apply to people with disabilities. Even if one receives good and capable care and support, it may well be true that much is still missing from life for people with disabilities if they are still struggling to find relationship, love and intimacy.

It is therefore “life-giving” to affirm these needs and wants of people, and to do what may be reasonable to assist with these challenges. These are deeply personal matters and should rarely be the public work of organizations and professionals. Nonetheless, this is quite different from recognizing their importance to people, and adjusting the sensitivities of organizations to give greater weight to how their conduct impacts on people’s personal and

relationship life. It may be possible to discover strategies of support that do help in these aspects of living, and this is all the more likely to occur if much of the guidance on how this might be done arises from the people themselves. Love, relationship and intimacy, are so deeply a part of who we are as people, that we must not lose sight of the fact that for people with disabilities this is no less true. Like everyone else, they also have their pain and struggles, and this must be honoured and respected.

i) People Can And Should Contribute To Life

It is easy enough for people to become so preoccupied with assisting people with the many practical needs that arise from having a disability, that the person can inadvertently be put into the role of being solely being someone who demands and takes care from others. This is often captured in visions of “client hood” that focus on what people require of others. Obscured in this is the reality that people with disabilities may also be hungering for ways that they can also give to others and to make a contribution to their world. Like others, they are seeking to make a difference in the world and to find some personal satisfaction and enrichment in the process.

It may come easier for many people to be in the “giving” rather than “receiving” role and this is no different for people with disabilities. It may even be a matter of pride and dignity for many individuals to be recognized for the contributions they can make, whether this is personal, professional or otherwise. This aspect of people may be even more difficult to see when the person is quite needful of the assistance of others because so much of what gets attention is what the person requires of others. Consequently, it is all the more important that, the fuller and more contributive elements of the person be given notice and appreciation. It may even be “life giving” to cultivate these aspects of people, as they are undoubtedly underdeveloped and forgotten in many instances.

j) Personhood: The “Inner” Life Of People Matters

We are a very material culture and much of what happens for people is actually in the more invisible inner realms of their being. What is going on in people’s hearts and spiritual life is not some frill at the edge of who people are. It may often be their “core”. It is certainly true that such matters are deeply personal, and kept out of sight in most of daily life. Nevertheless, their opaqueness and need for being protected from the prying eyes of others, does not diminish their importance. These dimensions of life are the wellspring of life for many people and must be noted as being matters of often great gravity and importance for people.

The “life giving” attitude in this regard must certainly begin with a view of service, fellowship and relationship that takes account of these aspects of life and living and that generously provides for their nurturance alongside the other necessities of life. This is not a matter of simple tolerance for people having a personal spiritual life. Rather, it involves seeing that people struggle with their values, their choices and priorities, their faith or lack of it and the ultimate meaning of their lives and events. This is no less true simply because people do not have words for these things or seem not to be interested or lack intellect. The heart and soul of people is perhaps mediated by intellect and expression, but not bound by or dependent on them. Rather, the inner life of people is interwoven with the outer parts of their lives and must be seen as being every bit a source of vitality and need in life as is what it takes to help them function otherwise in the world.

We must be careful to see that “personhood” arises from within, and is constituted by more than just the social identity and roles through which we “outwardly” tend to see people. “Personhood” in this sense is akin to what religious people tend to think of as the soul. It is a gift of life itself, and is present even in those that a society believes are uninteresting, impaired or even barely human. This explains the ever-present ability of such people, so classed by others, to suddenly seem to come to life when their personhood is finally recognized and valued. Their personhood had

always been there, but had undoubtedly been denied and deprived of nurturance by a world unseeing and indifferent to its existence.

The Importance Of Choosing “Life-Giving” Values and Assumptions

Both as individuals and as a society we must be exceedingly careful to recognize the role our values and assumptions play in shaping the way people with disabilities get treated. It is tempting to believe that we are blameless in this regard and that our values and assumptions cannot be faulted. Nevertheless, the poor progress many people with disabilities are experiencing in getting closer to their dreams and hopes for their lives should give us pause. Further, the quite reversible deprivations and degradations of people with disabilities at the hands of their society should also make us wonder if the reassuring rhetoric we hear about society doing its actual best is, in reality, a self-congratulatory myth.

Much rests not simply on who we see ourselves to be but also who we may actually be underneath the veneer of socially acceptable behaviour we can use to disguise ourselves from ourselves and others. At the same time, we are very much capable of, sincerely and with great care, choosing values and assumptions that bring added life possibilities much closer for people who would otherwise be denied them. It is this wonderful potential to bring out the good in all of us, that is the prize that awaits those who take up the problem of deep attitude with concern and hope. We must learn to frame our choices much more clearly as being those that are life-giving and those that are life-denying in order to see more clearly the better way ahead.