

The Good Life is About Relationships

Hugh Mackay is a social researcher and the author of sixteen books – ten in the field of social psychology and ethics, and six novels. A newspaper columnist for over 25 years, Hugh is currently an honorary professor of social science at the University of Wollongong, an adjunct professor in the faculty of arts at Charles Sturt University, and a patron of the Asylum Seekers' Centre. In 2015, Hugh was appointed an Officer in the Order of Australia. This series of excerpts are taken from two of Hugh Mackay's books, A Good Life and The Art of Belonging. They highlight the universal nature of what it means to live a Good Life.

When thinking about what makes a 'Good Life' for people with disability one only needs to think about what would make a good life for all people. Often there is a consensus about what makes a good life: having a home of one's own, having a job, making a contribution, having opportunities for learning and growth and so on. It is because of this consensus that a common framework used for crafting a good life for people with disability is to think about 'ordinary' or 'typical' lives – a life like anyone else's.

As a social researcher and philosopher, Hugh Mackay speaks about universal human yearnings. By examining readings that reflect on the broader human experience, we of course also come to understand the experience of people with disability.

In his books, Mackay regularly returns to the point that it is our relationships with other people that are at the heart of what is considered The Good Life.

"For most of us, life's richest meanings spring from our personal relationships and connections. That's why the desire to belong is a throbbing urge that won't be stilled until our hearts find safe lodgings."

Here, Mackay talks about the importance of relationships in the context of 'love.'

"Ask yourself this: what is the most powerful, creative and fruitful force for good in the world? Answer: Love. (Do you have a better answer?) Love, in all its many manifestations – kindness, care, compassion, generosity, tolerance, encouragement, support – is the source of everything we admire and appreciate most in human behaviour. Next question: how can we make any sense of love without putting it in the context of a relationship or a community? Love, given or received, is about our engagement with others. The answers to those two questions lead us logically, inescapably, to...If love is the ultimate source of goodness in our lives, it follows that the good life is primarily about others. What else could it be about?"

You might be thinking, "I know that relationships are important but it's difficult to find people who make an effort to really get to know people with disability." Mackay reminds us that all relationships are difficult and naturally have ups and downs. Despite the deep feelings of hurt that can be felt in our attempts to build or sustain our relationships, we rarely give up on the idea of relationships altogether.

“From our chance encounters with total strangers to our long-term associations with family, friends, neighbours and colleagues, our connections with other people form the test bed of our sensitivity, our moral courage and our capacity for love. After all, our relationships, whether fleeting or enduring, are the source of life’s richest meanings, but, as we struggle to establish them, nurture them and sometimes forsake them, they teach us that happiness and sadness are mere accidents of our fluctuating emotional state, incidental to the great realisation that it is in loving we are made whole. And yet love’s work is the hardest work of all, which is why this...is about the good life, not the easy life.”

So, love’s work is the hardest work of all and yet we pursue it anyway because relationships are so important. Because of the challenges inherent in building and maintaining relationships, it is necessary that we be intentional in our efforts. Without deliberately seeking out friendships and placing ourselves in situations where friendships are likely to form then it is unlikely that we will be successful.

If you need any further convincing about the power of relationships then keep in mind that it’s not only that social interactions and loving relationships sustain us, but isolation and loneliness will have a profound negative impact on our wellbeing.

“We are not only defined but actually sustained by our social networks. We thrive on being part of a community – whether that’s familial, social, residential, intellectual, cultural, political, religious, professional or vocational...We’re tribal. We’re social. We’re communal. We need to belong...If the deepest truth about us is that we are social creatures by nature, then it follows that social isolation is unhealthy for us. Even a less-than-optimal daily dose of social contact can have a deleterious effect on our wellbeing, our mental acuity and our outlook on life: nothing keeps us on our toes like random, unplanned conversations. Reduced Social Interaction (let’s call it the other kind of RSI) carries a hefty penalty...”

Indeed, isolation is not abated simply by being surrounded by people. It is connectedness and a sense of belonging that are the antidotes to isolation. A sense of belonging might come from feeling as though you truly ‘fit’ within a group or from sense that ‘these are my people.’ Friends are usually people who share similar interests, people that we have something in common with and people that we choose to spend our time with. Unsurprisingly, it is not enough for people with disability to be grouped with others with disability for us to conclude that the experience of loneliness and isolation would be resolved.

“Feeling lonely in a crowd is not an uncommon experience. Even being in the midst of a friendly, noisy group can be an isolating experience if this does not feel like a place where you belong; if there is no sense of connection or acceptance at a level deeper than superficial sociability.”

In the midst of busy lives, connection doesn’t just happen. As well as being deliberate in our efforts towards our own search for belonging, we also need to be conscious of being open to inviting other people in.

“The art of belonging is not just about finding your own place in the networks and neighbourhoods that sustain you; it’s also about creating space for others to join (or rejoin) the

circle. Social exclusion is a crime against humanity. While it's true that people sometimes exclude themselves, our duty as humans is to ensure that they receive every encouragement to reconnect, knowing that the longer they remain excluded, the harder it will be for them to emerge from the shadows."

The Good Life (2013) and The Art of Belonging (2014) by Hugh Mackay (Macmillan Publishers) are available at all good book stores.