

Being Accepted and Valued

Francis Vicary describes herself as someone who is totally reliant on others for eating, dressing and bathing, yet lives in an unmodified unit, by herself, and does not have or want 'twenty-four hour care'. In her early life, Francis was involved in individual action for change, and has more recently been engaged in collective action through membership of various disability groups, including Queensland Disability Network.

What, you might ask, is a 'good life'? The word 'good' is so over-used that it sometimes seems that good could even be bad. For example, imagine that you have a daughter with a disability and, for reasons of hygiene, she never gets to feel dirt or mud, or make a mess. She would be a very hygienic child, but she would never have felt that squelch of mud through her toes or the tickling, sprinkling of rain on her face, or smelt that soft, sweet smell of rain. My parents let me play with mud and even swim in dirty rivers with my sisters. And on washing days, I'd be lowered into the blue-water of our twin-tub machine. I remember this with pleasure. I would be hot and dirty and Mum would lower me into the ever-so-soft, cool, blue water. This is why 'good' is such a contested word. But if this article is not to further muddy the waters, I will explain what I think a 'good life' is.

What we call a 'good life' might be totally unattractive to many other people; and what they might term a good life might not appeal to us at all. Some people's ideas of a good life may even vary greatly from so-called societal norms, but how boring life would be if we were all the same. Each individual has an equal right to pursue his or her idea of a good life. But what if people need help to choose a good life for themselves? If this is so, we need an outline to assist us in defining a good life.

A good life is living in a community where you are accepted and valued. To achieve this, every person needs to be given choice and freedom. Often people with disabilities are accompanied by workers and this can act as a barrier to real community engagement. In contrast to this, during the writing of this article, I had to go out to do the shopping, post mail, see the real estate agent and do some other things. The women at the grocery shop asked how I was and where I'd been because they had genuinely noticed that I hadn't been around for a few days. The real estate agents were pleased to see me and know me as a good tenant who attends to business. The people at the post office found the parcel I wanted to post in my backpack, got a parcel-pack, wrote the address, noticed that I'd bought a CD, and discussed *R.E.M.* They see me as an independent person. Because they know me, all these people ask where I have been and what I have been doing. Observant acquaintances like these can be the best protection for people who might be vulnerable. But we also know that service providers can inhibit this type of engagement. There should always be a careful assessment about the form of the supports that are offered to a person. If supports are necessary, workers need to be instructed to become 'invisible' so that the person that they are supporting is the one who is given the focus.

A good life for anybody includes a secure place to live, where we can be surrounded by the things and people that we like: a place to enjoy good food, and maybe wine, with friends who like us for who we are. Sometimes friends may even have started out as paid support workers; often the friendship continues long after the person ceases to be a paid worker. Friends from work, play or any part of life, are the ones who stick with us even when life is not so good. The major qualities of a good life are acceptance and inclusion. These qualities are almost always gained through reciprocal relationships. For any of us, the more inclusive and accepting we are, the more favourably we will be received into the community.

A good life also includes change and variances: the opportunity to change direction, place and acquaintances if something is not right. This is highly integral to creating and maintaining a good life. While opportunities for change are taken for granted by most members of the general community they are ignored or negated in the lives of people with disabilities.

In summary, it could be said that a good life does not include the same things for everyone. But a good life does include acceptance, inclusion, and having friends and places where we can feel comfortable and relaxed. It also includes having the opportunity to gain the wisdom and power for making change if things are not working well.