

Achieving the Good Things of Life

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Introduction

WE HAVE MARVELLED at the exploits of Jessica Watson, who has just arrived home after seven months circumnavigating the world non-stop and by herself in her small yacht—so vividly and courageously living her dream. I'm not sure if she imagined the media scrum that would follow her every time she took a walk down the beach!

We are also impressed that such a young person should be so audacious as to imagine herself at the centre of her accomplishment. So often we dream of the good things of life dependent on the actions of others (like winning the lottery) rather than on our own efforts.

So I want to discuss what it really takes to enjoy the 'good things of life,' for ourselves and for others.

If we contemplate what it is that we want from our life, we might be surprised to discover that such hopes and dreams—many of which are already fulfilled—have much in common with other people, even people across cultures.

These ideas are so universal of what all people want, that provide a broad though distinct vision—even a mission of what it is we are working towards (Wolfensberger, Thomas & Caruso, 1996).

Some people find such ideas of what they want from life easy—because it's at the forefront

of their thinking. Even now, Jessica is thinking, "what next" (Sydney Hobart)! Others find this hard; such ideas are easily overridden by the daily grind, "keeping our head above water," "just surviving." It's that way too for many family members who have a son or daughter with a disability; daily life is so stressful that one seemingly doesn't have the mental space to devote to long-term dreams. Yet without dreams, we just react to daily predicaments without the benefit of a clear direction. No wonder decisions taken in people's lives can be chaotic and too often very damaging to their wellbeing.

Our western culture too lives in the moment; it conspires against our plans for a better future. Richard Sennett, a scholar on society and work from NY University and the London School of Economics, writes:

How do we decide what is of lasting value in ourselves in a society that is impatient, which focuses on the immediate moment? How can long term goals be pursued in an economy devoted to the short term? (1998, 10)

Thus external pressures can make it difficult to imagine goals; other short term pressures make it hard to dedicate oneself to living your dreams.

If we know what we want from life; this "Good Life," we can develop strategies for achieving them: the 'What' and the 'How.'

You usually develop and articulate goals, even to yourself, and then you find a context where these goals can be achieved: work, university/study, community groups and associations, and relationships of every kind. In other words, you craft some roles for yourself. The people you support will require significant assistance to achieve such roles.

Some of these roles are formal and structured, like obtaining a degree; other dreams are more dependent on the strength and commitment within a relationship, like being married and having children.

In either case, success in the good things of life is dependent on the presence of others: some who do things for you, others who do things with you and some who just believe in you, encourage you and offer you love and affection.

Has this list changed for you at all? Have your dreams changed since you were a teenager? Do you think Jessica's list of 'to do's' will change and develop? It shows that our vision for a better life for people must also adjust with time, with mastery and changed values and priorities that they have in their life.

Not everyone you know aids your dreams; some people want to cut you down and promote responses against your interest. They become jealous when they see someone close to them excel. Have you ever met people like that? Sometimes you have to cut those people loose and begin to surround yourself with people who can share your dreams.

Some dreams are shared with others and can benefit from the collective energy a common dream creates. Imagine the power of a dream that everyone shares? Clearly though, the good things of life can't be achieved in the context of a 'managed life' where at best only basic needs can be met. The good things of life have always occurred in the 'shared space,' where flourishing and thriving is free to take place.

But other people can't make your dreams come true for you—there is always the sustained effort you must bring yourself; to learn, practice, sacrifice and suspend one's immediate yearnings for something better. As Jessica said: "You've just got to have a dream, believe in it and work hard."

What about the people you support—what are the implications of the good things in life for them? One is that people will need more assistance in discovering and shaping the roles they can occupy.

Connection to SRV

WE KNOW FROM OUR TRAINING in Social Role Valorization (SRV) that the more social roles one has, and the more valued those roles, the more chance one has of having access to the good things in life (Wolfensberger, 1998).

Why is this the case? Well, roles express one's worth and value, one's status—and status affects the way you get seen and treated. If you are devalued, valued people feel compelled to treat you badly, even if they say they love you. One primary way is to lower their expectations of what you might achieve and become. It is very hard for most people to not be affected by the low status they perceive in someone.

Well, we could just berate them for that, but they would still be compelled to respond to what they see. It is so powerful, even negative ideas about someone persist well after things have improved. They have to see people in successful circumstances repeatedly that communicate worth and value, if they are to be seen and eventually treated differently. One starts to comprehend how hard one has to work to achieve this. This concerted effort has sometimes been interpreted as unwarranted zealotry by those who don't see the seriousness of people's bondage.

I know a man who has had a terribly deprived and harsh life. He had frequently destroyed furniture, but once he started to live in a more attractive place and be treated respectfully, all of that changed. He is now able to live in a dwelling with pleasing furniture and appointments, but some would still resist such a move because they remember his past more than they acknowledge his present.

Now that he is living so well, the question becomes "well, what next for this man"? But that's an impossible question if you still see him inhabiting the past.

Happiness

SOME OF THIS RESISTANCE might be due to some mistaken ideas about ‘happiness.’ In an effort to make complex things simple, people can attempt to summarise the point of all these efforts in an over simplistic fashion. They might say, “It’s just down to common sense” or “it’s about what people choose” or “it’s whatever makes people happy.” It’s a loophole we provide to our thinking that actually stops us thinking about what we should be doing. Typically it means we have to do very little to make that happen other than acquiesce “to the service recipient’s maladaptive but presumably happiness-inducing behaviours and decisions” (Osburn, 2009).

Yet valued roles bring many wonderful benefits that are indeed concordant with bringing happiness: security, relationships, well-being, growth and development, learning and new experiences, self-esteem, respect, dignity, belonging, acceptance, home life, work, contribution to others, etc. These are the benefits we all get from valued social roles, but wait—there’s more! There is also the potential for the added benefits of enhanced image, competency development, having defenders and protectors when needed, defence against wounds being struck that could define one’s life, a chance to heal the psyche and the chance to be seen as more intelligent. Sounds pretty good.

Negative roles and low status affect the belief others can have about your life and what you should experience. It’s much like the problem Jessica Watson faced because she was a teenager and a girl, sailing alone and running into ships, but much, much worse. Low expectations can become a self fulfilling prophecy providing not only a loophole justifying low expectations for the observer, but even the person themselves. They come to believe that they are right in thinking they can only fail.

Preferences

HAVING OTHERS BELIEVE IN YOU is such an important requirement, but the person must also make an effort. The good life can’t be imposed, it has to

be embraced—you have to want it, and deeply! But harsh experiences and backgrounds often weaken the capacity for the strong habits that are needed to do so. How might one respond?

Have you ever gone shopping and come home with things you didn’t intend, with things you don’t really need? (Oh, always?) Have you ever made rash or impulsive decisions that you later regretted? There are those instantaneous decisions we can make in the spur of the moment. They are usually based on a superficial assessment that sees only an immediate pay-off. They are referred to as ‘first-order preferences’ (Hamilton, 2008). They are the preferences we are exposed to in the marketplace. They come from superficial interests, desires and passions. For some, such superficial interests can grow into preoccupations, preoccupations into compulsions, compulsions into obsessions and finally obsessions into addiction. We can become enslaved to desires.

With experience, hindsight and some self control, and help from others, we develop second-order preferences. These are preferences that bring long-term benefit to ourselves and others, and we will even forgo first-order preferences to achieve these second-order ones. Thus while we eat our greasy chicken, we can simultaneously be thinking of the good food we wish we were eating. First and second-order preferences can therefore be opposites we entertain simultaneously (though some people have had such limited experience with second-order preferences that they cannot identify what they even might be).

One cannot really assess the value of a first-order preference without holding second-order preferences. When we talk about supporting people’s choices, what level of choices are we referring to? But why should we prefer second-order preferences over first? Second-order preferences reflect our moral self; our true self that we have discovered in ourselves, rather than only a thoughtless response to an external stimulus. (After all, only animals persistently behave according to first-order preferences.)

Second-order preferences represent the actualisation of our vision. Second-order preferences mean

we are in control of ourselves rather than being impulsively led by external contrivances. Freedom comes when I have the will and intellectual application to select my preferences (Hamilton, 2008). Second-order preferences make one free.

Yet first-order preferences are continually emphasised in our market society. But which one is emphasised in our support of devalued people? First-order preferences promise a life of pleasure, though mostly it turns out to be a life of vain futility, even misery. The good things of life come from consistently and repeatedly making second-order preferences. And once we have acquired sufficient elements of the good things in life, and with much internal and personal work, we might even discover a meaningful life.

A meaningful life reflects not your vision for your life, but the vision for the person you want to be. It's a vision that defines the excellence you strive to be that is transformative to those who know you, including those you support.

How might second-order preferences be encouraged for the people who use your service and the staff who support them?

Firstly, only with a powerful and conscious set of goals, a vision towards a better life, might someone be able to resist the attraction of first-order preferences. That is, they have something better to live for than the shallow short-lived attraction of material and sensual things. We all slip up occasionally; we tend to treat it as respite, but some want to exist there. We have sayings for this; "Let your hair down," "Let it all hang out" (well, we used to say that); but then statements like "Be yourself" and "do what's right for you" disguise the seduction and betrayal of first-order preferences to what is not actually in one's own interests. Second-order preferences are only made when you clearly know and comprehend your own interests and have the volition to see it through. Hopefully any fleeting indulgence doesn't lead to tragic results that one frequently reads in the paper—almost every day actually.

Secondly, it also depends on the quality of those you relate to. Some of the people you know as your models often reflect this character. Their qualities impact on you enormously—for good or bad. Having the right people around that can be trusted to offer good support is an essential ingredient. Can you imagine what this could look like as you collectively assist people to acquire some valued social roles?

Have you noticed that many people with an intellectual disability pay attention to the character of people they meet, including support personnel? Wolfensberger (1988) described this ability as being able to relate to the "heart qualities" of others. Where non-disabled people are captivated by status and all manner of outward appearance and assumed importance, people with intellectual disability tend to be much more likely to respond to the genuine good character of those close to them.

Leadership

WHERE MANAGERS MAKE PEOPLE DO THINGS, ethical leaders lead people to want to do things (Thrall et al). Each of you already provide a measure of leadership to the people you support. There are broadly two types of leaders: those that lead through fear, control, division and anger; and those that lead through love, enthusiasm, vision—leaders who shine a light and provide direction.

Poor leaders of all persuasions use the same negative approaches. Ethical leaders are alike too, but they bring out the best in people. They don't reduce people, they use love as their influencing principle. They are gracious and merciful to everyone.

But what is their ethic based upon? According to Naomi Wolf, author of *The Beauty Myth*, if one examines all of the world's religions, leaving aside questions of food, days for worship, etc., one finds a remarkable set of just seven precepts. And they are:

- Kindness and compassion
- Honesty
- Truth

- Peace-making (to heal the breach)
- Justice, based on everyone being equally precious, with equal dignity and value
- Generosity and giving
- What you sow, you reap; what goes around comes around; cause and effect

There are few that would argue against the importance of these. They provide a basis of comparison for what one wants to live up to. But are they ours?

We can all become good at replicating voices that aren't ours. But part of the integrity of an ethical leader is that they have found and identified 'their voice,' that connection to their true self or core. With it comes a close sense of mission or vision (some call this 'a calling')—something within our deepest being we 'hear' and must respond to. When that mission is coherent to your role, then you and those you positively influence are free to flourish.

However, speaking our true voice may make us very unpopular with some, perhaps because one is seen as a threat, or through jealousy or inconvenience. A voice can open or close doors that lose people but also gain other people. Your voice should speak what is beautiful in your heart.

It's very interesting that the nerve that stimulates and controls our voice travels from the brain via our heart (it actually loops under the aorta), before it goes to our vocal cords. Does our anatomy suggest the potential talent to speak not only from the head but also from a perfected motivation of the heart?

Vision

AND THERE IS A CONNECTION between dreaming and happiness. Dreaming and striving brings vigour and vitality, even charisma, because it's so energising. Then, of course, doing what you're passionate about brings you alive as opposed to just doing one's duty. Visions and dreams stimulate creativity and problem solving, team work and relationships. When people comprehend their mission, they are very quick to seize an op-

portunity. Serendipity plays a significant role in their life. They are more optimistic and therefore willing to take calculated risks.

People without vision often become risk averse, over-concerned with remaining 'safe.' They worry too much about what might go wrong which can immobilize their thinking. Whole organisations can be immobilised by their aversion to risk. They become over reliant on prescriptions, regulations, policies and routine, which pushes us beyond our moral boundaries. A workshop participant told me a story recently of a worker he encountered who, when cleaning a woman's bathroom, just cleaned around all the objects on her cabinet without moving them. When asked why, she said "It was because of the 'no-lifting' policy."

There is nothing predictable or routine about empathy (Sennett, 38). Mindless compliance to routine can destroy our empathy for another person. And when we restrict our empathy by failing to act (perhaps because it wasn't pre-scripted for us), we have to reduce the pain of guilt caused by inaction by retreating further into our routines. In time this process leads to callousness (Staub, 2003); a hardened heart instead of a responsive one. So the two big questions that only you can answer:

- Do you really want the people you support to experience the good things in life?
- Are you willing to do what it takes to make that happen?

The leadership that is needed is an ethical leadership. It seeks excellence that rises well above the norm. Ethical leaders are serious about themselves, they don't amble through life; they treat themselves and others with professional courtesy—like being on time. They put demands upon their own standards. They are committed to others. They live by their best values; they apply consistently their best values. Ethical leadership will be an exemplar of second-order preferences.

Loyalty

OF ALL THINGS, a service must be beneficial to the people served and, to be sustainable, to the people serving. Some degree of reciprocity is essential if relationships are to last. But the very essence of so-called ‘person centeredness’ is the value of loyalty—loyalty to the person being served. It has little to do with official forms and assessment protocols, but instead speaks to an orientation to never sacrifice the interests and needs of a service recipient in favour of oneself, one’s organisation or the powerful interests of other parties.

In this day and age of heightened economic imperatives, this may be one of the greatest hazards for the aspiring ethical leader—to not betray the people one set out to serve. The culture doesn’t expect people to strengthen their second-order preferences, nor does it expect people to look out for each other; instead it wants you to look out for yourself. After all,

Neoliberal politics has almost nothing to do with self-discipline and consideration for others. It is designed on assumptions of unlimited desire and individualistic ambition (Aly, 2010, 37).

Where do we think the rhetoric of ‘choice’ and ‘rights’ that fills our service system has come from? Such an orientation is strangely at odds with communities that flourish, which have always been built on a foundation of mutual obligation.

Everything we have discussed is diametrically opposed to this neo-liberal vision. For the people you support, they too will need a vision for their better life if they are to ultimately resist the deception posed by the market; that a good life can be had by just gratifying oneself.

People don’t have to fully reach their dream to still benefit; incremental steps will still make you happier. And if you live your life in accordance with your larger vision, you are already realising your vision. ☪

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