

# Activating life-giving visions

by Michael Kendrick

**Michael Kendrick** is an independent consultant in human services and community work with a focus on both national and international work in the US, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the UK as well as other countries. He has a passionate interest in the provision of quality services to people with disabilities and other marginalised people. With over 25 years of experience, he has made a very significant contribution to the field as an educator, consultant, and advocate.

His interests include leadership, service quality, the creation of safeguards for vulnerable persons, social integration and community living, change, innovation, values, advocacy, the role of individual persons and small groups in creating advances, evaluation, alternatives to bureaucracy, personalised approaches to supporting people, and reform in the human service field amongst others. He is particularly interested in individualised service responses for people considered 'difficult to serve'.

He has most consistently worked in the disability, mental health and aged care fields for nearly 30 years but has also worked in areas such as drug abuse, aboriginal affairs, child protection and community education. He is very active as public speaker and trainer as well as evaluator, consultant, and advisor to advocates, governments, agencies and community groups. His masters and doctoral work were in social work and sociology respectively. He regularly teaches at various universities both here and abroad as time allows. A listing of his publications and training he offers is available at [www.kendrickconsulting.org](http://www.kendrickconsulting.org).

Michael J. Kendrick PhD, Kendrick Consulting Services  
4 Bullard Ave., Holyoke MA USA 01040  
Tel: 413 533 3511 Fax 413 533 8071 Email: [kendrickconsul@attglobal.net](mailto:kendrickconsul@attglobal.net)



## Assisting families to build big visions and following natural (typical) pathways for an inclusive life: What's helpful and what stands in the way?

**L**ife's inherent possibilities are not always appreciated by us. Nonetheless, there is a relationship between what we can envision and what we are likely to attempt in our lives or in the lives of others. Visions are the mental pictures we create that enable us to visualize our world in old and new ways. We see these images in our "mind's eye" much as we see the material world with our regular eyesight. The American mystic and psychic Edgar Cayce, of the early twentieth century, often used the phrase that the "mind is the builder". By this he meant that we can use our minds to recreate the world through the images, attitudes and ideas that have their origin in our imagination and the mental attitudes and outlooks we embrace. He was drawing attention to the constructive possibilities latent in our minds that enable us to reformulate our lives and our world should we choose to do so.

It is evident that many people with disabilities live in a world of unnecessarily low expectations for their potentials in life. This atmosphere of diminished expectations acts to dilute the quality of their lives by depriving them of important opportunities to experience, grow, develop and flourish. As we can see from the substantial progress of the last half-century, these low expectations can be replaced by more positive developmental ones with commensurate benefits for the people who experience them. What may be less clear is precisely how such a transformation of outlook takes place and what each of us can do to bring it about. What follows is a description of the key components of creating and fulfilling a life-giving vision in regards to a given person. These considerations would hold whether that person is yourself or others that you are concerned about.

## **Recognizing the potential benefits embodied in efforts at “imagining better”**

It is unlikely that any sustained effort at “imagining better” will be attempted if one remains unconvinced that generating practical opportunities in a person’s life that had not been there before can be achieved quite regularly. It is compelling to see examples of how others have transformed their lives, as it will highlight the scope that exists to make it possible for a person to enjoy more of life. However, if one remains doubtful, it is good to name those doubts and misgivings and talk with others about them. Doubts should be listened to and learned from rather than just serve as a reason not to move ahead. If we can affirm that we can make a difference in our own life or that of others, it then becomes possible to act upon this conviction.

## **Defining and choosing “life-giving” values**

It is our values that will guide us and set our priorities. It is important that values be selected that are “life giving”. By this it is meant that values which ensure that people’s own or the lives of others are lived to their fullest potential. If this is not the objective, then it is predictable that we might settle for much less beneficial lives than are actually possible. Having a “life-giving” outlook does not in any way mean that others will always cooperate with such a positive attitude, but it does make it more likely that the person of concern will come much closer to a life that is fulfilling in the ways that are meaningful for them. Values that are accompanied by decision and commitment are more likely to flourish than those that stay simply as goals, which are never acted upon.

## **Undertaking “imagining better”**

One can initially begin with “imagining better” by reflecting on the person’s current life and how this contrasts with the lives of others in the community of a similar age. Seeing how the potential in the lives of others have been nurtured and developed will help create a sense of what could someday become equally true for the person you are concerned with. It is important to not be unduly concerned about the person’s disability, as this will commonly draw attention and emphasis on what people cannot do rather than the many things in life they could enjoy if they were properly supported to do so. As an enabling vision gradually expands and builds upon the persons strengths, gifts, passions, and life

interests, it will become more obvious that one can “build a life” that suits the person and their capacities to live life fully. Not surprisingly, this will mean an emerging lifestyle for the person that is increasingly “life giving” rather than “life denying”.

## **Testing the vision: Becoming convinced**

It is not the case that every inclination that can inspire, intrigue or engage us will lead to practical outcomes in due course. This is because we normally need to become convinced about the worth of any proposition and this will require that we test and challenge our vision with some regularity. Promising but as yet unproven, Ideas often emerge in vague, underdeveloped and even symbolic forms and that is why it is often necessary to carefully evaluate what has merit and would be worth pursuing. When we are genuinely persuaded that the vision will be beneficial then it is time to act on it, giving due consideration of our level of confidence in what this vision seems to promise. Vision, however positive it appears, will undoubtedly have the ability to mislead. Sound vision will stand the test of time, but it may take time for that to become clear.

## **Deciding upon and affirming the vision**

Vision cannot be acted upon and enlivened by practical actions if the holder of the vision remains undecided. At some point, if any meaningful benefit to a person is to eventually be achieved, it must be resolved that the vision is worthwhile to embrace. This bringing of oneself and others “to decision” means that the back and forth of weighing the vision is put aside and a decision is taken to act on the vision. This is not meant to suggest that the vision no longer evolves, but rather that a time comes where it is decided that action is needed or the vision and its potential benefits will never be realized. In this kind of decision, there is certainly risk, but there is also resolution. With resolve and affirmation of the vision comes the possibility that we might now move from shaping and weighing the vision to achieving it.

## **Actualizing the emerging vision**

There is much to be learned from trying to live a vision, as this bringing of deeper values into actualization is always a contributor to wisdom. Not the wisdom of being certain and untroubled by one’s vision, as this is likely illusory. Rather, this task of being and living a vision demands that we have a “practice” i.e. a way of acting and being. What

follows are some dimensions of “practice” that are likely to be helpful if pursued.

- **Normative means for meeting normative needs**

If people are to obtain the many benefits of “a good life” in community, then the chances of achieving this in some unprecedented way are remote. A more likely pathway to success is the possibility of building upon what others have already achieved in order to meet one’s needs or the needs of the person we may have in mind. If what is needed is normative for many people and what has met that need for countless others has worked most of the time, then doing the same will have a high probability of meeting one’s own needs. People with disabilities are not some strange version of humanity requiring their own exotic responses to everyday needs. What is satisfying to countless other people will also likely work equally well for them. Hence we should see the wisdom of starting with the strategy of “using normative means to meet normative needs”. This is in contrast to the damaging presumption that people with disabilities are not fundamentally like other people and thus will need a way to live that is “special”.

- **Exploiting the resources of community**

It is tempting for many people to imagine a life for people with disabilities that somehow can be achieved in segregated and often utopian islands of existence isolated from the broader community. The appeal of this instinct is in its desire to avoid the countless shortcomings of community by substituting a supposedly more idyllic one. This temptation is deeply misguided because it deprives people of the very real benefits of being included in the richness of communities and being able to benefit from the vast resources that can be accessed. Nonetheless, a pale imitation of a normal life in communities will also not satisfy, because life at the margins of community will always be voyeuristic rather than providing the person with the authentic fulfilling satisfactions of being able to taste deeply of life by being fully in the life of communities. Watching life is quite different from experiencing it first hand with all of its tribulations and rewards. Consequently, the wealth of communities should be as available to people with disabilities as it is for others.

- **Recognizing, recruiting and supporting “natural” supporters**

When we are alive, engaged and present in communities, we may not always appreciate how many people are potentially available to us who can enrich our lives. When we expect that the only people who might contribute to our lives will need to be paid to do so, we fall prey to a view of our fellow citizens as entirely selfish, uninterested and possibly heartless. In reality, we all have such traits but these are easily offset by the fact that each and every person we might meet and share a bit of life with, may bring with them gifts, qualities and specific practical contributions that can make our lives better in so many ways. However, if we do not look for such people and invite them into our lives, it would be like they were non-existent. Yet, in all fairness, countless people that we inadvertently meet or could set out to meet, have the capacity to share parts of our lives and support us in valuable ways as may be needed. Nonetheless, we can easily lose their contributions to our lives by walling them off and denying their presence and gifts. Our task is to welcome such people and return their generosity with our own. In this way we can be there for others and others can be there for us.

- **Becoming and staying pro-active about “life building”**

Making a life “come alive” requires ongoing intentionality as waiting for life to happen is a very weak strategy, which relies wholly on good fortune. We can set out to build or shape our own lives and those of others should they be willing to cooperate with the exercise. Very little can come into being on its own. We must be prepared to be very deliberate to make it happen. This requires an attitude of being consciously pro-active both in ourselves and in the people who join in with the exercise. It also creates a pressure within us to use the time and resources we have available to us in ways, which are creative and optimize their potential. Sustaining this focus on “life building” is taxing, but it does offer realistic hope that rewarding opportunities in life can be generated with some regularity.

- **Tasting life: Exploration and learning**

It is not always the case that we know precisely what we might want and need in life. This leaves room for much exploration and learning about what in life appeals and satisfies and what does not. Though

having a variety of unsatisfying experiences in life is inevitable in choosing what is to one's liking, these sometimes adverse experiences play a helpful role in bringing insight about what is really interesting and valuable to us in life. If we give up on the process of tasting life because some things do not suit our taste, then we will cheat ourselves of the discovery of things that do fulfill.

- **Staying constructive about problem solving**

It is impossible to take on the challenges of “life building” and not run into many problems and obstacles that arise in terms of reaching our vision. These can be discouraging, vexing and bewildering at times, so there is always the risk of feeling defeated and overwhelmed. To avoid such despair, it is often necessary to recognize and consciously pursue the discipline of staying in a positive and constructive mind set as often as we can manage to do so. Rather than have negativity and self-defeat gain a grip on our attitudes to the problems we encounter, we can intentionally choose a mental attitude of positivity. Though this may seem to some people as being naïve, it is actually helpful to take on problems as constructively as we can.

- **Celebrating gains: Thankfulness**

Another source of contentment can be generated by developing and practicing the habit of looking for the good results that do come into our lives and reflecting upon these gifts and benefits. When we celebrate the gains in life we affirm the good in life and resist the negative. It is good for one's outlook to be grateful and the regular practice of appreciating life's blessings is good for the mind, spirit and our overall health and well-being. It also allows us to avoid taking things for granted and enhances our enjoyment in life.

- **Regularly adjusting one's thinking and expectations**

It would be incorrect to assume that our thinking and expectations are always right and that they do not need regular adjustments in light of what we might learn from our experiences. Such a rigid attachment to our ideas, mental states, attitudes and expectations will make us unable to adapt and progress in the pursuit of a good life because we are unwilling to see and meet the world as it is. On the other hand, by regularly giving ourselves permission to simply change our mind and see such adjustments

as advantageous, we will enable ourselves to be more flexible, adaptive, resourceful and creative.

- **Seeking the support of others**

It is almost always the case that people do better when they seek out and draw upon the support of others. We are strengthened in countless ways by other people and it is unwise to shut ourselves off from them on the mistaken presumption that we can achieve more by doing everything ourselves. That strategy simply isolates us, denies us the many resources of helpful people and traps us in our own mind and outlook. However, to enjoy the support of others we must seek it out and welcome it when it is offered. This does not reduce our self-reliance and personal responsibility. It just gives us a better way to act upon these qualities.

- **Cultivating wisdom and inspiration**

Though we may often forget it, we are built to be inspired and we benefit greatly when it does occur. Like other beneficial factors, we can find inspiration only when we seek it out. There will always be people and examples that inspire and teach us, but we cannot benefit from this wisdom unless we open ourselves up to it with some regularity. Wisdom comes within our own experiences and through the experiences of others, but it will not provide any benefit unless it is continuously cultivated in how we live. There is an abundance of practical wisdom available to us from across the centuries, so we will not be disappointed when we search it out and draw from it. Similarly, by intentionally providing for regular infusions of inspiration, we will find that we are much more able to re-engage with the challenges of living and make progress.

### **Conclusion: Evolving the vision**

It would be unwise to see vision as a fixed and settled question. Vision can continue to be evolved in ways that bring much benefit, so we should never conclude that we are somehow at the end point of vision. Our imaginative capacities to build anew are typically always available to us and if they are not, they are available to others who might take up this task. To relinquish the possibility of the further evolution of life's possibilities is to conclude that life is over. Where there is life there is always hope and “imagining better” gives hope a way to move forward and add to our lives and those of others.