

What makes for a fulfilled life?

(Some random thoughts for thinking aloud!)

What does 'fulfilment' sound and look like? How do we recognise it? Let's think around fulfilment before we attempt to answer the question.

Each of us would give a different answer to what makes a fulfilled life because we are all different. What one person regards as fulfilment another would not. I had a conversation with a nun (or sister) who was a member of an enclosed community, that is, a community that does not go out beyond the walls of the convent but each sister spends her time working, praying, studying and relaxing within the convent. All the sisters take vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. The sister told me that she loved her enclosed life and made it clear that if she had her time over again, she would take exactly the same path. The rhythm of her daily life with its focus on God, with her praying for the world, with her friendships, work and study provided a life of fulfilment and joy. While it clearly suited her with her personality and character, it would not suit everybody. It enabled her to flourish.

The sister's life-style is a reminder that fulfilment is not necessarily to be found in the accumulation of material possessions, though there are basics required in order to live, viz article 25 of Declaration of Human Rights. <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>

Do our possessions alone make for a fulfilled life?

Does length of life make a difference in whether we have a fulfilled life? Society imposes a pattern of life and living upon us which judges a person's worth by their productivity. Once we pass the age of 'productivity' we may be viewed differently, though age discrimination laws challenge some of this thinking. Taking society's view into account, do we look back and regard certain stages of our life as more fulfilled than others or do we look for fulfilment at each stage? Does Shakespeare's 'Seven Ages of Man' from 'As you like it', reflect a view which lies behind society's thinking:

All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players; they have their exits and their entrances; and one man in his time plays many parts: his acts being seven ages. At first the infant, mewling and puking in the nurse's arms; and then the whining school-boy, with his satchel and shining morning face, creeping like snail unwillingly to school. And then the lover, sighing like furnace,

with a woeful ballad made to his mistress' eyebrow. Then a soldier, full of strange oaths, and bearded like the pard, jealous in honour, sudden and quick in quarrel, seeking the bubble reputation, even in the cannon's mouth. And then the justice, in fair round belly with good capon lin'd, with eyes severe and beard of formal cut, full of wise saws and modern instances; and so he plays his part. The sixth age shifts into the lean and slipper'd pantaloon, with spectacles on nose and pouch on side; his youthful hose, well sav'd, a world too wide for his shrunk shank; and his big manly voice, turning again toward childish treble, pipes and whistles in his sound. Last scene of all, that ends this strange eventful history, is second childishness and mere oblivion; sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.

What does it mean to be fully alive? Can we be fully alive if we suffer from some disease or if we live with disability. Paralympians have shown what is possible regardless of our physical condition. We can't all be Paralympians but they have something important to say to us.

What is the relationship between fulfilment and achievement? People may achieve much in life, but does this always bring fulfilment?

Can a person live a fulfilled life by seeking their own fulfilment? Can we be fulfilled if the price of that fulfilment is that others around or close to us are prevented from being fulfilled? Or are we all in it together, in other words do we only find our fulfilment by actively ensuring that others can find theirs?

So, returning to the first question, what do we understand by fulfilment? What does it sound and look like? Do we go and seek it or is it lying within us waiting to be discovered? Acknowledging that every person is different and will view fulfilment in different ways, are there any 'ingredients' which are common to all?

At the last meeting of 'Thinking Allowed' it was suggested that each person identifies one or two elements important for a fulfilled life. Please think about this, but be assured that nobody will be directly asked to share their thoughts.

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