Fall 2022 Quarterly Newsletter Submission

Calvin Calton

The other day I was with several other people gathered in a hospital room discussing plans to discharge of one of our residents. As the attending physician was going over medications, he uttered a cringeworthy statement about how certain medications affect "these people". This choice of words, or some very similar, were interlaced throughout his spiel.

I do not wish to be critical of this doctor. He gestured towards the patient, throwing occasional glances towards the focus person, talking about his extensive and successful history of treating people "like them". I felt as though, in his clinical and detached way, he was genuinely making every effort to show empathy. The rest of the day my thoughts continued to wander back to replay that conversation in my head. After I had done some vacillating between taking offense and trying to rationalize his attitude of superiority, I came to some conclusions.

There is no "us" and "them". There is only "we". Our resident, his patient, did not in any way have a diminished quality of life simply because of his cognitive impairment. No one told the patient that he should feel less satisfied because of all the life experiences he would most likely not have. On the contrary, during the meeting he was watching musical videos on his Ipad, occasionally reaching out to shake a hand or high five the familiar staff surrounding him. By all indications he looked to be having every bit as much fun anyone else does when they are engaged in activities they enjoy.

There is an analogy which runs parallel to a similar theory, that having more money gives you a greater quality of life than being poor. There are studies that show people with more money are not any happier in life than those who do not have such resources. This line of thought meshes with my own personal experiences. Some of the most miserable people I have met are financially well off. They are prone to judging people by measures such as what car they drive, what they wear, where they live. To them, happiness is quantified as numbers in a bank account or material possessions.

We should not judge people, nor feel it's our place to measure their quality of life, based on either financial wealth, or on perceived intellectual abilities. Think of your earliest memories. When you were three did you feel diminished or less than others because you were not married or engaged in a fulfilling career? No, you found happiness in hugs, ice cream, and other age-appropriate things. This same thing holds true for the people with developmental disabilities. They can still be filled with a joyous soul, regardless their developmental age. They do not feel less happiness or overall satisfaction with life because of their disabilities. The developmentally disabled people I know are full, they are complete, and they live life just like you and I, trying to make the most of every moment they've been granted on this Earth.

This meandering train of thought led me to think about disabilities in general. What is the distinction between being developmentally disabled and not? It all comes down to someone qualifying for assistance from Medicaid and the state. Obviously, there are those with cognitive impairments that will need support to live in the community. Diagnoses like Autism, Down's Syndrome, Cerebral Palsy, IQ below 70, these are qualifying conditions for taxpayer funded services. An actual disability is the degree to which a given diagnosis impairs someone's ability to independently function without some form of assistance. A diagnosis is not a disability, and a disability is not an identity.

If we are going to speak honestly, then we all have some sort of disability. I struggle with facial recognition. I struggle with name recall. It may even be slightly worse now than when I was younger, but I've always had more difficulty than most people with respect to these two abilities. Some people don't get math, some are unable to engage in public speaking, some do not do well in large crowds, some are incapacitated with bouts of depression or anxiety. The degree to which these challenges affect our ability to lead functional lives is the degree to which they disable us. All of us have some level of disability. And if we live long enough, then each of us will get to find out what it's like to depend on others to help us to remain living independently in the community.

So, when you encounter some of our friends and neighbors who maybe cannot speak, who don't perceive or process sensory information like others, or who get around in a wheelchair or with the assistance of a support staff, don't think for a moment their quality of life is anything less than your own. Measure their happiness like you would do with anyone else. Notice the smile they're wearing. Wonder what's behind the sparkle in their eyes. Ponder the zest with which they grab onto all this journey called life has to offer. And if our paths cross and I cannot place your face or quite remember your name, don't assume I forgot who you are because you're not important to me. It's just a manifestation of my own disability.

Calvin Calton,

Director, RSS