

Quality of Life
By
Daniel E. White June 3, 2024

“I don’t think I could live like that,” said my friend as we stood in line for our iced coffee. He nodded toward a man even older than us, legs unnaturally bent, his movement supported by his walker, very slow movement.

“I wouldn’t be able to cope with the lack of quality of life.”

A week later, in the post-golf chat we aging gents look forward to each Saturday, he repeated his observation to others in our group, prompted by a passing comment by one of us about some nagging malady. This time, I answered him.

“It’s hard to know what he thinks about the quality of his life from the inside.” I added, “look at Stephen Hawking.”

Our weekly banter can vary from the reflective and serious—a topic too frequently brought on by our collective reaction to the ailments of someone we all know—to the cantankerous, like when we bemoan the way so many baseball pitchers have arm surgery these days because they are taught to pitch in ways injurious to the human arm. “It wasn’t like that when we were growing up.”

Among our group batting around the topic of quality of life were a fellow just back playing after several weeks on our Injured List with a bad shoulder, another whose back kept him in the sidelines for a month, and a gentle soul whose life has been transformed as a result of his wife’s increasing lack of mobility.

One of us said, “you know, it’s sad to think about the things we used to be able to do and can’t anymore. It’s just a series of losses these days.”

The purpose of our Saturday golf being to have fun and enjoy each other’s company, the comments over coffee seldom end on such sadness. This time was no exception. It was the day of the Kentucky Derby, and quickly, our chatter raced to stories we shared about the times we...

Are we the only species blessed and cursed with the capacity to think about such things? Later in the day, I watched a Turkey Vulture glide on the wind for several hundred yards, never moving a feather, glorying (it seemed to me) in its freedom. Will it experience a decline in its capacities paralleling mine, and does it regret not being able to do things it once did? Is there a measure of the quality of life for Turkey Vultures of which they are aware?

Of course, I never knew Stephen Hawking. So, my reference to him was simplistic. In fact, I had made an assumption about how he might have regarded the quality of his life: how could I know? Still, wouldn’t it seem like having so brilliant an intellect and being internationally recognized for it would supersede the frustrations of limited physical mobility and enrich his quality of life?

I have known people as they approach the end of their days on earth who had active minds angry at being trapped inside bodies that would not function as they once had done. My father was one of them for his final two weeks. I have known others who have endured illnesses, wartime captivities and injuries, physical impairment beyond what seems fair for anyone to endure who radiate optimism about the freshness of each new day.

A good friend who seemed in decline found in those days of seeming loss a new purpose writing books for children. For years, my mother sewed bears that she provided her pastor to give to members of their church as he visited them in hospital. As her hands gradually become unable to manipulate a needle, she found new avenues of service through handwritten notes and phone calls to people in need of a kind word or encouragement.

Isn’t it fair to say that each of the women above probably felt good about the quality of their lives, limitations notwithstanding?

I understood my friend’s reaction that Saturday morning. He and I have both been blessed to remain physically active well into our seventies. Sure, we don’t drive a golf ball as far as we used to, we don’t hear so good, the 2 cubic foot bag of potting mix gets heavier with time. We make a joke—we can do what we used to do, just not as fast and it takes twice as long to recover. (Not entirely the truth, of course). Our limitations are just not as obvious and visible as were those of the man with the walker.

What comprises one’s quality of life?

One of a series of positive developments in 2023, according to the website “Nice News” was the determination by researchers at Harvard that the key to happiness, based on their interviews with thousands, is connection with others. Does the positive energy that can envelop two people sharing time and thoughts together count toward quality of life? Does the love my friend shows his wife each day he does more and more for her contribute to the quality of their lives, just not in ways they might have expected?

Who can predict what the spirit inside each of us might produce in any set of changed circumstances?

The closing comment that Saturday came from the oldest among us. “The fellow with the walker made the choice to come out for coffee. He could have just stayed home.”

Click Here to email your comments to Dan: danwhitehi@gmail.com