Realizing a Good Life: Men's Pathways Out of Drugs and Crime by Elizabeth Comack (2023) Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 223 pp.

Reviewed by Christopher Santiago

What is a "good life" and how do justice-impacted men overcome addiction and realize such a life despite the systemic inequalities that stand in their way? In *Realizing a Good Life,* criminologist Elizabeth Comack tells the stories of 23 criminalized men, highlighting struggles and successes in their efforts to restore balance, maintain connections, and ultimately recover from the problems that derailed their lives.

Her book is the result of a five-year project she conducted in collaboration with Larry Morissette. In 2014, they recruited a group of men, most of whom are Indigenous, from the John Howard Society of Manitoba's Bail Assessment, Support and Supervision Program. The two researchers then followed these men, regularly conducting interviews to record their progress and setbacks on the journey to realize a good life, but their project took some unexpected turns. Sadly, Morissette passed away two years into the study. On top of that, only five of the original 23 men stayed with the project to its completion, and of those five, only four were able to maintain sobriety. The death of a friend coupled with the loss of contact with most study participants might have discouraged a lesser scholar, but Comack continued meeting with the remaining men documenting their experiences until the end.

So, what is the "good life"? Comack begins her book by debunking the 19th century novelist Horatio Alger's myth that anyone who works hard enough can achieve happiness and success through the accumulation of wealth. She specifically takes aim at the American dream of affluence that is epitomized by so-called self-made men. In reality, the wealthy rely heavily on the privileges of the race, gender, and class into which they were born. Yet social inequalities create those privileges for some by denying them to others. Rather than an American dream that values people according to their riches, Comack presents an Indigenous understanding of the good life, called "mino-pimatisiswin". This concept involves the "relational aspects that can foster well-being in a person's life: achieving wholeness, balance, connection, growth, and healing" (p. 27). Especially important are caring for others and being cared for by others at the individual, family, and community levels (Hart, 2002). Of course, this includes maintaining one's health, having meaningful relationships, and being able to put food on the table.

In addition to defining the good life, the first chapter explores the intersecting race, gender, and class inequalities that create barriers to living it. This part of the book reads like a primer on Canadian social problems, complete with facts and statistics on poverty, homelessness, precarious jobs, and poor health. It tackles the country's history of systemic racism, hegemonic masculinity, and settler colonialism, while also explaining the harmful aspects of the child welfare and criminal justice systems. All of this provides readers with the larger social context in which the men's stories are told.

My favorite thing about *Realizing a Good Life* is how, throughout the book, Comack uses events from the men's stories as jumping off points for further discussion. In the second chapter, for example, she provides nine pages of perspective from her many years studying Indigenous street gangs (Comack et al., 2013). Many of the men, especially those who lacked adequate social supports and economic opportunities, were drawn to gangs at a young age. Gang membership provided a sense of belonging and new ways to earn money, such as drug dealing. However, the gangs also encouraged toxic masculinity and violent behaviour. They were another pathway to law breaking and addiction.

As they cycled in and out of jail, whatever attempts the men might have made to rebuild their lives were repeatedly interrupted by the criminal justice system. In the third chapter, Comack calls attention to the problem of restrictive bail conditions that set people up for failure. Men struggling with substance use disorder, for instance, end up facing even more criminal charges if they have a drink or use drugs in violation of court ordered abstention. The irony here, writes Comack, "is that the criminal justice system responds to people who are apparently having trouble following the rules by imposing more rules for them to adhere to" (pp. 86-87). In this way, stringent bail conditions serve to perpetuate a cycle of re-incarceration making it harder for people to escape the criminal justice net and get their lives together.

One of the things the men repeated again and again in their interviews was how, when they were getting high and committing crimes, they simply "didn't care". It makes sense, then, that their turning points came when they had someone else to care about and when others cared enough about them to offer help. Their stories of recovery share common themes such as joining a supportive community, taking responsibility as fathers,

managing their mental health, and finding financial stability. The men also found Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, residential treatment programs, and Indigenous ceremony helpful for staying sober. *Realizing a Good Life*, Comack says, "is an inherently social project, one that requires the care and support of a collectivity, be it a family, community, or the state as representative of a larger community where everyone has responsibility for each other" (p. 124).

It is the men's stories, which I have barely mentioned here, that are truly the heart of the book, and Comack does a superb job of detailing their complex lives from a critical criminological perspective. She provides a great deal of meticulously researched in-depth information about the unjust social and economic conditions they contend with. And she manages to do all of this in a way that is respectful to victims. Her book deserves to be widely read.

Royalties from book sales support Ogijiita Pimatiswin Kinamatwin, an organization founded by Larry Morissette to help gang-involved men improve their lives. I highly recommend this book.

REFERENCES

Comack, Elizabeth, Deane Lawrence, Larry Morrissette & Jim Silver (2013) *Indians Wear Red: Colonialism, Resistance, and Aboriginal Street Gangs*, Halifax: Fernwood Publishing.

Hart, Michael (2002) *Seeking Mino-Pimatisiwin: An Aboriginal Approach to Helping*, Halifax: Fernwood Publishing.

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