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Radical Decency Reflection #12
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Radical Decency in Politics: Pitfalls and Possibilities

Radical Decency's goal is to systematically replace the values that predominant in our culture – competition, dominance and control – with a new set of values – respect, understanding, empathy, equity, and justice. But embedded in the mainstream culture are a myriad of beliefs, ways of operating, and supporting institutional structures that maintain and deepen its grip on our lives. If we hope to meaningfully advance Radical Decency's ambitious goal, a thorough understanding of these processes is an essential first step.

With this as its starting place, Radical Decency offers fresh perspectives on “what is” – what really drives our lives – and what we need to do to craft more effective change strategies. In this Reflection, I deal with these issues in politics and public affairs.

I have been involved in public affairs for almost 50 years: Civil rights and anti-war marches; Common Cause/Philadelphia; the Public Interest Law Center of Philadelphia, the National Constitution Center; domestic and overseas service trips; Radical Decency; and, when it seemed important, partisan politics (Wilson Goode vs. Frank Rizzo; Barack Obama). A lesson I have drawn from these experiences is that the key processes, making meaningful change so difficult, are seldom recognized and discussed – and, for that reason, are all the more effective.

One of the geniuses of the mainstream culture is that it rarely quashes people who want to reform it. Instead, they are distracted and marginalized, leaving the engines that drive the mainstream culture free to pursue their purposes with little meaningful interference.

How are they marginalized? By having their energies channeled into discrete subject areas – poverty, housing, the environment – where they work on a piece of the puzzle but not on the puzzle itself. Then, they are provided just enough financial support to keep them going but not nearly enough to accomplish even their (highly commendable but) partial agendas. These processes, and possible responses to them, are discussed in greater detail in *Reflection 6: How the Good Guys Miss Each Other* and *Reflection 7: Gathering in the Good Guys*.

And how does the system use distraction to defeat their efforts? By creating the illusion of meaningful choice around particular elections and issues. Inordinate amounts of energy are then sucked into the fight over these “pivotal” elections and “make or break” issues. The result? The systemic issues that could more effectively promote meaningful change are never attended to.

The obvious example is elections. They do matter. Lives are affected by our choices. But, in the end, they offer no realistic prospect for fundamental change. The consuming

sense of urgency generated by Kennedy vs. Nixon, Kerry vs. Bush, or Obama vs. McCain masks a deeper truth. On the vast majority of big issues, nothing ever changes – at least not for the better. Across the last 50 years, without regard to who is in office: The enormous defense budget remains, the grotesque underfunding of services for the poor has steadily increased, businesses continue to use their economic leverage to enrich ownership and senior management and to squeeze workers and consumers, the degradation of the environment continues, and unnecessary wars are fought.

Equally distracting are the so-called big policy fights. As John Kenneth Galbraith noted years ago, what usually captures our attention are close, rather than important, decisions. While the healthcare reform bill will help, what finally reached the floor for a dramatic midnight vote was in no sense transformational.

In reality, most really important changes just happen, without little or no debate at all. In the late 1970s, a bankruptcy reform bill was passed allowing judges to modify labor contracts. Over the ensuing decades, this became a key mechanism used to disempower the labor movement. Equally invisible in their implementation – and seismic in their impact – have been the dismantling of country's pension system (e.g., defined benefit plans replacing defined contribution plans); and the transformation of the criminal justice system into a decentralized system for locking up and disenfranchising shockingly large numbers of African American males.

So where do we begin? As I see it, the only viable path to fundamental political reform has to begin with Radical Decency – the systematic replacement of the predominant culture's values with more humane values at every level, from the political to the most personal and private.

Why? Because the juice that keeps the current indecent system going is the priority it places on success – money, power, and winning. And in the service of these goals, indecent behaviors are condoned, encouraged and, often, celebrated while, on the other side, “being nice” is subtly (or not so subtly) dismissed as soft and naïve, the province of losers.

The temptation to be indecent for the sake of success, immense in our private lives, is even greater when it involves strangers; that is, in the area of politics and public policy. So what is needed is a strategy that is just as forceful in the other direction; a strategy that challenges us to be decent at all times, in all areas of living, and without exception.

The alternative seems doomed. Going along with our mainstream habits when it is convenient and “less important,” we will inevitably succumb to temptation. A well-intentioned nonprofit, for example, will modulate its programs to maintain desperately needed funding. As these exceptions accumulate, clarity of mission will corrode and tactics will revert to the tactics of the mainstream culture. We wind up playing the culture's conventional game, but with far fewer financial resources than corporations, lobbyists, and politicians that drive the system. In that struggle, guess who wins?

In saying this, I am not suggesting that more conventional reform efforts be limited or curtailed. The ameliorative work of nonprofit entities, healing professionals, and well intentioned office holders is highly important. Their work softens the virulent consequences of the existing system, helping millions. The problem, however, is that this work is too often confused with the transformational political work that our culture so desperately needs. We need to be clear about the difference – and deeply supportive of activities in both areas.

The approach I advocate is intellectually and emotionally difficult, to say the least. And its success is equally problematic. But the alternative – to simply accept our indecent culture as inevitable – is worse.

Decency with family and friends is condoned and even encouraged by the mainstream culture. But when it comes to serious change efforts in the public arena, active engagement is discouraged and often greeted with hostility. As a result, the concrete choices needed in this area often require uncomfortable adjustments to our automatic ways of operating.

So, we can no longer simply pay all of our expenses and engage in our consumer whims before we reflect on how much money to invest in social causes. That approach is inconsistent with co-equal attention to decency to self, others, and the world. Similarly, Radical Decency needs to guide what we buy, where we buy it, and how and where we invest. If people like us systematically applied Radical Decency in these areas, we might actually create some momentum toward greater decency in the crucial area of business. And yet, how many of us live up to this ideal – or promote it with others.

Still another area where a radically decent approach to public policy requires uncomfortable change is in the area of collaboration. A dark – and intended – side effect of our culture’s emphasis on individualism, privacy, and “doing your own thing” is that neglect of our civic responsibilities is hidden from view.

However, decency in the public arena requires effective action – not token gestures – and that in turn requires collaboration. We need to understand the Radical Decency contributions of others and, when possible, integrate our efforts with theirs. But this means that we can no longer take refuge in our anonymity. We have to acknowledge the good and bad of where we are as public citizens even as we strive to do better.

The final challenge I want to highlight involves the predominant culture’s use of chronic fight/flight states to perpetuate itself. To be an effective force for change, we need to wean ourselves from these habits in the public sphere as well. The uncomfortable truth is that ridiculing George W. Bush or Sarah Palin – as opposed to condemning their policies and tactics – rehearses and reinforces caricaturizing and dismissive behaviors; behaviors that allow others, in other contexts, to discriminate against minorities or to dismiss the suffering of the poor. On this crucial issue, I strongly recommend Encountering Bigotry, by Philip Lichtenberg, et al, a book that brilliantly, and with empowering specificity, describes how to engage in this vital work.