

Jeff Garson
Radical Decency Reflection #13
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Radical Decency Is Its Own Reward

Alan died a few weeks ago. He was a remarkable person, devoted to his family and friends and active throughout his legal career in efforts to improve the lives of the disenfranchised. He will be missed. At his funeral, his brother remembered his trip to Mississippi in the 1960s, at the height of the civil rights struggles. Asked why he went, Alan said it was the right thing to do. I have no problem with that response. But Alan's life exemplified another, much less discussed answer: That the choice to actively engage in decency in every area of living is the surest path to a more vibrant and joyful life.

The culture is all about shrill self promotion. But, when it comes to kindness and generosity, it promotes a different model: Modesty and anonymity. We would instinctually feel tacky and puffed up if we said out loud: "Living the way I live is the best way to create a better life."

But this reaction unwittingly supports the purposes of the mainstream culture. How? By leaving the cultural megaphone entirely in the hands of the forces that promote its values. Even as the Alan's of this world shrink from advertising their success at living, Donald Trump's values are celebrated on a weekly TV show. So, an essential part of Radical Decency is to free ourselves up to say that, yes, I (also) do it for me – and it works.

The reason why this is true is grounded in our neurobiology. We are wired to be in relationship. As Daniel Siegel says, the brain is a complex nonlinear system that exists within a larger complex nonlinear system consisting of it and other brains. In other words, it makes no sense to think about a brain in isolation.

A baby's brain is molded by its interactions with its primary care givers: Mother joins the baby in its joy, modeling and teaching how that looks in a mature brain; then, as the baby moves into a sadness or frustration, the mother moves with him, modeling these emotions and, just as important, modeling a mature transition between emotional states.

And this process continues throughout life. More than any other factor, our growth and evolution, for better or worse, depends upon the social context within which we exist. If our family, friends, communities, and culture model decency we will, whatever our innate disposition, tend in that direction. If they model competition, dominance, and control, our states of mind and habits of living will move in that direction.

In choosing how we live, we also need to account for the fact that we are creatures of habit. According to Hebb's Theorem, "if it fires together, it wires together." So when our baby is startled by a barking dog, a chain of synapses fire. And because they fired once, they are more likely to fire again in response to similar stimulus; and, confronted with that stimulus a third time, the likelihood that they will fire again is even greater; and so

on. In other words, absent conscious intervention, our brains will do in the future what they did in the past.

Why do these neurobiological realities point to Radical Decency as the surest path to a better life? First, because in stark contrast to the values that predominate in our culture, Radical Decency is congruent with our biology.

Bowing to the imperative to compete and win, we (very sensibly) become skilled in hiding our motives and suppressing a whole range of emotions that put these goals at risk – fear, confusion, weakness, even altruism and empathy directed toward competitors.

But in doing so, we cut ourselves off from the mutual and authentic contact with others that is our most essential nourishment. The result is an epidemic of depression, anxiety, and behaviors designed to anesthetize those feelings – drug and alcohol abuse, workaholism, sexual addiction, video games, etc.

By seeking to systematically replace the mainstream culture’s inhumane values with values that express our affiliative nature – instead of riding roughshod over it – Radical Decency is specifically designed to overcome this debilitating pattern.

Radical Decency also accounts for the fact that we are creatures of habit. Pick and chose decency – doing what we have to do “out there in the real world,” and then making a 180 degree pivot to decency in our private lives – is untenable. We spend the best hours of the majority of our days at work and in other venues of the mainstream culture. As a result, the habits of thinking and living we cultivate in those arenas will overwhelm any private islands of decency we seek to carve out in our off hours.

Selfishness, manipulation, defensiveness, rage, withdrawal – some or all of these will infect our intimate relationships. And we will punish ourselves as well. Driving ourselves too hard – as the culture demands – we will be self-judgmental and unforgiving when, as is inevitable, we exhibit any of a wide range of human emotions: Confusion, physical and emotional fatigue, fear, and so on.

With a pick and chose approach to decency we are defeated, over and over again, by the habitual mechanisms of our brain. But as we apply decency radically – in every context and without exception – these mechanisms become our ally. Over time, Radical Decency’s more humane values become our new “habitual brain.” And as this process gathers momentum, they become trusted allies in overcoming the mainstream culture’s values and the virulent consequences that come in their wake.

What is so hopeful is that a committed Radical Decency practice points the way to a better life. The focus isn’t some far-off ultimate goal – “how to be happy” or “how to be fulfilled.” Instead, we work day by day, moment by moment, on the task of being decent. Doing so, we trust that the habits of mind we are cultivating will powerfully support us in creating a more vibrant and nourishing life. Here’s how it works.

When across the board decency is our priority, curiosity becomes our habitual state of mind. Why? Because we quickly learn that, in order to make good choices, we need to more deeply understand our motives, feelings and states of mind, and those of others.

One fortunate side effect of chronic curiosity is a decline in our tendency to judge ourselves and others. Focusing on why we do things requires openness, thoughtfulness, and reflection. And because these states of mind are inconsistent with judgment, this debilitating, culturally induced habit simply shrinks from inattention.

Note also that a committed Radical Decency practice regularly requires difficult choices. Moment by moment, how do we harmonize and balance decency to ourselves with decency to others? And what choices should we make when it comes to the thorny issue of allocating an appropriate level of resources to social causes?

In the mainstream culture, the standard operating procedure is to duck these issues: Ignoring them in the rush to deal with the day to day pressures of living; “solving” them by either ignoring our needs (placating, stuffing) or the needs of others (insensitivity, selfishness); or by latching on to a convenient sophistry (the invisible hand of capitalism will cure our ills; giving money to a beggar is enabling).

Good things happen, however, when we really allow ourselves to be in these “wisdom stretching” moments; when we sit in these seemingly irreconcilable dilemmas as Radical Decency demands. We hone our emotional awareness and analytic skills. We also cultivate the courage to act in uncomfortable situations, the patience and self control to forbear when that is the better choice, and the wisdom to know the difference. In the process, we become more and more skilled at loving ourselves and others.

And where does all of this lead? When all that we do is approached with curiosity and growing sense of discernment, we will have an increased sense of:

Living in the present, which leads to less shame, guilt, and remorse about the past, and fear and anxiety about the future;

Appreciation, empathy, and acceptance for yourself and others, which leads to less judgment, jealousy, possessiveness, greed, and need to control;

Clarity and coherence about your priorities and choices, which leads to less anxiety and an increased sense of ease in life; and

An ennobling sense of purpose, which leads to less hopelessness and mistrust and an increased sense of vibrancy, aliveness, and pleasure in living.

These are, it seems to me, the attributes of a vibrant and nourishing life. And a committed Radical Decency practice is a vital pathway toward their realization. So while Radical Decency is the right thing to do, the really exciting news is that it is also its own reward.