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Radical Decency Reflection #16
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Mainstream Thinking – The Tyranny of Opinion and Judgment

One key area we tend to gloss over – as we seek to craft more nourishing and generative ways of operating in the world – is how we think. This may seem like a theoretical issue, but it isn't. Our habitual, cultural conditioned ways of thinking vitally affect our outlook and choices in life.

What are these habitual ways of thinking? Put simply, we live in a world where opinions and judgments are all important. Lacking them or, even worse, expressing tentativeness or confusion, we are likely to be judged as indecisive, wishy-washy.

Opinions and judgments are, of course, important. But what is troubling is the central role they play in our conversations and ways of thinking. Far too often, they are substitutes for, rather than conclusions drawn from, a careful marshaling of evidence and sustained reflection.

Where does this opinion-based thinking show up? Everywhere. In politics, for example, most of us are wedded to a belief in our “extraordinary” experiment in “democracy” and “free-market capitalism.” But what is obvious, when you stop and think about it, is that these are simply statements of faith. Over the years, there have been dramatic shifts in our system of governance and ways of managing the economy. But our belief in the unique virtues of our system – however it happens to look at the moment – remains.

The result? Even as evidence of the system's inefficiencies, indecencies, and inequities accumulates, we maintain our belief in it. Whether conservative or liberal, we continue to invest inordinate amounts of psychic and emotional energy in the next election. We persist in believing that we can solve our problems by working the system, by electing better leaders.

Maybe this confidence is well placed and maybe it isn't. But what is clear – my essential point – is that we are treating an opinion as fact. And what atrophies in the process are our critical faculties: Our ability to absorb new information; to integrate it into our pre-existing notions of how things are; and to allow new, more discerning understandings to emerge.

In our personal lives, a similar dynamic is at work. When people fail to meet our expectations, we don't instinctually become curious – sifting the evidence, attempting to understand how they are different and why they act the way they do. Instead, we judge and dismiss. They are insensitive, or selfish, or lazy, or (the ultimate judgment) an asshole. And this pattern applies even when the other person is our spouse or child.

Why are these habits of thinking so pervasive? Because they so perfectly promote and reinforce the culture's predominant values. These values – competition, dominance, and control – are not relational. The goal is not to engage with and persuade others but to overpower their will – in Gestalt terms to annihilate.

So, not surprisingly, we develop habits of thought to serve these goals. Certainty – a firm opinion – is a perfect instrument of aggression. Then, when we take the next step – judging people who do not share that opinion – we are primed to ignore and dismiss. At that point, we are fully empowered to operationalize dominance and control; saying, implicitly or explicitly, either agree with me or be pushed aside.

Notice, too, that deep reflection and a careful weighing of evidence are the antithesis of this process. Inviting curiosity, inquiry, and dialogue, they are deeply relational. In other words, they subvert the mainstream culture's "certainty/ judgment/annihilation" mindset. So, intent on getting ahead in the world as it is, we instinctually de-emphasize these qualities. At best, they are of marginal value. At worst, they are a significant impediment to our conventional ambitions.

The good news is that we are not dealing with endemic stupidity. Indeed, that all too easy, dismissive judgment is just another manifestation of these mainstream habits of thought. But we are dealing with processes that are deeply embedded in, and supported by, ways of operating that predominant in our culture.

How do we begin to undo these habits? A good starting place is to identify common conceptual pitfalls that allow them to unwittingly infiltrate into our ways of thinking.

One particularly corrosive pitfall is our tendency to assume the best about members of our group. In a recent episode of the Daily Show, Jon Stewart presented side-by-side videos of Barack Obama and George W. Bush saying the exact same things on a series of foreign policy issues. The show's "reporter" reacts with exasperation, saying that Obama is different. Asked why, his response is that "Obama doesn't mean it."

Stewart's point is, of course, a serious one. Our tendency to assume the best about people like us is chronic – and seldom acknowledged. So, as the example discussed above illustrates, most of us refuse to connect the negative dots about our government. Even as examples of its cruelty and injustice accumulate, we see these events as unfortunate exceptions in an overall landscape of fairness, decency, and justice.

The converse is also true. We instinctually judge others by their worst examples, a tendency made more virulent by the media's eagerness to amplify the shrillest voices – those that promote the most strident and debased versions of the communities they represent. This point was driven home for me in the 1990s when I became deeply immersed in the evangelical world, as an attorney. Prior to that experience I judged that community by its worst examples – the Jimmy Swaggarts and Tammy Faye Bakers. Being exposed to many thoughtful and dedicated evangelicals leaders, however, laid bare

my reflexively dismissive attitude and guided me toward a more nuanced and respectful view.

That experience was also a stark reminder of how easily I slip into this judgmental frame of mind. Unless I am vigilant, my habitual, gut response – when presented with people, groups and ideas that are different – is to judge them as “less than” and, often, as suspect in their motivations and wrong. “Not knowing” and curiosity are not my instinctual vocabulary. Compounding the problem is the striking absence of any meaningful social norms, cues, and sanctions to steer me away from this mainstream mindset.

A second pitfall, equally pervasive, is to look for a singular, value-laden cause. Working with couples is a continual reminder of how widespread this pattern is. A typical couple will come to counseling with her saying (for example) that “the problem” is that he doesn’t share. He in turn identifies her controlling ways as “the problem.”

The reality? There is no single cause and, typically, no fault. Instead, there are a series of a mutually reinforcing acts, all taken in good faith, that lead to unfortunate results. He feels anxious and does something to protect himself. Sensing that, she responds with her own protective behaviors; which triggers a renewed, more escalated response from him; and so on. Two good people doing the best they can.

What is true in our intimate relationships is also true in every other area of living. That “malevolent” boss or co-worker is almost never “the cause” of our woes at work. And Wall Street – or Bush – or Obama (chose your villain) is not “the cause” of the current economic downturn. However, our tendency, over and over again, is to oversimplify and demonize; to feed the “certainty/ judgment/annihilation” machine.

The final conceptual pitfall I want to highlight – referred to by Francis Bacon as one of the “real distorting prisms of human nature” – is what he calls the “idol of the imprisoning cave, the idiosyncrasies of individual belief and passion.” We live in a world that celebrates individualism and, as a corollary, promotes a debased version of relativism: That everything that everyone thinks is fine. The result is that we “feel” something or have a “spiritual experience” and all too easily assign a sweeping meaning to it.

My problem is not with experience itself, but the with uncritical nature of this meaning making process. Wouldn’t we be better served if we were open to the possibility that it wasn’t a message from God or the universe? Wouldn’t we also be better served if we were culturally empowered to critically question our friends and acquaintances when they offer these sorts of explanations?

Needless to say, the patterns of thought I discuss in this Reflection are examples only. There are many other ways in which these mainstream ways of thinking insinuate themselves into our lives. Hopefully, a deeper understanding of these processes – and the intent behind them – will allow us to cultivate more curious, accepting, and reflective habits of mind.