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Radical Decency Reflection #18
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Men and Women/ Similarities and Differences

Radical Decency is a relational philosophy, challenging us to be in mutual and authentic contact with our self, others, and the world. For this reason, it impels us to be tireless detectives. Why? Because a deepening understanding of our feelings and motivations, and those of others, is essential if we hope to make better choices in the service of this goal.

Unfortunately, there is little support for this investigative frame of mind in the mainstream culture. Motivated by a competitive, win/lose mindset, we instinctually find a handful of stories that work for us and stick to them. I am a tough guy; or a nurturing wife and mother; or a hard working but unappreciated employee. You are funny and fun loving; or emotional and artistic; or hard driving and critical.

With these stories in place, we become progressively less open, curious and speculative about the enormous complexity of factors that inform our feelings and motivations. Instead, we cherry pick the evidence. We notice behaviors that support our stories and use them to deepen and harden those views of the world. Evidence that contradicts them ignored or minimized. More often than not, since it doesn't fit into our pre-existing frames of reference, it simply disappears from view.

Our gender stereotypes are an especially pernicious example of this phenomenon. Even today, women struggle with the too easy assumption that they are overly emotional. And in the minds of many the Madonna/whore dichotomy persists, and assertive woman are seen as "aggressive bitches." Equally prevalent are the stereotypes that men live with. Emotionally, they are insensitive, shallow, and self-absorbed. Rather than being understood and met by their women, they need to be placated and handled. "Testosterone poisoning" makes them overly aggressive. Sexually, they are "dogs," ready to "screw anything that moves."

These stereotypes deeply hamper our ability to understand and empathize with the opposite sex. And since each sex also internalizes the stereotypes assigned to their gender, they hamstringing our self-understanding as well.

So how should we understand our similarities and differences as men and women? Here's how I see it. We are different but not in the sweeping, judgmental ways that are our received cultural "wisdom." And, importantly, our similarities overwhelm our differences.

Both sexes experience the full range of human emotions -- anger, vulnerability, sexual desire, empathy, and so on. Given this fact, it seems implausible to assume

that their different styles of emoting are biologically determined and, therefore, immutable.

More fundamentally, our differences are of little consequence when we remember the larger existential context we share. We are all, men and women alike, here through no choice of our own. We and every one we love are going to die. Everything we do, while we are here, is made up. There is no roadmap. And, importantly, we know all this. Like soldiers on the front line – in a meaningless war – the need to deal with these unforgiving contextual realities shapes a commonality of experience that eclipses our differences

But there are gender-based differences, and understanding them better makes it possible to have greater mastery over our choices; to be more decent to our self and others. As I have explored these differences, in my own life and as a couples therapist, a paradigmatic difference has emerged that explains far more than the easy gender stereotypes that dominant the mainstream dialogue.

We have existed as a distinct line of primates for 7 million years and as homo sapiens for about 300,000 years. For all but the last 10,000 years or so, we existed in small groups of hunter/gatherers. So, not surprising, virtually all that we have become through the process of natural selection evolved in that context.

Steven Stosny points out that, in order to use our energy efficiently, women evolved in the group's early warning system; the folks who scan for danger. Thus, even today, it is the woman who typically bolts up and bed and says, "I think I heard something." Since duplicating the women's process made no sense, men evolved as reactors, not to the environment but to their women's emotions.

Given this evolutionary division of labor, men and women developed different emotional sensitivities. Continually scanning for danger, women are especially susceptible to safety issues. Men, wired to react to their women, strive to be good providers, protectors and lovers. They are more susceptible to shame.

This distinction explains a lot. A couple comes into my office. She is upset. They hosted Thanksgiving dinner and, while he helped, he just didn't seem to care how the house looked, whether the guests were graciously attended to, and so on. He is bewildered. I did what you asked me to do. What's the big deal?

Why is this couple struggling? Because no one told them that the woman – wired to be more sensitive to safety issues – is having an experience that is very different from her husband's. For him, a few folks are getting together for dinner. For her, the warm and nurturing "safe" sanctuary that she is emotionally wired to create is being opened to her entire clan. So much of what she viscerally cares so much about is on display. Truly, he doesn't understand. And she feels unseen and unappreciated.

Needless to say, analogous situations happen in reverse. Wired to be a provider, protector, and lover, powerful feelings of shame come up for him when (for example) his competence at work is challenged. Now she is the one who doesn't understand. Why is work so important to him? Why is he so withdrawn and preoccupied? He, in turn, feels unappreciated, misunderstood, and alone.

Notice how this evolutionary artifact explains women's alleged over emotionality. Challenges to a man's core sensitivity – shame – tend to be discreet and boundaried. He loses his job. His wife is sexually disappointed. His competence is questioned. However, the events triggering a woman's core sensitivity – perceived danger – are more diffuse and pervasive. So, perhaps, women are not more emotional. It's just that we live in a world in which their triggering events are far more prevalent.

This evolutionary difference also explains why men avoid conversations about feelings. For women, an ongoing intimate dialogue is an anxiety reducer, allowing them to monitor the situation moment by moment; to confirm that all is well or that danger exists. For men, no such emotional pay-off exists. When his wife says, "we need to talk," his evolutionary wiring signals risk only; the possibility of shame.

This evolutionary difference explains as well why men – when they get together – talk sports, exchange insults, and leave pizza boxes and crushed beer cans on the couch. Looking for surcease from the risk of shame, they are creating shame-free zones. In this environment, nothing he does will be judged – unless of course he acts like a girl (hence, their homophobia?).

There are, of course, many factors besides this danger/shame dichotomy that shed light on our gender-based differences. Focusing on cultural influences, for example, Real and Gilligan explain how the culture pulls boys away from intimacy but allows their power, while girls maintain intimacy but are pushed to relinquish their power. Understanding these cultural pressures, we can let go of the view that either or both sexes are inherently limited.

Thus, boys and men are not wired to be angry, aggressive, and over sexed. It's just that for them anger and aggression are more socially acceptable than vulnerability and tears. In short, it is a learned behavior. Similarly, boys and men are preoccupied with sex because it is one of the few places where they can receive the hugging, stroking, and nurturing they learned to retreat from at such an early age.

The hopeful corollary to these insights is that learned behaviors can be unlearned. Men and women alike can grow into better, more fully human ways of living.

The larger point – that these examples illustrate – is that approaching gender issues with openness and curiosity makes sense of behaviors we might otherwise judge. That, in turn, facilitates appreciation, empathy, and an increased sense of possibility both for the opposite sex and for our own gendered journey. Radical Decency demands – and promises – nothing less.