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Radical Decency Reflection #19
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Implementing Radical Decency – Wisdom-Stretching and Other Thoughts

Most approaches to living put a priority on one area of living over others. The mainstream culture, for example, puts financial (and physical) security first, making work the priority. We stay late at the office or go in on weekends because we “have to,” but have a much more difficult time taking Thursday afternoons off for our kid’s soccer game or to visit mom at the nursing home.

Most “do gooders” are similarly one-sided in their point of emphasis but go to the opposite extreme, privileging others over themselves. So the golden rule speaks about “doing unto others” but is silent about how to treat your self.

Radical Decency, by contrast, insists that we attend to all areas of living. Why? Because our biology demands it. While fundamental change is possible, a realistic program for change needs to deal with the fact that we are intensely creatures of habit; wired to do in the future what we did in the past.

For this reason, partial approaches to change will never work. We tell ourselves that we can be decent in one area – to our self and our family – and, at the same time “do what we have to do, out there, in the real world.” In the end, however, we wind up shirking on sleep and leisure, bickering with our spouse, and virulently judging our selves when we fall short. The indecent values that pervade our culture inevitably infiltrate and pollute the small islands of sanity we seek to create.

Recognizing this reality, Radical Decency calls for decency across the board. It is premised on the belief that our engrained, indecent habits of living can only be changed if we systematically cultivate a new, better set of values at all times, in every context, and without exception.

This approach offers the strong medicine that we need to deal with a virulent cultural disease. But it is also tough and uncompromising. Even in the best of circumstances, it is difficult to integrate and balance decency to self, others, and the world. And the context in which we need to apply the philosophy – the culture in which we live – is far from ideal. So, for example, seeking to be radically decent in business, we struggle to apply these principles in face of the profit-first expectations of co-workers, customers, investors, and bankers.

How do we deal with this daunting challenge? The first thing to remember is that Radical Decency is aspirational; an ideal that we will never fully realize. Despite our best efforts, engrained, scarcely conscious mainstream habits – and sheer human frailty – will regularly lead to choices that fall short of our goal. We will judge or

dismiss others (less decency to others), neglect obvious environmental choices (less decency to the world), or passively tolerate abusive behavior (less decency to self).

If we are results oriented, our commitment to Radical Decency is likely to be short-circuited by this discouraging reality. However, everything is different if we see the journey – rather than the destination – as the essence of Radical Decency. Doing so, our commitment to the philosophy is sustained by the enormously positive habits of mind that are the byproducts of a committed decency practice: Increased appreciation, empathy, and acceptance for our self and others; greater clarity and coherence about our priorities and choices; and an ennobling sense of purpose. See Reflection 13, Radical Decency Is Its Own Reward.

Embracing this outlook, we bring a very different mindset to our shortcomings and, more generally, to the seemingly insoluble dilemmas that implementation of across the board decency present. Instead of being times of discouragement and defeat, they become “wisdom stretching” moments, opportunities to cultivate and sharpen our “wisdoming skills.”

Using a familiar hypothetical as an example – whether to give money to a beggar – most of us start with an instinctual conclusion (either yes or no), which we then bolster with a handy rationale or two. Radical Decency’s approach, however, is very different. Focusing on the process and not the result, it invites us to “sit” in this dilemma and to reflect on its implications for decency to self, others, and the world.

Since only a person in extreme need would beg, giving him money has merit. And focusing solely on decency to this person, I might even offer to buy him a meal.

But what about decency to individuals other than the beggar – and to the world – and to myself? Encouraging public begging condones a violation of other people’s space (decency to others). And a donation to an appropriate agency would certainly be more strategic (decency to the world). On the other hand, a charitable donation, at a later time, would negate my publicly modeled act of decency (decency to the world) and the good feeling I would derive from the act (decency to self).

Thinking in radically decent terms, other considerations abound. Being approached for money, without my permission, disrespects me (decency to self). On the other hand, issues of equity and justice are integral to a full understanding of decency. And while the culture’s system of rewards and sanctions have materially enhanced my economic status, it has, in all likelihood, severely penalized his. So perhaps this reality should trump his rudeness. I could go on, but I’m sure you get the idea.

Given the complexity of the world, and the compromised cultural context in which we operate, our ultimate decisions are seldom fully satisfactory. And that is the case here. However, a radically decent approach – habitually practiced – changes us. It cultivates the more nourishing emotional states described earlier. And by

deepening our understanding of the implications of our choices, it promises to make them more attuned, creative, and strategic.

A final point bears special emphasis: Saying that the journey is its own reward does not mean we should be less invested in outcomes. Indeed, passionately seeking – and then implementing – approaches and choices that yield the best possible results is the very thing that gives this process its vitality. If we treat Radical Decency as an interesting intellectual idea but, then, compromise on its implementation, its value will quickly recede.

This point highlights still another challenge inherent in a committed Radical Decency practice. For each of us, there are potential deal-breakers; choices – and whole areas of living – where we recoil from its whole-hearted embrace. We struggle to pay the bills and desperately want the “best” for our kids. In this context, how many of us are willing to consider more than token contributions to social justice causes?

For some of us decency to self is another deal breaker. Standing up to an emotionally abusive spouse is way too scary. For others, it is decency to others. We feel incapable of taking significant time from our demanding job to be a continuing intimate presence in our child’s life – or in the fabric of our chosen communities.

Because these choices feel so overwhelming, our instinct is to pull back from Radical Decency. Since I can’t be radically decent in these crucial areas, the philosophy seems like a permanent prescription for feeling like a failure. Better to subtly shelve it altogether; to slide quietly back into my mainstream life.

Here, too, a key is not to hide from our shortcomings but to embrace them. Of course we will fall short. As Vikki Reynolds says, we are all in the dirty bathtub.

But with this attitude of self-forgiveness, we also need to be willing to stretch; to make choices out of our comfort zone; to grow. Unfortunately, there is no rule-book for deciding when to act boldly and when to respect our limits. There will, however, be times when we have to make a leap of faith; doing what we know we should do even though it is way out of our emotional and/or physical comfort zone.

So in this area as well we need to remember that, when we embrace this difficult work, we are growing our wisdom. And that that process – and its emotional byproducts – are Radical Decency’s ultimate rewards.

Staying the course with a committed Radical Decency practice requires us to both embrace our limitations and, at the same time, to challenge our magnificent possibilities. But then, aren’t self acceptance and self love – offered in the crucible of life’s biggest challenges – among the greatest of gifts that you can offer to your self, your loved ones, and the world? In writing these Reflections, I am passionately inviting you to join me on this exciting, perplexing, and soul-nourishing journey.