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Social Justice – The Third Rail of Radical Decency

When it comes to our self and our intimate relationships, most of us approach Radical Decency with curiosity, even eagerness. But when it comes to social justice, things are different. Confronting the grim, unforgiving face of poverty and discrimination is too demanding. And we instinctually fear that a full engagement with these issues might make uncomfortable demands on our time and money

Unfortunately, finessing our commitment in this area is all too easy. Because injustice is so thoroughly condoned in the mainstream culture, there are no perceptible sanctions attached to complete indifference. Indeed, even half-hearted efforts, far from being critically examined, are celebrated in completely disproportionate ways. We seldom point out the obvious: Small contributions relative to net worth and occasional service days, while helpful, are not a cause for congratulation.

Radical Decency can transform us but only if it is embraced boldly. If our commitment is tepid – if we shy away from its most perplexing and uncomfortable challenges – its rewards will be equally tepid. So failing to fully embrace our responsibilities in the area of social justice, we will never be able to inhabit the psychic and emotional states that transform Radical Decency into a vital, living philosophy. The states of mind that are the philosophy's greatest challenge – and reward – will never be ours.

Seeking to apply Radical Decency in this area, we need to remember that, recent progress notwithstanding, discriminatory patterns continue to affect women, racial and sexual minorities, people with disabilities, and others. We also need to acknowledge our dismal history with regard to economic disenfranchisement. Decade by decade, the gap between the rich and poor steadily widens, even as programs to level the competitive playing field or to relieve its consequences continue to shrink. “Decency to the world” requires our full engagement, not just with sexism and racism but also with the thornier, less acknowledged, and deeply consequential issue of economic injustice.

Our engagement with social justice issues needs to begin with the recognition that – notwithstanding heroic efforts by many remarkable people – our current efforts are not working. Better political candidates, new governmental programs, more generous support for the nonprofit sector – none of these mainstream approaches has been able to counteract the avaricious, profit-first, economic forces that dictate our public choices.

We need to create new, more effective ways of engaging with issues of social justice. To do so, however, we first need to better understand the factors that make patterns of injustice so pervasive and persistent.

One crucial -- and perplexing -- question is why the victims put up with it. Systematically cut off from the mainstream economy, starved for services, and locked up in astonishing numbers, why don't the residents of North Philadelphia burn Center City down? Another key question is why we allow this to happen. Why do so many good people ignore what's going on just a few miles from their homes; just outside the window of the commuter train they take to work each morning?

Set forth below is a discussion of three key processes that help to answer these questions. Hopefully, understanding what keeps us stuck will help us to craft strategies that more effectively challenge the status quo.

The first of these processes is cultural. The culture's predominant values -- competition, dominance, and control -- impel us toward self-serving behaviors. Equally, they make attention to larger, social issues seem like a risky diversion of time and resources from our relentless drive for success. Radical Decency addresses this issue, seeking to systematically replace our indecent habits of living with a new, more decent set of values.

The second process, a psychological one, addresses the "why do they put up with it" issue. In Community and Confluence, Philip Lichtenberg describes a pivotal psychological transaction that operates in sexism, racism, economic exploitation, and every other authoritarian system. Specifically, the dominant person projects his pain onto the victim and, crucially, the victim internalizes that person's pain.

So, as a young lawyer, I was the unwitting beneficiary of patriarchal and economic privilege. Preparing for court and unable to find a file, I would yell at my secretary: "Where the [bleep] is the discovery file?" Thrown into a place of anxiety by my aggressive words, she would then scurry around, seeking to solve my problem.

What Lichtenberg points out is that, as the privileged person in an authoritarian system, I transferred my anxiety to my secretary -- and, significantly, she took it on. This same pattern repeats itself in myriad of ways with disenfranchised populations. The result is that, like my secretary, they do not react to bullying, exploitative behaviors with anger and appropriate pushback. Instead, internalizing the aggressor, they experience pain -- anxiety, confusion, self-judgment.

This transaction is emotional and not cognitive. And one of life's more uncomfortable lessons is that, recognizing an established emotional pattern, does not mean we can flip a switch and stop it. Once in place, psychological systems are exceedingly difficult to unravel. So, not surprisingly, this process has vastly complicated the ability of women (and well intentioned men) to overcome patriarchy, and of minorities to overcome social and economic exploitation.

In Encountering Bigotry and Getting Even, Lichtenberg and his co-authors provide a detailed program for weaning ourselves from these debilitating authoritarian patterns. I would urge anyone interested in Radical Decency to read these books as well as Lichtenberg's seminal work, Community and Confluence.

The final process I want to discuss – a biological one – adds significantly to our understanding as to why so many good people are so passive in the face of grotesque and routine injustice. To frame the issue, consider two hypotheticals.

In the first, a woman stops her car before a man who is bleeding profusely at an accident scene. Her first instinct is to respond to his urgent request for a ride to the emergency room. But, then, remembering the cost of the leather seats in her new Lexus, she declines. In the second hypothetical, a man is going through his bills and comes across a request, from a highly reputable nonprofit, for \$200 to “save the life” of a child in Bangladesh. Having just flipped through his mortgage, electric and cable bills, he quietly throws the request in the trash.

The premise of the researchers who created these hypotheticals is that there is no substantive difference between the two scenarios. And yet, not surprisingly, they report much greater outrage at the woman's behavior.

So what is going on? The answer is that, as we evolved over the course of 7 million years, we developed a powerful empathic system. But the context within which it developed was hunter/gatherer society. That was our reality for all but the last 10,000 years. In that environment, there was, literally, no larger world.

And so, even today, we respond powerfully to the bleeding man in front of us, just as our evolutionary wiring dictates. By contrast, we are just not wired to react empathically to suffering halfway around the world – or in an unseen neighborhood, a few miles from our comfortable suburban home. Most social justice issues simply do not trigger our empathic neural pathways; hence our puzzling indifference.

Our emotional reactions are powerful. In fact, they are more powerful than our thoughts. But that does not mean they are our destiny. Knowing how we are wired, we can consciously choose a path of greater sensitivity and growth.

In closing I want to acknowledge that, standing alone, this discussion of causation is incomplete. The additional, more consequential work is to use these insights to craft more effective strategies for action. In this area my thinking, to date, feels inadequate; pallid answers to the daunting challenge that social justice represents.

But Radical Decency is a journey, not a destination. And its end point is an unattainable ideal. So I acknowledge the current limits to my thinking without apology. My hope is that, even as I seek greater clarity, others will see new ways of moving forward in this crucial area and carry me with them.