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Holistic Healing – A Five-Pronged Approach

Radical Decency is a comprehensive approach to living. It is not about feeling better – or about treating others more decently – or about saving the world. It is about all of that. Moreover, a central premise is that each of these areas is mutually reinforcing. If one is emphasized over the others, our efforts in every area will be hamstrung.

The reason? We are creatures of habit. For this reason, how we treat our self and others tend to converge. If we judge and take advantage of others, we will tend to be harsh and overly judgmental of ourselves. Conversely, decency to others and the world cultivates self-empathy and self-acceptance – and vice versa.

Being creatures of habit also dictates a systematic approach to change. Seeking to act differently at home but not at work, or in politics but not in our self-care, we fatally underestimate the extent to which the culture's indecent values insinuate themselves into our lives. When these values continue to operate without meaningful challenge, in so many other areas of our lives, our isolated experiments in greater decency are diluted and marginalized.

Many healing venues embrace these ideas, at least in principle. Hence the frequent references to holistic healing. The problem, however, is that they seldom follow through on their implications.

Holistic healing typically refers to approaches that encompass mind, body, and spirit. Notice, however, the extent to which this definition focuses on what is happening inside a single individual. We work to become more conversant with what is happening inside the four walls of our body and on how to make this internal system serves us more effectively.

The shortcoming in this approach is that it fails to fully take account of the context within which we exist. We do not live inside our bodies and brains. To the contrary, we are, at our core, relational beings.

Everything a baby becomes – the way it thinks, feels and self-regulates – is fundamentally molded by interactions with its primary caregivers. And throughout our lives, the people who we live with, and social contexts in which we exist, are the primary drivers of our evolution, growth, and change. As Daniel Siegel, one of our leading neurobiological theorists, flatly states, each person is a complex nonlinear system that exists within a larger complex nonlinear system consisting of it and other brains. In short, it makes no sense to think about a single brain in isolation.

To account for these contextual realities we need to develop a five pronged approach to healing. In addition to mind, body and spirit, our strategies also need to encompass “the practical” and “the radical.”

First, our healing strategies need to fully account for our need to effectively negotiate the world as it is – the practical. Meditation – increased body awareness – our spiritual connection with all things; all of these are helpful. But, standing alone, they are incomplete. Equally important is how they can help us to create more generative and satisfying relationships, not just with our self and family and friends, but also at work and in the larger world. As the “money” example, discussed below, illustrates, our commitment to this practical aspect of the work is far too tepid.

Note, however, that because we live in a world that is endemically indecent, simply “fitting in better” is not enough. Why? Because fitting in requires us to play by the rules of the mainstream culture, with all of its spirit-draining emotional and practical demands. We need instead to be active agents in molding the environments in which we live: The part of healing that I call “the radical.”

My own journey of healing and growth took place over many years. But for much of that time I was an attorney in private practice, operating in a highly demanding and competitive environment. In those years, I found teachers who offered many invaluable insights and tools. But, then, I would return to work, where I would rehearse – with enormous focus and energy – the competitive, manipulative, self-aggrandizing values of the mainstream culture.

Certainly changed occurred. But it always seemed frustratingly compromised and limited. The really important stuff was squeezed into the relative corners of my life – luncheons carved out of extended work days; evenings that too often started at 6 or 7 pm; workouts and runs at 6 am. And with so much time devoted to work, most of my social contact was with people living similar lives; people who, by their example, continually reinforced my conventional ways of operating in the world.

In 1993, I participated in the Essential Experience workshop, an experiential, weekend retreat. While the workshop was great, it was not unique. Like other similar events in my life, it was destined to recede into a warm memory, beginning the very next day – a Monday – when the routines of my life inevitably reasserted themselves in earnest.

What was unique, however, was the community that had been nurtured by workshop graduates. My whole-hearted involvement with that community shifted the context in which I lived. I continually placed myself in environments in which there was a greater emphasis on openness, empathy, and nurturance.

The cumulative impact was, in many ways, subtle and imperceptible, understandable only in retrospect. But it was also seismic. Standing on this

different ground, I was able to wean myself from the seductive attractions of the mainstream life I had been living. Over time, I stopped “playing by the rules,” dictated by my job and success oriented mindset. Ultimately, I abandoned the law entirely, entering a profession that actually supports and reinforces my healing.

At a systemic level, money offers a prime example of an area where we need to more fully integrate more traditional healing – mind, body, and spirit – with culturally based approaches – the practical, the radical. Few areas are more emotionally fraught. And yet, notice how the relevant “healers” – that is, the people who purport to deal with our issues around money – are isolated from one another.

You can talk to a therapist about your money issues, but most will quickly admit that they have no particular sophistication around its practical aspects. On the other hand, there is an endless supply of financial planners, accountants, stockbrokers, insurance agents and so on to advise you on how to manage your money. But these people are just as forthright in telling you that they aren’t there to deal with the murky world of emotions.

What is needed is an approach to healing that integrates these and other healing perspectives around money. Suppose, for example, a couple planning to write a will began with a coaching session to deal with the highly emotional issues that will inevitably arise. The attorney or financial planner could be present. Or, alternatively, he and the therapist could consult prior to his meeting with the couple. The benefits to the couple are obvious. Equally obvious are the ways in which the perspectives of the two professionals would expand and be enriched.

Moreover, if the professionals follow through with the principals of Radical Decency that brought them together in the first place, their perspectives would be expanded in other, less obvious ways. As things stand now, most financial experts are utterly indifferent to the social implications of their recommendations. While seldom acknowledging this fact, they implicitly push preservation of wealth and maximization of income as the only legitimate priorities. The result: Ideas such as socially screened investment and purchasing are viewed as an optional, potentially risk increasing add-on, to be avoided whenever possible.

However, viewed from a Radical Decency perspective, these strategies – prudently implemented – become sensible, even inevitable choices; part of a larger pattern that seeks to make decency to our self, to others and the world our habitual priority. Being led by the logic of Radical Decency, these and other “radical” aspects of healing would inexorably work their way into the healing strategies they offer.

So notice the shift in perspective that comes with this expanded view of holistic healing. With Radical Decency as an integrating perspective, healing strategies would more fully attend to clients’ physical, emotional, spiritual, and practical needs and, at the same time, support us in being conscious moral agents, more actively molding the world in which we live.