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Radical Decency Reflection #5
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Radical Decency Guideposts for Healers

Radical Decency challenges us to continuously consider three realms – ourselves, others, and to the world – in everything we do. We need to identify processes that are problematic in each of these areas, understand their impact, and craft effective strategies for dealing with them.

Here is the reasoning behind this approach.

The overriding problem we face in crafting better, more generative lives is that we live in a culture that, through a myriad of norms, cues, incentives and sanctions, habituates us to a fundamentally inhumane set of values – competition, dominance and control. Why do I say this? Because if you were building a culture from scratch, you would want it to do at least one of three things: Support us in being decent to ourselves; or support us in being decent to others; or support us in being decent to the world. Remarkably, our culture fails to do any of these things.

The sensible response, then, is to place a new, more humane set of values at the center of our lives. But complicating this task is the fact that, as the best theorists' point out, we are biologically wired to be creatures of habit. Thus, we begin this work with a deeply engrained habits of living that are at odds with our goal. In the words of Vikki Reynolds, we are all in the dirty bathtub.

So, because we have to wean ourselves from a pre-existing set of habits, we need to practice our new habits of living – decency to self, others, and the world – at all times and in every context. If we temporize and make exceptions, the enormous pull of the predominant culture will defeat our purposes. This virulent cultural disease requires strong medicine.

For psychotherapists and other healers, the implications of this approach to living are profound.

Most healing focuses on the individual or on the individual in the context of her most immediate environments – intimate relationship, family, friends, and work. The culture's enormous influence in our lives is either ignored or treated as a given; something to which we have to adjust.

But it doesn't have to be this way.

Family therapy, for example, views the family as a system in which any member's changed behaviors necessarily affects the overall system and each participant in it. This

emphasis on the client's ability to effect his environment is itself empowering and healing. Equally healing is the recognition that new behaviors, wisely conceived and executed, can provoke changes in the system that, in turn, support and magnify the client's healing and growth.

The culture is, of course, a lot more complicated than a family. But since it too is a system, these same principles apply. And since the values that predominate in our culture have such a pervasive, debilitating effect on our lives, the application of systems based healing techniques, in this context, would seem to be an urgent concern if we are serious about being the best healers we can be.

The systematic de-emphasis of cultural factors in psychotherapy and other systems of healing is no accident. Systems tend to perpetuate themselves and the predominant culture's self perpetuation mechanisms are truly brilliant. Not surprisingly, then, while mainstream healers are supported in doing useful work, they are guided away from approaches that would meaningfully challenge the prevailing power structure or the belief systems that support it.

Thus, for example, we use the DSM to diagnose conditions "in the client" but are given no categories – none – to account for culturally caused conditions or contributing factors. Then we are paid to fix these defined problem; that is, to change the client in ways that allow him to more comfortably fit into the culture – to feel less pain, to compete more effectively, to be better, to be stronger. The cultural factors that play such a formative role in so many clients' emotional distress are either ignored entirely or, at best, given cursory lip service.

This dismal truth is confirmed by the mainstream literature. When I was in professional school, our clinical textbook advised us to avoid cultural factors because we are not trained to deal with them. The "Wheel of Life" – a standard tool of life coaches – provides a comprehensive list of categories for assessing clients' lives (work, family, leisure, etc) but fails to include the public sphere (politics, social movements, etc.) or the culture. And the current, standard definition of "holistic" healing – mind, body and spirit – similarly makes no reference to these categories.

In making this point I am not suggesting that fitting in and getting by are bad things. Since we will inevitably be crafting our lives within the existing culture, we need to creatively support clients' efforts in this area. But if that is all we do as healers, what we are offering is limited and compromised.

We also need to lay bare the unstated assumptions that flow from the mainstream culture, and punish so many of us so badly, including, for example:

- That we are failures if we don't make money;
- That perfection is the goal and anything short of that – in ourselves or others – is to be judged;

- That confusion and vulnerability are a weakness to be hidden;
- That it is selfish to ask for what you want;
- That you can accomplish anything if you just try hard enough.

We also need to define with greater insight and precision the cultural disease. Examples in this area would include an acknowledgement of the following realities:

- That, with rare exceptions, businesses are authoritarian, places that (often despite nice words) work against our efforts to create more humane lives;
- That we bring the culture's problematic ways of interacting into our most intimate relationships.
- That while football, movies, and popular books are entertaining and seductive, they promote the values of the predominant culture and, immersed in these entertainments, we dilute our efforts to create more nourishing habits of living.

Finally, in partnership with our clients, we need to develop more humane attitudes and beliefs, and specific techniques for more effectively loving ourselves and others, and contributing to a more just, equitable, and humane world. In Reflection #3, I offered one example. In the future, I hope to provide others.

When you deeply reflect on how things operate in our world, the depth to which this cultural disease is engrained in our ways of living is deeply disquieting. Seeking to more and more fully understand and implement Radical Decency is, I have found, the most effective antidote to my tendency to slip into discouragement, cynicism, inaction – and, therefore, into complicity with the mainstream culture's values.

Radical Decency is a roadmap that orients the choices that create my days and define my life. Striving to discern decency to myself, others, and the world, I offer (or refrain from offering) an intimate word, make an uncomfortable phone call, chose a visit to a friend over a run in the park (or vice versa), invest my energy in one professional project over another, or do nothing. Because the disease is everywhere, virtually every choice is an opportunity to practice and model something better.

As I am fond of saying, Radical Decency is its own reward. In every moment of every day I am attending to life's endless opportunities for offering and accepting love, to and from myself and others. In so doing, I embrace my living and dying with compassion, curiosity, zest and a deepening sense of acceptance and celebration.