

Jeff Garson
Radical Decency Reflection #9
September 18, 2010

The Promise of an Integrated Approach to Living

Radical Decency is a comprehensive approach to living. We seek to be decent: (1) to ourselves; (2) in every interaction; and (3) in every area of living. Equally, it is an integrated philosophy: No one area is more important than another; none is optional; each area informs and enriches the others.

In this Reflection, I discuss how this comprehensive and integrated approach drives a more robust and “radical” understanding of what it means to be decent. I also discuss how it brings greater clarity to the choices we need to make in order to make Radical Decency a more effective, potentially life-altering reality.

The example I use is effort to be decent “in every interaction.” I have chosen it because in this area, more so than in any other, the demands of the philosophy are immediate, vivid, and nonstop. Our days are filled with interactions with others. So seeking to be decent in every interaction requires daily, virtually moment by moment attention to the philosophy’s challenges and possibilities. It is Radical Decency’s vital pulse.

Being decent in all of our daily interactions with others, even as we tend to decency to ourselves and the world, is a compelling and wisdom stretching process. Notice, however, that the philosophy’s integrative and comprehensive approach pushes its principals beyond this obvious area of application. It also invites us to apply decency in every interaction to ourselves as well; to the cacophony of voices inside our heads.

So, for example, you are talking to a friend, and suddenly a pang jealousy arises because of her recent success, almost immediately followed by another “voice,” shaming you for your small mindedness. Applying the principals of decency in every interaction challenges you to disengage from your instinctual self-judgment. It moves you instead toward empathy, curiosity and understanding; a firm but gentle and forgiving approach as you manage these discordant voices.

The application of decency in every interaction to work, politics, and the other public arenas in which we participate provides a vivid illustration of how the philosophy’s integrative approach drives a more radical vision of decency. In the mainstream culture, we are invited to neglect decency to self and others as we pursue seek to move ahead with our careers. Perfectionism; virulent judgment of self and others; neglect of health, leisure, and intimacy to long hours at work; insensitivity to or, worse, exploitation of the vulnerability of others; puffery, deception and outright lies – all of these are condoned for the sake of profitability and competitive success.

But Radical Decency’s comprehensive and integrated approach pushes us in a very different direction. “Decency in every interaction” applies not just with family, friends,

and people like us. It applies in every context, at all times, and without exception. So, we are pushed to re-examine the normal and expectable ways in which things are done. Charging what the market will bear, little regard to the value of the product, is no longer acceptable. Equally, our easy judgment and dismissal of George W. Bush or the loud mouthed bigot sitting across from us at dinner also needs to be re-examined.

For me, these kinds of demands – to which we are driven as we dig into the nitty-gritty of the Radical Decency’s integrated approach – are positive and life altering. They remind us that work and the world politics cannot be altered by engaging in business as usual, but tying it to a more worthy goal.

Nor will we, as individuals, be transformed by a partial, pick and chose approach to decency. The values of the predominant culture are too pervasive and engrained. If we apply our values on an ad hoc basis – practicing them in some areas; rejecting them elsewhere, when it is convenient – we will recede to the cultural norm. Our efforts at change will wind up being tepid, partial, and peripheral.

So, out in the “real” world of work we need to resist (or better, vigorously challenge) the temptation to modify our mission in order to attract a mainstream funding source; to treat employees as an expense item, no different from plant and equipment, because our bank wants a more robust income statement; or to make the repeated “small” sacrifices of decency – a extra undisclosed charge here, an unwarranted claim of expertise there – that the pressure to be profitable invites. Indeed, we need to embrace the possibility of failure, as that term is conventionally defined, if the alternative is the slow death of our values and larger mission in life.

All of this – and much more – is brought into more vivid focus when we seek to apply “decency in every interaction” to our dealings in the larger world.

There is one final aspect of the philosophy’s integrated approach, bearing on decency in every interaction, which I want to highlight. The mainstream culture invites us to compartmentalize our lives, putting our personal lives into one category, work in a second, and our social and political lives in a third. When we do this, however, our attention to decency “in every interaction” tends to focus on our interactions with family and friends, and not on strangers.

The result is that key aspects of decency with others are obscured. We focus on techniques for creating intimacy, while neglecting the important choices that precede the decision to be intimate. Also neglected are the thoughtful, decent choices that need to be made in situations where less intimacy is desired.

Thus, many books are written about being open and vulnerable, being a good listener, and constructively processing conflict. But there is much less discussion of how to create a boundary that limits or excludes intimate sharing in a respectful, understanding and empathic way. The reason? We seldom need these skills in dealing with family and friends. And the implicit message of the mainstream culture is that we have no obligation

to strangers or with people from whom we feel alienated. Since we don't need these skills, we make little or no effort to develop them.

This means that, in seeking to treat others with decency, our range of skills is limited and distorted. So, for example, a person seeks us out as a friend. If we are not interested, the "normal" response in our culture is to ignore his calls or to make excuses, until he gets the hint. In other words, attention to how we are treating this person receives no serious attention.

On one occasion, not long ago, a person was seeking a closer relationship with me. In a moment of clarity, I told her that, while I liked her, she was likely to be disappointed if she was expecting more regular contact. With my work and other commitments, I didn't have the time or inclination to invest that kind of energy in our friendship.

What I did isn't noteworthy. What is remarkable, however, is how little time we spend reflecting on possible strategies for being more decent in these situations. My belief is that a comprehensive and integrated approach to decency would support us in finding more decent ways to create and accept appropriated boundaries, and to acknowledge and be more comfortable with difference.

Another area where we pay an enormous price for our culture's lack of interest in bringing decency to non-intimate situations is in our politics. Meet the Press and Face the Nation on Sunday morning offer a stark lesson in ineptness. A politician makes partisan speech, masquerading as the answer to a question. It is non-responsive, disingenuous, and peppered with inaccuracies. Then, with little or no effort to point this out, the moderator elicits a different, but similarly nonresponsive and disingenuous response from a spokesperson for the other side. And these programs are, of course, among the more responsible political programs offered by the mainstream media!

What is disturbing is the absence of any serious discussion of meaningful change to this dismal charade. Should the moderator intervene more forcefully? Should sarcasm and ridicule be disallowed? Should nonpartisan experts be routinely added? Each is a reasonable suggestion. But there is no meaningful discussion of these issues in the public dialogue. Why? Because, given the mainstream culture's preoccupation with competition and power, there is little interest in bringing new norms of decency into non-intimate relationships, including relationships among participants in our ongoing dialogue about politics and public policy.

So numbed by years of exposure to this sham, we are conditioned to tolerate, not just nonsense, but grotesque indecency as the norm in our debate over issues that vitally affect the lives of millions of people. And, habitual indecency in our political debate sets the stage for public tolerance of inhumane, murderous, indecent policies.

As these examples illustrate, the failure to create an integrated and comprehensive approach to living comes at a high price. But the more hopeful message is that, by embracing Radical Decency and similar programs, we can do so much better.