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Recognizing, Naming and Valuing Difference

I went to high school in the early 1960s, a different era – before the Stonewall riots and the women’s movement. So it never occurred to me and my friends that Miss Dodge and Miss Wheaton, who walked from their apartment to school each day, were lesbians. Years later, I watched a movie in which a lesbian’s life long partner died suddenly. The nephew arrives a few days later and “generously” tells her to stay in the house (titled in the decedent’s name) for another 30 days because she and his aunt were such good friends. Since her marriage was unnamed and unacknowledged, she was rendered mute, unable to express her anguish at the loss not only of her partner but of her home as well.

A final anecdote: An author at the center of the lesbian scene in Greenwich Village in the early 1950s, when interviewed, talked about how they loved the dime store novels of that era in which a young woman would visit the “dark” side only to be “saved” in the end by a man’s love. For them, the endings were irrelevant. What excited them was that their world was being acknowledged; they were being named; they existed.

This sort of marginalization is one of the culture’s most powerful tools of oppression. In some cases, the oppressed group literally has no name; think, for example, of the decades of child abuse in the Catholic Church. Prior to disclosure, the victims didn’t exist. If they dared to speak up they were dismissed as trouble makers, delusional, or worse.

In other cases, such as being a lesbian in the 1950s – or a transgendered or intersexed person today – the culture does offer a name. But the group is so thoroughly stigmatized and marginalized that it is seldom talk about – and when it is, the discussion is suffused with embarrassment and conducted hushed tones. The group exists in theory but there is no acknowledgment that its members are real people, living with and amongst us.

In either situation, repression is taken to a new level. When you are part of a recognized group, you can coalesce with others and take countermeasures. But when who you are is unacknowledged or your existence is deeply suppressed, the level of isolation and negation goes much deeper.

Even the seemingly simple act of naming yourself, to yourself, is tough. Many gays and lesbians of my generation always knew their sex drive was different. But because homosexuality was so marginalized and stigmatized they were, for years, in the closet not only to others but to themselves as well. And the challenge doesn’t end there. There is also the daunting problem of finding others like you for communion and support.

So being unnamed and unacknowledged, the more common result is diffuse, ill understood pain – frustration, loneliness, depression, confusion, a feeling that things just

aren't right. And because you don't understand the cause of your pain you assume, more often than not, that there is something wrong with you.

This phenomenon is deeply political. Groups at risk of invisibility are groups that interfere with, or slow the momentum of, the culture's predominant values. And while this political agenda is relentlessly applied to the economically and socially disenfranchised, it also reaches deep within our psyches.

The culture pushes us to be a certain kind of person: Logical, focused, goal oriented, organized, efficient, a good linear thinker. But who we are encompasses much more. We are also emotional, visual, sensing, tactile, and so on. And these qualities also need to be honored and nourished if we hope to create vital fulfilling lives. Fortunately, people have a wide variety of dispositions and aptitudes. There is no shortage of people who can help us understand our potential in each of these areas. But the mainstream culture's support for these people is tepid at best. And the more they diverge from the culture's left brain ideal, the less they are seen and acknowledged.

Take my friend William, for example. Trained at the best schools, he has all the necessary left brained skills. But that is not who he is. William's core passions and gifts are tactile and sensing, an essentially nonverbal world of movement and sensation. He loves to milk goats. He has tracked animals, been on archeological digs, and led bicycle trips. Recently, he spent a summer working on a family farm in the Pyrenees.

I don't understand the joy William feels in milking goats at 5 a.m. in the dead of winter. But I do know that I am deeply nourished by his very different sensibility; a sensibility that leads him to these choices.

Life has not been easy for William. Being smart, organized and charming, he spent years doing what he was supposed to do; working as a teacher and business executive. But he had no passion for these jobs. Much of the time, he was discouraged and confused.

A key cause of William's pain is the culturally imposed invisibility, described above. Systems perpetuate themselves and as they become more entrenched these self-perpetuating mechanisms elaborate and extend their reach. Thus, as the culture's competitive, win/lose norms have become more predominant, the pressure to live that life has steadily increased – and support for other styles of thinking and feeling has become ever more marginalized.

So having an “artistic” or “spiritual” sensibility is ok, so long as you find a way to make money off of it; that is, so long as you demonstrate competence in the skills that the mainstream culture demands. Absent that, your sensibility and habits of living are likely to be seen as a problem to be overcome rather as a different, and valued, way of living.

While William is a dramatic example, this same phenomenon applies to many individuals who, on the surface, seem to be doing just fine in the mainstream culture. These people fit in – sort of – but in fact the emotional fit is uncomfortable. However, responding to the

culture's pressures, they let their less mainstream aptitudes and passions atrophy through neglect and disuse. The result is a diminished life not only for themselves but for those around them as well, since they are deprived of that person's unique contributions.

When it comes to better recognizing, naming and valuing difference, the challenge is multi-dimensional. We need to cultivate a heightened sense of curiosity and possibility about people who are different from us. We need to manifest these qualities in our daily interactions. And, we need always to be alive to its political dimensions.

One area where progress is vital and where the potential rewards are great is in the workplace. Work is the epicenter of our culture's competitive, win/lose values. We spend the best hours of the majority of our days there and, at most jobs, the pressure to take on a mainstream persona is unrelenting. If meaningful change is the goal, a priority focus on the work environment seems crucial.

Imagine a workplace where an employee does not feel compelled to stifle his differences out of fear. Imagine as well an employer who does not instinctually judge and marginalize that worker but instead seeks to engage with, and magnify, his unique strengths. And when that is not possible, consider the possibility of an employer who then seeks to modify the worker's job description, hours, and (if necessary) compensation to maintain his viability as an employee.

There is no practical impediment making this a reality. Indeed, one very realistic outcome would be soaring morale and increased productivity. And there are, in fact, companies that experiment with this sort of approach.

What we need, however, is a paradigm shift – from “interesting experiments by a few companies” to “accepted way of doing business.” But that will require companies to replace current marketplace norms with a comprehensive set of new, more humane values; values such as those reflected in Radical Decency's approach to living. Why? Because, if companies remain psychically wedded to old ways of operating, competitive pressures will inevitably cause them to regress to the (culture's) norm: Reserving the new policies' benefits for their most economically productive workers; shrinking or abandoning the initiative when, as is inevitable, the company goes through a period of reduced profitability.

Such an approach to decency will never succeed. Inured to inhumane workplaces, employees will quickly smell a rat and, very sensibly, refuse the invitation to greater openness and trust.

As this example illustrates, effective strategies for fostering a greater appreciation of difference are difficult to craft and even more challenging in their execution. But the rewards are commensurate with the challenge. People like William will find their place in the world more easily and with less pain, and we will all be enriched by the new vistas that their more robust and empowered involvement will open up.