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Radical Decency Reflection #15
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Transforming Business – Values-Based Social Justice

Our culture's predominant values – competition, dominance and control – have been around for a long time. And as I have often pointed out in these Reflections, systems elaborate and perpetuate themselves. So it is not surprising that a vast array of perspectives and habitual ways of operating have embedded these values in virtually every aspect of our lives.

Teasing these processes out, in all their variety and subtlety, is an essential part of meaningful change work. Far more than we understand, our best efforts to create better lives and a better world are defeated by our assumed, unexamined perspectives on living. This Reflection deals with one example: Our taken for granted ways of viewing social justice and social change work.

Our generally accepted, mainstream definition of social justice is as follows: Working to bring greater equity and justice into the lives of the economically and socially disenfranchised. While this definition seems sensible it is, in reality, a mechanism for guiding otherwise well-intentioned people away from any serious investment in social change work. Here's how the process works.

Defining social justice in this way, we are invited into two areas of activity. One option – the global approach – is to tackle one of the big issues: Poverty, war, environmental degradation. But, given their size, these sorts of issues are not an effective call to action. Who do we call, what meeting do we go to go – to make even the smallest perceptible dent in world hunger? Lacking any but the most quixotic of answers, we stifle our better instincts and get back to the more pressing business of getting by in the world as it is.

The other option – the worm's eye view – is to do service work, volunteering for Habitat for Humanity or a local shelter. Here too, we quickly see the insignificance of our contribution. Given the macro forces that drive our society, we could work at the shelter 24 hours a day, 7 days a week for the rest of our lives and things will continue to deteriorate. Once again, it is an invitation to inaction.

Good things certainly happen when we pursue social justice in these culturally sanctioned ways. But the deeper truth is that, channeled into these areas of activity, we focus on the consequences of our inhumane culture and give the system itself a free ride. Thus, their overall effect is to marginalize reform energy and, in so doing to perpetuate the status quo.

It's as though, with a pack of wolves running loose, we focus all of our efforts on patching the wounds of the injured, making no efforts to hunt and kill the pack. And

this is, of course, our reality. We are being attacked, every day, by an enormous, culturally sanctioned pack of ravenous wolves – with most of us being both wolves (or wolf enablers) and victims.

So what is the way out? We need to shift our strategic focus from the victims of the system to the perpetrators. Instead of imploring indifferent politicians and businesspeople to allocate a few more dollars for the poor, we need to systematically challenge the habits of mind and routine ways of operating that make self-aggrandizement – money and power – their unquestioned priority.

Such a values-based approach to social justice avoids the global vs. worm's eye dichotomy that plagues current social justice efforts. Indecency is endemic in our culture, dominating our politics, day- to-day dealings as workers and consumers, and personal relationships. So every day, and virtually every encounter, offers the opportunity to make choices that promote a more humane set of values.

However, a fundamental shift in the way we live will not happen spontaneously; through serendipitous parallel choices of millions and millions of good-hearted people. It will require instead determined organization around appropriate strategic goals. One of the great virtues of this values-based approach to social justice is that it points the way to such an organizing focus.

Systemic social justice efforts usually focus on politics. Against overwhelming evidence to the contrary, we hope that a people indoctrinated into a competitive, every man for himself, dog eat dog approach to living will elect good-hearted politicians who will legislate on behalf of the disenfranchised. When we focus on bad values as the root cause of our endemic indecency, however, the obvious becomes painfully clear: Politicians are not motivated by humane values and are not even leaders, in any meaningful sense. They are instead poll-takers and panderers who, in their zeal to get elected, unerringly reflect the culture's predominant values

So where should our organizing efforts be directed? Toward business, the epicenter and driving force behind the culture's indecent values. Why? Because the wealth generated by business is the main driver of system. Not just politicians but also the media, mainstream churches, universities, and nonprofits – all are dependent on streams of financing and income that find their way back to business' profits and accumulated capital.

So if the prevailing mindset in business shifts and, with it, their allocation of resources, the world we live in will shift with it. Imagine how different things would be if mainstream companies were seriously committed to quality products at a fair price, worker welfare, truth in marketing, socially conscious purchasing and investing, environmental prudence, and so on.

There are also a number of factors that make a strategic initiative in the workplace realistic – exquisitely difficult but realistic nonetheless. To begin with, there are no elections. An empowered CEO can simply implement Radical Decency.

Moreover, the idea that a company can be fully committed to Radical Decency – and profitable – is entirely plausible. Such a company would be well positioned to attract a highly competent and fiercely loyal group of employees and customers. Imagine, for example, the market niche for the first credit card company that treats its customers fairly – doing away with 30 page single spaced contracts, usurious interest rates, and exorbitant penalties and late charges.

Finally, the business world lends itself to serious organizing efforts on behalf of Radical Decency. Meetings to discuss its implementation can occur at 10 a.m. on a Tuesday, people will show up on time and will treat their take-away assignments seriously. Why? Because it is part of their jobs. This may sound like a trivial point, but it isn't. Imagine how hard it would be to schedule a single meeting of neighbors, let alone a series of meetings, to take action against a local environmental hazard?

Needless to say, getting such a movement off the ground – even in individual companies – will present an enormous challenge. One problem is that many companies have cynically crafted marketing campaigns around these kinds of values (“quality is our most important product”). For this reason, any initiative in this area is likely to be greeted with skepticism, both within the company and in the marketplace.

In addition, the project can only succeed if decency is applied radically – at all times, in every context, and without exception. And that requires guts, patience and persistence. Absent such a commitment, mainstream competitive pressures and habits of mind will overwhelm the initiative, unraveling it piece by piece, exception by pragmatic exception – quality compromised for the sake of profitability; lawyers dictating how disputes are handled; the reduction or elimination of humane worker benefits and environmental programs when (as is inevitable) a few less profitable quarters are strung together.

The initiative for this shift in approach could come from many sources – shareholder activists, unions, business schools, socially conscious funders. My immediate hope, however, is that a group of wise and determined business people – seeing these possibilities – will undertake the serious work of organizing for Radical Decency, in both their individual businesses and in the larger business community.

While the future is inherently uncertain, the chance of such an initiative actually transforming our mainstream ways of doing business is, of course, surpassingly small. But we can strive to create – and to offer to others – a new, more nourishing, more life-affirming business model. And remembering that Radical Decency is its own reward, is there a better way to spend our time and energy?