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Radical Decency Reflection #17
December 6, 2010 (revised and repub, August 28, 2011)

Decency – A Baseline Definition

“Decency” is a useful summarizing term, evoking certain attitudes and behaviors, and disqualifying others. But Radical Decency’s goal is broad and ambitious: To provide a new and more humane, orienting frame of reference for handling the endless variety of situations and circumstances that constitute our lives. To move effectively toward this goal, a detailed roadmap for understanding what we mean by “decency” is essential.

Toward that end, I have evolved this working definition: Respect, understanding, empathy, equity, and justice. Testing its utility, over time, I always refer back to an intensely practical question – at the heart of Radical Decency: How well does this definition support us in making the day by day choices that can best guide us toward more nourishing, purposeful, and generative lives?

One of Radical Decency’s core beliefs is that we are intensely social creatures, deeply influenced by our environments, and that we live in an endemically indecent world. To counteract the culture’s corrosive influences, our operating model of decency needs to guide us toward choices that feed our individual spirit and, at the same time, actively re-mold the many mainstream environments that do so much to divert us from our goal. No small task.

Tested by this standard, my base line definition holds up pretty well. However, as I have worked with Radical Decency over the years, I have come to believe that additional qualities – trickier in their application – have the potential to further energize the philosophy and extend its possibilities. In this Reflection, I discuss my base-line definition. In a future Reflection I will discuss these additional qualities.

Respect, understanding, empathy, equity, and justice – each is a broad concept, open to a wide variety of interpretations. In addition, they are more commonly viewed as distinct values, at best, only loosely related to one another. When it comes to operationalizing Radical Decency, however, this group of values needs to be viewed as a unified whole, with each working with the others, magnifying their impact. The discussion that follows begins with an explanation of their interconnectedness and goes on to offer a working definition of each.

Interconnectedness

To see how these qualities reinforce one another, consider “respect.” In the absence of “understanding,” “empathy,” “equity” and “justice,” respect is pallid and incomplete, exemplified at its worse by the cold, even cruel person who is

unfailingly polite. Similarly, equity and justice – uninformed by respect, understanding, and empathy – invite angry, adversarial, and destructive political radicalism.

Another example of this deep interconnectivity is the relationship between empathy, on the one hand, and understanding and justice, on the other. Because we live in an indecent world, we need to manage our feelings of empathy judiciously. Understanding allows us to be discerning, and appropriately protective, when the object of our instinctual concern is duplicitous, manipulative or dangerous. And embracing an active sense of justice, we are better able to act on appropriate empathy even when it involves sacrifice or risk – or to offer a more measured response when considerations of justice dictate that choice instead.

Others examples abound. But the bottom line is that, living in such a complicated and treacherous world, we need to actively cultivate a range of skills in order to navigate the tricky road that more fully accounts for decency in every area of living – to our self – to others – and to the world.

Respect

Respect is Radical Decency's entry way value; the orienting context in which the other values can be more productively cultivated. When it is absent, our empathy and desire to do justice quickly dissipate in the face of behaviors we find uncomfortable or offensive. As a nonprofit executive once said to me, many of our donors are interested only in "pretty little white girls in wheelchairs" – not in overweight, verbally outspoken African Americans.

The mainstream culture associates respect with politeness: Expressing yourself with civility; making space for others. Properly conceived, however, it encompasses much more, challenging us to consistently presume good will; to sustain that presumption in the face of provocation; and to value the contribution of others.

The competitive, win/lose values that pervade our culture make manipulative and underhanded behavior all too common. So an approach that ignores these possibilities does not make sense. At the same time, however, we need to interrupt our automatic inclination to label the speaker we disagree with a heartless conservative or knee jerk liberal; or a friend who is critical and self-absorbed as selfish or mean.

With respect as our habitual mindset, bad motives need to become the last option. We need to strive, instead, to make sense of people with whom we disagree; to see them as people who, seeking to get by in a difficult world, are doing the best they can.

Understanding and Empathy

Primed – by our habit of "respect" – to be curious rather than judgmental and dismissive, there is a natural flowering of understanding and empathy: Our ability to

be aware of differing outlooks, beliefs and communication styles, to see the world as others see it (understanding, or cognitive discernment); and to feel in our bones what it feels like to be another person (empathy, or emotional and visceral discernment).

Many people instinctually resist these “soft and fuzzy” values, seeing them as an invitation to bullying and domination. Far from advancing the goal of better lives and a better world, their consistent application will (they tell themselves) simply increase their victimization. Driven by this fear, they are drawn to a “fight fire with fire” approach – seeking to overpower their adversaries and silence their voices.

This approach will never succeed. Adopting it, even a “win” becomes a loss since it perpetuates the very system we seek to overcome. The stark truth is this: We’ll never be able to bully our spouse – or the world – into being more relational and decent.

Equity and Justice

Being equitable, we make fair play the touchstone of our behaviors in every area of living. Being just, we cultivate and maintain a sense of accountability for our own actions and the actions of others. Notice importantly that, from a Radical Decency perspective, the goal is not to judge ourselves or others. Instead, we are reaching for an ongoing, fearless inventory of what we and others are doing that, in turn, leads to a consistent challenge to the inequities and injustices that litter our life and world.

A full-throttle commitment to equity and justice is the crucial, rubber-hit-the-road test of our commitment to Radical Decency. It is at this point – and this point only – that we become active agents for fundamental change, not only in our politics but also at work, in our intimate relationships, and in the ways in which we treat ourselves.

But such a commitment flies in the face of the mainstream culture’s incessant message: To compete and get ahead, to build a career and make money. Indeed, even those of us who want to resist these pressures – anxious to get by in the world, as it is – feel compelled to make choices that, to a disturbing degree, reflect this mindset.

In this environment, support for simple notions of equity and fair play is shockingly thin. While there is some cultural support for extending ourselves on behalf of family and friends, the drop-off beyond this limited area is steep. With our co-workers, we too easily jettison notions of fair when it interferes with our ambitions. And in arms-length business relationships – with customers, vendors, funders, and so on – the norm is to get away with what you can, to deny responsibility, and to blame others when challenged.

When it comes to decency in the world, the absence of cultural expectations is even more pronounced. There is no perceptible pressure to invest with, or to purchase from, socially conscious companies or even to avoid the most virulently exploitative. Instead, we are encouraged to go for the best price and best return on investment – decency be damned. Equally absent is any expectation of involvement with groups that promote social justice. Instead, we fill our time with the relentless work demands, endless chores, and the distraction of entertainment and consumption.

In this environment, making the day-by-day choices that make equity and justice a priority is exquisitely difficult. Given the mainstream culture's relentless demands, we are fiercely protective of our time, money, and job security. But if we hope to be radically decent, we cannot accept the culture's easy invitation to avoid these responsibilities.

We need to seriously consider how we allocate our time and money – what we offer to others, what we conserve, what we use for our own purposes – and, equally, what we buy, where we buy it, and how and where we invest. We also need to be inquisitive about all forms of oppression – among the economically and socially disenfranchised, at most workplaces, in the marketplace (where superior resources almost always dictate results) and, importantly, in our relationships. We need to recognize that bullying or silencing a spouse or child perpetuates the same pattern of dominance, control, and exploitation that is so instrumental in creating the injustices and inequities that permeate the world.

The crucial piece in all of this is the need to act. We need to reach, always, for the choice that is more equitable and just – and respectful, understanding, and empathic – to ourselves, others and the world. Only then can we legitimately lay claim to a fully committed Radical Decency practice.