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 Radical Decency Reflection #27
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Radical Decency – The Basics

Radical Decency is an idea that came together for me about 9 years ago. Since then, I have been working through its implications, in my life and in a variety of professional initiatives. Because it seeks to be a comprehensive approach to living, its guiding principles have led to me to new perspectives in a wide variety of areas – from politics and business, to intimate relationship and death and dying.

Writing these weekly Reflections, I have jumped into these topics with only occasional references to the philosophy's basic premises; the core set of perspectives from which my thinking derives. For many readers, it may (accurately) feel like they are dropping into the middle of a very long conversation.

So in this Reflection, I offer a basic statement of what Radical Decency is. I also explain why, in my view, it speaks with special force to the central challenges we face – in this time and place – as we seek to create better lives and a better world.

We live in a highly valued world. But, unfortunately, the values that predominant – competing and winning, domination and control – lead to incalculable damage to our selves and others. Indeed, the evidence is irrefutable: We live in a failed culture. Why? Because, starting a culture from scratch, you would want it to support us in pursuing at least one of the following goals:

Being decent to our selves; or
 Being decent to others; or
 Being decent to the world.

Sadly, remarkably, our world fails to support us in any of these purposes. Consider, for example, these questions:

With regard to how we treat our selves: Does the culture support us in doing the things that truly nourish and satisfy us? Or do we feel compelled to devote our most productive time and energy to making money; to jobs that drain our energy and distract us from our deepest longings?

With regard to how we treat others: Does the culture make concern for others a priority? Or is the operating rule of thumb to focus on how other people's actions affect us; or, even more narrowly, on what they can do for us? Does the culture model and reinforce curiosity about other people's ideas and opinions? Or does it teach us to judge and dismiss people who are different? Does the culture encourage us to treat people in need

with respect and generosity? Or does it condone and implicitly encourage half measures and outright indifference?

With regard to how we treat the world: Does the culture encourage us to marshal the environment's resources with caution and care? Or does it place primary emphasis on their unrestrained exploitation for our material advantage? Beyond the treatment of house pets, gardens, and window plants, does the mainstream culture provide any significant support for life choices that actively consider the fate of other living things?

Operating in an environment that is saturated with cues, incentive and sanctions that push us toward indecent behaviors, the compelling question before us is this: What can we do to reverse this dismal equation? How can we craft ways of living that are more decent to our self, to others, and to the world? This is the question Radical Decency seeks to address.

Doing so, we first need to deal with the realities of our biology. We humans are profoundly creatures of habit; wired to do in the future what we did in the past. And, far more than we care to acknowledge, the culture's predominant values are woven into the very fabric of our taken-for-granted, habitual ways of living. In large ways and small, they pull us toward the "safe," "smart," and "obvious" choices that, in the end, root us in ways of operating that, being borne into this culture, are our unfortunate birthright.

Given this reality, the process of diverging from our mainstream ways living cannot operate solely or predominantly at a cognitive/logical level: Identify the problem, craft a solution, implement. Instead, what is called for is a re-habitation process. We need to systematically cultivate new habits of living that can, with practice and persistence, replace our status quo ways of operating.

Working from these premises, Radical Decency invites us to be decent to our self, to others, and to the world and – crucially – to do it on an across-the-board basis: At all times, in every context, and without exception. At its core, the philosophy grows out of this simple premise: If we whole-heartedly commit to this different way of living, we have a fighter's chance of leading a better life and contributing to a better world.

The reverse is also true. If we adopt a pick and chose approach to decency – with family and friends but not at work; in our self-care but only in half-hearted ways in our politics – we will fail. Given their pervasiveness, the mainstream values we continue to practice – out there, in the real world – will inevitably invade and compromise the small, private islands of decency we seek to create.

The really good news in all of this is that a fully committed Radical Decency practice is not just the right thing to do. It is also the surest path to a better life. Here's how it works.

Seeking to harmonize and balance decency to self, others, and the world, we are confronted with a seemingly endless series of difficult choices. When, for example, does self-care take precedence over the needs of others – and vice versa? And when we truly face up to our responsibility to the disenfranchised, what is an appropriate allocation of time and money to their needs?

With these challenges, however, come a whole series of life changing benefits. When grappling with these “wisdom stretching” dilemmas becomes our habitual way of operating, there is a perceptible shift in outlook and approach. We instinctually reach for a richer understanding of the diverse needs, motives and feelings – ours and others – with which we must deal. And with that, we become more open, curious, thoughtful, and reflective.

As we settle into these new habitual mindsets, increased emotional awareness and analytic acuity are the inevitable byproducts. We also develop an increased ability to act, even in uncomfortable situations; the patience and self-control to forbear when that is the better choice; and the wisdom to know the difference.

The endpoint? When all that we do is approached with openness, curiosity and growing sense of discernment, we wind up with an increased sense of:

Living in the present, which leads to less shame, guilt, and remorse about the past, and fear and anxiety about the future;

Appreciation, empathy, acceptance, and love for our self and others, which leads to less judgment, jealousy, possessiveness, greed, and need to control;

Clarity and coherence about our priorities and choices, which leads to less anxiety and an increased sense of ease in life; and

An ennobling sense of purpose, which leads to less hopelessness and mistrust and an increased sense of vibrancy, aliveness, and pleasure in living.

These are, it seems to me, the attributes of a vibrant and nourishing life. And a committed Radical Decency practice is a vital pathway toward their realization.

In my view, Radical Decency works. If the goal is to create better life and a better world, it offers the strong medicine we need to deal with the virulent cultural disease that ails us.

But the wisdom, in adopting a committed Radical Decency practice, does not depend on my analysis being correct. In the end, a radically decent life is its own reward.