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 Radical Decency Reflection #28  
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## **An Aspirational Approach to Living**

Last week's Reflection brought the following provocative and thoughtful reaction – the subject of this week's Reflection:

If "picking and choosing" where to practice Radical Decency is "doomed to failure" does that mean only saints can succeed? How does one incrementally improve? . . . If Radical Decency is doomed to failure unless applied at all times to everything, must I be a Buddhist monk or the equivalent?

This is an issue that has gnawed at me for years. Am I doing enough? If I tend to myself, am I neglecting clients, family, and friends? How do I explain my continuing habit of shopping for the best deal, without regard to the vendor's "decency profile"? Surrounded by so much hardship and deprivation, how many \$200 excursions to Eagles' games or \$4,000 trips to the Caribbean – if any – are enough, before I stray into habits of entitlement and self-indulgence?

There have been times when – on a comparative basis – my wife and I would have been described as highly charitable. But decency is not a comparative sport. And even in our best years, our contributions to social justice causes were always in the single digits as a percentage of income and less than 1% of our net worth. Moreover, as our income and net worth have declined – due to a stagnant stock market and my switch from law to psychotherapy – our deepest cuts have been to our charitable budget.

How should I manage these persistent ruminations and doubts? Should I conclude that, indulging in "pick and chose decency," I have failed to embrace the very approach to living I advocate? Perhaps. But after many years of head scratching, I have come to a different conclusion.

Radical Decency seeks to decisively diverge from the competitive, win/lose values that predominate in our culture, replacing them with a more humane set of values. That is its central purpose. With this in mind, notice the extent to which this self-judgmental approach replicates the very values Radical Decency seeks to replace. Tally up the evidence and make a judgment: Have I succeeded in being radically decent – or not? Am I a saint – or a failure?

One unfortunate byproduct of this unforgiving, all-or-nothing mindset is a sense of ineffectiveness and helplessness. And that, in turn, invites passivity and a retreat from Radical Decency's seemingly impossible challenges. So, when we slip into this

approach, the very values Radical Decency seeks to supplant deeply insinuate themselves back into the philosophy. The result: Radical Decency is transformed into an unwitting ally of the mainstream culture, dissipating and marginalizing the very reform energies it seeks to unleash.

When we understand this process, resistance to this self-judgmental approach becomes still another key aspect of a successful Radical Decency practice. Contrary to our culture's individualistic, "can-do" mindset, success in being radically decent requires far more than an individual act of will. In particular, we need to understand how our efforts are complicated, and compromised, both by our biology and the environment in which we operate. Only then will we be able let go of the shame, guilt, and self-judgment that our shortcomings provoke and, in doing so, free ourselves to deal with our "failures" more effectively.

The culture's debilitating effect on our Radical Decency efforts is, needless to say, an outgrowth of its pervasive influence in our lives. Attending schools that relentlessly focus on testing and grades indoctrinates us, from an early age, into its competitive mindset. And throughout our lives, we are – through the media – saturated with mainstream roll models and an endless litany of "heart warming" stories about how you can accomplish anything – if you just try hard enough.

When it comes to a more decent set of values, however, the cultural landscape is vastly different. These values are typically ignored – and frequently demeaned as soft and naïve. So we are literally on our own as we seek to wean ourselves from the mainstream culture's relentless propaganda machine.

Moreover, the norm in the culture is to be warm, friendly and congenial – except, that is, when it really matters. Then, go for the jugular. As a result, building communities of support for this different way of living – already a challenging task – is further complicated by the difficulty in distinguishing between true allies and those who talk a good game.

And then, of course, there is also the problem of our biology. In doing this work, we need always to remember that, by our very nature, we are highly susceptible to environmental influences and predisposed to reflexively repeat past behaviors. So in addition to everything else, we need to continually resist our innate tendency to recede, in large ways and small, to mainstream ways of thinking and acting.

These complicating factors leave all of us humbled before the challenge that Radical Decency represents. Indeed, my operating (though unprovable) theory is that no one is radically decent – and that, as a result, viewing the philosophy as an attainable, concrete endpoint is an illusion; a false god.

The better approach? – To view Radical Decency as an aspirational goal; as an ideal that provides an empowering framework for grappling the complex choices that are the philosophy's meat and potatoes. Working from this perspective, "being"

radically decent is no longer the holy grail. Instead, success is measured by our willingness to make Radical Decency our highest priority and by the focus, persistence, imagination, and sheer guts with which we pursue its practice.

The Buddhist approach to meditation offers a useful model. In the basic practice, you are taught to focus on your breathing as a way of rooting yourself in the present moment. But you are also told that your brain will wander. Inevitably – and repeatedly – your thoughts will drift to memories from the past and thoughts about the future. When this occurs, you are instructed to notice what has happened and – without judgment – to re-focus on your breathing.

Similarly, with Radical Decency, we need to attend to each moment's endless possibilities for being decent – to our self, to others, and to the world – and the ways in which we can balance and harmonize these disparate goals. But then, inevitably – and repeatedly – our attention will falter.

We will be distracted by old habits, seeking an edge or defending ourselves with sarcasm. Or, slipping into the mainstream mindset that equates well-being with job security, we will over focus on work, neglecting in the process our loved ones and our own needs. Or, infected by the culture's obsession with financial security, we will fail to consider a meaningful charitable contribution or the offer of aid to a financially strapped co-worker or friend. Or, weighed down by the sheer breadth and complexity of the choices that continually confront us, we will simply lose focus.

When these things happen, we need to notice our faltering attention – and the return of our old, mainstream habits. Then, without judgment, we need to return to our Radical Decency practice; learning from our lapses, doing effective repair work when that is called for, and stretching in new, more creative and effective decency choices.

Committed, long-term meditators do not eliminate their brain's distractability. In that sense, they never succeed. But this does not mean that they have failed. To the contrary, persisting in their practice over the years – trying and falling short, trying again and “failing” again – they fundamentally shift their outlook and way of living.

A similar process is at work in Radical Decency. Just as a committed meditation practice chips away at an engrained, biologically determined mindset, so too, a dedicated Radical Decency practice chips away at engrained, social determined ways of being. We will never succeed. We will always fall short. But my hope – and passionate belief – is that, in the process, we will craft better lives and more effectively contribute to a world that is more decent and humane.