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Radical Decency Reflection #3
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Why Can't You Do the Dishes?

Last week, I discussed the extent to which the culture's predominant values – competition, dominance and control – have led to a virtual addiction to fight or flight states of mind. The discussion in that Reflection focused on some of its political implications. This week, I want to discuss the personal side.

In my analysis of the particulars of Radical Decency I refer to mutual and authentic contact as the philosophy's "vital pulse." If, in our relationship with ourselves and others, we develop habits of mind that allow us to express our needs in constructive ways and to hear the needs of others, then, as innately empathic and loving biological beings, we will naturally move toward decent choices in all areas of living.

The formulation sounds simple. But, as I have discovered in my relationships as well as my work as a psychotherapist and coach, its application is frustratingly difficult. Why? The overriding cause is our culturally induced tendency, when disagreements arise, to lapse into fight or flight patterns of thinking, feeling and acting.

Here is the example I want to discuss. A husband comes home and his wife, looking at a sink filled with breakfast dishes, says, "Why can't you clean the dishes?" The husband's response: "I was just too busy this morning, I usually do them, give me a break."

Even assuming that the tone or "music" of the communications is a relatively restrained, do you see how both sides of this dialogue flow from fight/flight states of mind? Both partners are focused on the recent past. The wife's relatively neutral words are in fact words of judgment; words of attack. You didn't do something – something you were supposed to do – and (by reasonable inference) something you all too frequently fail to do.

And what does the husband do? Equally focused on the past, he counterattacks. Instead of dealing the merits of the issue (who should do the dishes and when) – a response that would invite further dialogue – he seeks to disqualify his wife's position, telling her that she is wrong on the facts AND emotionally out of line in even raising the issue ("give me a break").

What usually happens next is – nothing. Each person, being subtly attacked, feels disconnected and sore. But the interaction is, in their minds, too commonplace to be worthy of further discussion. Better to absorb the pain and move on.

The other likely result is not, unfortunately, an honest, problem solving discussion (mutual and authentic contact). Instead, if the couple chooses to get into it, the far more

typical result is escalating attacks and counter-attacks until one or both parties go cold and withdraw (the flight part of fight/flight).

Much of the hard work of relationship needs to be done precisely in these small moments. We know how to seduce and charm – ways of acting that are congruent with (and in fact promote) dominance and control. But the culture does not train us to lovingly engage with one another at our points of sensitive difference. The reason: If these techniques were learned and internalized, they would undercut our existing habits of competition, dominance, and control. The predominant culture, as it has evolved, has an unacknowledged but powerful stake in minimizing these skills.

The challenge of Radical Decency, then, is to learn these skills and, over time, to make them our habitual ways of being, replacing our current fight or flight habits of living.

What would that look like in our example?

First, and very importantly, both partners would focus on the near future and not the immediate past. As a child of our fight or flight culture, the wife, ever vigilant to the possibility of attack, sees the dirty dishes as evidence that danger exists (her needs are being ignored, love is being withdrawn). With her fight or flight physiology activated, her words seek to deal with the perceived source of the attack: her husband and his past behaviors.

He likewise is focused on the immediate past; the words she just spoke. Why? Because in his culturally reinforced, overly vigilant state, he too is feels under attack (unappreciated, devalued, unloved). So he criticizes her and her comments to him.

What is so sad about this all too typical pattern is that there is nothing to defend. Each partner has made the other the most important person in his or her life. The levels of love, trust and respect are enormous.¹ So, the perceived attacker isn't a source of danger at all. He/she is, instead, the other partner's staunchest ally in life.

Given this reality, the couple would be better served by focusing, not on the illusory attacks of the recent past, but instead on the immediate future. Why? Because they each want to increase the love flowing back and forth between them, and the best way to do that is to focus on what they do next, rather than in picking apart the choices already made.

Here's how it would work. The wife wants to be loved in a specific way – by coming home to a clean kitchen. So she would ask for what she longs for: “Honey, it makes me feel great when you do the dishes before you leave in the morning.” Now, he is set up for a positive loving act (“sure, I’ll do my best to do it”) rather than a defensive counter-attack (“I am not a bad person for forgetting to do the dishes this morning”).

¹ Obviously, there are couples that make choices over time corrode and destroy the love, trust and respect. But, for now, I am speaking about the many couples for whom these qualities persist.

Alternatively, he might acknowledge her desire but say, “My mornings are really tight. It is difficult to take the time to do the dishes.” Now, with the needs of both partners on the table – her, for a concrete expression of love; him, for a routine that takes account of the pressures he feels – they can seek creative solutions that best meet each of their needs. With defensiveness eliminated, creative problem solving can flow since their goals – meeting their own needs and the needs of a partner they dearly love – are completely congruent.

A similar transaction can also be initiated at the husband’s end of the conversation. Not rising to the bait of her nascent reactivity – by counter-attacking – he can thank (yes, thank!) his wife for raising her issue. Why? Because he now has a more vivid roadmap for loving her. And that, along with decency to self, is one of his key priorities in life. Then, proceeding from a secure awareness of their mutual love, trust and respect, he can initiate the kind of forward-looking, positive solving conversation, described above.

While this different way of treating our intimate partner may seem a little unusual and strange, that is only because we are so relentlessly pushed toward very different ways of thinking, feeling and acting. The sad reality is that these more contactful and loving techniques are seldom taught and find precious little support in our culture. Hopefully, initiatives such as Radical Decency can act as healing correctives, in our intimate relationships and, by extension, in all other areas of living as well.

