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Radical Decency Reflection #30
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In Defense of Our Troubling Values

Central to Radical Decency is the belief that competition, dominance, and control – the values that dominate our culture – incalculably damage our selves and others. If we hope live differently and better, we need to wean ourselves from the corrosive habits of living that are spawned by the relentless emphasis on these values, replacing them with more decent ways of being.

Repeating this formulation over and over, it is easy to create a pantheon of good and bad values. Respect, understanding, empathy, equity and justice are good. Competition, dominance and control are bad. Doing so, however, misses the point. The problem is not inherent in the values themselves. It lies, instead, in their over emphasis and the relentless pressure to conform to their strictures.

Radical Decency puts its priority on modeling and promoting the virtues that are, in our culture, chronically neglected: Attending to the well being of the socially and economically disenfranchised; treating others with respect, empathy and fairness even when it draws energy from our competitive aspirations; focusing, with the seriousness it deserves, on our need for rest, reflection, novelty, and play.

But promoting these neglected values is not the full story. We are multi-faceted beings, with a wide range of dispositions – from the most loving and affiliative to highly aggressive and dominating. We also operate in diverse and, all too frequently, indifferent and unforgiving environments. So even as we pursue our aspirational goals, we need to constructively employ and manage our diverse biological instincts, and realistically come to grips with these harsh cultural realities. For these reasons, the culture's predominant values have an important – though far more limited – role to play in our lives.

Take competition, for example. Our pervasive emphasis on testing, grades, and getting into the “best” school – all the way down to the pre-school level – has led to an epidemic of self-judgment, anxiety, depression, and reactive coping mechanisms. Then, we deal with these horrific consequences by suppressing them, medicating them, and helping our children to become better-adapted competitors. For most of us, this troubled psychic world continues to dominate throughout our lives.

Given its indiscriminant use, it is easy to lose sight of the fact that a competitive spirit, properly used, sharpens our wits, motivates us to higher levels of

performance, and creates an intimate bond with co-competitors. An engrained part of our nature, it can add its own unique zest to the fabric of our lives.

Competitiveness, then, is not the problem. It is, instead, the grim, “winning is the only point” attitude that threatens to entirely eclipse this nourishing sort of competition. How far gone are we? Pretty far – and, I am afraid, farther than we think.

As things stand now, the coaches and parents of 10 year olds, who scream at referees and kids who don’t play well, are a cultural commonplace. And our “normal” expectation is that businesses will distort the truth, skimp on quality, and overreach in pricing to improve profitability; that is, to “win.”

Contrast these attitudes with the Talmud’s injunction that a losing litigant should thank the judge for enlightening him as to the correct behavior. Reading that as a young attorney, I was brought up short. It seemed so sensible and appealing – and so utterly foreign to the world in which I operated. Now, 30 years later, that sensibility seems even more farfetched. But imagine how different things would be if an attitude of curiosity, possibility and ease was more present in our competitions?

We also need to look beyond the inhumane versions of domination and control that are rampant in our culture. Like competitiveness, they are aspects of our psychic make-up that, used judiciously, are useful and, at times, indispensable.

Every day, and in virtually every area of living, we are surrounded by people who operate by the culture’s mainstream values. As a result, we continually confront this dilemma: How can we be appropriately self-protective (decency to self) without sacrificing decency to others and the world?

In many instances, the best approach is to create a firm boundary. As I often remind clients, sharing anger with a total stranger – such as the guy who buds in line – is an act of intimate disclosure. It increases your vulnerability and emotional connection with a person with whom you actually want no connection at all. Better to ignore him and to manage your feelings, either alone or with the support of someone you trust.

But sometimes this option is not viable. The bully persists. Or the bully is your boss or your child’s teacher. Or you are dealing with a person that seems intent on harming you. In these situations, acts of control or domination may be called for.

Far from being wrong, lying to a would-be rapist (control by deception) is an invaluable skill. And, after exhausting more respectful options, appropriately modulated counter aggression may be the best option when confronted with an implacable foe, intent on domination and control. Indeed, even a physical attack

may be appropriate when the only other option is injury or death from an unprovoked attack.

In the mainstream culture, competition, dominance and control are a habitual stance – not an exception, judiciously employed. Dealing with this reality, Radical Decency challenges us to better understand why these mainstream attitudes make sense. The reason? Because, doing so, we lay the groundwork for a more honest, respectful and cooperative dialogue. And that, in turn, is the most hopeful path toward healing and growth at both an individual and social/political level.

Traditional gender roles are one manifestation of these mainstream attitudes. Passive/placating women and unemotional/ unresponsive/work-first men – it is all too easy to dismiss these people as hopelessly stuck; unthinking conformists with whom any attempt at serious dialogue is a waste of effort.

But while these behaviors are limiting and counterproductive, we also need to recognize their value. As discussed in an earlier Reflection (#18, dealing with gender issues), women evolved, across 7 million years of species history, to be our early warning system; the folks who scan for danger. And, since duplicating this process made no sense, men evolved as reactors, not to the environment, but to women's emotions.

Given this evolutionary division of labor, men and women developed different emotional sensitivities. Woman – wired to react to danger – are especially susceptible to safety issues. Men – wired to their women – strive to be good providers, protectors and lovers and, for that reason, are more susceptible to shame.

These emotional sensitivities, deeply embedded in our psyches after millions of years of evolution, continue to drive our behaviors. Understanding this, the behavior of a placating woman is much more understandable. Her steady message to her mate – that he is a good provider, protector and lover – minimizes his shame and frees him to play his traditional role more effectively. In an analogous way, a stoic man – keeping his fears and anxieties to himself – attends to his spouse's emotional sensitivities by making her world seem safer.

Since we no longer live as hunter/gatherers, these restricted gender roles no longer serve us. But we need to understand their logic and utility – limited though it is. And we need to extend this understanding to other mainstream habits of living as well. Doing so, we enhance the possibility of a true meeting between people who are very different but who, more often than not, are both seeking, in good faith, to create better lives and a better world.