

Jeff Garson
Radical Decency Reflection #31
March 20, 2011

Perfectionism

One troubling aspect of psychotherapy is its focus on symptoms, rather than causes. Depression and related conditions, for example, consume 9 different DSM categories with more than 30 subcategories. And while many clients are chemically prone to depression – so that the symptoms are, in fact, a key issue – the great majority are dealing, wholly or partially, with non-organic issues.

Symptom relief is, without question, an urgent goal. But the growing tendency is to stop there; to see psychotropic medications and cognitive/behavioral interventions, not as important tactics in a larger fight, but as ends in themselves. Today, more than 90% of psychiatrists – the most educated and highly compensated clinicians – prescribe drugs and do nothing more. And more and more “talk based” clinicians have adopted short-term approaches to therapy, driven by insurance companies’ demands for “measurable” success toward “concrete” goals.

The reason for this trend is, to me, self-evident. The mental health establishment, like every other industry of any size and persistence, is not interested in pursuing problems to their root causes. Why? Because so many of the real culprits, lurking behind our emotional issues, are the unexamined values that keep us locked into our roles as compliant workers and consumers. Implicitly recognizing this reality, the mainstream culture – with its genius for self-perpetuation – will financially starve and marginalize any healing strategy that seriously challenges these attitudes and outlooks.

Salvatore Menuchin’s career is an object lesson in this phenomenon. His systems approach to family therapy was widely recognized and became a generative force in the profession. But his later work – applying these same ideas to larger social structures – was mostly ignored. Why? Because it dared to challenge our mainstream ways of operating.

In this Reflection, I deal with one of these root causes: Perfectionism. This mindset – an almost impossible to resist byproduct of our obsession with competing and winning, domination and control – is one of the more obvious causes, not just of depression, but also of our epidemic of anxiety, shame, and self-judgment.

Notwithstanding this reality, perfectionism is not a condition that is dealt with in the DSM. Indeed, the culture’s ability to deflect attention from the real drivers of our pain is exemplified by this chilling fact: Far from being seen as a problem, perfectionism – dressed up in more acceptable language – is widely seen as a

positive value, to be celebrated and encouraged. Indeed, this rhetoric is so pervasive that we scarcely notice, and rarely comment on, its perversity.

For me, the archetypal example is the culture's constant reminder that "we can do anything we want, if we just try hard enough." The inescapable second clause – studiously omitted in mainstream versions – is this: "and, if you don't accomplish your goals, there is something wrong with you."

This statement is, of course demonstrably false. The odds of a poor African American child going to an Ivy League college, after 12 years at a ghetto based public school, are astronomically small. Similarly, if you work in a dying industry, or are seeking work in a saturated market, you may not find any job at all, let alone the job of your dreams.

Moreover, the primary reason for these "failures" is not, in most cases, some defect in the person or lack of effort. To the contrary, the game is fixed: Those with money and connections have a long head start. The game is also arbitrary: Since most every system is authoritarian, a teacher or boss that has it in for you can squirrel the deal in a heartbeat. And, of course, our options are limited by our particular skills.

What is interesting is that we know this – and, yet, at the same time, utterly fail to follow through on its implications. For most of us – when it comes to our situation – there are no excuses. If we fall short, the automatic response is that "I" am the problem.

Never mind that there were massive lay offs. I, somehow, should have been the exception. And the fact I was sick – or distracted by my child's crisis at school – or am just not good at public speaking – none of these things matter. My presentation should have been crisp, tight, and compelling. Pointing to external causes feels wimpy and shameful. We need to "man up," take responsibility, redouble our efforts, do better the next time.

This automatic, socially engrained mindset is wonderfully effective – if the goal is to maintain the status quo. Since we habitually believe that we are in control of our fate, we reflexively blame ourselves; a state of mind that, in turn, breeds a wide variety of painful, psychic by-products. Ashamed of our failure, we isolate. Feeling ineffective, self-doubt saps our confidence and ability to act. Unable to shake the sense that we are "defective, "less than," "a fraud," we are primed to passively accept our fate.

I vividly remember a friend who, out of 300 job applicants, eventually became one of four finalists. When she didn't get the job, she felt like a failure. And in my work as a therapist, I visit innumerable moments of exquisite, private pain: The woman – vibrant, generative, and deeply loved by her husband – who struggles with feelings of failure because the laundry isn't getting done; or the man who is flooded with

shame because his boss – a man he doesn't like or respect – told him he wasn't measuring up.

Our obsession with being a perfect performer/competitor also deeply obscures the systemic factors that contribute to what ails us. Millions of people, financially leveled by the recession and downturn in the housing market, have taken second jobs and economized to a point of real pain. And yet, remarkably, there has been no perceptible movement to reform our patently corrupt financial system.

Similarly, a handful of "bad actors" were prosecuted for torturing prisoners in Iraq while the policies they were carrying out, and the people who created them, have been ignored. The implicit message: Policy and malevolent systems don't matter. "Good" people should just know what the right thing to do is – and have the will to do it.

Part of the genius of perfectionism, as an instrument of social control, is that no one can every live up to it. We walk around with a measuring stick in heads, remorselessly assessing our value. And, for most of us, there are moments of success. But the problem with measuring sticks is that anything less than 100% feels like failure. So our "wins" are, in reality, fleeting visits to an all but impossible to attain mountaintop; moments of surcease in a larger system where, losing – not measuring up – is the norm.

Consumed by this unwinnable game, virtually all of us are susceptible to the painful, spirit-sapping mindsets described above – and, I suspect, regularly experience them. The result? An epidemic of psychic pain that, in turn, allows our inhumane, status quo culture to operate without restraint – a good deal for this out of control system; a very bad deal for us.

Perfectionism is a byproduct of the culture's deeply engrained, predominant values. For this reason, programs such as Radical Decency – that seek to systematically replace our mainstream values with more humane ways of being – are the most strategically viable response; the strong medicine we need to deal with a virulent cultural disease. As we re-orient our energy toward the consuming task of being decent in all that we do – to our self, to others, and the world – our perfectionist habits, such a distraction from our more ennobling purposes, will, with time, wither and recede.

Getting from "here" to "there" is, however, an enormous challenge. Being creatures of habit, there is no easy way to wean our selves from our mainstream ways. My mantra to clients – and to myself – is that a fundamental change in outlook requires four things: Practice, practice, practice – and lots of support. The work is hard but the pay-offs are, potentially, life changing. And while it is a long shot, it is, as I see it, the most realistic path toward creating a better world.