

Jeff Garson
Radical Decency Reflection #32
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Being the Person I Hope to Become – My Personal Guide to Living

There are two aspects to Radical Decency. The first is to be “decent”: Respectful, understanding, empathic, equitable and just. See Reflection 17, *What Is Decency?* The second is to do it “radically,” at all times and in every area of living: With my self; with family, friends, and all of my communities; at work; in public affairs; and with the physical environment.

Where Radical Decency gets complicated – and interesting – is when we put it into practice. Doing so, we are confronted with a myriad of perplexing and, often, uncomfortable moments of choice as we seek to “radically” integrate and balance decency to self, others and the world. The devil is, quite literally, in the details.

To meet this challenge, I have developed a series of operational guidelines that orient my outlook and choices – moment by moment, day by day – so that Radical Decency can become a more vibrant reality in my life. Here they are:

1. I am important to the people in my life. What I do matters.
2. Understanding this, I am letting go of outcomes and attending to each moment’s endless possibilities for offering and accepting love.
3. With intent, focus, and persistence, I am modeling mutual and authentic contact in every area of living.

When these guidelines began to crystallize, my starting point was the second half of the second guideline – offering and accepting love. However, I quickly discovered that I was failing in my purposes. Far too often, my generosity of spirit was quashed or diminished by anger, annoyance, jealousy, or a fear of “getting less” or “being left out.” And, letting go of outcomes was equally difficult. In my gut, it really mattered if I “won” – landed the new client, made the cleverest point, got through the traffic light before it turned red.

Over time, I realized that the thread in all of these feelings was the sense that I didn’t matter to “this” person or “that” group of people. This insight brought new meaning to a story Henri Nouwen tells about the mentally challenged woman in his cloistered community. Unable to talk, she spent her days smiling at her compatriots; becoming, in this way, a beloved member of the community.

For me, this story drives home a powerful truth. Because we are biologically wired to be in connection, the simple fact of my humanity makes me important to others. My words, looks, and energy matter – to family and friends, to co-workers and business colleagues, even the waiter at lunch and people I pass on the street.

Indeed, the opposite – not mattering – is a cognitive distortion, insidiously promoted by a culture that equates importance with the ability to dominate others. Habitually focused on this narrow goal, we distort our energy in order to manipulate and control our environment and the people in it. In the process, our best instincts are waylaid by corrosive feelings, such as those described above.

Understanding this process hasn't magically cured me. But persistently reminding myself that importance to others is my birthright, as a human, has helped to free my energy – more often, and in more and more situations – from these outcome-laden pre-occupations.

Freed to follow my better instincts, my guidelines focus on two goals. The first – the second half of the second guideline – is an ongoing invitation to attend life's many opportunities to offer and accept love.

Note, importantly, that my focus is on possibility and choice, and not on simply loving everyone all the time. Why? Because loving acts increase our level of intimacy and, with it, our vulnerability. Thus, appropriate levels of safety and trust are a prerequisite. In addition, our energy is finite. Choices have to be made.

These qualifications, however, operate in the context of a larger reality. Given our competitive, achievement-oriented culture, loving options are chronically underexplored. For this reason, a central challenge, as we seek to live differently and better, is to be alive to the virtually unlimited possibilities for loving and being loved that constantly come our way.

Should I call or visit a troubled friend? Should I take the time to acknowledge a child's desire/demand for my undivided attention? Should I attend to a sad and distracted co-worker? Should I work to understand why the views of others, deeply different from mine, make sense in their world? Remembering to love myself, should I interrupt my busy day to go to the gym or have lunch with my daughter?

If we take the time to notice, each of our days is filled with these kinds of moments. And, with this in mind, my first priority item is to cultivate the fullest possible awareness of these choices and, then, to deploy my loving energy wisely.

My second goal is to invite contact, in every area of living, that is “authentic” – vivid and intimate, and “mutual” – engaged in by all parties. These interactions are a priority because they orient me toward behaviors – indispensable to a

comprehensive Radical Decency practice – that would otherwise fall through the cracks. Indeed, my first and second goals are complementary. “Offering and accepting love” embodies Radical Decency’s upside, while mutual and authentic contact provides its ballast; the vital ground out of which decency can grow.

The importance of mutual and authentic contact has everything to do with our biology. We humans are wired to be deeply and intimately connected with one another. So, when we truly know another person – when there is authentic contact – the inevitable byproducts are a growing sense of understanding and empathy, as well as a desire “to do right” by this, now very human, other. And, when this process is mutual, the possibilities for more cooperative and productive relationships expand exponentially.

Here, once again, my approach is not indiscriminant: To seek intimate contact with everyone, all the time. My intent, instead, is to “invite” others to be more mutual and authentic and, when appropriate, to offer leadership, guidance and inspiration by “modeling” these behaviors. At the same time, I consciously avoid strategies that, moving beyond a passionate invitation, proselytize others or implicitly demand conformance. The reason? Because these more aggressive approaches recreate the very values – domination and control – that Radical Decency seeks to replace.

Note that mutual and authentic contact is a guideline that applies in every area of living, from the most private and personal to the most public and political. In a marriage, for example, listening with an open mind and heart to your partner’s thoughts, feelings and emotions – and sharing yours – forges the intimacy out of which a lasting partnership can grow.

And in our politics as well, we can strive to listen to people on the “other side” with respect, curiosity and empathy; knowing that their positions make complete sense, given their background, values, and world view. Equally, we can look for opportunities to offer our outlook, not as partisan argument, but rather as an authentic expression of our values and perspective on life.

Authentic contact in a political context will not, in most cases, lead to agreement. But it can create the ground out of which common goals, mutually agreeable strategies and, short of that, respectful compromises can be crafted.

I close this discussion with a reminder that, as I explain in Reflection #13, Radical Decency is its own reward. So while these guidelines are challenging, I trust that their pay-offs are equally powerful. My personal version of this reality is expressed in my 4th, and final, guideline: Doing these things, I embrace my living and dying with compassion, curiosity, zest, and a deepening sense of acceptance and celebration.