

Jeff Garson  
Radical Decency Reflection #36  
May 8, 2011

## Indecency – A Historical Overview

Through virtually all of our 7 million years of existence as a distinct line of primates and 300,000 years as *Homo sapiens*, the rhythm of our lives was dictated by the physical world. We foraged and hunted, sought warmth and shelter in the winter, shade in the summer. Daily chores started at sun up and ended when the sun went down.

As Jared Diamond points out, however, a dramatic turning point in our history occurred about 12,000 years ago with the domestication of crops and animals. What we call civilization – the history of the last 5,000 years or so – is a direct outgrowth of the exponential increase in the food supply and population that these innovations made possible.

Two powerful trends were unleashed by these events that continue into the present. The first is the ability of one group of people to dominate another and, with it, the growth of nations, empires, religious movements, and other complex hierarchical and – more typically than not – authoritarian organizations. The second is our accelerating ability to harness nature to our purposes.

Given these extraordinary developments, major shifts in our traditional ways of being were inevitable. But because the catalyst for change was technological – and not moral or spiritual – there was nothing to guarantee that these cultural adjustments would be wise and humane. And, in fact, they have been anything but. Instead of using these evolving technologies to meet our emotional and spiritual needs, we have moved in the opposite direction: Subordinating our needs to the demands of the increasingly powerful authoritarian organizations that were spawned by our technological advances and that, in turn, have been the driving force behind their continuing momentum.

A prime example is our response to innovations that improve productivity. While they could be used to reduce our workload – thus freeing time for family, leisure, and our private passions – they almost never are. Instead, the time they free up is used to work even harder in service of our culture's singular obsession with more and more productivity and material wealth. We have, in short, been indoctrinated into a way of living that makes us cogs in an enormous, endlessly voracious "productivity machine."

The system's self-perpetuating momentum is then sealed by our induction into the culture's equally voracious "consuming machine." Conditioned to always want more, we are driven in our jobs to produce more, which in turns feeds our addiction to wanting more, and so on, in an endless cycle what chews up our days and leaves less and less room for the expression of other aspects of our humanity.

---

While this trend has been gathering steam for thousands of years, I want to call special attention to the last two centuries. As recently as 200 years ago, our lives were still largely rooted in the rhythms of nature. Then, our accumulating technologies reached critical mass – and massive reality-altering change swept the world. Electricity eliminated night as a meaningful limit on our activities. Central heat and air conditioning similarly eliminated summer and winter. And, with the advent of modern travel and instantaneous communication, time and distance have also ceased to be limiting factors.

The result? The physical environment had ceased to be a significant, defining factor in our lives. We can now work and consume day and night, 365 days a year. And, remote locations and private moments – something we used to take for granted – are rapidly disappearing. The Internet instantaneously connects missionaries in Borneo with their families in Phoenix, and computers and smart phones keep us fully connected during the morning commute, as we sit on the beach – even when we go to the bathroom.

The scope and magnitude of these changes is, of course, highly important. But so too is the speed with which they have occurred, since it hampers our ability to craft reasoned and humane responses. In my life-time, for example, the implications of the telephone, the car, radio and television were barely digested, when jet travel was introduced, followed by the pill, which was then followed by a revolution in office technologies (Xerox machines, word processors, email), and the arrival of instantaneous access – to virtually everything – via computers and smart phones.

As the scope and pace of change has accelerated, so too has the impact of our corrosive habits of living. In earlier Reflections, I discuss some of their consequences, including a precipitous decline in community (#29, #22) and intellectual vitality (#21), and the pain that comes from perfectionism (#31), denial of vulnerability (#14) and loss of intimacy (#22). But these examples do not tell the full story. The cultural adaptations of the last 200 years have also fundamentally distorted our most basic neurobiological wiring in ways that incalculably damage our humanity.

---

Millions of years of evolutionary history have created us as profoundly affiliative beings. Our emotional and intellectual growth – and continued vitality – depend upon ongoing, intimate contact with others. According to Daniel Siegel, one of our leading neuroscientists, the brain is a complex nonlinear system that exists within a larger complex nonlinear system consisting of it and other brains. In other words, thinking about a single brain – a single person – makes no sense. We only exist in connection with others.

But nature has also provided us with an auxiliary fight or flight brain. Designed to deal with danger, it's fast – 10 times faster than our thinking brain – and powerful in its effects. Energy chemicals (cortisol and adrenaline) are pumped into our system, blood rushes to our large muscle groups, and the activity of the thinking brain shrinks – in order to avoid indecision at a time of crisis. Faced with a potentially life-threatening emergency, we are ready to act quickly, forcefully, and instinctually.

When the natural world dictated the rhythm of our lives, a natural balance was maintained between our fight or flight and thinking/affiliative brains. Most of our hours and days were spent in a nonreactive emotional state as we went about the highly routinized chores of daily living. Then, occasionally, there would be flashes of danger – a predatory animal, enemy, or natural disaster – that would activate our fight or flight brain. When the crisis ended, we would return to our normal, more relaxed state of mind.

But in today's world – after 200 years of momentous change – everything is different. Groomed to be competitors and “winners,” we are “on” on a more or less constant basis – both because we can be and because an endless stream of cultural cues, incentives, and sanctions tell us that that is what successful people do. We move through our days anticipating danger; striving for a competitive edge; viewing setbacks as unacceptable and traumatic; and exhausting ourselves, physically and emotionally, to get ahead. In other words, we have taken fight or flight – an auxiliary system, designed to deal with isolated moments of danger – and, to truly unprecedented levels, made it our base-line operating system.

Some of the fallout from this seismic shift in consciousness is easy to identify: Heightened levels of stress and anxiety, drug abuse and alcoholism, verbal and physical abuse, and so on. But the damage goes further. Fight or flight is specifically designed to neutralize or “annihilate” the will of the other – either through aggressive force (fight) or withdrawal (flight). These choices are, however, the antithesis of intimacy – which requires a willingness to engage others with empathy and curiosity, and to be similarly open in return.

So, it is no accident that so many couples and families are locked in an endless cycle of criticism, counter criticism and withdrawal; or that self-criticism and judgment – indicating loss of intimacy with self – are so pervasive; or that combative/attacking behaviors dominate our politics. The disquieting reality is that the cultural choices of the last 12,000 – and, in particular, the last 200 – years have led to a marked deterioration in our intimacy instincts and skills. And, compounding the problem is the fact that fight or flight is highly infectious – with attacks provoking counter attacks, even from ordinarily more conciliatory people. For this reason as well, overcoming this new “normal state” is a huge challenge.

---

Decency to self, others and the world, practiced radically – at all times, in every area of living, and without exception – is an approach that, at a personal level, can make a real difference as we seek to deal with these engrained habits of living. At a societal level, however, a perceptible shift in ways of operating that have their roots in three millennia worth of history is a long shot, to say the least. But the future is inherently uncertain. And the hopeful thought – implicit in this analysis – is that our current situation is the result of historical choices, and not an inevitable product of human nature or “just the way things have to be.” Thus, it can also be undone by the choices we make going forward.