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Radical Decency Reflection #37  
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## Recognizing Our Comfort Zones

I vividly remember my first encounter with Howard Lesnick, just over 40 years ago. Dressed in a three-piece suit, pacing ominously behind a podium, he intoned “Hall, Horton, Heck.” Sitting several seats down – in my first class, on my first day of law school – I could feel the tension jumping off of Terry Hall’s body as he reluctantly struggled to his feet: Our first encounter with the Socratic method.

When I was re-introduced to Howard, years later, I found that he was no ordinary law professor. An original and iconoclastic thinker, he is one of those rare people whose insights are balanced, fair-minded and, at the same time, unsparing in their directness.

Because the Reflection’s readers are the best of us – people who care about issues of decency, equity and justice – I tend, at times, to pull my punches; joining with them in decrying the culture’s obvious excesses but, then, glossing over the ways in which they (and I) fall short. But decency is not a comparative sport. If we hope to live up to our ambitious goals, we also need to name and challenge our own shortcomings, blind spots, and fears.

One of Howard Lesnick’s special virtues is the forthright way in which he raises uncomfortable issues. The three examples, set forth below, direct challenge people like us to do better.

To the final “hopeful thought” in last week’s Reflection – that we have the power to change what history has created – Howard adds this: “In the meantime, each person has the responsibility to decide for himself or herself whether . . . to act on the recognition that there may be some significant room to make life choices that are not dictated by ‘historical choices.’”

In Listening for God, he cuts to the heart of the moral and intellectual challenge, implicit in this responsibility, “cautioning against” “taking the rightness of parental preference for granted” in a society where “the degree of parental preference is far too extensive to be morally justified.”

Finally, there is his skepticism toward a “do your own thing” approach to social justice: “I do not believe in the avalanche theory of change; that individual choices by millions and millions of good-hearted people will alter the world.”

In what follows, I elaborate on these points.

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As creatures of habit, we humans are deeply wedded to a wide variety of engrained, taken-for-granted outlooks and behaviors that allow us to move through our days more easily. These “comfort zones” are our unconscious ways of adapting to what is: To our family, community, culture, and innate disposition.

At one level, these adaptations are positive. They orient us in life, play a key role in defining our place in the world, and simplify our choices. But if meaningful change is the goal, they are inherently problematic, for two reasons.

First, because the culture’s pervasive indecency is the context within which we live, most of our comfort zones – crafted to fit in and get by in that world – are complicit with those values. In addition, our habitual comfort zones are instinctual adaptations that emerge over time, with little or no conscious intent on our part. As a result, the choices they dictate don’t feel like choices at all. They are, instead, the “right” or the “only” thing to do, and other choices, if they are considered at all, automatically register in our gut as wrong, inappropriate or, simply, uncomfortable and far too risky.

The result? We wind up making choices that thoroughly enmesh us in the culture’s mainstream ways of operating – with little or no understanding of, or control over, the process.

This, I believe, is the issue Howard addresses in the comments cited above. He is challenging us to do the uncomfortable work of naming these unrecognized comfort zones and, doing so, to “make life choices that are not dictated by” the mainstream culture’s predominant values. And Howard, being Howard, he does not temporize with his examples. Instead, he speaks directly to two of our most prevalent comfort zones; instinctual adaptations that – while seldom seen as such – are instrumental in short-circuiting the efforts of otherwise well-intentioned people to make the difficult choices that a committed Radical Decency practice require.

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The first is an over emphasis on childrearing. While recognizing it as a legitimate priority, Howard forthrightly points to the high price we pay when the focus on our children becomes excessive and unbounded, calling it “morally unjustified.”

The point he is making plays out the lives of the many well-intentioned people. Relentlessly focused on what is “best” for the kids, bolder choices – choices that meaningfully diverge from our conventional ways of living – become impossible.

We have to live in a more expensive neighborhood, with better schools – for the kids. We have to keep working long hours at spirit deadening jobs to buy “this,” to join “that,” and to pay for the best (read, expensive) colleges – again, for the kids. And, in whatever spare time exists, homework and the children’s overstuffed extra-curricular schedules are our unquestioned priorities.

There is, of course, nothing inherently wrong with any of these choices. It's just that, with this relentless focus on the kids, there is, quite simply, no time, money or psychic energy left over for study, personal growth, community activism, or other possibilities that might lead to a different – and better -- life.

Note that the unacknowledged driver of the process is a deep ambivalence, on the parent's part, toward the mainstream culture. By their choices, they are implicitly saying this: While alternative ways of living seem sensible in theory and may be ok for me, they are just too risky for my beloved children. For them, better to play it safe: Top grades at the "best" schools and gold plated extra-curricular records – leading, hopefully, to prestigious and highly paid careers. In effect, these parents are seeking to have it both ways: To raise the kids with better values but also to make them into successful competitors – just in case.

This approach is fatally flawed. A relentless focus on competing and winning works no better for kids than it does for adults – as the explosion of anxiety, depression, substance abuse, eating disorders, and suicide amongst children and teens attest. So sadly, with all of the parents' well-intentioned sacrifice, the children wind up living the very lives the parents long to escape.

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Howard's second example focuses on our tendency to uncritically applaud change oriented activities that grow out of a person's special interest or passion – organic gardening, meditation, animal rescue work, and so on. Once again, the problem is not with the choices themselves which, standing alone, are entirely commendable. It arises, instead, when we accept the culture's too easy invitation to view these activities as fully adequate responses to the culture's endemic indecency.

Meaningful change requires attention to many issues, at many different levels of living. For this reason, these single-issue responses will, inevitably, fall far short of the mark. A fundamental shift will never occur unless we join with others – making a sustained effort to understand their initiatives, and to coordinate and integrate our activities with theirs. In other words, if we are serious about seeking change, good old-fashioned organizing and collective action are indispensable parts of the equation.

Recognizing this reality, we also need to understand that "do your own thing" initiatives – while not intended this way – actually represent a retreat into an unproductive comfort zone; a way of operating where, feeling like you are doing your part, you avoid the hard, unpleasantness, and thankless work that is the meat and potatoes of effective organizing.

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My intent in raising these issues is not to beat up on the good guys. I do, however, want to encourage a fearless inventory of the places where we fall short. Becoming an effective agent for change is exquisitely difficult. But, because the change we seek is so important, we should never settle for simply being better. Our noble goal deserves the very best we have to offer.