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Radical Decency Reflection #40
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Size Matters

In 1964, Joe Namath signed a \$400,000 contract. It was huge news. Today, \$100 million plus contracts, for second tier sports stars, are commonplace. In 1960, America's 5 largest companies had, on average, \$498 million in profits. By 2010, that number had grown to \$12.2 billion. In 1982 – its first year – the average net worth of Forbes' list of the 400 wealthiest Americans was \$285 million. By 2008: Almost \$4 billion.

Wrapping our brains around the true dimensions of this extraordinary explosion of private wealth is a truly difficult task. Equally hard to understand is a similar explosion in the size and reach of the mainstream culture's propaganda and reality molding machine; a de-centralized but highly coherent set of messages and cultural cues that deepen the hold of these forces over our lives. But, failing to do so, we will never grasp the enormity of the challenge we face as we seek to meaningfully influence the system for the better – and will too easily settle for change strategies that are far too tepid and limited in scope. These are the issues I discuss in this Reflection.

Understanding this vast shift in wealth is, at bottom, an order of magnitude problem. A billion isn't just bigger than a million. It's a lot bigger. And a trillion is, similarly, way, way, bigger than a billion. Here's one way to look at it. Suppose you had decided to count your money, dollar by dollar, with each dollar counted consuming one second. Also assume that your the goal was to finish the job just as we reached the year 2000. If you had a \$1 million, your count would start the morning of December 21, 1999. If you had \$1 billion, you would start in April 1969. And if you had \$1 trillion, you would begin in 29,710 BCE – more than 20,000 years before we humans developed our first numbering systems!

Going back to the numbers quoted earlier, in 1960 America's 5 largest companies would have started to count their profits, on average, in March 1984. By 2008, however, their counts would have started in March 1614 (two years before Shakespeare's death). And the counting time for the Forbes 400 would have been pushed back from January 1991 (in 1982) to June 1875 (in 2008).

Notice, also, the "plight" of our best professional athletes who are, we need to remember, hired employees and not owners or investors. While they are making a lot of money – still, in relative terms, it's chump change. While Joe Namath would have started his count around noon on December 27, 1999, today's \$100 million athletes would only be pushed back to October 1996 – a graphic reminder of where true economic power lies.

This order of magnitude analysis provides a dose of financial reality as we assess the effectiveness of conventional change efforts. Increasingly the nonprofit sector is being asked to fill the void created by the government's increasing abdication of its social safety net responsibilities. Yet in contrast with the exponential growth in private wealth,

growth in charitable giving has been tepid –from \$55 billion in 1980 to \$217 billion in 2010. Thus, while the net worth of America’s 400 richest people in the early 1980s outstripped this entire sector by a factor of 5 to 1, this differential is now close to 20 to 1.

Thus, an always present, fiscal mismatch has turned into a rout. Massively outgunned in terms of lobbyists, lawyers, political contributions, and advertising budgets, the possibility of effecting meaningful reform through traditional political processes has become more and more implausible.

These same years have also experienced comparable, explosive growth in the mainstream culture’s propaganda/reality molding machine. In this area as well, it is difficult to fully grasp the scope of change because of its gradual emergence. But in contrast to the shifts in private wealth, our understanding in this area is complicated by two additional factors. Because the change we are dealing with is so diffuse, identifying its many manifestations is difficult and quantifying its growth impossible. For these reasons, it operates with a cloak of invisibility that makes its effects even more pernicious.

Note that this sort of cultural brainwashing is not new. Embedded cultural cues – that make people “wrong” when they don’t do what their “betters” expect – have always been with us. Indeed, George Bernard Shaw offered Eliza Doolittle as an iconic example, 100 years ago: A poor flower girl who could pass for a duchess, but only after she learned the “right” way to talk, walk, and dress.

The last half-century, however, has been different. The culture’s reality molding machine has expanded to unprecedented levels, driven by two key factors. The first is the enormous increase in wealth, wielded by the individuals and institutions at the heart of our mainstream culture. The second? The vast array of technological advances that have so greatly expanded the intensity, persistence, and reach of these messages.

To begin to appreciate this seismic growth, it is useful to compare the 1950s – when I came of age – with today’s world. Back then, there were just a handful of TV stations – which stop broadcasting at midnight – a couple of local newspapers, and a handful of weekly and monthly magazines. So each day offered any number of taken-for-granted places of refuge from the messages of the mainstream culture: Late at night; in the evening hours between your favorite TV shows; on weekend mornings when all that TV offered was Sunrise Semester and cartoons.

Other “unplugged-in” times included your daily drive to and from work, after 10 pm when telephone calls were inappropriate, and the natural lulls that occurred at work because letters took days to arrive. And, in this pre-computer/ Xbox world, many more of leisure activities were our own creations: Card and board games; bowling and tennis; catch with the kids; and visiting with friends and neighbors – a taken for granted activity in 19th century novels that was still a common occurrence in the 1950s.

All of that is now gone or strikingly diminished. We are plugged in all the time. Our computers and smart phones are our constant companions. Texting, instant messaging,

facebook, and email saturate our lives with instantaneous communication. The TV is a nonstop source of whatever entertainment suites our fancy – news, sports, shopping, movies, even pornography. And it's all available – or inconveniently present – on demand: In the car, at the beach, even in the bathroom.

While these new toys are delightfully distracting, they extract a heavy price. Why? Because the subtext of so much of what they offer embodies and reinforces the corrosive values that dominate our culture – competition, dominance, and control. We are awash in nonstop messages that push us to want more, to buy more and, in general, to be perfect and invulnerable: Poised and articulate; youthful, thin, and attractive; hard working, successful, and rich; winners in whatever we do. At times these messages are explicit, offered as product ads or commentary. But far more pervasive and influential are their implicit expressions; the story lines and characters and, equally, the ways in which our celebrities – actors, entertainers, TV hosts, reporters, commentators, and politicians – present themselves and conduct their lives.

For me, the depth to which these messages have taken root is exemplified by NPR's routine editing of interviews to eliminate every "ah," "umm," and other verbal stumble. Even at NPR, apparently, we are not ok – not publicly presentable – until every pimple and unseemly bulge has been made to disappear.

These changes deeply impact our effort to create better lives and a better world. To begin with, it is almost impossible not to be influenced by these pervasive messages. We are all in the dirty bathtub and, in the last 50 years, it has gotten a lot dirtier. In addition, if we hope to be effective in creating better lives and a better world, finding kindred spirits is imperative. And, in this environment, it is a difficult task indeed.

When it comes to the culture's predominant values, we are saturated with cues that define us. Our jobs and schools, where we live, how we dress and accessorize, how we talk, what we eat and drink – they all point to where we fit in, in the mainstream culture. But what are the reliable indicators of a person who consistently seeks to be decent to themselves, others and the world? While these people do exist, the resume of social cues that allow you to identify them is, by contrast, strikingly thin.

And, unfortunately, we live in a world where the language of concern has been co-opted; where empathy and symbolic acts of charity have become a kind of affective camouflage, used to make our competitive, self-aggrandizing pre-occupations more acceptable to others – and to ourselves. In this environment, how do you tease out the genuine article – real allies – from this endless stream of faux reformers?

With these examples I hope to demonstrate the importance of scale and orders of magnitude. But as much as size matters in understanding the dimensions of the challenge, it matters even more as we craft our responses. We need to conceive of change strategies that, as they take root, can become comparable in scope and impact to the problems they seek to address. In these Reflections, my goal is to creatively contribute to that effort.