

Jeff Garson
Radical Decency Reflection #41
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Safety and Aliveness

Life is an impossible deal. We arrive here – and leave – through no choice of our own. While we are here, there is no roadmap for what to do, or – if there is – we have no idea what the right one is out of all the ones being proposed. And, to seal this (impossible) deal, we know all this.

Oh to be a dog! At 12, they never brood over the fact that their best years are behind them. And at the moment of death, all they know is the comfort of their beloved owner's arms and the pinch of the vet's needle. But while self-awareness is our greatest burden, it also creates life's most redemptive possibilities.

Central to Radical Decency is a forthright acceptance of this unforgiving equation. Instead of ignoring life's fundamental mysteries, or presuming to answer to them, we seek to more deeply understand the inherent limitations of our biology and neurobiology, as well as its intricacies, contradictions, and potentialities. Then, working with our flawed humanity – with all of its demoralizing shortcomings and equally stunning moments of transcendence – we seek to create lives that are more loving and decent to ourselves, others, and the world. This is the essence of decency to self.

Daniel Siegel is one of psychotherapy's most generative, contemporary thinkers. In seeking to operationalize this approach to living, he offers a frame of reference that, as you work through its implications, has a lot to teach us: Viewing life as a river, one of the banks is safety; the other aliveness.

His thought is that, beneath all of our busy-ness, we long for a comfortable balance between these two state's of mind, with life's central dilemma being this: With too much stability, we feel flat and drab. But if we veer too far to the other extreme – constantly reaching for stimulation and excitement – we can too easily slip into overly stressed, emotionally fraught, unstable habits of living.

Siegel's metaphor casts an uncomfortable spotlight on the typical life journey our competitive, win/lose culture invites. The high road to a safe and secure life is, we are repeatedly told, to compete and win. Go to the best possible schools, get the most financially rewarding job, accumulate more and more money – so the vagaries of life can't touch us.

Immersed in this world-view from grade school forward, the idea of a job that is exciting and soul nourishing – that feeds our need for liveliness – is, for many, a nonstarter. Better to leap into a career as an accountant, salesman, or human resources administrator.

Never mind that it, right from the start, it feels like a spirit deadening slog and sets them up for lives that feels flat, boring, demoralizing or, even worse, filled with dread.

For others, an exciting, vibrant job is – at least initially – a part of the equation. But then, all too often, the pressure to be safe overwhelms the dream. They start off with the ennobling goal of teaching children but wind up enforcing order on 30 unruly kids, and force-feeding information so they can get better scores on the standardized tests by which the school is judged. They endure these and other indignities – the slow death of their dreams – because they “have to;” to protect their income, benefits, and pension.

The thing that is so dispiriting in all of this is that the entire proposition – equating safety with financial security – is so deeply flawed. So long as it lasts, a stable job and good income does provide a certain level of security. But we live in a world where markets crash, and corporations and entire industries disappear overnight. So the idea that money can be the secure cornerstone of safety in life is, for most of us, an illusion.

The deeper truth, moreover, is that no amount of money can buffer us from life’s unforgiving equation. For all of us, inevitably: A child will lose his way; a spouse, desperately seeking to rekindle her own aliveness, will leave; a loved one will die; illness and injury will diminish us.

The net result? Driven by our culturally engrained need to succeed, we eagerly give ourselves over to spirit draining jobs, grievously neglecting, in the process, our need for emotional, intellectual, and spiritual stimulation. But in the end, the promised pay-off in terms of safety simply isn’t there. We wind up with the worst of all possible worlds – a life lacking in both safety and aliveness.

But the dismal equation does not end here. While safety is the main preoccupation in this success driven life, that does not mean that our longing for aliveness disappears. To the contrary, the need for stimulation is a fundamental part of our nature. But because it is so habitually de-emphasized and suppressed, it is usually expressed in less satisfying and, often, less healthy ways.

In the best-case scenario, our longing for aliveness finds constructive albeit limited expression in the relationships and activities we pursue in our “spare time” – nights, weekends, and vacations. But all too often, we settle for debased forms of stimulation: The rat-tat-tat of computer games – a pre-occupation with the successes and failures of our favorite football team – the consuming stimulation of work’s competitive dramas – drugs and alcohol – the endorphin hit of sex. Thus, our flawed pursuit of safety is matched by an equally flawed pursuit of aliveness.

There is no easy way to stand apart from this culturally prescribed way of operating. Because we have to make a living, we need to find some workable compromise with the mainstream culture. But accepting this fact also means that the incentives and sanctions

that push us – to do the “smart” thing, to go along to get ahead, to conform – will continue to bear down on us in earnest.

Radical Decency offers a pathway for navigating this territory; to get by in the world as it is and, at the same time, to craft lives that more effectively nurture our safety and aliveness. The key to the approach is to focus, not on ultimate goals – happiness and inner peace; aliveness and safety – but on the concrete, day by day choices that, as they accumulate, define our lives.

Pursuing happiness directly, we tend toward behaviors that are intense and instantly gratifying. But pursuing highs puts us on an emotional rollercoaster that is at odds with the goal – crucial to Siegel’s model – of a comfortable and sustainable balance between safety and aliveness. In other words, a direct approach to happiness is a flawed model.

Radical Decency, by contrast, sends us out in the world, each day, seeking to be decent in all that we do – to our self, others, and the world. Steadily attending to this task changes us. We become more curious and less judgmental; more thoughtful, creative, and intuitive; more rooted in the present; more discerning in our choices.

As these habits of mind become more and more engrained, happiness – a comfortable and growing sense of safety and aliveness – is its natural by-product. But with this approach, safety is based, not on economic security, but on the comfort that comes from clear and coherent priorities and a growing sense of appreciation, empathy and acceptance for our selves and others. Similarly, our aliveness is nurtured, not by highs, but by the vibrant, moment-by-moment sense of purpose that results when we fully commit to being decent to our self, others and the world, all times and in every area of living.

Notice also that, applied to the work and career, a committed Radical Decency practice steadily guides us away from a life organized around the endless pursuit of wealth. While economic security is a legitimate goal, decency to self also requires intimacy and companionship, novelty and play, rest and relaxation, and simple respect for our physical and psychological processes and rhythms. Equally, if decency to others and the world is a central vocation, a meaningful commitment of time and energy is essential

If we tend to these goals with the seriousness of purpose they require, a progressive re-ordering of our priorities – away from the unrelenting demands of work and career – will naturally and progressively unfold. Jobs that require us to habitually sacrifice our personal, family and communal goals cease to be of interest. Instead, we will be drawn to careers and jobs – and bosses and co-workers – who treat themselves and others with respect, and have a sense of vocation and service to others and the world.

In short, Radical Decency invites us to systematically cultivate habits of mind that decisively diverge from the values of the mainstream culture. And as these more decent play a more and more central role in our lives, they offer the powerful antidote we need to resist relentless pressures of workplace, even as we find an appropriate place within it.

Focusing on Siegel's metaphor, on simple but very important insight metaphor offers is, quite simply, that both sides of the equation matter. People eagerly seek out work that offers job security – or a good pension – or the six figure income. And then, all too typically, they endure dreary, spirit-deadening days, weeks, and years because leaving the security of their “safe” job or career is unthinkable.

And, embarked on a career, most of us unthinkingly reach for the seek way to spend their days. , and stay with it even though the thought of going to work each day The reason? I

Working with this metaphor invites us

Both are important

The quality of each

Integrating – work now, enjoy later; the one can invade the other

respect these realities and, at the same time, express , working with It accepts the inexplicability of our Instead of deny them or ignoring them. , instead of denying or ignoring Specifically, decency to self invites to