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Radical Decency Reflection #43  
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## A Fairy Tale

Once upon a time . . .

A group of friends stumbled upon a smart iconoclastic writer, Daniel Quinn, who told this story. As a struggling author in the 1980s, he, his wife, and three colleagues started a newspaper in rural New Mexico. The paper was only modestly successful, but they persisted. While making money was vitally important, they soon realized that their higher priority – the one that kept them going – was their pleasure in working together. Quinn labeled this a modern day tribe; a group of people bound together, not by physical proximity, but by a work environment they were able to thrive in as people.

To the group of friends, Quinn made a lot of sense. Since work dominated the best hours of the majority of their days – and so much of their energy – why not make it a primary place of sustenance? Instead of being an unfortunate exception to their most deeply held values – at the center of their lives – why couldn't it be a place where, surrounded by people they liked, admired, and trusted, their lives found vital expression?

So they decided to go into business together. The type of business didn't really matter. It could have been a financial planning firm, a computer consulting company, a chiropractic office, even a farm. What was important, however, is that, having spent years at typical mainstream companies, they were determined to operate differently.

Here is what they decided to do. Because their economic future would depend upon it, profitability would be priority 1A, vitally important but clearly subordinant to their first priority, Radical Decency; that is, decency to self, others and the world – at all times, in every context, and without exception.

Because some members of the group had been involved in similar projects in the past, they knew how easy it was to embrace Radical Decency in theory and how hard it is to apply it day by day, especially in the pressured packed environment of a business. So in the beginning they went slowly – exploring the idea in detail, allowing the group to evolve organically. Eventually, a core group of people emerged that understood the philosophy, were eager to organize their work lives around it and, importantly, were willing and able to meaningfully contribute – each in their unique ways – to the budding business' profitability. In other words, all the initial participants had a clear and strong commitment to priority 1 – and to priority 1A.

Getting the project off the ground was wrenchingly difficult. In addition, to all the problems that a new business must face, the organizers had to figure out what it meant to actually run a business in a radically decent way. From day one, big, obvious, wisdom stretching questions had to be answered. Who “owns” the company and what rights are associated with ownership? How do you allocate profits and risk of loss? How do you

price products when the goal is fairness both to the firm and customers, rather than whatever the market will bear? What is fair compensation at every level? How are decisions made in an environment where a collegiality is not just a hoped for result but it at the heart of the firm's mission? How do you fully honor the concept of decency to self – for every participant – without unduly compromising Priority 1A?

What also became apparent, early on, is that “little” things were vitally important. Virtually everyone involved had long experience working at “business as usual” companies. Mainstream habits of operating were what they knew and what they instinctually fell back upon at times of stress. And, on the flip side, there were no manuals were available for operating a radically decent business, to guide them and keep them on track. It was all new, complicated, and perplexing.

For this reason, an ever present danger was that the business' day-to-day pressures would drag them back to mainstream ways of operating, one small compromise at a time: Toleration of a powerful employee's entitled behavior here, a willingness to manipulate an unsuspecting customer there, and so on. The best antidote? An intense, detailed – even obsessive – attention to the company's mission in all things, large and small.

So in the early days, a lot of time was spent figuring out what Radical Decency had to teach them about: Running meetings; talking to each other – and to customers, vendors, and competitors; dealing with co-worker conflict; even keeping the lunch and bath rooms clean. These seemingly endless conversations were a frequent source of frustration, since “important” work had to get done. But it was time well spent. Over time, it all became easier. Like a hitter obsessively practicing an improved swing, these new, more decent ways of operating eventually became their engrained, habitual ways of operating.

As time past, their ability to more fully understand the implications of Radical Decency in business grew and grew and, with it, their sure footedness in putting it into practice. As this process unfolded, good things started to happen at an accelerating pace. The business prospered.

It is not uncommon for a company to promote itself as a nice place to work, backing this promise up with pot sweetening benefits such as flex time or more generous maternity leave. But, at this company, decency and fairness were built into the very fabric of its personnel policies. Full disclosure of company finances; fair and transparent compensation at all levels; equitable sharing of sacrifice; open and collegial decision-making – all of these were standard operating procedures. The result: The company attracted an unusually capable, imaginative and loyal group of employees.

Word also began to get out to an expanding group of customers that, here, Radical Decency was more than just a marketing slogan. The quality of the company's products and services – fashioned to reflect its mission – was exceptional. Nothing was offered that exceeded its ability to deliver. Pricing was fair and transparent. And, more generally, people who did business with the company were powerfully drawn to an environment

where people – with unusual sensitivity, thoughtfulness, and thoroughness – were decent to them and, equally, expected decency in return.

But the company's success reached far beyond its financial bottom line. Requiring decency at all times and in every context, it insisted on a very different approach, for example, from its lawyers, accountants and, marketing consultants. Attorneys who offered the standard, adversarial approaches to litigation, employment law, and contract negotiations were unacceptable.

So over time, the company found its way to collaborators who not only “got it,” but were, in many cases, eager to re-caste their own businesses as radically decent enterprises. With its clarity about Priority 1, the company actively taught the techniques it had pioneered to these people – and others – becoming the catalyst for an expanding network of radically decent businesses.

At a purely income generating level, the network was a big success. Because their relationships were based on a shared mission – and not just economic self-interest – referrals happened far more frequently and their philosophical compatibility meant that leads were turned into customers on a much more regular basis. But as it grew, the network's successes extended far beyond this vital but ultimately mundane world of customers, sales, and revenue.

As tricky as decency to self and others can be, crafting ways to meaningfully contribute to decency to the world can be mind-meltingly complicated. But the possibilities for effective action expand exponentially when service and reform oriented nonprofits, real estate developers, health care professionals, educators, and widget manufacturers of all types and variety are bound together by a full throttled commitment to Radical Decency.

Before long, landlords were collaborating with trauma specialists to offer respite housing to victims of abuse; people with employment challenges were being placed at radically decent businesses by radically decent healers and financial advisors; investors were funding new and expanded Radical Decency initiatives in business, politics, and the world of service and social reform; and, in time, a whole variety of articles, books, courses, seminars and retreats were being offered to discuss lessons learned and to craft more strategic and effective ways to implement radical decency at all levels – from the most intimate and personal to the most public and political.

And the group of friends? Well, things evolved and changed. Some stayed at their widget company. Others, intrigued with other aspects of the expanding enterprise, moved on. But bound together by a common mission, they maintained a warm, intimate, and nourishing connection.

. . . and they lived – ever after – with an ennobling purpose and energizing sense of possibility.