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Radical Decency Reflection #44
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Intimate vs. Strategic Relationships

A gifted supervisor – when you can find one – is one of the great benefits of being a psychotherapist and I was lucky enough to find one in Carol Brockmon. One highly useful tool she introduced me to was the distinction between intimate and strategic relationships. In this Reflection, I explain that distinction and elaborate on some of its more important implications.

Here is a typical interaction in a strategic relationship. Needing to make a key decision, a department head – at a conventional, mainstream business – convenes a two-hour staff meeting, at 1 p.m. Being an enlightened leader, she encourages each team member to freely stating his or her beliefs and a vigorous exchange ensues. Now, it's 2:59. The discussion ends and the department head makes a decision. Whether they fully agree or not, the rest of the staff is expected to fall in line.

Here, by contrast, is a typical intimate interaction. A husband and wife sit down at 1 p.m. to discuss where to send their son to school. Now it is 2:59 and, after a lot of back and forth, no agreement has been reached. What happens? A decision is deferred. The couple keeps talking.

The difference? In the first scenario, the priority is on achieving a goal – getting something done. In the second, the highest priority is on the relationship itself – on creating and maintaining an empathic, loving relationship.

Note that these categories are not mutually exclusive. Strategic relationships work better when tools of intimacy are used. The department head could have simply sent a memo out saying, this is what we're going to do. But she understood that an open exchange of ideas, properly managed, improves the staff's morale, its willingness to embrace the ultimate decision, and, more often than not, the overall quality of the decision as well. Similarly, there are many strategic aspects to an intimate relationship. A decision about their son's school has to be made. The couple can't keep talking until November.

What makes this distinction so useful is that it clarifies our confusion on both sides of the equation. Each type of relationship – intimate and strategic – is discussed below.

Discussions in which couples kill each other, arguing over strategic issues, are endemic. Over and over in my practice, I remind my couples that, 90% of the time, either choice is acceptable. A visit to mom or a day at the beach with the kids; how much cleaning is enough; how and when to pay the bills; the toilet seat up or down – there really aren't any "right" and "wrong" decisions.

So, I repeatedly remind my clients, put outcomes on the back burner. Remember that this is an intimate relationship and, for that reason, the far more important part of the discussion is not the subject itself but your emotional needs and those of the other person – be it your spouse, another family member, or a friend.

Viewed from this perspective, you should clean the dishes before leaving the kitchen, not because it's the "right" thing to do, but because you are stretching to love her in a way that is meaningful to her. Conversely, the reason for asking her to leave earlier for the airport has everything to do with your emotional comfort and nothing to do with good planning. After all, in all the years before she became your partner, she always managed to be in her seat when the plane took off.

When the emotions that inform your intimate discussions are your priority, the results are dramatic. Focused, not on outcomes, but on each partner's needs and desires – yours and hers – your empathy, patience, and skill at loving and being loved, grow and grow. At the same time, those seemingly inevitable, repetitive flare-ups become less common and easier resolved. And, guess what? Regardless of where they come out on the substantive issue – her solution, his, or a compromise – everyone survives, just fine.

On the strategic side of the equation, our confusions are just as great. What I notice, here, is the frequency with which we become wedded to emotional outcomes in situations that are plainly strategic.

The most obvious place where this occurs is at our mainstream places of business. Work could be a place where intimate relationships are the norm – a possibility I wrote about in last week in Reflection, #43. Unfortunately, in our culture that is rarely the case, hence that Reflection's title: *A Fairy Tale*. So, in the hypothetical that follows I deal with what is – and not what could be.

Lou works in a small department and one of his co-workers – call him Fred – is harassing him. Fred refuses to provide Lou with information he needs to do his job, does everything he can to undercut Lou's credibility with the boss, and even – deliberately, it seems – clutters their common work area with his files.

While important, Lou's job is not his life's priority. That would be his wife, kids, and private passions. And yet, he gets sucked into this unsolicited war, registering repeated complaints about Fred's conduct, creating extensive written rebuttals to each of Fred's accusations, and obsessively plotting ways to "win" the battle for his boss' good opinion

by strategically pointing out – at staff meetings, in a carefully crafted memos – why he is right and Fred is wrong.

The problem, of course, is that Lou – like so many of us – is unable to maintain emotional clarity about the context in which he is operating. At a typical work place, the priority is on getting things done and not on dealing with people’s feelings. But in seeking to win the battle with Fred, Lou is seeking emotional outcomes – an acknowledgment that his anger is justified and that he is held in high regard by his co-workers and boss. And in service of that goal, he is deeply engaged at an emotional level.

Ideally, Lou would treat Fred’s behaviors as he would the acts of a stranger – unpleasant, unwanted but, ultimately, of no emotional significance; no different than his reaction to the rantings of the road-raging driver in the next lane. Maintaining that distance, he would no longer be caught up in responsive anger and anxiety about becoming an outcast in this work “family.” And with these uncomfortable and distracting emotions out of the picture, he could more effectively counter the threat that Fred represents – dealing with his behaviors as a purely strategic challenge.

Taking this approach is, needless to say, difficult. When we are attacked, our brain is wired to respond quickly, powerfully, and in kind. And once our fight or flight response is activated, it is exceedingly difficult to turn off. But to have mastery over our choices, we need to cultivate the ability to emotionally engage only in those situations where it is appropriate. While the work is difficult, it is worth the effort.

Note, importantly, that this tough-minded approach to strategic relationships in no way compromises Radical Decency. Prudent boundary setting, including a cautious and measured approach to emotional disclosure in unsafe environments, is an indispensable aspect of decency to self. And, with across the board decency as our highest priority, we need always to remember that this self-protective choice should never be an excuse to dispense with the attributes of decency – respect; understanding and empathy; equity and justice – in dealing with the Freds of the world.

This does not mean that Lou should ignore Fred’s conduct, “make nice” with him, or fail to defend himself. But it does challenge him to maintain civility, even in the face of Fred’s provocations; to avoid the temptation to demonize; and ideally, to understand and even empathize with the emotional demons that are undoubtedly driving Fred’s behaviors. And Lou’s larger goal should be fair treatment – equity and justice – and not revenge.

There are, obviously, many relationships that have both intimate and strategic dimensions: The friendships that flower in work environments, the co-parenting relationships that many former spouses share; the very different sort of workplaces that Radical Decency envisions; and so on. Hopefully, however, focusing on the very different challenges, presented by these twin poles of relationship, will support us in making choices in all of our relationships that are more loving, appropriately self-protective – and radically decent.