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Radical Decency Reflection #45
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Re-visioning Social Change Work

From my teenage years forward, I have been puzzling over this question: Is there an effective strategy for creating a more decent, just and equitable world that I can be a part of? Preoccupied with this issue I became a lawyer; acquiring the skills I needed – so I thought – to effectively participate in such an effort.

In my 25 years as a civic-minded attorney I was involved in many activities that seemed, at the time, to offer a workable answer to my “big” question: Civil rights movements, political campaigns, single issues advocacy, lawsuits, civic education, volunteer tutoring, domestic and overseas service trips. In the end, however, I felt deeply frustrated. The larger goal – an effective change strategy – seemed forever out of reach. None of the activities in which I immersed myself seemed, in a final reckoning, to even remotely alter the indecent trajectory of our culture.

Asking myself why, I arrived at this answer: The tentacles of our system reach much more deeply than is commonly understood, thoroughly infecting the ways in which we think and feel, and deeply limiting our ability to be in fruitful relationship with one another. Realizing that change efforts need to grapple with these issues as well, I re-tooled as a psychotherapist and coach – and began to develop Radical Decency as a more comprehensive and, hopefully, more effective strategy for change.

In this Reflection, I offer a critique of our mainstream approaches to change and discuss the ways in which Radical Decency can, potentially, alter them and magnify their impact. I make these arguments with considerable diffidence. The people who devote themselves to these conventional change efforts are the best among us and their initiatives do so much good in the world.

But the deeper reality we need to come to grips with is this: That in ways that are subtle, indirect, and chillingly effective, the system diverts and marginalizes reform energy. What happens is that change efforts are condoned and even encouraged, but only up to a point. A new law is passed that moderates some of the system’s worst excesses but leaves its operative mechanisms unchecked. A humanitarian initiative is funded that, while meaningful in its immediate impact, touches only a relative handful of lives.

The problem with this approach is that these visible, accessible but ultimately limited-in-scope projects capture the time and energy of many of the most reform-minded among us. And, consumed by these activities, these natural leaders of, and participants in, larger changes effort never take on the more radical initiatives that could, potentially, more fundamentally alter the cultural landscape.

Here's how the process works.

At a structural level, reform-oriented people are channeled into one of three approaches to change: "Change within the system" approaches – lobbying for new laws, bringing lawsuits, electing better people; the "service" approaches – tutoring children, working at homeless shelter, tending to people's physical and emotional ills; and "save the world" approaches – seeking to eliminate hunger, disease, or war.

Notice, first of all, how effectively this structure isolates and divides reform energy. One group lobbies for changes in the environmental laws, another organizes tutoring programs, and a third raises money to fight AIDS. But strikingly absent are meaningful efforts to coordinate their efforts and magnify impact.

Moreover, each of these culturally condoned approaches, viewed individually, is inherently limited. Trying to pass laws or elect more enlightened leaders requires you to compete in a system that has been systematically structured to reward the very values you are trying to overthrow. Outgunned many times over, in terms of lawyers, lobbyists, and campaign contributions, can we reasonably expect these efforts to fundamentally alter our status quo ways of operating?

Service-oriented activities, for their part, are admittedly oriented toward individuals, and not systemic reform. And the idea that millions of individual acts of kindness will magically coalesce and spontaneously shift the culture's orientation and outlook is a comforting but untenable illusion. While social movements may originate in a spontaneous spark – felt by many – they can never take root and grow in the absence of self-conscious organizing and community building.

The self-limiting aspects of "save the world" efforts are subtler but not less real. We mere mortals may decide that ending hunger is an inspiring goal. But, what exactly should we do when we get to our desks? Who do we call? What letter do we write? Faced with the overwhelming enormity of the task, most of us quietly shelf our longing to make a difference and return to the more immediate task of getting by in life. In short, save the world initiatives, more often than not, are invitations to paralysis and avoidance and not to meaningful action.

Note moreover, that these efforts are almost always issue specific: Hunger, or disease, or illiteracy. So even if they could solve their "big" issue of choice – a doubtful outcome – their impact on the broad sweep of indecency that pervades our culture and lives would be tangential at best. Despite the ambitious goals of these "save the world" initiatives, they fail, in the end, to address what really ails us.

In what ways can Radical Decency support us in escaping these deeply embedded structural impediments to change? By offering an expanded frame of reference that allows people, immersed in activities that now seem disparate and unconnected, to

more fully understand the depth of their common interests and goals and, with that, to forge collaborations that broaden their respective missions and magnify their effects.

The key element, driving this shift, is Radical Decency's comprehensive perspective. Our current crisis is not about unjust laws, or rampant incivility, or epidemics of depression and anxiety, or racism and sexism, or a failed education system. While all of these conditions exist, they are in fact the expectable consequences of a more fundamental malady: A system in which a bad set of values – competition, dominance, and control – predominate and drive our choices in every area of living, from the most personal and intimate to the most public and political.

The answer, then, is to focus on these dreadfully consequential symptoms – of course – but to do so within the context of the larger value issues at the heart of our failed culture. In other words, fight for better schools or a reformed financial system, if that is the issue that moves you. But do so in concert with others who are seeking reform in others areas, with the unifying goal being a progressive shift toward a society in which the new norm is Radical Decency: Decency to self, others, and the world – at all times, in every context, and without exception.

Doing so, “change within the system” types would, for example, quickly notice the unique insights that “service” types have to offer when it comes to applying principles of decency at a more micro, interpersonal level. Moreover, understanding that their own work is powerfully vitalized when it is integrated into the larger push for Radical Decency, their interest in this work – instead of being cursory and superficial as is now more typically the case – would be intense, hands-on, and thoroughly integrated with other aspects of their mission.

And, needless to say, “service” types would be equally invested in absorbing and incorporating, into their work, the insights and strategies for living that “work within the system” types craft in their struggle to transform our politics – a process I describe, in part, in Reflection #24, *Holistic Healing – A Five-Pronged Approach*.

So how, then, might this expanded perspective change the specific strategies and approaches used by a reform-minded, political nonprofit? To begin with, its push for decency, justice and equity would not be directed outward, only. Principles of Radical Decency would guide every aspect of its business operations as well, including wages and benefits, purchasing, money management, overall decision-making – even in the way in which its meetings are run.

Radical Decency would also powerfully reshape its approach on substantive issues. In the political arena, the prevailing view – seldom critically examined – is that manipulative, power oriented ways of operating need to be used, as well, by the advocates for greater equity and justice; that the only way to fight fire is with fire. The problem with this approach is that it over focuses on what are, in the end,

tactical issues – getting more votes, winning elections – and fails, in the process, to address the system’s more fundamental problem: The primacy of money, influence, and power – policy concerns be damned.

Whole-heartedly committed to Radical Decency, however, our hypothetical organization would avoid this trap. Politics-as-usual tactics would be replaced by ways of operating – pioneered by service types and psychotherapists – that, while appropriately aggressive, are honest, respectful, understanding, and empathic.

With this larger vision of decency as its guide, the organization’s programs – and very ways of operating – would more forthrightly challenge the endless manifestations of the indecency that drives our politics: Its obsession with winning; the breathtaking absence of meaningful dialogue; the systematic buying and selling public officials via campaign contributions, contracts, and jobs; the mainstream media’s complicity with these outrages; and so on.

Moreover, operating from a radically decent perspective would empower it to confront, with greater force and clarity, our endemic tendency to make exceptions to decency such as, for example, the tendency noted above to condone the use of manipulative, mainstream tactics by politically engaged social activists. The problem with this “pick and chose” approach to decency is that it is far too slippery a slope. Applying the same logic, we too easily condone reporters who fail to challenge the nonsense politicians’ spout “because they have to, to maintain access;” and, excuse self-interested lobbying, by otherwise civic-minded business people, when the issue directly affects their company.

With Radical Decency as our reference point, however, the boundary between decent and indecent – while exquisitely difficult to navigate – is not confused, shifting, and filled with convenient, easy way out exceptions. Either you strive to be decent to your self, others, and the world or – in your indifference to one or more of these areas – you don’t. And, modeling and advocating for this approach in all that it does, our hypothetical organization would be far better able to mount a coherent challenge to the practitioners of pick and chose decency.

Needless to say, this same process of cross-fertilization would work in in every direction. All of us – change within the system types, service types, save the world types and, importantly, a growing number of people, from all walks of life, committed to the principles of Radical Decency – need to understand the self-evident importance of embracing the work of our comrades in arms.

Hopefully, then, as our vision expands and our separate and varied initiatives coalesce into a unified, values-based movement, so too will our impact in the world. One can only hope.