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Radical Decency Reflection #47
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Operationalizing One-ness of the Universe

In *My Stroke of Insight*, the neuroscientist, Jill Bolte Taylor, described the reality she inhabited after suffering a massive stroke that shut down the left side of her brain. Given over entirely to her right hemisphere, she was aware only of a field of energy of which her body, now fluid and permeable, was an integral part. If someone came into her room feeling tense, she was aware of his presence. If, however, he was calm she could not differentiate him from the rest of the energy that inhabited her and her room.

For me, Bolte Taylor's testimony is persuasive. I believe in the interconnectedness of all things, what some refer to as the one-ness of the universe. But . . . there is a big but. We inhabit this integrated world as humans, and the reality of our biology fundamentally defines and limits the ways in which we can participate in this interconnected universe.

In his brilliant lecture/podcast, *Reality and the Sacred*, Jordan Peterson illustrates this point with the following example. When we stand in front of the mirror, what do we see? A face, a nose, a mouth. And, what are we are incapable of seeing? The molecules, atoms, electrons, and quarks that are the building blocks of our faces. Equally beyond our perception? The cosmic forces that govern all matter and energy including, of course, the thing you and I see in the mirror and refer to as "me." In other words, we humans are designed to experience only a thin slice of the universe's larger reality.

It is true that a statistically insignificant number of humans have, in the course of our history, reported exceptional moments of transcendent consciousness. But parsing out the reliability of these reports – and, I confess, I'm a skeptic – is beside the point. Even conceding the possibility of transcendent events, far in excess of 99% of the moments of consciousness, experienced by members of our species, are limited in the ways that Peterson describes. Like it or not that is the reality that defines our lives and with which we need to come to grips in seeking an answer to this question: How best can we act on – operationalize – our one-ness with the universe?

Unfortunately, this question receives far too little attention. Most people are unreflectively rooted in the mainstream culture's view of reality: That each individual is an independent entity, charting his or her own unique course, choosing on a strictly voluntary basis whether and, if so, where and with whom to attach. For these people, the question has no relevance.

Then there is a much smaller group of people who embrace the idea of the interconnectedness of all things. But these people, with limited exceptions, are channeled by the cues and sanctions of the mainstream culture into activities that marginalize and dissipate their impact: Prayer, ecstatic religious experiences, consciousness expanding retreats and vision quests, mind-altering drugs, and so on.

My feelings about these people are mixed. On the one hand, I admire their willingness to embrace an expanded vision of reality. On the other, I am disturbed by their pre-occupation with activities that largely ignore the urgent need to translate these understandings into effective change strategies. To say that the flutter of a hummingbird's wings in Japan affects what happens in New York, however true it may be as a theoretical matter, is not – decidedly not – a viable strategy for changing a culture whose predominant, indecent values so deeply infect us all.

The most visible exception to this pattern is the environmental movement's emphasis on our symbiotic relationship with other species and the physical environment. This is one place where an important part of our interconnectness is translated into active social engagement. But even here, the approach is partial and incomplete. Lacking a fully integrative model, the approaches pursued by most environment organizations – as important as they are – fail to follow through on the implications of “one-ness” in non-programmatic areas: The structure and operation of their organizations; the treatment of employees, vendors, and adversaries; investment policy; and so on.

So is there a way to more effectively follow through on the implications inherent in this interconnected view of the universe? In his signature book, Beyond Permanence, Craig Eisendrath offers a way forward. Fully accounting for the interconnectedness of all things, his prescription for living allows us mere humans to more meaningfully contribute to a better world and, in so doing, to create richer, more meaningful lives.

Eisendrath's orienting context thoroughly departs from the individualistic outlook that dominates our culture and so effectively reinforces its win/lose, every man for himself ways of operating. What we would put in its place is:

“A new way of thinking about the relation of personhood and society, not in opposition, or even a situation in which people view society as a stage upon which to make an effort or impact, [but instead as] an organic, nurturant relationship in which human beings emerge from the physical and social worlds and reciprocally exercise their responsibility to make these environments even more nurturant and beneficial.”

To his great credit, Eisendrath also offers a prescription for operationalizing this view of the world. His first ingredient is “activism.” According to Eisendrath, “understanding one's condition and the condition of one's associates and the surrounding world” can only emerge when we actively immerse ourselves in the issues and events of our lives. But activism isn't enough. To make a wise and strategic choices, our activism needs to be informed by a “vision;” what Eisendrath refers to as “an effective personal philosophy.” Finally, he argues for a symbiosis that unites vision and activism: “We [need to] integrate our continuing experience with a developing personal philosophy, creating a basis for principled [and wiser, more strategic] action in the immediate situations of our lives.”

My personal journey underscores, for me, the wisdom of Eisendrath's prescription. I can do the mainstream thing with the best of them: Arguing, complaining and pontificating about what's wrong with the world, all within the safe confines of my status quo life.

But my most meaningful growth has occurred when I have been actively involved with the big issues that have marked the time and place in which I have lived: Marching for civil rights; doing the nitty-gritty organizing of a Common Cause/Philadelphia group and the National Constitution Center; traveling to El Salvador to live and work with re-settled rebel fighters; struggling to run a business, based on principles of Radical Decency; working with my coaching and therapy clients, day by day, to figure out more effective ways of living.

The importance of "activism" has also been driven home for me in my more intimate engagements. For me, professional and community involvements have always been instinctual. But my sense of life's possibilities really took off when, in addition, I more fully committed my time and energy to the perplexing task of being a good spouse, father and friend.

With all this, I also recognize the indispensable role that the second half of Eisendrath's prescription – an evolving personal philosophy – has played in my life. The indecent mainstream culture that dominates our world and permeates our lives is devilishly clever and deeply misleading. It distracts us with faux dramas. It draws us into big fights over marginal issues. And it divides energy, separating the "good guys" into their separate silos – education reformers, environmentalists, social workers, meditators, body workers, visual artists, and poets – with interactions between these silos being, at best, haphazard and episodic.

Many, many wise people offer insight and perspective on our discouraging state of affairs. And finding these people – amidst all the noise – is deeply important. But that isn't enough. All too typically, these teachings are embedded in the outlook and jargon of one of these culturally defined silos. For that reason, a kind of synthesis and ownership needs to happen if we hope to knead them into a coherent philosophy that can guide our concrete choices. In the absence of this "vision" work, we are likely to remain confused, frustrated and discouraged and, with that, to recede into a way of living that accepts adapting to things as they are as the only viable alternative.

This journey of synthesis and ownership has led me to Radical Decency. It is my working, evolving answer to the "vision" half of Eisendrath's prescription. In these Reflections, I invite others to consider its possibilities as an approach to living that, by accounting for the one-ness of the universe, allows us (as Eisendrath would say) "to exercise our responsibility to make the physical and social environments from which we emerge – and of which we are so thoroughly a part – more nurturant and beneficial."