

Jeff Garson
 Radical Decency Reflection #48
 August 14, 2011

Radical Decency – Naming A New “It”

My friend Gary Gray says a lot of smart things. A few years ago he described how women, in the 1960s, would meet to talk about “it.” They knew something was deeply wrong with the cultural roles to which they were consigned but couldn’t quite put their finger on it. Only after considerable ferment were they able to name it: Feminism, women’s liberation. And only then was it transformed into a mass movement.

This act of naming is crucial. Until something is named, its existence is problematic. Either it is culturally invisible or exists only in a series of seemingly diffuse, disjointed, and (at best) vaguely connected thoughts, feelings and activities. But the naming process has the potential to transform such an inchoate thing into something coherent, powerful and, in its most expansive form, world changing. In We, the Jungian theorist Robert A. Johnson, focusing on the emergence of romantic love as a cultural phenomenon in the Middle Ages, describes the process in this way:

“At a certain point in the history of a people, a new possibility bursts out of the collective unconscious; it is a new idea, a new belief, a new value, or a new way of looking at the universe.”

And it can operate as a powerfully positive force if “it can be integrated into the [collective] consciousness” and we “learn to handle its tremendous power.”

The culture in which we live is in the grips of a highly defined and thoroughly elaborated “it,” so much so that we usually think of it as reality, as just the way things are and have to be. Competitiveness – the need to get ahead, to prevail and win – permeates virtually every part of our lives.

What are we supposed to do? For anyone living in our culture, the answer is easy. Get the best possible grades at the best possible school so you can get a prestigious job where you can make more and more money. And, of course, always strive to be richer, thinner, sexier, and more popular.

Do you notice how singular the values are in this prescribed way of living? Compete, win and, ideally, be dominant. Be in control of every aspect of your life. And the ease with which we can answer this question graphically illustrates how thoroughly these values have infiltrated our collective consciousness and become the “it” that dominates our lives – either through conformance or our struggles to loosen its grip.

As I discussed in an earlier Reflection, these predominant values are not intrinsically bad. Properly used, a competitive spirit, sharpens our wits, motivates us to higher levels of

performance, and creates an intimate bond with co-competitors. Similarly, lying to a would-be rapist (control by deception) is an invaluable skill. And, after exhausting more respectful options, appropriately modulated counter aggression (domination and control) may be the best option when confronted with an implacable foe, intent on imposing his will. See Reflection #30, *In Defense of Our Troubling Values*.

But we have utterly failed – in Johnson’s terms – to integrate these values into a larger “collective consciousness” that allows us to manage their “tremendous power.” What is starkly absent from our lives is a more encompassing frame – a new “it” – that can subsume and manage these competitive, win/lose values so that they serve our humanity instead of riding roughshod over it.

As I see it, Radical Decency is perfectly designed to operate as this new “it.” Why? The answer begins my deep seated belief that are good people everywhere; people who, troubled by the culture’s predominant values, are actively seeking craft more decent and humane ways of living. But, having no commonly understood name – no “it” around which to coalesce— their energy is hopelessly fractured and divided.

The mainstream culture divides us up into groups: Liberals, conservatives, libertarians, evangelical Christians, environmentalists, free market capitalists, and so on. And most of the people who affiliate with these groups honestly believe that their approach is the right one, the one that will create a better world – if only everyone else would listen.

However, the deeper truth about most every mainstream movement of any size and persistence is that, while they capture the energy of many well-meaning people, their message is deeply compromised by the culture’s predominant values. Why is this so universally true? Because doing so allows them to tap into the resources of the mainstream culture. And failing to do so, they would wither and die – or, at best, remain quixotically small and marginal – due to a lack of funding, access to power, and media attention. They compromise their message because they “have to,” to be “successful.”

Note, also, that this is a leadership driven phenomenon. Why? Because the mainstream culture’s mechanisms for allocating money, access and media attention make it virtually inevitable that the people who build and maintain these movements will be goal-oriented people who know how to work the system. Only people with these skills can do the job. But that, in turn, means that – unless they have extraordinary awareness and mastery over what drives them – their instinctual, personality driven choices will, in large ways and small, reflect our mainstream ways of operating.

Given their aptitudes and skills, these compromises are – for them – far less gut wrenching than you might imagine, even when their public message challenges the mainstream system. For this reason, this process of domestication and emasculation typically occurs seamlessly and imperceptibly; a fact that makes it all the more effective.

So where does this process leave the well-intentioned people who so passionately identify with these causes? Sadly, because of their powerful emotional identification with the

cause, most of them stick with the group's party line, becoming in the process unwittingly apologists for its compromised message and leadership.

Thus, liberals bite their tongue and go along with President Obama's failure to push for meaningful financial regulation and Hillary Clinton's vote in favor of the Iraq war. Evangelical Christians condone wildly uncharitable judgments leveled by their more strident leaders at gays and immigrants. And Catholics are required to remain loyal to leaders who condoned and then minimized massive, systemic child abuse.

However, if Radical Decency ever "burst out of the collective unconscious" as a "new way of looking at the universe," it would offer to these well-intentioned people – wherever they sit on the political spectrum and however they identify themselves – a life and world-altering perspective. And their new "it" would be this: The problem is not greedy businesses, or government handouts, or the failure to follow the Buddha or Mohammed or a literal reading of the Bible. It is, instead, the pre-eminence a set of values – competition, dominance and control – that deeply compromise our humanity. And the solution is to systematically implement an alternative set of values – respect, understanding, empathy, equity and justice; that is, Radical Decency.

Radical Decency works well as the new "it," first, because it is specifically designed to deal with the pre-eminent challenge of our time: The indecent values that dominate our lives and world. For a new sensibility to emerge, this clarity of focus is essential. In addition, because it is not a pre-existing religious, political, or social movement, there are no additional agendas to deflect and divide energy, and to confuse its purposes. This fact also makes it a perfect gathering place for well-intentioned people, operating from diverse perspectives. Christians, Jews, Muslims, and nonbelievers – liberals, conservatives, and free market ideologues – all of our well-intentioned people can continue to be who they are and still be radically decent.

If Radical Decency took hold as the new "it," here's what could happen. Armed with a new clarity of purpose, our well-intentioned people would separate themselves from the indecent aspects of their established movements, either by reforming them from within or, if that is not feasible, by abandoning them entirely. In the process, their co-opted leaders and flawed messages would be de-legitimized. And, understanding their deep kinship with similarly well-intentioned people – operating from their own unique perspectives – a new values-based movement would emerge; a movement with the power to change the world.

What would new this movement look like? How would these reformed and reinvigorated political, religious and social groups be organized? What would their leadership look like? How would they cooperate? I don't know. But, in contrast to the virtually universal disdain and mistrust our current decision-making processes evoke, theirs would be a process worthy of our confidence and respect. Why? Because, with their whole-hearted commitment to Radical Decency, we could trust them to steadily move toward policies and ways of living that are more decent and humane. This is the world in which I long to live.