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Radical Decency Reflection #50
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Decency – Expanding Our Possibilities

The definition of decency I have worked with over the years is as follows: Respect, understanding, empathy, equity and justice. In Reflection #17, I offered an explanation of each of these qualities and described how they interconnect. In this Reflection, I discuss three additional qualities that, properly understood, have the potential to further energize Radical Decency and extend its possibilities: Acceptance, appreciation, and love.

My work as a psychotherapist has been deeply influenced by narrative therapy, an approach that emphasizes the extent to which we are defined by the stories we tell about ourselves. Thus, a regular theme in my practice is to progressively assimilate and understand my client's stories and, as this process unfolds, to help them evolve more hopeful variants which soften and help to transform their initial, more painful versions.

Immersing myself in this process, one important lesson I have learned is this: People's dominant narratives, no matter how dysfunctional, almost always contain positive aspects that, properly nurtured, can allow a more generative and fulfilling side to emerge. So, for example, a "gem" within the person whose story is filled with anger at a hostile world might be a powerful life force that refuses to shrink in the face of adversity. Similarly, someone who feels judged and diminished by the world may have a special gift for attunement to others.

This perspective has led to a fundamental shift in the way in which I see people. We live in a culture where the norm is to see our group as "good" and the other side as "bad." But immersing myself in the narratives of many different kinds of people – and listening for the best in them – these categories have largely dissolved. Each one of us, I now believe, has the potential for the full range of human thoughts, feelings, and actions, from the most loving and generative to the most hateful and destructive. And, given this fact, we all have the potential to lead more humane and loving lives.

Complicating this hopeful reality, however, is another fundamental truth. Living in an endemically indecent culture, many people are locked into narratives that inflict great pain on others, sometimes murderously so – and, crucially, are uninterested or incapable of modifying their stories. For this reason, a belief in our inherent potential for good needs to be coupled with an unflinching recognition of the pain these "permanently stuck" people inflict and a willingness to respond with strong counter measures.

My traditional definition of decency does a good job of dealing with these hopeless cases without compromising the philosophy's underlying principles. Recognizing that a "fight fire with fire" approach reinforces and perpetuates the underlying abusive patterns, it offers an alternative approach that is both decent and appropriately protective. See Reflection # 44 *Intimate vs. Strategic Relationships*; and Reflection #35 *Salaried Workers – Realities and Possibilities*. But what I have come to realize is that, on the flip

side, my traditional definition fails to fully take account of the inherent upside potential that we humans possess. Here's my thinking.

In my standard definition of decency, the first 3 elements are reflective, inviting us to cultivate these states of mind: An initial presumption that others' are operating in good faith and have something of value to offer (respect); and deepening sense of connection at both an intellectual level (understanding) and an emotional and visceral level (empathy). The final 2 elements are a call to action, challenging us to make choices that are fair (equity) and make all people accountable for their actions (justice).

How does this definition fall short? By setting up a dynamic, that in a subtle but very real way invites us to be passive in dealing with people who act indecently; to simply accept them as we find them. Absent the expansion I suggest in this Reflection, it offers far too little guidance for positively engaging the many people who act indecently – often due to cultural pressures – but are not permanently stuck in these behaviors.

The omission is significant. Radical Decency's goal is to create a better life and to meaningfully contribute to a better world. So if, as discussed above, more humane and decent ways of being are a lively possibility for all but the terminally stuck, seeking ways to activate this potential with as many people as possible should be central to its practice. It makes no sense to passively walk away from all this potential – and all these potential allies. And that is the motivation behind my extension of “decency” to include acceptance, appreciation and love. Properly employed, these qualities can nurture and support the emergence of this potential in a wide variety of contexts.

With these additional aspects of decency, I am, once again, proposing reflective elements – acceptance and appreciation – that, in turn, prime us to act more effectively in service of Radical Decency's larger goal, in this case through acts of love.

Because we are human, all things human – the Buddhists teach us – will come our way, from the most uplifting to the most painful and demoralizing. Thus, it makes no sense to treat adversity as an aberration or an affront; as something that should never occur. The better approach is to view every experience, however pleasing or painful, as a part of living – to be greeted, ideally, with acceptance and equanimity.

For me, this idea naturally bleeds into the related concept of appreciation. In Imago couples therapy, you are coached to use the following prompt with your intimate partner: “You make complete sense.” Doing so challenges one partner to take stock of the other's history, adaptations to that history, and hopes and dreams for the future and, then, to explain why “of course” his partner – given who she is – reacts in that way. Appreciation applies this approach generally. Everything everyone does makes complete sense, if we just know enough about the conditions and circumstances of their life. Thus, appreciation of others – their pain, confusion, and struggle to make sense of and get by in life – though highly aspirational, is a realistic and worthy goal. Indeed, in its fullest manifestation, we wind up being grateful for the ways in which, being more fully with their unique journey – however it looks – we are enriched as well.

Cultivating acceptance and appreciation can transform our approach to others, be it a family and friends, business colleagues and competitors, or even political and ethnic adversaries. For me, its transformative power often shows up in my work with couples. In a typical therapeutic moment, he yells and she goes cold and withering in her judgments. Out there, in the real world, most of us would be quick to judge him – or her – or both, as self-absorbed, immature, and manipulative. But as a therapist, I am challenged to approach to these people with a sense of acceptance and appreciation.

With this mindset, my sense of the moment is fundamentally altered by the larger context in which I hold them: Their devotion to one another, their longing to love and be loved; their courage in persisting on this intimate journey. I am then able to see their behaviors as a natural part of the rich and varied tapestry of our shared humanity (acceptance). And, equally, I am mindful of the complexity of experience that, for each of them, has led to this moment (appreciation). Again and again, in these moments, my abiding belief is this: These are two good people, doing the best they can.

What is important in all of this is where it can lead. An enormous part of any relationship is defined, not by what we say, but by the unspoken emotional music that we bring to the encounter. When that music includes acceptance and appreciation (in addition to respect, understanding and empathy), the other person – or each partner in my example – is far more likely to feel safe, seen, and warmly held. And that in turn can lead to a lowering of defenses, and increased likelihood of authentic and intimate contact – the interpersonal transaction at the heart of Radical Decency.

And this is where love comes in. When we are able to create this environment, tending to the other person (loving) and warmly accepting their attentive gifts in return (being loved) is the surest route toward cementing this more productive relationship. Moreover, in situations in which these prerequisites are not fully in place – but we sense possibility – loving acts are an excellent way to invite a fuller flowering of this sort of relationship. With a committed Radical Decency practice, we need – always – to be alive to these possibilities, and ready to judiciously use loving acts to explore their potential.

Note, importantly, that applying acceptance, appreciation, and love, in these ways, in no way implies or invites passivity in the face of indecency. To the contrary, Radical Decency is specifically designed to subvert our indecent culture at its values-based core, and these strategies are designed to extend its reach. Thus, it is a complimentary strategy, designed to work in concert with and to enhance our efforts to bring more equity and justice into our lives and world.

A final thought: As difficult as it is with friends and family, this approach is far more challenging in business and in the world of politics. The mainstream's culture nonstop messages push us in the opposite direction – counseling caution, suspicion and mistrust – and are quick to label a fulsome commitment to decency as naïve, soft, Pollyanna-ish, unmanly, and so on. But, remembering that Radical Decency is its own reward, we need never be deterred by the size of the challenge it presents.