

Jeff Garson
Radical Decency Reflection #52
October 2, 2011

Marketing Radical Decency: Lessons Learned

Radical Decency is an action and process oriented approach to living. It is not based on an *a priori* set of values. Instead, it seeks to thoroughly ground itself in our biological limitations and potentialities and, then, working with these realities, to offer behaviors that cultivate better lives and meaningfully contribute to a better world.

These behaviors – respect and understanding; empathy, acceptance and appreciation; equity, justice, and love – are the meat and potatoes of Radical Decency. But equally important are the means by which they are implemented. To achieve the philosophy’s ambitious goals, substance and process – means and ends – need to be in harmony.

Adopting this approach, Radical Decency rejects the idea – condoned and widely adopted in the mainstream culture – that a worthy goal gives us permission to temporize on the means employed to attain it. It views with deep suspicion the politician or social reformer who claims that he is (1) “playing the game” to (2) get power, so that once in power, he can (3) reform the system. Why? Because it doesn’t work: Part (3) never seems to happen.

Indeed, the deeper truth is that this “ends justifies the means” approach is a key way in which the efforts of well-intentioned people are domesticated and marginalized. In their zeal to be effective – to be big, to have a perceptible impact in the world – they are seduced into ways of operating that reflect the culture’s predominant values and wind up perpetuating the very system they seek to reform.

With these premises in mind, one very key question I have puzzled over, for many years, is how to maintain Radical Decency’s principles as an unyielding, uncompromisable priority but, at the same time, effectively present it to others. Here are my thoughts.

As I have pointed out in many Reflections, the predominant culture has evolved a myriad of mechanisms –subtle, indirect, and devastatingly effective – for corroding and neutralizing change efforts. Thus, it is no surprise that it offers a ready answer to my question that, while seemingly benign and neutral, in fact invites complicity with its core values. Its answer is this: To be successful, Radical Decency needs to be effectively marketed and sold, just like any other product in the marketplace of ideas.

When I first started working with Radical Decency, I accepted this approach as a self-evident proposition. Over the years, however, I have come to realize that it conflicts with

Radical Decency's core principles and, in the end, emasculates both the message and the social movement we hope to nurture around it.

The proponents of this approach tend to be the business-smart people; a group that I very much identify with, given my many years as an attorney and political activist. Drawing on their experience, and success, in the mainstream world, they instinctually push marketing initiatives that people like themselves – with money and real-world smarts and capabilities – find comfortable and congenial.

Thus, the messages they craft avoid any buzzwords that might be off-putting to mainstream audiences; soft-pedal the philosophy's more visionary and radical ideas; and, to the extent possible, make Radical Decency sound like good, smart business. And, there is little or no concern about diluting or confusing the core message because, after all, these are merely marketing strategies, designed to "sell the product" and nothing more.

What is wrong with this approach? To begin with, even people seeking to radically diverge from our habitual ways of living are deeply immersed in the dirty bathtub that is our mainstream culture, and have been for their entire lives. For this reason, understanding and implementing Radical Decency – a daunting task even when all of our energy is focused on that goal – is a practical impossibility when our marketing strategies use the mainstream culture's language and require us to continually rationalize Radical Decency based on its premises. The predictable result is that our purposes become confused, diluted, and irrevocably diminished.

A second, equally fatal flaw with this approach is that the conventionally successful people it so uncritically pursues and recruits are – because of that success – instinctually biased toward status quo ways of operating in the world. So as more and more of these people become influential in the movement, their mainstream outlooks and tactics will progressively supplant Radical Decency's original, more radical vision.

In the end, the inescapable, inconvenient truth is that this approach is fundamentally inconsistent with the philosophy's principles. Its willingness to mold the message to meet the target audience's expectations speaks to its willingness to use manipulative methods – the antithesis of Radical Decency's mutual and authentic contact. And its pre-occupation with competing and winning in the competition for money, members, and influence – by whatever means necessary – is, in reality, a return to the very values Radical Decency seeks to supplant.

Crafting more decent lives and meaningfully contributing to a better world is a mind-numbingly complicated and wisdom stretching task – and Radical Decency offers an exciting and creative response. So, for example, one of its primary virtues is its breadth of vision; encompassing, as it does, all areas of living from the most intimate and personal to the most public and political. Another of its virtues is its attention to the place where we all necessarily begin this healing journey. So, in addition to offering a comprehensive roadmap for living differently, it also seeks to understand the processes

that keep us rooted in our *status quo* ways of operating and provides detailed strategies for escaping their grasp.

But these and other virtues do not mean that Radical Decency has all the answers. To the contrary, there are many other exceedingly smart and helpful approaches that deal, in their way, with the issues Radical Decency addresses: How to create more decent lives and to effectively contribute to a better world.

Putting these two thoughts together, Radical Decency needs to be invitational in its presentation but not proselytary. We need to present it as the exciting, creative, potentially life- and world-altering program it truly is. Equally, however, we need to avoid becoming exclusive and exclusionary; viewing it as the only true way.

But without diminishing this the importance of this caveat, we cannot become diffident or falsely modest in our presentations. Radical Decency and approaches like it are desperately needed in our lives and in the world. So our invitation needs to be strong, clear, and appropriately amplified. In other words, it needs to be a “passionate invitation” – while always taking care never to slip into proselytization or exclusivity.

Then, with this honest, assertive, but appropriately limited approach in place:

- If you are fully in, great. We are confident that you will be richly rewarded for your choice.
- And if you and I share some but not all of Radical Decency’s premises, that is fine too. Perhaps our ongoing dialogue will reveal commonalities and new and creative ways of collaborating in our common causes.
- And if you have no interest, we genuinely wish you well in finding your way knowing that, in the end, we have no monopoly on wisdom.

Importantly this approach, unlike the more traditional marketing approach described earlier, does not compromise Radical Decency’s core values in the process of selling it. To the contrary, in this approach, a “sale” can only occur if the other person feels genuinely respected and heard and, building on the trust this process cultivates, is increasingly able to entertain our ideas with an open mind and heart. Fully embracing this process, we are continually challenged to practice and model Radical Decency’s core values: Respect and understanding; empathy, acceptance, and appreciation; equity, justice, and love.

In all of this, the issue of effectiveness is very much in play. Foregoing traditional marketing tactics will undoubtedly leave many opportunities on the table. But if we are serious about creating an alternative approach to living – and maintaining its integrity – there is no other way. The truth in this area, as in so many others, is that there are no easy choices. And as tempting as they are, choices that temporize on Radical Decency’s core values for the sake of short-term gain are misguided. The pull of the culture’s mainstream values, and the difficulty in maintaining clarity as we chart a different course, are far too strong to flirt with strategies that seek to have it both ways.