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 Radical Decency Reflection #54
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Being Radical

Calling an approach to living Radical Decency, I am, needless to say, suggesting two things: (1) Make decency your priority; and (2) apply it radically. Earlier Reflections break decency down into a detailed set of attitudes and behaviors, the intent being to offer a concrete roadmap to guide our day-by-day choices. See Reflection #17, *What Is Decency?* and Reflection #50, *Decency – Expanding Our Possibilities*. In this Reflection, I deal with the radical aspects of the philosophy.

Viewed in isolation, Radical Decency's component pieces are unexceptional. Be Respectful? Understanding? Empathic? Fair? Just? Loving? Ask a person who is thoroughly invested in the mainstream culture's competitive, win/lose approach to living and he is likely to say, "sure, no problem, all of these things are good."

His response, however, is actually code for this: I will happily be understanding and empathic, but only when it doesn't interfere with my headlong pursuit of money and power. I will honor the idea of equity and justice, but only when it requires no meaningful sacrifice on my part. With these unspoken caveats, he is faithfully expressing a deeply engrained mainstream approach to living that I call pick and chose decency: Be respectful, fair, just and so on when you can, but when it really counts "do what needs to be done." This approach is, of course, not decent at all.

Radical Decency is interesting and different, not because it promotes these values, but because it kneads them into a coherent, integrated whole and, then, applies them – not partially and when it is convenient – but at all times, in every context, and without exception. In other words, the philosophy's transformative potential is only realized when it is applied radically. In the discussion that follows, I elaborate on three elements that I see as indispensable to this radical approach.

1. Make a positive, forward-looking vision your central focus. Don't define yourself in reaction to others.

This principle is central to Radical Decency and a cornerstone of its radicalism. Taking this position puts me at odds – I know – with the dictum of Saul Alinsky, the legendary radical organizer: That successful organizing requires a designated enemy to coalesce around. It also rejects the model that has been integral to so many of recent history's more visible radical movements: Labor's struggles against management; socialism and communism vs. capitalism; the civil right's movement of the late 1950s and early 1960s vs. the deep South's belligerent racism; Reagan and the tea partiers vs. the Federal government, and so on.

The culture we live in is consumed with defeating enemies and winning. And, immersed in this mindset, we spend remarkably little time on what is, in the end, the really crucial question: Once we win, what do we stand for and what are we going to do? Because we

are good and right – and they are bad and wrong – we assume the answers to these questions will be easy; that, once in, our goodness and rightness will point the way. But we are wrong. These issues are highly complex and difficult. And for me, the disqualifying aspect of Alinsky’s “us vs. them” approach is the extent to which it replicates these mainstream ways of thinking.

Many reform-minded groups view the system as a given and focus, instead, on the narrower goal of getting a bigger piece of the pie for a particular group. For groups that take this approach – implicitly conceding that the game must to be played by the mainstream culture’s rules – Alinsky’s approach is a viable option. But for a group that seeks to fundamentally alter the ways in which we operate, the idea that we can change the system by adopting its mindset and tactics makes no sense. Indeed, the failure to grasp the fundamental contradiction, inherent in this approach, is a key reason why so many of history’s originally well-intentioned movements – the French Revolution, the Russian Revolution, Mao-ism, and so on – went so grievously wrong.

Radical Decency seeks to avoid this trap. It starts, it is true, with an in depth analysis of the mainstream culture’s dysfunctional ways of operating. But the goal is not to identify, demonize, and defeat an enemy. Instead, we seek to understand ways in which the culture neutralizes reform efforts – in order to avoid these pitfalls. Then, armed with these understandings, the focus decisively shifts to the positive, forward looking agenda that defines Radical Decency: To understand what decency looks like, and to craft strategies that will allow us to implement it more effectively in all areas of living.

So, for example, this Reflection begins with diagnostic explanation of the culture’s “pick and chose decency” shell game. But the balance of the discussion deals with ways in which we can be more effectively radical in our choices. More generally, I have worked to make cure – the tricky business of charting a different, more positive course – the touchstone of Radical Decency and to avoid the trap of offering one more robust rant against “what is,” with far too little discussion of “what can be done.”

2. Be strategic.

In our laissez faire, do your own thing culture the importance of a strategic outlook receives remarkably little attention. And here, once again, the culture’s taken for granted attitudes work beautifully – if you are looking for an approach that keeps us rooted in the status quo.

Prevailing attitudes about charitable giving offer an excellent example. People are urged to give. But strikingly absent is any societal pressure to make that giving strategic. Instead, we are effusively congratulated for any contribution – of any size – never mind that it might represent an infinitesimal fraction of our net worth and income. And a gift to a college with a multi-billion endowment is, in the mainstream view, just as commendable as a gift to an organization that is working with the neediest among us, or or seeking to change our indecent ways.

To be truly radical, we need to continually examine and re-examine our priorities. The process is incredibly complicated and often uncomfortable. How do you allocate your time, talent, and financial resources – day-by-day – between your family, your immediate communities, the larger world, and your own needs? Like so many other aspects of the philosophy, there are no easy answers. But as we willingly engage in this wisdom-stretching enterprise, we will more fully make good on the goal of creating a decency practice we can legitimately call “radical.”

One final thought on being strategic: We need to pay special attention to ways in which we can collaborate and integrate our efforts with others. Because the slope we need to climb as we seek to create a more decent life and world is so steep, we can’t take the easy, more comfortable route of pursuing our special passions only, while offering little or no support to other, vitally important initiatives.

3. Be fully committed; “all in.”

Joseph Stalin was a mass murderer, responsible for the death of 60 million people. Jesus, by contrast, was an exemplary person; an inspiration to countless millions for 2 millennia. But they were both radicals – and in one respect their message was identical. When a wealthy man asked Jesus what he needed do to get eternal life, his response was: Sell your possessions, give to the poor, and then come and follow me. Similarly, after the collapse of the 1905 revolution, when so many of his compatriots got married and found jobs, Stalin railed in frustration: You cannot be a householder and a revolutionary.

Being “all in” is a tough discipline, as the Bible fully recognizes in reporting that the rich man, “went away sad.” But Jesus and Stalin were right. If you conclude that fundamental change is needed you cannot commit yourself to the process halfway. You have to be willing to risk all: As Jesus did when entered he Jerusalem with his radical, anti-establishment message; as Lenin and Stalin did in their years of beleaguered organizing and, at the decisive moment, when they stormed the Winter Palace.

Doing so in the context of Radical Decency presents special challenges. Unlike so many other radical movements, it is not exclusive or rejectionist. Instead, it counsels us to find ways of living in the world as it is – an essential aspect of decency to self – while, at the same time, actively making choices that foster greater decency in our immediate environments and in the world. Given this approach, the philosophy usually unfolds quietly, in the privacy of our day-by-day, moment-by-moment choices.

This means that most of the choices that truly put us “all in” are invisible to everyone – except us. It also makes it easy to fake it, since there is nothing to stop us from doing the stuff we are comfortable with, even as we quietly neglect the necessary choices that trigger our anxieties and fears.

The bottom line in all of this? Being fully committed – being “all in” – requires lots of discipline and self-accountability. As with so many other aspects of the philosophy, its radical demands are enormously challenging – worth pursuing only because the potential rewards are commensurate with its demands.