

Jeff Garson
Radical Decency Reflection #55
October 23, 2011

Be Decent To Hitler?

In this Reflection, I focus on the more practical side of Radical Decency, working with an example that is regularly raised by readers: How do you react to a public person who is intent on dominating and controlling others, and willing to employ any means to achieve those goals. This issue has wide ramifications, since we live in a world in which demonization of political adversaries and movements is endemic: Osama bin Laden, Saddam Hussein, Muammar Gaddafi and, on the current domestic scene, Sarah Palin and the tea partiers (on the left) and Barak Obama and feminist/socialist/elitists (on the right). The list goes on and on.

In the analysis that follows I discuss how a person, seeking to be radically decent, might constructively engage with a political leader who, in that person's sincere but subjective opinion, is dangerous and unscrupulous; in other words, how to engage with a "Hitler" in a more decent way. One interesting and hopeful aspect of the approach I advocate – not dealt with in the discussion that follows – is that it will, inevitably, soften our perceptions of the leader who has been given this label when, in fact, it is undeserved. I invite you to consider this aspect of the process on your own.

A key to dealing with this issue is to remember – always – that Radical Decency makes decency to self every bit as important as decency to others and the world. However, putting this perspective into practice is not as easy as it may seem. Why? Because the mainstream culture cultivates an either/or outlook: Either we are selfish, self-absorbed competitors, intent on getting ahead; or, we are selfless nurturers who, in the words of the country and western anthem are "always giving, never asking back." Since Radical Decency is clearly not a selfish approach to living – we instinctually stereotype it as a selfless philosophy and over-focus on how we treat others.

Making decency to self a co-equal priority leads to interesting and helpful shifts in our outlook and choices. It reminds us to be respectful, understanding, and empathic not only in our dealings with others, but also in how we handle the often-discordant voices inside our head. And, importantly, it brings into focus two key, threshold questions that are all too easy to overlook in our dealings with others: How much intimacy do we want to have with this person? What kind of boundaries do we want to set?

Why are these questions so important? Because, lacking clarity on these issues, we are likely to reach a point when one of us will expect more than the other person is willing to give. This, in turn, is a recipe for misunderstanding, hurt, disappointment and, as tensions rise, reactive fight or flight behaviors that – while they persist – make respect, understanding, and empathy emotional impossibilities. In the "demonized politician" context, the disappointment and frustration are likely to be to our expectation – not shared by our political leaders – that they will strive to be wise, fair, and just.

With these orienting thoughts in mind, how should we deal with a Hitler? The starting place is to be clear, from the outset, that we have no interest in a frank and open connection with the politician in question or with his followers; that our entire focus is strategic; that intimacy is no part of the equation. See Reflection 44, *Intimate vs. Strategic Relationships*. Then, clear about our purposes, we should strive: (1) to be self-protective; (2) to embrace our responsibility to resist injustice; and (3), consistent with Radical Decency's core principles, to be respectful, understanding and empathic.

Pursuing these goals is not easy – to say the least. Many of us, fearing retaliation, choose instead to abandon the second and third goals retreating, as unobtrusively as possible, into our private/nonpolitical pre-occupations. Others accept their responsibility to resist injustice but make no effort to be respectful, understanding and empathic.

The first of these two reactions is a retreat from the principles of Radical Decency, pure and simple. But the second is more complicated and presents a more interesting dilemma. The “fight fire with fire” approach that this reaction reflects is fueled by two emotions. The first is anger: Do you really expect me to be decent to “him,” after all that has done? The second is the fear that, if we remain true to our radically decent ideals, we will – at a personal level – condone and enable his conduct, and – at a political level – be rolled in the knife fight that is the reality of politics.

The pitfalls that motivate these fears, while not inevitable, all are too real. But allowing them to control our choices is a classic example of missing the forest for the trees. We cannot and should not tolerate murderous dictators. But the root problem is not the Hitlers, Saddams, and Gaddafis that regularly turn up in our world. It is, instead, our mainstream values – competition, dominance, and control – that, pursued to their logical extreme, spawn one ruthless dictator after another. And when we give ourselves license to demonize the politicians we oppose – however objectively bad their behaviors may be – we unwittingly adopt and perpetuate these values.

The more productive approach is to model the change we seek. We should persist in efforts to understand the other – even a Hitler – on his terms, knowing that his worldview has an internal logic that makes sense to him. And more fundamentally, we should seek to understand – and empathize – with the fears and vulnerabilities that have driven him to such perverse attitudes and behaviors.

So, when you see “that person” on television, lean forcefully against the temptation to sputter in anger, call him names, and change the channel. Instead push yourself to listen, to understand who this person is and why he is saying the things he is saying. Then craft a response that is not a reactive “fuck you” to this “idiot” but is, instead, thoughtful and strategic. Finally, and very importantly, show up and speak up, offer your more decent ideas and outlook, and integrate your efforts with the efforts of other like-minded people.

One particularly thorny problem that repeatedly comes up, in this context, is how to respond when you are drawn into a substantive debate on the issues. As I see it, the more productive approach is to parse out the real arguments – which deserve to be addressed

on the merits – from the ones that are obviously partisan and sophistic; a process made surprisingly easy by our politicians’ utter lack of subtlety or restraint in presenting these bogus arguments. Then, instead of responding to these points – a useless exercise – seek to expose their inauthenticity.

In the 1980s, I experienced the power of this approach when Elie Weisel, in presently his arguments in an issue of the day, was greeted with a highly personal attack on his character. His response: “Shame on you, there are important things to say on your side of the argument and your response dishonors them.”

Another point I want to emphasize is that the approach I advocate does not exclude extreme measures. The first principle of decency to self is to maintain physical safety. So if the choice is to kill, or be killed by a person or movement intent on doing you in, killing is appropriate. Hitler needed to die. But such extreme choices are unusual and we need to remain vigilant lest a principle applicable in extreme situations is expanded to condone killing or other forms of oppression in less extreme contexts.

Cultivating this balanced approach when faced with the extreme provocation of a Hitler is, of course, extremely difficult. But we need to remember that, with each exception we make to the principles of Radical Decency, we are walking down the road toward “pick and chose decency,” the self serving version of decency that the mainstream culture embraces as a convenient cover for its avaricious, exploitation ways.

The good news is that inspiring historical precedents demonstrate the potential power of this radically decent response to tyranny. One need only look at the lives and choices of Gandhi, Mandela, Martin Luther King, and Jesus to understand that this approach can be forceful, audacious, heroic, effective and – at the same time – respectful, understanding, and empathic.

We also need to remember that the alternative, “fight fire with fire” approach is a self-defeating proposition. To begin with, we are unlikely to defeat a dictator at his own brutally murderous game. And if we do – as occasionally happens when corruption saps his vitality or fortuitous events conspire against him – the people who succeed him are primed to use these same authoritarian methods since they are, after all, the very tools that allowed them bubble to the top as leaders of a violent opposition.

Any challenge to entrenched power is a long shot and the discouraging truth is that most of us, if we engage in struggle at all, genuflect (figuratively or literally) before the inspiring leaders of the past and, then, revert to the mainstream tactics that – if history is our guide – offer, at best, short term surcease from oppressive systems that will inevitably reassert themselves in an authoritarian, exploitative culture such as ours. Hopefully, the clarity of vision and concrete strategies that Radical Decency and similar approaches offer will allow us to be more effective contributors in the struggle against oppression.