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 Radical Decency Reflection #58
 November 20, 2011

Humor, Reason, and the Disease That Ails Us

In crafting a workable strategy for contributing to a more decent life and world, one of the biggest challenges is to understand the precise nature of the problem that makes this seemingly straightforward goal so difficult. The Reflections talk a lot about the flawed values that dominate our culture. But these values – competing and winning, dominating and controlling – are not the fundamental problem.

To the contrary, properly managed, these qualities are helpful aspects in our overall human arsenal. Giving ourselves over to our competitive spirit in appropriate situations sharpens our wits, motivates us to higher levels of performance, and can create an intimate bond with co-competitors. And far from being wrong, lying to a would-be rapist or the Gestapo – control by deception – is an invaluable skill. See Reflection # 30, *In Defense of Our Troubling Values*.

Viewing the culture as the root cause of our endemic indecency also misses the mark. Attacking indecency at a culture/structural level is certainly a useful activity. But if we think reforming the education system, or the ways in which we finance political campaigns will fundamentally alter the ways in which we live, we are mistaken.

What we have learned from the various campaign finance reforms efforts over the last 40 years is that, if we limit the flow of money in one area, it will almost immediately be redirected into other channels that end-run the reforms. And if an impeccably humanistic education became the norm – and nothing else changed – the great bulk of us would simply tolerate this impractical, airy/fairy curriculum and find other venues where we could focus on making money, on competing and winning in the mainstream culture.

So if the fundamental issue isn't the culture or our mainstream values, what is the crux of the problem? It is the process by which these values infiltrate into virtually every area of our lives. I think of this process as a giant, voracious amoeba that silently oozes into, infects, and if unseen and unchecked – as it usually is – co-opts to its competitive, acquisitive outlook virtually every institution, movement, relationship, and way of operating in the world.

This Reflection offers examples of how deeply this process infects even the most seemingly private and benign of human activities: Humor and reason. By focusing on these less obvious these examples, I hope to persuasively illustrate how shockingly deep and widespread this phenomenon really is.

1. Humor

Jokes, quick quips, irony, and sarcasm are deeply woven into the fabric of our lives. The little jolt of pleasure that a funny remark provokes is a constant, very welcome

companion as we tend to our day-by-day chores. But if we hope to be a force for change, we cannot uncritically give ourselves over to our instinct for teasing and sarcasm. Why? Because of the (largely unacknowledged) role humor plays in reinforcing and perpetuating the mainstream culture's dominant values.

Anger is an integral part of our fight or flight brain and is specifically designed to overpower someone else's will. Given the culture's emphasis on domination and control, it is no surprise that anger and aggression are endemic. But explicit anger risks unwanted consequences: Alienation of an important person, social stigmatization and, of course, retaliation.

So one of humor's unstated but very important roles is to offer an acceptable social cover for anger. A joke can be utterly benign – even warm and loving. But the same joke, told with different intent and timing, can also be a searing putdown. For this reason humor offers a double cloak of non-accountability for unacknowledged anger.

First, it is often difficult to gauge the joke teller's intent. Is this a manipulative act of aggression? It feels that way, but how can I be sure? In addition, even when intent is clear, effective counter-measures are almost impossible. Making the effort, the victim is likely to be greeted with this all too familiar, accountability denying response: "What's the matter, can't you take a joke?"

Humor is also a very important bullying tactic in the context of a debate or dialogue. When I was a practicing lawyer, a smart aphorism I frequently heard was this: "The first person to get angry, loses." But equally telling is this thought: Ridicule, in the guise of a joke, can have the opposite effect. One dismissive comment, provided it is funny and well-timed, can effectively disqualify the position of the person on the receiving end.

This phenomenon may seem relatively benign, but it isn't. We are a culture that has largely lost its ability to engage in civil dialogues; dialogues that acknowledge and respect difference and seek common ground. So if we are serious about counteracting the massive infiltration of the mainstream's culture values into our lives, we cannot condone and engage in indecent humor just because we enjoy the emotional "hit" and are susceptible to its disarming charm.

2. Reason

Reason is, for most of us, an unalloyed good. While our emotions often seem unreliable and potentially damaging, to our selves and others, we view our ability to think calmly and logically as our mature, stabilizing force.

The problem with this view is that it ignores the reality of our biology. Our emotional brain is, actually, far more powerful than our thinking brain. In fact, all data enters our brain at that point. Why? So that before anything else happens we can determine whether something is pleasurable – to be pursued – or dangerous, thereby triggering our fight or flight system. Only then does the data migrate into our thinking/reasoning brain.

Thus, while the in the mainstream view is that the rational brain limits and controls the emotional brain, the opposite is far closer to the truth: Far more frequently, it is the emotional brain that harnesses the thinking brain to its purposes. As Edward O. Wilson notes, “we make decisions for reasons we often sense only vaguely, and seldom if ever understand fully.”

Trusting our reasoning abilities as cool and objective – when, in fact, they are anything but – they are ripe for infiltration and co-optation by the culture’s mainstream values. And so, we weave webs of logic that are, unknown to our thinking brain, a cover for emotional drives that are, all too often – given the culture we live in – aggressive, controlling, and manipulative. Here is how the psychologist and social theorist, Jordan Peterson, describes the process:

I understand and having understood, I impose order on reality. That's what every ideologue does and what every utopian does. It's convincing and, I think, the reason people do this is partly because they want an explanation for their being. More important than that, however, is that they want a mask that covers up their tendency to atrocity with the appearance of virtue. And most utopian thinking is of that sort even though the mask can be very well argued.

The consequences of this process wrecks havoc in our lives, at both a personal and political level. Operating unseen and unacknowledged it has led, over and over, to murderous rampages by political and religious zealots. Equally, it has more quietly shredded one intimate relationship after another as the parties battle over what is “right,” if only their partner could understand.

If we hope to create better lives and a better world, the fullest possible understanding of this process of infiltration and co-optation is vitally important. Why? Because, failing to understand the precise nature of the problem – and its breadth and depth – we will never be able to craft strategies that are equal to the challenge. Instead, the best of us – those of us who actually care – will continue to be channeled into activities that seek to soften our indecent system’s excesses: Elections, legislation, lawsuits and, of course, a myriad of (shamefully underfunded) services to the culture’s endless victims. And with our good energy and attention diverted away the disease that really ails us, the mainstream culture’s headlong pursuit of private wealth and power will continue unabated.

Radical Decency, by offering an alternative set of values – applicable in all areas of living – offers a way to deal with this core issue. It is not designed to supplant the very useful, but more limited, reform efforts that are our current focus. Instead, it offers a more comprehensive context in which each of these activities can be pursued. In this way, they can expand their potential impact and, crucially, understand how deeply interrelated and mutually reinforcing their seemingly separated pursuits really are. Then, hopefully, they can be knitted together into a unified and far more strategic, powerful, and effective change movement. See Reflection # 45, *Re-visioning Social Change Work*.