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Radical Decency Reflection #6  
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## **How the Good Guys Miss Each Other**

Radical Decency grew out of my journey with the Eccoes Foundation, an organization my wife and I started in 2000. With our long involvement with personal growth work and social justice causes, we were puzzled about how little overlap there was between those two worlds. To unravel that mystery, we decided to offer grants to organizations operating at the intersection of these worlds.

In our 3 years as grantmakers, we found any number of inspiring groups that acknowledged the connection between these social justice and personal growth. But true programmatic integration was hard to find. Instead there were social justice groups that, recognizing that personal healing enhanced the effectiveness of their staffs, would sponsor staff retreats. And, on the flip side, we found personal growth groups that had social justice committees or sponsored occasional community-oriented events. But in every instance, the organizations we funded clearly existed in one world or the other.

The experience led me to a lot of head scratching, writing and, ultimately, to Radical Decency, an approach to living that, fully thought through, has the potential to integrate social justice and personal growth.

But the separation remains, and the consequences of that separation have enormous consequences for the “good guys;” that is, the many people who share my passion for creating a better world and way of living. My premise – no surprise to regular readers – is that, through a series of mutually reinforcing cultural norms, the good guys are separated from one another, and that the effect is to fragment their energy and marginalize their impact.

The cultural norms at work are easily named. We are encouraged to “do our own thing,” to focus on “our” career, to be a “success.” We are also pushed to view success in terms of power, recognition, and wealth which, in turn, pushes us to cultivate a sense of “personal ownership,” not just of things, but also of ideas, programs and philosophies. How many of us escape a sense of diminishment when our good idea or approach is adopted, but we receive no credit?

What is less obvious is the extent to which these values are embedded in the very structure of the organizations we join and create to promote our goals, and the ways in which we think about our lives and careers. Indeed, they are so thoroughly woven into the structural fabric of our lives that it is difficult to conceive of different ways of operating. This is reality, the way things are. Any radical divergence is utopian, a pie-in-the-sky dream that will only distract us from the highly important but (in terms of overall power and influence) marginal work that can be actually be accomplished.

The way in which these values are structurally embedded in our culture is illustrated by the very different worlds in which I existed as a commercial bankruptcy attorney and, alternatively, as a public interest attorney and, later, a psychotherapist/healer.

As a mainstream, “play by the rules” attorney, I tended to “my career,” developed a name for myself in a narrowly defined and financially rewarding area of the law, cultivated a stable of good paying clients who were loyal – to me, and measured my success in terms of income. Playing by the predominant culture’s values and rules, I was offered an easily identifiable career path and way of living, and rewarded for that choice with the mainstream culture’s indicia of success, money and respect.

By contrast, as a person interested in contributing to social justice and personal growth, the world that was open to me looked very different. As a young attorney, interested in a public interest career, my choices were housing law, civil rights, environmental law, and so on. There was no career path for an attorney seeking to work, more generally, on the deeply flawed ways in which we live.

Similarly, while social work school trumpeted an approach to healing that considered both personal and societal effects, incoming students were required to choose either a clinical or policy track. Again, no integrated “big picture” approach. Thus, right from the start, the structural realities of the culture pushed me to shrink my focus and, in so doing, to work closely with only a limited group of similarly focused specialists.

So why, as a potential agent for change, was I channeled into a career where I could work on a piece of the puzzle, but not on the puzzle itself? Because the predominant culture, with its genius for self perpetuation, will tolerate small incremental improvements, within the system, but has no tolerance for – and hence offers no structures to support the work of – people seeking to fundamentally alter the status quo.

This same process is at work when the good guys go on to create organizations to implement their visions. As a society, we have created vast markets to finance risky new ventures and to reward the organizers and early investors when they are successful. These structures are, however, only available when the prime virtue of the product or process is its ability to make a lot of money. In other words, access is limited to people who embrace the predominant culture’s vision of success.

For people seeking to create a better world, the realities are very different. Nonprofit entities have no meaningful access to capital markets, and their organizers and investors (donors) can never cash out. Even the size of their salaries is limited by law. And change agents working in the “healing provisions” (psychotherapy, acupuncture, yoga, etc.) are similarly limited because fees are modest and their products are of no interest to capital markets.

But financial marginalization is only a part of the story. Since they are offered enough money to survive, and can focus on their passion for change, most of the good guys allow

themselves to be funneled into the nonprofit world and the structurally analogous, healing professions.

But in accepting this invitation, they are forced to play by ground rules that have been crafted by the predominant culture. So to retain the goodwill of mainstream funders – foundations, individual donors, government agencies – they need to focus on a limited and defined substantive area and, more often than not, confine themselves to service oriented products. They also need to trim their more radical instincts. While they can work to make the existing system better, even the limited support they receive from the mainstream culture will evaporated if their focus turns to more fundamental change.

Moreover, the great majority of these good people are not immune to the pull of the predominant culture's values. They worry about whether they can afford to send their children to a good school and how they can support themselves when they are old. They are also susceptible to the allure of a pleasant home, fancy gadgets, and nice vacations – all the material things the mainstream culture so relentlessly promotes.

So while choosing their careers for noble reasons, it is a difficult to resist tendency to protect the viability of the entity they depend upon for their livelihood by adopting mainstream business practices. Encouraged by donors, mainstream board members, as well as the lawyers, accountants or other “experts” they consult, they increasingly treat other good guys as competitors; view their services as a proprietary brand to be preserved and protected; and see their clients and funding sources as closely held corporate assets. Here once again, powerful cultural forces are at work to discourage collaboration and mutual support among change agents.

Embarking on a mission of change, our good guys wind up in the vise of a system that offers work on (important and inspiring but in the end) narrowly focused programs; that discourages active cooperation with change agents in different fields; and will, if fundamental change is sought, quash their financial life lines and, with them, the jobs they rely upon to support their families. Small wonder, then, that organizations working at the intersection of social justice and personal growth are hard to find. Our world is specifically structured to prevent good guy energy from cohering into a unified and, therefore, more effective force for fundamental change.

Overcoming these cultural forces is a daunting task. Radical Decency's proposed approach is to systematically replace the cultural norms that produce these structural results with attitudes and behaviors based on respect, understanding, empathy, equity and justice. I have some ideas – partial and incomplete – about how this might happen and will discuss them in a future Reflection.

My big dream, however, is to be joined by others in a collaborative effort that translates the values inherent in Radical Decency into comprehensive, system-wide processes and structures that will, over time, make a meaningful, status quo altering contribution to the creation of better lives and a better world.