

Royal Bank Letter

Reflections on Our Times

The Decent Thing

Decency is not a highfalutin word — not up there with related words like humanity, dignity and honour. It does not, like them, resonate with lofty principles and idealistic purpose. No one ever charged out to die on a battlefield crying: “For Decency!”

Rather the virtue it describes is a minimal one, the ground level of the hierarchy of modern social and moral values. When we refer to “basic decency,” we mean the least that can be expected from members of a so-called civilized society.

A LONG WITH “BASIC DECENCY” COMES “COMMON decency,” the adjective referring to a general consensus on what constitutes acceptable behaviour. If this universal standard is not always honoured in practice, it is certainly given a lot of lip service in everyday speech.

Just think of how often the word “decent” turns up in conversation about life in the western world: a decent income, decent housing, decent schooling, etc. The repetition of the term demonstrates that the expectation of an exchange of decent treatment is a precondition of a civil society.

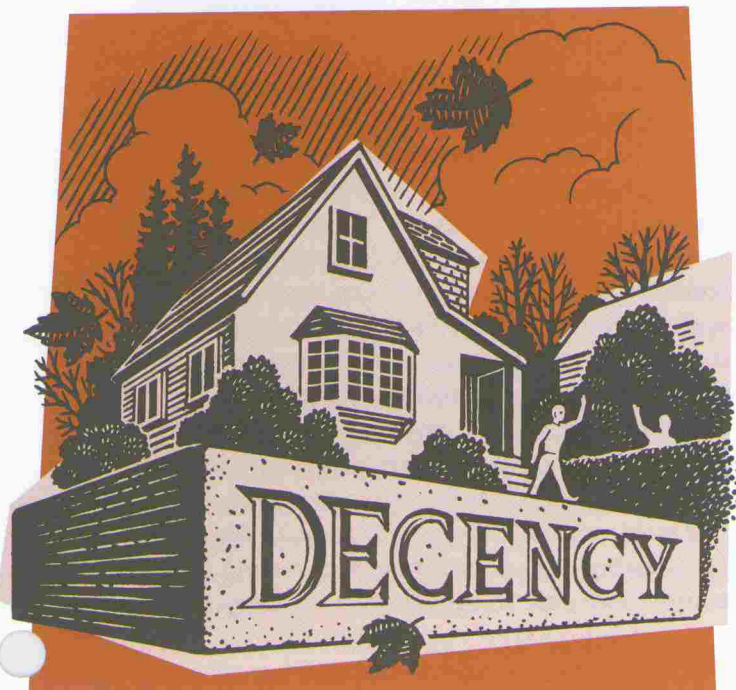
The expectation that people will behave decently towards one another, and that their institutions will behave decently to them, is at the core of the social contract that informally governs human relations under the democratic system. Decent intentions are so taken for granted that they are seldom noticed unless they are lacking.

As part of the exchange of decent intentions, most people do “a decent day’s work for a decent day’s pay,” giving their employers or customers value for their money as long as that money compensates them properly. The proposition might sound mundane on an individual scale, but it is vital to human existence in the aggregate. For this honest effort, duplicated billions of times every hour of every day, is what makes the economic world go round.

Decency is middle class

Decency is the definitive virtue of the middle class, meaning of the majority in western countries. According to the late great cartoonist Charles Schultz, creator of *Peanuts*, this quiet, level-headed mass of people is what keeps the United States from ruining itself with excesses.

Canada is as middle-class a country as will be found anywhere, and sure enough, its people are



noted internationally for their decency. They are not easily moved to excitement, but they are sure to become vocally outraged when their governments are found to be treating people less than decently according to Canadian standards. They are less concerned with national glory than that their country will continue to be a decent place to live.

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Being of the great middle class, decent folk tend to be upholders of "middle class morality." (This phrase presumably was coined by intellectual snobs who could not conceive that morality could be the same for anyone of any social status.) The maintenance of morality is behind at least one

dictionary definition of decency, "avoidance of obscene language and gestures and undue exposure of person." There is an obvious linkage between this and the primary definition of the word: "Propriety of behaviour; what is required by good taste and delicacy."

Undermining decency in society

Today, behaviour that once was commonly identified as indecent has become almost the norm in western cultures. In our larger cities, with their comedy clubs and nude bars, "obscene language and gestures and undue exposure of the person" are so routine that they have lost much of their power to shock or even titillate.

One need not live in the urban jungle, however, to be exposed to public indecency. People could dwell on a mountain top and still have it delivered to them via television – whether they want it or not.

The difficulty for many adults today is not so much avoiding indecent material themselves, but keeping their children from being exposed to it. Parents rightly worry that the influence of the media makes children grow up too fast. Until a few years ago, television networks more or less answered their concern by censoring programs at the times of day when the young ones were most likely to be watching. Now, however, "children's hours" are but a memory of a more innocent age.

There was a time when a TV viewer could seek refuge from the flow of smut by turning to news and public affairs. No longer: the Clinton-Lewinski scandal furnished the lead items for newscasts for months on end. While it was argued that this story had to be thoroughly reported due to its political significance, the coverage dwelt at excessive length on its more salacious details. Anyway, there was no evident political significance to the Bobbitt case a few years earlier, but the media nonetheless gave it lavish coverage.

Political correctness versus decency

Having evidently embraced the notion that there are no absolute goods or evils, TV journalists are chary of being seen to take anything resembling a moral stand. Their reluctance in this regard is shared with other opinion-makers. Relativism of this kind recently caused an American social critic to express concern that "we are becoming a nation that can no longer make fundamental judgements about what is right and wrong."

The mere raising of the question of whether something is right or wrong is likely to be ruled out in mainstream intellectual circles as irrelevant and outmoded. It is as if the age-old concept of sin had suddenly been declared passé. Rationalizations are offered for breaking every one of the Ten Commandments — except for the Eleventh one, which is, according to sociologist Paul Stein, "Thou Shalt Not Judge."

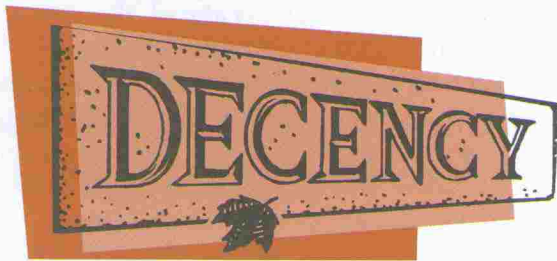
Being judgemental is not politically correct, and is therefore not *de rigueur* trendy company. The righteous champions of PC have managed to replace a lot of bad old taboos with bad new taboos. PC is reminiscent of the prudery in Victorian times which went to such extremes as to declare that no part of a human limb should ever be displayed in public. That was modesty run wild; in an extreme reaction that built up over many years, immodesty is running wild instead.

Somewhere along the line, the old social safeguard of shame was thrown aside along with critical items of clothing. In contemporary entertainment and fashion, indeed, shamelessness has become a lucrative commodity. It finds its most extreme manifestation in the pornography that is now freely available in books, magazines, videos, and web sites. Sex-oriented advertising on the Internet has made it into an "electronic red light district," as one writer recently observed.

But immodesty does not have to be taken to extremes to be indecent. Indeed, it need not even have anything to do with sex; a person can be indecent while fully clothed. Remember the definition which talks of decency as “what is required by good taste and delicacy.”

The use of foul language would offend against good taste even if the words employed had no connection with immorality. And though “dirty words” are so routinely spoken by young people of both sexes that their original meaning has been forgotten, there are likely to be those within hearing range whom they make uncomfortable. As a simple courtesy (another word whose meaning seems forgotten these days) offenders should recall the old exhortation to “keep a decent tongue in your head.”

Where there is bad language, there will be bad manners, too. Both are born of the prevalent attitude that individual freedom and self-expression come before the rights and feelings of one’s fellow human beings.



Can it be saved?

All of the above paints a pretty grim picture of the present state of decency, especially as it applies to obscenity, nudity and vulgarity. The curious thing about it is how resilient it has proven to be; the decent folk have so far resisted or ignored all the recent assaults on their code of behaviour, and have gone on practicing it nevertheless.

At first glance it might be thought that they are guided by an innate sense of how to relate constructively to their fellow human beings, but life is not that simple. People talk of a sense of decency as if it were the same as any other sense, but it is obviously not something that is basic and constant in the human species. Consider the fact that there are times and places where all feelings of decency have been thrown to the wind.

One recent horrible example is the ethnic cleansing in the Balkans. People use the phrase, “a decent burial.” One look at those pictures of the mass burial grounds of victims of ethnic atrocities will show you what true indecency is.

Decency learned at home?

It would seem that the nature-versus-nurture debate is resolved, as far as decency is concerned, by the fact that it runs in some families and not in others. While it is true that there is a naturally good-natured streak in some blood lines, it is even more true that attitudes are learned in the home, including the attitude that directs a man or woman to behave in a decent manner. There are also cases where people from decent-minded homes turn mean under the influence of mean companions. And decency seems particularly vulnerable where money or careers are at stake.

In spite of the evidence that it is learned behaviour, it is generally thought — if it is thought about at all — that no particular ability is required to act decently.

More’s the pity, because decency is not as simple as it seems. It is not acquired simply. The dictionaries do not do it justice, for, in the common understanding of the quality, it involves a great deal more than merely following established social rules. Instead, to act in a decent way is to bring into play a complex and intricate set of character traits such as benevolence, honesty, fairness, a sense of justice, and integrity. The whole ethos is deeply grounded in philosophy. No matter how insignificant an individual act may seem, decent behaviour is the actualization, the philosophical theory of human good.

What’s in it for me?

At the same time, it is a curious fact that few philosophers have ever dealt with the subject specifically. Perhaps the quality is just so common that it was almost invisible to the great minds of history. Possibly the nearest thing to a theoretical framework for it was Confucius’ concept of the “duties of universal obligation.” His starting-point was what is otherwise known as the golden rule; in Confucius’ back-handed rendering, this means that you should not do to others what you would not have done to yourself. From this standpoint, the practice of decency assumes the coldly pragmatic character of a kind of insurance policy for

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equitable treatment. Good-heartedness has nothing to do with it.

The great Chinese sage was not so idealistic as to deny the presence of evil. He acknowledged that, in an imperfect world, it is not always easy or convenient to do right. Still, he wrote, “to see what is right and not do it is cowardice.” The obverse of that proposition is that it takes courage to consistently do the decent thing.

In his *Anelects*, published circa 400 B.C., Confucius recognized that people come under pressure to behave less than decently. Since virtue is not, as advertised, its own reward, it is not always in one’s material interests to practice decency. To avoid the pressure to do otherwise, he warned

against succumbing to the influence of “those who are good at accommodating their principles” and “those who are good at talking.” This also has recourse to a standard philosophical principle, expressed in the Bible as, “to thine own self be true.” In his concern with the temptations of what we now call situational ethics, Confucius originated the maxim, “practice what you preach.” To him, sincerity

was the virtue to be cultivated above all else. The sincere person, he wrote, is one “who chooses what is good and holds it fast” despite all the world’s blandishments to let go of it. But in the end it was “the way of heaven,” he wrote.

Maintaining the balance

Another classic thinker who studied decency, though not in the modern sense of the term, was Justinian the Great, the Byzantine emperor. Writing in the 1500s, he distilled its elements into a pithy formula: “The precepts of the law are these: to live honestly, to injure no one, and to give every man his due.” (That a woman also should be granted her due was not even considered in his day and age, but the spirit of the thought is the same for either sex.)

As a professional administrator, Justinian knew that by far the most important laws are of the unwritten variety. The laws which people follow from the dictates of their own consciences are the ones that ensure true justice and civil peace.

There may be ordinances to ensure decency as it pertains to modesty and morality, but there are none that say that a man or woman can be prosecuted for not treating his or her neighbours with fairness, compassion and consideration. That treatment can only be guaranteed by the prevailing standards of a society. In a truly well-ordered society, the unwritten law of decent conduct is the one that is most strictly obeyed.

Whether it is obeyed or not makes all the difference to the quality of life in a time or place — and to life itself, for that matter. For “the thin precarious crust of decency is all that separates any civilization, however impressive, from the hells of anarchy or systematic tyranny that lie in wait beneath the surface,” as the superb 20th century novelist and essayist Aldous Huxley wrote.

Equally thin and precarious is the veneer of civilization with which modern man has managed to cover himself — a veneer that was rubbed away by bloodthirsty demagogues many times in the 20th century. In a passage written in the 1930s which presaged the manifold horrors ahead, the doyen of journalism in his time, Walter Lippmann, wrote: “Men have been barbarians much longer than they have been civilized...and within us there is a propensity, persistent as the force of gravity, to revert under stress and strain, under neglect and temptation, to our first nature.” In that first nature, the instinct of decency, such as it is, comes a dim second to savagery.

However, at the same time as the walls of various parts of the world have been spattered with innocent blood, a spark of decency has shone through the darkness. It was, for instance, that spark that caused non-Jews in Europe to risk their lives hiding their Jewish neighbours from the Nazis during World War II.

Despite the forces that would extinguish it in an undisciplined, unprincipled and self-indulgent world, the spark of decency continues to flicker among the masses of ordinary people the world over. Like the original gift of fire, it should be assiduously protected, defended and nourished if human beings are not to slip back into the darkness of barbarity, as they have so many times in the past.

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