"Radical Responsibility"
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Smart People don't tell themselves stupid lies.
You're all smart. So like most smart people, the rationalizations, excuses and justifications you have for actions and inactions, beliefs and emotions…oh, they'll be good. You'll have a wine with friends and they'll nod reassuringly, agreeing with you. But somewhere, deep inside, you know when they aren't true.

A while ago, John delivered a thought provoking sermon and posed questions about what could be done about Syria and other problem spots in the Mid east and around the world. It got me thinking, not about specific political or policy solutions, but about human interactions that produce such outcomes. After all, all of those situations are the direct result of human decision making, even though we may euphemistically describe them as geo-political dynamics.

And then I wondered about congruency. We seek to have our leaders and "others" hold themselves to a high standard in the hopes it will influence the rest of society. But what if the great lesson is that it goes the other way. What if those circumstances are both the outcome and the symptom of individual human choices aggregated? What if they are mirrors in which, if we look closely, we can see ourselves? Perhaps, we can't expect leaders to make change it if we won't ourselves.

Let me give you a tough illustration…true story. There is a high school teacher who came into class one day. He started teaching and 5 minutes in a student entered late. The teacher stopped and just tore a strip into this kid. Berated him, called him names, told him he'd never amount to anything. After a few minutes, he walked over, shook the kids hand and said "Thank you James." He then turned to the class and said "I just stood here and abused one of your classmates. Every one of you knew that what I was doing was reprehensible, but not one of you did anything to stop me. Today we 're going to study the Holocaust and how it was allowed to happen."

I see these tragedies we're talking about as extreme extensions of our own shortcomings. But with that comes the amazing opportunity to grow from them. These tragedies are painful, but as CS Lewis said "Pain is God's Megaphone to rouse a deaf world."

So, what I'm going to discuss is what I'll call "Radical Responsibility." The root of radical is actually "root." Interesting, suggesting here that *radical* does not come from a word that means rebellious or revolutionary but rather, "totally from the deepest source of being."

Radical responsibility is where you recognize that every outcome or result in your life is your responsibility. Not fault. But responsibility.

One of the problems is that our brains have evolved, with a lot of built in biases that were useful to survive and to be accepted in the tribe.

We tend to have a negativity bias. We see danger more vividly. We feel fear and anger longer. We have a confirmation bias, we have selective perception (i.e. that is in a game we'll see the other team commit more fouls than our own team), the backfire effect where evidence to the contrary of a belief we have and share causes us to become more entrenched. (see the climate debate.) And this is all, essentially, biology.

And yet, one of the great lies that smart people tell themselves is that they are immune from those biases. "I'm smart enough to know when those things are happening and therefore I'm able to see things properly." Well, let's test that theory. Here is a video. I want you all to play if you can see the screens. There are two teams passing basketballs. One team is in black. One team is in white. You want to focus on the white shirted players. Now, they are moving around. Your job is to count how many times a white shirted player passes to another white shirted player. If they bounce it on the ground, it counts. If they bounce it off the wall it counts. If they bounce it to themselves, it doesn't count. If you know the answer, don't share it. Ready go. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vJG698U2Mvo

(For written version, STOP: don't read on on until you've done the test)

Let's hear your answers. Great. How many times did the gorilla beat its chest? Watch it again and now look for the gorilla… yes, it's the exact same video. You just didn't see it, even though it was right in front of you.

What's my point with this? We evolved to survive. That means we see danger, we feel fear. Those are healthy things for individual survival. They live back here in the lizard brain. But they aren't so healthy when seeking fulfillment, when striving for peace, when looking to flourish. Maybe, just maybe, the great spiritual and moral teachers: Jesus, Buddha, Lao Tse, Gandhi…maybe they are all pushing us to evolve from seeking to survive, to learning to thrive…not materially, but to realize our moral potential. But you won't see that gorilla if you're not looking for it

Jesus with the woman at the well, inviting the tax collector to join him, entering town waving palm leaves on a donkey during a politically charged period; the First Nations concept of considering the impact of one's actions 7 generations later; Buddha's notions of the causes of suffering…all of these contain calls to resist the accepted norms that have evolved around us, to pause, to be thoughtful so as not to yield to the smart lies, to elevate ourselves individually and thereby elevate the whole.

The state of affairs in Syria, in Uganda with the LRA, in Canada where there are entire First Nations communities without access to clean drinking water, in all the places where prejudice and fear preside, those calls are clearly not being heard and therefore afford us an opportunity to consider the extent to which we are or are not listening ourselves. SO, I'm going to try to point out a few gorillas that stand in the way of radical responsibility.

Before I get into some specific dynamics that I wrote to John about, let me share the best example I have of where this has been done right. For those who heard me speak in the summer, this is a rerun, but with a slightly different emphasis.

My Mom died about 8 ½ years ago while battling cancer in Calgary. She was in the hospital in great pain. She had been receiving great compassionate care. Then one day, I went to see her. As I entered the room, a new doctor was leaving. She had just come on shift a few hours earlier. I walked in the room and my mom was in tears, my dad was white and a friend of theirs looked like he'd been hit by a truck. My mom said, "It's way worse than we thought; if I don't make it through the next round of chemo, I may not make it." I went to the doctor and asked "Did you run some new tests?" She said "No," "Did you get some new results?" Again, no. So I asked, "What was that?" She replied, and I quote…"your mother cannot possibly understand how serious her condition is … because she's too positive."

Now, I did not answer the call for elevation at that moment. I was as angry as I've ever been. But here's what my mom did after she was assured that, in fact there was nothing new. The next day, the doctor came in and my mom said "Do you have a minute to talk dear?" The doctor said yes. My mom explained "I want you to know

that I have a treatment plan, that's in addition to your treatment plan. Everyone involved in my care knows and accepts my part of the treatment plan. And my treatment plan is to only have people around me who are positive. Would that be ok?" The doctor said yes.

Now, this is how the story ties to the notion of Radical Responsibility. If my mom had complained, she would have been "justified." She would have had "justifiable outrage." If she'd asked for a new doctor or demanded a complaint on that doctor's file, no one would have said she was unreasonable. But it would have not created the outcome she wanted. Instead she took full ownership and strategically considered what actions *she* could take to create that outcome regardless of the moral quality of the actions of the other person.

This is all about burying ego, anger, fear, to take total radical responsibility for one's own actions and outcomes.

That terrible trio of Blame, Excuses and Denial are the kryptonite to radical responsibility and, to John's question, to finding meaningful and lasting peace. But smart people use them in somewhat creative ways. The first is a conflation of responsibility with blame. If I see a dog running into traffic, it isn't my fault that the dog is running loose. It's not my fault that someone is running a red light. But if am close to the dog and can grab its leash, I would argue it's my responsibility to do so.

I believe that one of the big lies, in politics, in media and in our personal lives is that the questions "who started it" or "who is at fault" are the most important starting questions. They may become relevant at some point, but the truly important question is who will take responsibility to address the challenge and how? When the two issues are confused, we see ridiculous arguments such as "I never had a slave, so why is it up to me to do something about it?" Or "Nobody in my community built or worked in residential schools, so why should my tax dollars be used?" Or, "Canada didn't bomb Iraq, so why should we be responsible for refugees fleeing Syria?"

The simple fact is that people don't want to accept community responsibility if doing so suggests or implies individual culpability.   The simple distinction is this: blame looks backward: who did what. Responsibility looks forward: who will do what.

Think about personal relationships. Have you ever been in a relationship in which one of you said "Well, if you hadn't said that I wouldn't have done this?" What would happen instead if both people sat down and said "What can I do to make this better for both of us?" What if both Alberta and Ontario or <gasp> Russia and the US both said "How can we help you?"

Which takes us to another seductive lie that undermines radical responsibility. When you hear it out loud, you realize it makes no sense. But in practice, people succumb to it all the time. Some will argue, as John so forcefully did, that the west is

highly culpable for mid-east tensions flowing from everything from the drawing of colonial borders to the installation or support of dictators like the Shah and Saddam Hussein. Some would take that argument to its extreme and say that it's all our fault and therefore all our responsibility.

At the same time, I watched an interview with an Arab activist and she argued that there has been intra Muslim conflict in the mid east for over 1200 years, so it makes no sense to lay the blame at all on the doorstep of the United States which has only been around for less than 300 years. Her argument is that they can't fault the west.

Maybe it's the result of living in a digital age, but this is extremely binary thinking. Can't both positions be right? Can't both groups share responsibility? If you pay attention, you hear it all the time. "Yeah, but the chiefs on reserves are getting paid too much" as if that frees us from responsibility for our failings. Or "Well you left the vase in the wrong place" as an excuse for having knocked it on the floor.

Related to that resistance to shared responsibility is the fear that acknowledging one's own contributions to a problem exposes one to costs or demands. So we deflect and defend before listening and trying to understand. There is fear of …here it is…legal liability. Lawyers regularly advise against apologizing as that is an admission of wrongdoing that may cost.

People also feel that admitting a wrong or apologizing involves a loss of face; it hurts one's ego. In my work, I have occasionally recommended what I call "Strategic apology." It's amazing how people short circuit around that notion; "Why should I apologize; they were wrong," or "They were wrong **too**." But that is stuck in blame and ego. Look at any region where there is territorial conflict. There are always two wholly inconsistent and competing historical narratives. Neither party will grant any legitimacy to the other's story or admit to any wrongdoing despite the body count.

However, in areas where Truth and Reconciliation Commissions have been conducted, the act of apology has been both therapeutic and productive in moving forward. In places where hospitals have ignored lawyers and apologized for mistakes, litigation actually drops. And in personal relationships, how often would the simple acknowledgement of how you feel turn down the temperature in the conflict and improve the relationship.

There are more ways in which we rationalize the avoidance of radical responsibility, at both the personal and political, but you get the point. In church and other contexts, people talk about virtue or being virtuous. The word virtue actually comes from the greek word *Arite*, which is closer to an excellence. Excellence is something we achieve with effort, which seems apt. We are not born with virtue; we are born with the ability to develop virtue. But this requires effort and practice.

The Navy Seals have a saying: you don't rise to the occasion; you sink to the level of your training. How often in our personal lives and in our work lives do we discuss notions of radical responsibility, of virtue and not just issues of strategy, pragmatism, financial gain? Marcus Aurelius, leader of the Roman Empire, if you read his Meditations, you'll see he struggled mightily with achieving excellence in moral decision making and in maintaining humility and fairness in the exercise of power because he recognized how critical it is.

A Confucian Scholar named Wang Yang Ming said "To know and not to act is not to know." In other words, if you don't live it, you don't know it. It seems to me this is one of the challenges with modern Christianity and virtually all faiths. A lot of people "know it" but don't live it. As John told us in one of his early sermons, the Roman Emperor Julian was frustrated in his efforts to revert the Empire to Paganism because of Christian kindness, their willingness to offer support to anyone, to offer safety and shelter to travelers when no one else would. Now, we have Christian leaders advocating for the rejection of refugees. And in Canada the past government wouldn't agree to accept more than one recommendation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. We aren't training ourselves.

The last thing I'll say at that political level is as citizens, radical responsibility must make us reject leaders, of any party, and at any level, who offer us excuses, not excuses for themselves, but that let us off the hook. Primarily because it is insulting. When someone offers you excuses, offers you an out, it's because they think you weak. They think you can't cope with the truth or make the sacrifice for a better future or accept the costs of remedying past errors. People who challenge you respect you and think you capable. They'll say we can put a person on the moon. That we can simultaneously grow an economy and move to green energy; that we do have the courage and strength to make things right with our first nations, that we do have the ingenuity and creativity to compete, that the costs of integrity and accountability are worth it.

At the individual level, radical responsibility means we must be cautious of the excuses we offer others and offer ourselves. It means accepting that courage doesn't replace fear, it overcomes it, that joy doesn't eliminate pain but is nourished by it, that humility doesn't abdicate leadership but injects it with wisdom and that love…love doesn't just forgive injustice but seeks to remedy its causes.

And that last point I think is the summary of everything I've said. We have a note on our fridge. It is one question that I believe to be the most important question. Its simplicity hides the difficulty of answering it in different situations. But I believe the practice of asking and attempting to answer it gives the training needed to become radically responsible. It is this: What would love do? Initially, people think it leads to squishy, mushy answers. But when you look at examples, like Jesus who insisted on living the answer in the most uncompromising way, you realize just how demanding, hard and ultimately transformative it can be.

Choosing a life of radical responsibility requires an ongoing battle with our evolution-installed instincts, but ultimately leads us to collectively create impact by fully living Gandhi's often quoted and consistently ignored call to "BE the change you want to see in the world."

Thanks for considering my thoughts.