

The Decency Project
Shared Labor as Communal Conduit
<https://www.scottbraun.com/the-decency-project>
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It's a scenario that's become common to us all: In a pleasant conversation with a stranger, a colleague, a new acquaintance, one of you says something triggering that now-familiar repulsion. "Oh. You're one of *those people*." And the conversation is over, as we each walk away with virtual labels all over our bodies.

But what if we could have that conversation in reverse? Can we disagree without hatred or hopelessness? Can we engage the enemy without violence? Perhaps, rather than resorting to despair or destruction, we can find progress in critical discourse.

Let's talk about it.

The Decency Project is an ongoing participatory work which forms connection and conversation through shared labor. Seeking a bond between people of unlike mind, culture, or lived experience, I teach strangers to make a functional object while having a conversation. We are guided by a pedagogy of awareness embracing conceptual and critical thinking, and what I refer to as "the historical contextualization of everything." This dialogue is not about contemporary politics, but instead about abstracted ideals and our ability to coexist despite our differences. We question what it means to be human: What must I do? What *can* I do? What must I *not* do?

We begin by doing work together. Using 19th century Appalachian green woodworking techniques, participants carve spoons - objects of functional interaction at the center of the home - from logs and tree limbs found or cast aside by modern manufacturing requirements. I work on a colorful three-wheeled "shave horse" sculpture, stylized in form and decoration to attract passersby. The spectacle is useful in bringing other voices to the conversation.

What follows is an exploration of traditional craft skills, concurrently rejecting and acknowledging the romantic myth of lost mastery as a necessary given. Bonding through their shared labor and distracted by the dexterity of hand and material, participants are questioned and empowered to delve into abstractions of cultural and societal structure. Absorbed in their carving, participants discover a freedom for critical thinking within a cooperative discourse. The discussion is simultaneously interactive and performative, interrogative and declarative.

The resultant engagement is an interdisciplinary investigation incorporating the histories of philosophy and politics, art and literature, sociology, anthropology and archaeology and science and even timelines of geopolitical progression. In a word, everything. With this inclusive perspective, we envision the potential futures of such pursuits, imagining what progress is possible and what obstacles might prohibit that progress. Together, we identify where decency occurs within our lives, and nurture relationships in an historic moment of conflict and disconnection.

The project was conceived in late 2019, in the debate surrounding the existence of the Robert E. Lee monument in Richmond, Virginia. The first participants were invited from the Richmond City Republican Committee, local gun rights organizations, and protestors surrounding the statue. Those early informal conversations proposed to conceptualize local controversy by altering direct arguments about race and politics into abstracted discussion about social constructs: We agreed to sit in the shadow of the monument, do labor together, and - acknowledging our animosity - consider the imperative for coexistence. We wondered what it means to be decent.

2020 introduced a global pandemic and its associated lockdown, nationwide protests over police violence and systemic racism, a contentious presidential election followed by 2021's riot in the Capitol building in the United States. This profound sociopolitical division has escalated our crisis of engagement, and conversations within *The Decency Project* have expanded to meet this ever-increasing disconnection. We now explore foundational beliefs, question perceptions of progress, and consider the basis for ever forming cooperative communities at all. Building new tools for interaction, we discover the necessity to understand *why* we form civilizations before we can determine *how* we might be civil.

Nearly a thousand participants thus far have engaged in intimate dialogue and group discussion. A thousand spoons carved, serving as reminder of our shared labor, our conversation, and our rediscovered humanity.



The Decency Project has been performed in cultural/academic institutions and public parks in 15 states across the US, with: A women's march and counter-protestors hosted by The Museum for Art in Wood and LOVE Park in Philadelphia; immigrant populations in New York City with "Shared Dialog, Shared Space" hosted by Korea Art Forum and the NYC Parks Department; integrated conservative and Black Lives Matter activists at The Anderson Gallery and The Branch Museum of Architecture and Design, as well as chief executives on retreat at the Virginia Museum of Fine Art in Richmond, Virginia; scientists and engineers considering water rights at The Colorado School of Mines; students and faculty at university Art and Design Departments in Columbus, Ohio, Indianapolis, Indiana, Columbus, Indiana, and Lawrence, Kansas; elder tenants at the Douglas County Senior Resource Center in Lawrence, Kansas; resident scholars at the Haas Retreat for Writer Development on a farm in Lefor, North Dakota; and performed in public parks and private appointments across the US.

Scott Braun and *The Decency Project* are featured in the documentary series *The Line (That Divides Us)*, by Small Batch Films: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VFclAnzknh0>

Photographs and video clips can be found at <https://www.scottbraun.com/the-decency-project>, <https://www.youtube.com/@TheDecencyProject>, and on Instagram @suapyg or #thedecencyproject



