

KEEPING YOUR SANITY BY SLAYING THE GREEN-EYED MONSTER

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Envy is an ugly emotion with

awful effects. Many religions forbid or warn against it, as with the 10th commandment in the Old Testament. Storytellers show its awful effects, we all know that it's bad on a feeling level — yet envy persists as a powerfully destructive force.

It isn't about having very little; we aren't particularly unhappy when we have very little. But we *do* become very unhappy, depressed, and bitter when we dwell on having less than our neighbor.

Yet there is an antidote to envy: *empathy*, admiration, and the effective redirection of our initial impulses. It can also help to more fully understand this destructive and bitter emotion.

Envy de-humanizes the person envied. When we envy another person, we are not seeing that person for who they are, we are seeing him *for what he has*. It breeds malevolence; when we envy, we are not happy for the success of our neighbor, we are resentful of it.

Envy diminishes our capacity for empathy, and this lack of empathy makes it possible for people to do horrible things to one another.

It also reinforces a self-image of helplessness and impotence. Envy implies disbelief in ourselves.

It presupposes that we don't believe we can create the wealth, the relationships, the values that we see in others. Such helplessness can become a self-fulfilling prophecy, limiting our ability to work toward what we would like to create in our lives.

But like any negative emotion, by catching ourselves and understanding what we're feeling, we can redirect our actions in a way that works much better for us.

Envy is, initially, an impulse – a reaction to perceptions. It's not unusual to see something that someone else has and desire it – *as an impulse*. We've probably all felt at least a twinge of envy at some point in our lives.

But that's not where the danger lies. The important thing is *what we do with that initial impulse*.

Do we hang onto it, indulge it, and follow it? *Or* do we take that impulse and transform it into useful action?

In the case of envy, thinking of how we might earn the money to buy what we'd like, or use it to recognize something we may value, something we may admire in another person, and seek to develop those qualities in ourselves?

When I was playing water polo in college, there were moments when I was stricken with a wave of envy fighting for my position on the team. There could only be one starting goalkeeper, and once in a while, if I was behind, I would catch myself feeling resentment toward the fellow I was vying with for that spot – who was a phenomenal player and also a very good friend.

That friendship (along with the fact that I knew better) was a godsend, because it kept a human connection, so it always brought me back very quickly from indulging in envy and refocusing on the task at hand: *to play my very best, regardless of the circumstances*.

We all want things. There's nothing wrong with wanting things; it's part of our nature. And to the degree that this desire spurs us on to be creative and productive, it can be a great force for good.

But when we see other people with the things that we want, whether it be tangible items like a nice car or home, or less tangible accomplishments like a career or a triumph or a happy life, then another element can invite itself into our experience: A focus on the thing desired, and a weakening of the perception of the holder of that thing as human.

We also can be oblivious to what it took them to achieve what they have, which is another part of empathy.

One day after a particularly grueling water polo practice, as we were all getting out of the pool and heading for the locker room, I happened to look back at the pool. There was one teammate still in the pool: my friend and competitor, the other goalkeeper. While we were all beginning to relax, he was swimming *an extra thousand yards of butterfly*.

Seeing that changed everything for me. Whatever envy there had been was immediately replaced with something much more useful and powerful: *admiration*. With his example I knew what I had to do to bring my very best – and it was much more than I imagined was possible before.

He went on to play in three Olympics and win two silver medals – probably the best goalkeeper to ever play the game. I didn't make the Olympics, but I'm very proud of what I did achieve – all greatly inspired by that deep admiration. I never could have accomplished a fraction of what I have through indulging in envy.

Is there something that you want in your life? What do you need to do to earn it? Channel your desire into active, benevolent behavior that has integrity with your conscious values, principles, and priorities.

If you find yourself coveting what someone else has, catch yourself, and remind yourself that envy is a passive, helpless stance. Think about what they must have done to get where they are, give yourself the gift of admiration, and see if you can find a way to earn what you are drawn to that they have.

If you find yourself enjoying somebody else's loss, catch yourself, and remind yourself that nothing good can come from following that impulse. Open yourself to doing whatever *your* best is, while appreciating the best that others bring.

We have lots of feelings and impulses, and part of the challenge of life is mastering those feelings and impulses and directing their expression toward what we consciously value. We can't generally choose our impulses, but we can choose whether and how we express them – which does affect the nature of our impulses over time. That choice is the foundation of self-ownership and genuine happiness.

Just because we feel angry doesn't mean that we have to strike somebody; just because we're afraid doesn't mean that we have to cower; just because we hurt doesn't mean that we have to withdraw.

And just because we like what someone else has doesn't mean that we have to indulge in envy.

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