

THE PAIN AND JOY OF ENVY

A Sermon by Reverend Lynn Strauss

Have you ever struggled with feelings of envy...think for a moment...was it in high school, was it when your brother always got your father's attention, was it when your best friend got first prize, or the best post-doc position? Think of a situation when you were envious. It's a lousy feeling isn't it...psychologists and sociologists tell us we are more likely to envy a peer, rather than a movie star, or a billionaire. Maybe that's why it feels so bad, cause we often envy someone we also admire-even love.

The dictionary tells us envy is: "a feeling of discontent or resentment, usually with ill-will at seeing another's superiority, advantages or success...desire for some advantage possessed by another. The word envy comes from the noun vies...or the verb vying...also...to covet.

As in ...Thou shall not covet.

Envy is something we rarely talk about, something we rarely admit. Am I the only one who has experienced it? Am I the only one who envies a friend who gets exactly the kind of job I wanted? Am I the only one who pretends not to care, when friends leave on yet another cruise, or who wishes they had 'old money' in the family like their good friends do? Does anyone else ever envy natural beauty or amazing musical talent, or just plain good luck. It's hard to admit, because we are often ashamed of our feelings of envy.

Am I the only one? Am I the only one who has something in common with apes?

There is much primate study going on these days....

In the field of family systems thinking...there is both behavioral and brain research being brought to bear on human relational behavior.

Natalie Angier writing in a NY Times article titled: "In Pain and Joy of Envy, the Brain may Play a Role" relates data found in Frans de Waal Study of Primates.

A group of monkeys lived together and were happy when each of them received as a reward...a slice of cucumber...all were satisfied, when everyone received their cucumber...they earned them as a reward for other behaviors...and all went well...until One day...a certain monkey was given a grape as a reward...and the other monkeys were not pleased...they exhibited resentment and shunning of the privileged monkey...and they refused their cucumber slices. Suddenly everyone had to have a grape.

Professor of Psychology at University of Kentucky, Richard H. Smith, points out that most vices (or sins) like lust, gluttony or sloth bring pleasure to the sinner....but not so, envy...to be envious is to feel small, petty, inferior...there is no pleasure in envy.

So what is it's evolutionary value? What role does envy play in human relationships and why have we retained it in our emotional repertoire?

A Japanese study written up in the Journal of Science, shows that when participants feel envy, the brain regions which signal pain light up...but when the rival experiences a downfall...a loss of status or material wealth...the brain that was envious now registers pleasure. The two responses appear tied together.

Envy causes us pain...and the fall of a competitor brings pleasure. The stronger the envy, the stronger the pleasure.

Once again, human nature presents us with a serious problem. Thank God, for religion, ethics, spiritual practice and therapists!

Consider the economic crisis of today...have we arrived at this crossroads because of runaway envy? Could corporate leaders and investment firm presidents and bank board chairs simply not stand the shame of being mere millionaires?

Some suggest that envy serves to increase competition and causes people to try harder...perhaps greed is driven, in part, by envy.

What role does envy play in our daily lives. How does it impact our choices? Is envy a matter of nature or nurture. Is it innate or learned?

Where does envy fit in the competition- cooperation continuum in human society?

It has been taught that human society advances in proportion to successful competition. The patriarchal telling of human history advances the value of competition. Competition which often thrives on envy- "I'll do whatever it takes to become a multi-millionaire."

But a matriarchal telling of human history holds cooperation as a higher survival skill. And we have human infants to thank for it.

As researcher, Natalie Angier writes: nothing can beat a happily babbling baby. A baby is born not with a fully developed brain, not with the strength to insure it's survival, not an object of envy because of its talents or wisdom...no...a baby is born knowing how to work the crowd.

Primatologist Sarah Blaffer Hurdy writes: "the extraordinary social skills of an infant are at the heart of what makes us human." A toothless smile here, a musical squeal there...the babies have us...almost all of us...at the first gurgle.

Infant social skills have promoted in humans- an evolution as co-operative breeders...we have a need for shared childcare, a need to trust and rely on others...co-operation, not competition is the hallmark of mothers, even in western society. The twenty-four hour a day needs of human infants make it so.

We pass our babies around...new moms will even let strangers hold their babies...you've seen it happen here at church.

In foraging societies, 87% of nursing mothers, suckle each others' children. J-Lo was only doing what came naturally when she held a hungry baby, not her own.

Compare this to our chimp and gorilla relatives who hold fast to their infants for the first 6 months of life...each mother caring alone for her own offspring. One result of this single parenting is that gorilla moms...tend to give birth in six year intervals...rather than the 2-3 intervals of human moms.

Envy, according to Aristotle, is pain at the good fortune of others...but that is rarely the case among mothers and grandmothers...we like to share the babies. We know the value of cooperation.

It is a distinctive human adaptation...to be socially co-operative. In this way we optimize the advantages of the group while retaining our own individuality.

This is reciprocal altruism...we each fulfill our own needs, we also fulfill the needs of others, and we keep other's need fulfillment in balance. Darwin himself recognized that altruism could prove fatal to the theory of natural selection. He proposed that groups (hives, packs, families) not just individuals could be the objects of natural selection. He argued that what he called benevolence is entirely natural and deeply embedded in our biology...so we help with each other's babies because in biology, success is defined as keeping your genes going.

So we strive for altruism, for benevolence, maybe the patriarchal bias toward competition was/is ill-considered; but we still get blind-sided by envy.

Now we come to considerations theological and religious...considerations of human will and higher powers, like God or co-incidence, or nature.

Envy haunts us when we believe that we can control the outcomes in our lives. When we believe that we are totally in charge of happens. When we think we know exactly what the future will bring. The story of the farmers' son and his broken leg...teaches that we humans cannot predict the future.

Sometimes envy haunts us because we imagine we can predict or control future events.

My youngest daughter, said I could share this story with you.

She and her husband are about to close on their first house. The market in Asheville is pretty favorable to a young couple starting out. They've been looking at houses for months and months.

And they found the perfect house. Taryn called the same day and she was on cloud nine...she described the house in detail. It did sound perfect, the location was just right, there was a yard, a big kitchen, a lot of light...perfect.

And so they made a bid, the house had been on the market for awhile so they were pretty confident, but then they learned that another couple was bidding on their house...the other couple made a slightly higher bid...and they got the house.

My daughter was devastated...for a few days...but soon recovered, and found another house, that was almost perfect, the one they are about to close on.

But the story doesn't end there...during this time frame, my daughter and her husband were making some new friends, a couple much like themselves, into music, and theater, and politics and food. And guess what...it turned out that these new friends were the ones who bid and got the perfect house...

After losing that house, Taryn wanted to put the whole thing behind her, she never wanted to think about it again, dream about it again....but now her new friends are going to invite her to a house warming party in that house, to dinner in that house, to birthday celebrations in that house. Taryn was devastated again... for a few days.

What to do about envy? Well, I guess we can welcome it as a chance for spiritual growth. We can't fully exorcise the demons and shadows within, but we can prepare to meet them. Whether it's jealousy, or anger, or anxiety, or hubris; we can work on knowing ourselves and our human foibles.

When we are challenged by painful emotions, we can step toward them, acknowledge them...Taryn showed courage in sharing all that she did with her mother...she wasn't in denial about her feelings. She reflected on them, worked to accept them.

Because envy causes pain, we need to minimize its' impact, find ways to prepare for it...for it will come again. Perhaps Taryn can prepare for the next bout of house envy, by bringing all her artistic skills to creating beauty and balance in her new house...by lifting up and loving its best features, by creating family life that surpasses, mere walls and floors ...in joyful happiness of home and hearth. It may turn out that the house they have will be exactly the house they needed.

One aspect of the envy problem is the underlying fear that we don't already have enough...of whatever it is...that what we have, that who we are- is inadequate, doesn't' measure up....so one antidote is to count our blessings, to embrace our worth, to value our beauty and talents...to want what we already have.

Instead of making a list of what you want...make a list of what you have. Move toward an attitude of abundance rather than scarcity.

The other preparation is trust...trust in life and in what may come. There is a mystery at work in the universe...we are not in charge of everything, we can trust even in what we don't yet know.

In the Buddhist story that Seanan told...people made judgments on events...this is good, this is bad...but the outcome was a surprise, we cannot predict the outcome...of this day, of this action, of this desire. And yet, we can trust.

The bottom line is acceptance.

Perhaps a box to put our troubles in might help...or a little telescope to shine a light on acceptance as a place to calmly stand.

To confound envy, maybe we just stop...stop seeking, stop trying, stop performing, stop intending...maybe we simply accept.

Simply accept. Simply accept.

Breathe, sit in silence, walk under trees...simply accept, accept.

Tara Brach, my friend and colleague in her book; "Radical Acceptance" encourages us to realize that human nature is both emptiness and love.

The core problem of envy is that it is grasping, it is the opposite of spiritually emptying, emptying of expectations, of material desires, emptying of worry about one's own worth.

I'll close with words of Buddhist wisdom:

"Happiness cannot be found through great effort and will power,
But it is already there/here, in relaxation and letting go,
Don't strain yourself, there is nothing to do,
Only our search for happiness prevents us from seeing it,
Don't believe in the reality of good and bad experiences;
They are like rainbows.

Wanting to grasp the ungraspable, you exhaust yourself in vain.
As soon as you relax this grasping, space is there-
Open, inviting, comfortable.

So , make use of it. All is yours already.

Don't search any further;

Nothing to do, nothing to force, nothing to want.

Everything happens by itself.

All is yours already.

May you walk this path of radical acceptance.

Amen/Blessed Be