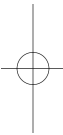




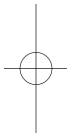
## Chapter Seven

# Tall Poppies, Cut Grass, and the Fear of Being Envied



*Just mention the words “beauty pageant” to some women and watch the claws come out.*

—Tamara Henry, former Miss Arkansas USA



*I have this beautiful engagement ring that my fiancé gave me and I won’t show it to any of my family because I know that there’s going to be static around it.*

—Roberta, 30-something professional

### TALL POPPY SYNDROME

Throughout this book, there are instances of phenomena surrounding envy for which we don’t have exact English expressions, such as *schadenfreude* (defined in Chapter 1) or the lack of a word for “benign envy” (discussed in Chapter 4).

Another example is the concept of “tall poppy syndrome,” which is more commonly discussed in Australia and New Zealand than in the United States. A “tall poppy” is anyone who stands out because of rank, success, good looks, or any other characteristic that might incite envy in other people. To “tall poppy” someone is to cut this person down to size, and “tall poppy syndrome” refers to the tall poppying of tall poppies.

We had a similar expression on the kibbutz. We commented bitterly about the need to “cut the grass to uniform height,” referring to the kibbutz’s tendency to reward those who went along with the flow and to punish those who tried to do something differently or stand out in any way. It is interesting the way in which both metaphors portray the chopping down of something

naturally beautiful to conform to someone else's sense of how things should be.

Schoeck<sup>1</sup> reports frightening example after frightening example of the destructive force of envy within small communities in many different cultures. It is his thesis that the reason these isolated communities inevitably were backward technologically (and possibly culturally, depending upon one's perspective) was because innovation was squelched by the villager's ubiquitous fear of the envy of their neighbor.

When I first started this book, I assumed that most of my focus would be on envy of other people. Based on interviews, and to some extent on my reading, I realized that our fear of other people's envy may be just as debilitating for our development as our envy of other people.

There is something to fear in being envied. In retrospect, some of the ugliest incidents of interpersonal hostility in which I've been involved have come about when someone was envious of me. There is a particularly cutting quality to an envious remark that I don't think any other emotion is capable of achieving. It's not only, "I want what you have," which would be difficult enough, but more like, "I want to destroy what you have through my criticism, hostility, and hatred." It spoils whatever pleasure there was in the success or reward, and replaces it with a feeling of anger, resentment, loss, and/or shame. How many times do we not share our good news, not express ourselves fully, and "hide our light under a bushel" in order not to incite the envy of those around us?

### "DON'T HATE ME BECAUSE I'M BEAUTIFUL!"

One of the women whom I interviewed, who actually requested that I use her identifying information rather than camouflage it, is a former Miss Arkansas USA Tamara Henry:

Just mention the word 'beauty pageant' to some women and watch the claws come out. What is this phenomenon? Mother Earth has a divine feminine energy. We don't hate her beautiful sunsets or her beautiful flowers, but there is a hidden phenomenon of hating her beautiful women. And it's not the men who are hating women. It's women hating women. And it's hidden in a dark corner and not talked about.<sup>2</sup>

Here are some lessons I received while conducting interviews:

- Women are much more willing than men to be interviewed on the topic of envy.
- Ugly behavior that women exhibit to other women out of envy is common. I was unaware of what women are capable of doing to other women until I

began asking them about their interactions with other women on the topic of envy.

- At the risk of unfair stereotyping, and if my interview subjects are representative, men are much more direct with their hostility and envy, and women are more indirect.

Henry, who competed in beauty pageants all of her early adult life, obviously knows envy from both sides of the spectrum—in losing and in winning pageants. When I asked how she coped with some of the cutting remarks she endured from others as she competed through the years, she said, “The best revenge against all these mean, nasty girls is success. ‘I’ll show them. I’m going to make something out of myself.’ They were trying to not let me shine. I was determined to not let them squash me. I was going to shine. I left that small town. I’m happy with my life. I feel like I achieved that success.”<sup>3</sup>

The thesis of this book is that envy must have some positive qualities and some redeeming reason for its existence or it would not be so ubiquitous. Tamara depicts one possibility in her description of how her desire to prove herself to those who envied her spurred her on to greater achievements. Schoeck explains:

The defiant ‘Now I’ll show them’ attitude has productive results as well as destructive ones. . . . Only when a man realizes the futility of brooding on invidious comparisons between his own lot and that of others, when a person realizes that the torment of envy is ineluctable because it will never lack stimuli and, out of that realization, is able to turn his feeling of his envy into an agonistic impulse, endeavouring to ‘outdo’ the others by his achievements, will he attain, by intent though motivated by envy, a fundamentally new plane of value-enhancing, competitive behavior.<sup>4</sup>

Of course, escaping the confines of the more narrow environments of one’s peers to succeed in a broader arena does not make the issue go away. A repeated theme in my interviews was the envy of those left behind by siblings, and even parents, who were envious because of someone’s success in rising above their humble origins to achieving success in another setting.

### ROBERTA’S TALE OF SIBLING ENVY

One of the most poignant of these tales came from Roberta, a 30-something professional now living in a major metropolitan West Coast area, having moved from a small farm town:

One specific scenario has created a lot of trouble in my life: my two sisters and my dad. I’m the third born child. My two older sisters have separate fathers; they both have different dads. And I’m the only child of my father. When my

mom met my dad, he had planned to adopt my two sisters, so my mom went ahead and gave them his last name and basically told them that he was their dad. And then, when he divorced my mother, he had not adopted them and he only paid child support for me. My two sisters have really had a very, very hard time with dealing with what that was like. To have him come for visitation and just pick me up, and just take me on vacations, and just buy me presents. We had a single mom with three kids, and we were dirt poor. It seemed like I got all the attention and I got all the gifts.

It's been really difficult through the years because I'm still with my dad. I still have a great relationship with him, and it never stops. The questions about what did he give me for Christmas, or when did I last talk to him, or any attention that comes from him toward me is a problem for my sisters. And so I've always had to kind of hide it or feel like I'm undeserving of it. Or I know that it hurts them to watch me have that attention.

That's when I say that I can't tell if it's envy or jealousy<sup>5</sup> because I do feel that they feel it is something they were told was theirs at one point, and now I have it and they don't . . . my [sisters]—they never really left the small town. They panicked at every step that I took. I've really just kind of been a free agent and I busted out of there. I moved to [the West Coast] and started doing things that nobody in my family did.

Every time something good happens for me, they applaud me because they're my sisters, but there's always this underlying 'Who do you think you are?' And even my mother has said to me throughout the years, as she's come into my apartments and my homes and said, 'Well, I never had anything like this. I never had anything this nice.' Every time I would ever get something or get beyond something, I would get this static, that maybe somehow I don't deserve it. Or how did I end up with this and they didn't? It's always kind of created this separation between me and my family and me not wanting to share my good news with them because they don't think I deserve it on some level or they wish they had it.

Let's take a break from Roberta's narrative and remark on a few salient features of her story, such as:

- The emotional pain that contributed to and was caused by the envy
- The conflicted emotions that Roberta feels in response to her family's envy of her (e.g., does she deserve her good fortune?)
- The fact that Roberta succeeded in leaving her more narrow confines while her sisters and mother did not

The first and most important difference between Roberta and the rest of the family is that she believes in herself. Because of this belief, it appears that she is not the one envying them; instead, they are the ones envying her. Of course, we only have her report on this, and her family may have a different perspective; however, from Roberta's perspective, we are able to highlight this most important aspect of being or not being prone to envy: the sense of

self-agency. If I believe that I can change my fate, go for what I want, and have what I see others have that I value, then I will be less likely to envy them and more likely to work to get those things myself.

This statement simply rolls back the question one step earlier: What is it about Roberta that gave her this confidence, and what is it about her sisters that caused them to lack it apparently? Clearly, the loving attention from a father to a child in dire straits was important. Did it also matter that Roberta was able to see herself favored? That is, while it made her uncomfortable, could it also have made her feel even better about herself because she saw herself above those around her? Conversely, was there something inherently more optimistic in Roberta than her sisters, which makes it easier for her to believe in herself and make others want to give to her? There is no way to know this.

As a psychologist, the question of why some people are able to believe in themselves and others are not has bedeviled me for years. One answer, which seems to be true in some (but not all) instances, is that it helps if you believe you are a meaningful part of a larger whole and that you have a place in the universe but are not the center of it. This stance makes it possible to feel the confidence necessary to overcome obstacles and bring forth something intrinsic to who we are, and have the humility to learn not to take things so personally when circumstances don't go our way. It can allow us to learn lessons from life rather than see ourselves as victims of an unfair fate in an arbitrary world.

Let's see how this difference plays out in a dramatic way with one of Roberta's siblings:

My sister, whom I am not speaking to right now because of a situation that happened this summer, came out to visit me in our new house, and I think she just like short circuited when she was here. Because it's nice. And she's never been in a place like this before. And she's having some troubles of her own where she's about to lose her house. I knew she wasn't in the most stable place.

She had spent \$1,000 on new clothes. She was raving about how she had so much luck and she can never find anything: 'It's [the West Coast], the place to shop.' That's where everything is great. She comes into my bedroom after that shopping spree, and I'm wearing a black T-shirt and jeans. And my fiancé said to me, 'You look cute. Doesn't she look cute?' And my sister said, 'Well, where's my cute, black T-shirt to wear?' And I said, 'What are you talking about? You just got \$1,000 worth of clothes that look great on you. Why can't you wear some of those?' And she goes, 'None of those work. You just don't want to help your sister.' And she flips her hair around and storms off.

It created this horrible energy in the house for the entire rest of the time that she was here. I ran after her, because she said, 'I should have just gone through your closet instead of going shopping.' Because she wanted to borrow a shirt. That's what this was all about. So I went to my closet and started taking

shirts out for her to see which ones she wants to wear. She goes through like 20 shirts and says, 'no, no, no.'

We finally get to this one shirt. She likes it. She wears it. Long story short, when she went to leave from that trip, she took that shirt with her. Like she kept it [sobbing]. And that's basically why we're not speaking right now. That shirt is more important to her. It represents something to her.

This is a very rich interaction and, in many ways, perfectly embodies the intersection of the envier and the envied. The shirt is involved in a material tug-of-war between these two sisters, standing in for some kind of redemptive spiritual force that only the person in physical possession can enjoy. One can palpably feel the energy being focused on this piece of cotton from some sweatshop in Taiwan. In this moment between the two sisters, it represents everything that one sister feels she didn't receive as well as the combination of guilt and resentment with Roberta: "Should I give it to her? No, I won't because it will never be enough!" In the end, her sister takes the shirt and, like a scene straight out of *Cinderella*, there is a rupture between the sisters over a single piece of clothing.

How can we understand the crystallization of so much emotional pain and yearning and hope and disappointment in a simple shirt? In Chapter 4, I explain Girard's concept of mimetic desire (i.e., how one person's desire for something makes us want the same thing). That could certainly be true here, but I would also like to consider the psychological concept of "projection."

## PROJECTION AND ENVY

The easiest way to understand projection is to think of a movie, where images are literally projected onto a screen. We watch these images and have strong emotional responses to them, even though at some level we know they are not real.

As problematic as it can sometimes be, our ability to project onto others can help us grow and develop. Dormant or buried feelings and emotions which cannot be accessed through daylight consciousness, are made available to us through the process of projection.

In psychological literature, this is normally described through its negative manifestations (i.e., if we see angry people all around us, it's because we don't recognize the ways in which we're angry). It is equally true that we do this in positive ways (i.e., the things we admire and envy in others are already within us but need to be accessed and brought into light). We cannot get to them as readily through simply thinking about them so, by projecting them onto other people, we have emotional fuel to help us work toward them. Ideally, Roberta's sister could recognize that all the power she was investing

in the T-shirt in that moment was available to her in order to step more fully into her own life.

From Roberta's description, which follows, it doesn't sound like this is happening:

I have done a lot of work to understand their thinking and try to deal with the sadness that has come from being alienated from my family because I'm different and almost demonized in many ways. . . . This is kind of a hard thing to say, and it's actually bringing up emotion [crying]. It's really at the core of this theme that I feel I've had on myself, or I've put a lid on myself, because if I become and do everything and do everything I have inside myself to do, then I'll lose them completely.

Maybe that's just an excuse for being lazy and not trying hard enough. I have this beautiful engagement ring that my fiancé gave me, and I won't show it to any of them because I know that there's going to be static around it. And I felt like I have to hide who I am. . . . It's a fear that's not even real because they're already gone.

I don't know what I'm afraid of. I'm afraid of something that's already happened, that's already happening. I also think that, if I was just full out confident and did everything and said everything the way that I believe in and have the potential to achieve, I would just come off looking like an absolute nightmare. And I don't have enough words to describe to you all of the things that they would perceive as not in alignment with their thought system at all.

I don't know why there's this desire at this point to want to try to maintain any part of framework when I've done everything in my life to try to free myself from that and bust loose of it. Why do I care? The only thing I can come back to is some kind of feeling of foundation of a family, which is a fantasy. It's an illusion because it doesn't exist.<sup>6</sup>

## ENVY AND THE NEED TO BELONG

Roberta is gifting us here with another portal into the topic of envy: how our need for belonging can compete with our need to become our fuller selves. This is the dialectic between the community and the individual, and there is no easy way to find this balance.

The only thing we can do is to explore as fully as possible our need for both (i.e., how we crave the security and the connection that come from belonging and how we thirst and hunger for the need to express our unique nature to its fullest potential). While this can seem like a conflict without end, I believe that, at its source, the two impulses are completely and irrevocably connected and compatible.

We cannot be our fullest, most unique selves without the connection to something larger. The community, the people, or the nation to which we belong cannot be its healthiest without each individual bringing forth his or her gifts. A community is an expression of its individual parts, which prosper

or struggle depending upon the health and supporting web of the community. Of course, there is tension in this combination, but we need to hold it as the tension inherent in the creative process; even its individual manifestations, such as what I experienced while living on the kibbutz or what Roberta is feeling with her family, can be painful kinds of creativity. Just as we need to overcome our judgmental reactivity to envy as an emotion, we also need to overcome our automatic assumption that there must be something wrong just because it involves pain and struggle.

### ENVY AND SELF-DESTRUCTION

Roberta had one more story to tell—even more harrowing than the previous one—regarding outstripping a childhood friend:

My very close childhood friend Dave from [my hometown] came from a very wealthy family. His parents owned banks; his parents were alcoholics. They were very generous in providing everything that a kid could imagine, and he had very little emotional support or parental supervision. When we entered high school, his family moved [away] and I basically lost touch with him.

It wasn't until several years later, after I had moved to [the West Coast], that I decided to look him up. To my surprise, he was in the area, had just finished college . . . and was working to find a job in public relations in [my city]. Once reconnected, we were immediate best friends again.

After a few weeks of lunches, dinners, and outings, he finally trusted me enough to tell me that he was gay. This of course was no real surprise to me but, in [our hometown], that is the LAST thing you want ANYONE to know, much less confess to.

At that time I was about 23, and I had magically landed a great apartment with an ocean view, and a high-paying job as an art director at an agency with a 10th-floor office and a stellar view of the ocean. Once Dave saw all of this, he immediately moved one block away from me into a more expensive apartment and got a job just down the street from my office at a well-known PR firm.

For about a year, we had a great time, talking on the phone daily, dining out together, traveling, and discussing our future goals and plans. During that time, I had been seeing a therapist to deal with anxiety attacks related to work. She was amazing and assisted me in making incredible progress discovering and uncovering a lot of things in a very short period of time.

At the same time that I was on top of the world and had started dating a fairly decent guy, Dave was having a hard time dating and dealing with his entry-level salary as well as the frustrations of being a new hire. He grew very distant, started drinking very heavily, took Ecstasy in gay clubs, became very reckless sexually, and started acting very strangely. All along, I had shared the happenings and progress of my therapy with both Dave and my therapist, and naturally urged him (as she did as well) to get some help. He did not.



A few months later, Dave was totally out of control. In the middle of the night, the police had come to his place because neighbors were complaining that he was screaming and breaking things. He began psycho-calling me repeatedly and hiding in the bushes outside my apartment, looking for refuge from the police. I chose to let him in and, in his frenzied state, he informed me that the reason he was having such a hard time was because he secretly hated me and was sick of comparing himself to me.

He said that it just wasn't fair. He was totally rich, great looking, male, and older than I was. He had a better education than I did and every possible advantage over me. He was making next to nothing and sitting in a crappy cubicle while somehow I had come from basic poverty, with nothing but a shitty art degree, and had managed to have everything that he felt he deserved to have. He said that he hated me and wished that I was dead, so he wouldn't have to look at me anymore and feel inferior.

I was totally devastated and became very worried for my safety, as he was obviously completely nuts at that point. My therapist agreed that I needed to cut things off with Dave because he was so dangerous. I basically avoided him until, a few months later, I found out that he had moved out of the apartment and was in rehab. I then moved to [another community] and lost touch with him once again.

About a year later, I got a very friendly call from Dave, trying to reconnect, and we decided to meet to talk things through. He came to my new place in [a different city], and we went to lunch. He proceeded to tell me that he had been to rehab three times in that past year, and was now unemployed and living with his father. As he spoke, he would not look me in the eye and could barely pick up a glass because of the 'shakes'. . . . It was awful.

Overall, the meeting was very odd and the conversation never addressed his hatred for me. He was clearly agitated by having to be near me and, after he left, it occurred to me that inviting him to my new home was probably not the best idea given his past grievances with me.

About two weeks later, I learned that Dave had basically gone home, started drinking again, and had decided to take his own life. Needless to say, I was completely wrecked by this news. Despite all of my healthy knowledge that I was not responsible for his sickness, it did not keep the flood of massive feelings of guilt over abandoning him, being such an upset to him, and the loss of his friendship from totally overwhelming me. I did not attend his funeral and, even though I have spent a lot of time journaling, emoting, grieving, and processing my feelings surrounding his death, I have never really been able to totally reconcile it.

I know that Dave had major problems beyond feeling threatened by me, and that his death actually had very little to do with me, but it doesn't take away the fact that all of that happened.

## SHOULD WE REALLY ENVY THE WEALTHY?

Let's take a breath and pay tribute to a soul who couldn't make it. It is very sad to hear of suicide as it signals giving up on a profound level. Therefore,

what follows in this book is in no way meant to diminish Dave's suffering or to judge him for his actions. It is meant, instead, to try to draw out some lessons from his life and death in a way that might be beneficial to those struggling with similar feelings, albeit in attenuated fashion.

One important element of this story is the life of privilege into which Dave was born. It is important on at least two levels:

1. It proves yet again the old adage that money does not buy happiness. No matter how often we hear this, no matter how many wrecked lives of the rich and famous we're aware of, those of us without this kind of money still fantasize that, if we had it, we could somehow do it differently.

2. It shows one of the challenges of having money and privilege, in that we are not forced by life into a channel of restriction that can help us develop our potential.

Here's a brief but related digression: At a couple's workshop I once attended, a man stood up during the first hour and spoke of how his life was wrecked by all the money he had inherited: how he had not worked since age 30; how, while he had been to every fancy place in the world, he was miserable; and how, after four failed marriages, he had finally found someone to give himself to, and he was now going to do it differently. He and his wife got into a fight before the first break, and they both left—three hours into a three-day workshop. At this same event, I witnessed many couples, who couldn't afford to pay for a three-day workshop and just walk out, struggle and be ultimately transformed.

It is incredibly sad and poignant to witness the waste of opportunity, time, and talent, which can result from being given too much and from being cushioned from too many of the blows with which most people must contend. I am spending some time on this aspect because it is connected to envy.

So often, we envy another person's money, or leisure, or what appears to be their lack of struggle. We need to try to be grateful for our struggles because they are the cauldron that contains us and forms us into new and improved versions of our former selves. These struggles squeeze out the unnecessary elements in our lives and refine us into ever more distilled versions of our true selves.

This is a somewhat idealized sketch of life's suffering and struggle, and we have to ask ourselves why some people appear to get shipwrecked along the way. Not everyone is able to do what Roberta does with her life of struggle (witness her sisters), and not everyone who is born into a life of privilege wastes it in the way Dave apparently did.

## ENVY IN ITS UGLY AND TOXIC FORM

Another element that is sketched in unusually sharp relief in Roberta's second story is the toxicity of envy, where Dave literally wishes that Roberta were dead rather than be confronted with the feelings of inferiority her existence brings up in him. This is the level of murderous envy depicted in *Amadeus* (a completely fictionalized account of Mozart and Salieri, as noted in Chapter 5). Why can envy bring out the murderous impulse in us, or, if does not quite reach the level of murderous rage, why is it so poisonous and hostile?

We don't like to explore these aspects of our inner world too deeply, preferring instead to recoil at demonstrations of them in others and to deny that we are capable of such ugliness. At the same time, most of the heroic tales of struggle and conquest on the big screen involve just this struggle between a polarized good and evil. The hero struggles against all odds to do what is right, and the evil one has given himself over to the dark side of negativity, spiraling farther downward into a life of violence and corruption. In one of the most important scenes from the *Star Wars* movies, Luke Skywalker is tempted to "come over to the Dark Side." Why would anyone be tempted by such a thing?

In truth, we are tempted and we fail every day; it's just that most of us are not honest enough or hold ourselves accountable enough to recognize all the incidents of micro-hostility and violence to which we regularly succumb. Whether it's indulging in gossip or negative thoughts, or grabbing a parking space before the competing car can get it, our dark side is alive and well and seeking sustenance every day. Dave is perhaps farther down the road in this story than the rest of us, as is Roberta's sister in her theft of the shirt; however, if we're honest enough with ourselves, we can find the ingredients of their behavior in our own hearts and actions.

It can be threatening to contemplate the ways that we're like Dave, such as the aspects of ourselves that we have left undeveloped, the ways in which we have killed off our own potential, and the ways in which our bitterness over our failures translates into hostility toward others, depression, and self-destructive behaviors. If we simply view the reasons we overeat, overconsume, overspend, gossip, speak ill of the "other"—any of the ways in which we essentially demonstrate that we are not happy with ourselves—we will have to see aspects of Dave within us.

It's taken me a long time to recognize that, in nearly 100% of the instances where I want to say something negative about someone else, it is purely and simply a way for me to feel better about myself by comparison. This kind of self-examination and personal accountability can appear daunting, and I don't know of a way out of it. Everything I've come to understand about life suggests that we must take on this challenge and that, in the way

we meet each day, we give birth to the seeds of envy, emulation, or illumination.

## TWO AXES TO ENVY INDUCTION

I've always thought that I wanted people to be envious of me, and that it would confirm my success if someone wanted what I had or wanted to be like me in some way. There are different strategies to inducing envy, and I've been guilty of all of them (e.g., name dropping, casually mentioning success in a particular endeavor, and hoping that someone else will give a glowing report about me to a colleague). While one part of me is aware of the ugly side of envy and has experienced it, another part doesn't understand why everyone is so worried about it. I say, "Bring it on!"

While doing this research, I found that the ambivalence of both liking and fearing envy is normal and has a long history. Anthropologist George Foster<sup>7</sup> described these two attitudes toward envy as existing on two axes, namely the "competitive axis" and the "fear axis." The competitive axis is the realm with which we're most familiar (i.e., we envy people who outproduce us), but it is the fear axis where:

man fears being envied for what he has, and wishes to protect himself from the consequences of the envy of others; man also fears he will be accused of envying others, and he wishes to allay this suspicion; and finally, man fears to admit to himself that he is envious, so he searches for rationales and devices to deny to himself his envy and to account for, in terms other than personal responsibility, the conditions that place him in a position inferior to another.<sup>8</sup>

I find it interesting that Foster uses and emphasizes the word "manipulative" to describe the way we can attempt to use other people's capacity for envy as a way to bolster our sense of self. It can be like the methods I described above, which I employ, or through conspicuous consumption, as he says.

Foster's interest lies in what we do to forestall the envy of those around us; in other words, his focus is on the fear axis. He believes that our custom of tipping originally evolved as a means to prevent the envy of those who serve us. He doesn't claim that, every time we go into a restaurant and leave a tip, we are consciously aware that we had better do so or the waiter will envy us and possibly do us harm; however, he does believe that this is the origin of the institution and cites as evidence the fact that most of us leave a tip no matter how poor the service:

We can only conclude that being served by another—even badly—establishes a psychological relationship that requires, for our peace of mind, the fulfillment of the prescribed ritual. We prefer to be angry with ourselves rather than

to risk the anger of the waiter who, even though we may expect never to see him again, in some mysterious fashion haunts us.<sup>9</sup>

On the topic of what Foster describes as the “manipulative axis,” we are social creatures, and most of us develop our sense of self through comparison with others, particularly others whose values or interests we share. Thus, it makes a lot of sense that, when someone envies us our achievement or good fortune, it would boost our self-confidence, make us more appreciative of our boon, and help us feel superior in an area of life we care about.

The smug self-satisfaction coming from another person’s envy has a short shelf life; much like any other kind of external trapping we seek for immediate gratification, the envy of others is not a nourishing diet on which to subsist. Conversely, if I’m expressing my true nature, my attitude will automatically be one of generosity of spirit toward others, and I would want them to share in the sense of boon I feel myself. To be seeking the envy of another is to be trapped in the same cycle that fuels any addiction: reaching for something outside yourself for something that ultimately needs to come from within.

I find it interesting that so little is written about this aspect of envy (i.e., wanting others to envy us), even though there is much evidence to show that it’s a major factor in consumerism and competitions (e.g., beauty, child talent, sports, dog shows, or simply bragging about one’s children). It may be the “shadow of the shadow.” Just as there is relatively little study of envy as an emotion because of its shameful aspects, perhaps wanting others to envy us is the most shameful aspect of envy.

### REASONS WE INCITE ENVY IN OTHERS

One of the few studies<sup>10</sup> I could find that looks at this aspect reports that some respondents in their three-country survey (the United States, the Netherlands, and Spain) tried to make others envious of them. The speculation of the authors was that, when two people are rivals, making one envious can make the other feel victorious. Making another envious could also serve the goals of retaliation, shaming, or humiliation. Overall, it seems that we can seek to make another envious in order to make ourselves feel better about ourselves, either because of the way the envy builds us up or because of how it tears our rival down.

*Not very pretty, but there you have it.*

In terms of feeling the envy from another person as unwelcome, this same three-country study had some interesting findings. First, people are envied for both zero-sum and nonzero-sum aspects. A “zero-sum” aspect is where there can be only one winner in a competition, or where a limited number of students can get into a prestigious university, and thus one person’s gain

could directly imply another person's loss; a "nonzero-sum" aspect would be where there is no limit to the aspect in question, such as being considered friendly, or popular, or a good listener.

Respondents from all three countries listed both zero-sum and nonzero-sum aspects as causing envy with peers, but the envy was more likely to result in hostility when it was over a zero-sum aspect. This makes intuitive sense, as a zero-sum aspect would be more likely to incite our more primal survival instincts. If you're admitted to Harvard, and I'm only wait-listed, then in a very concrete way you may have taken the place I coveted.

Those who outperformed their peers engaged in a variety of behaviors to decrease the likelihood of being envied (e.g., they professed humility, acted friendly, or commiserated with their less fortunate peers). Of the three cultures studied, the North Americans "were the most fearful of becoming the target of hostile ill will. More than the other two cultural groups, the North Americans expected that the less successful student would blame them and would wish to take away their success."<sup>11</sup>

### HONOR CULTURES AND ENVY

Another speculation from this study was the concept of "honor cultures," where there is a strong emphasis on reputation and social respect, and where one's reputation may be considered a zero-sum commodity where another's increase in honor may decrease my honor.

Especially interesting is their observation that there is a strong correlation between those societies high on the "honor culture" list and those that have highly developed institutions regarding envy, such as belief systems regarding the evil eye (see Chapter 6 for a discussion on the evil eye). Although not all cultures that have an evil eye belief correlate it with envy, researchers who have charted the occurrence of the evil eye belief systems associated with envy place them in the Mediterranean region.<sup>12</sup>

One major study of the rich and famous,<sup>13</sup> which seems to dovetail into the description of Dave from above, describes the debilitating effect of always being able to hit the reset button in life, and of living a life protected from consequences. The respondents in the study (i.e., those with fortunes in excess of \$25 million) described lives of anxiety and aimlessness, of growing up without direction, of wasted opportunities, and of isolation. Many who inherited their wealth found that they grew into adulthood without having developed any particular talent or ability because they never had to. So, while we may bemoan the need to work or the sacrifice required to develop a talent or skill, it seems pretty clear that this is what we're here to do.

A life of vacation on a beach sounds nice precisely because it's a time-limited treat in a life of duty, struggle, and a need for sacrifice:

Work is what fills most people's days, and it provides the context in which they interact with others. A life of worklessness, however financially comfortable, can easily become one of aimlessness, of estrangement from the world. The fact that most people imagine it would be paradise to never have to work does not make the experience any more pleasant in practice.

Career advancement is the standard yardstick by which most people measure success, and without that yardstick, it's not easy to assess whether one's time is well spent.<sup>14</sup>

## NOTES

1. Perhaps the fullest treatment of the debilitating effects of envy on people and communities can be found in H. Schoeck, *Envy: A Theory of Social Behaviour*, trans. M. Secker and Warwick Ltd. (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1969; original work published 1966); see also Chapter 6.

2. T. Henry, personal communication (Nov. 19, 2009).

3. Ibid.

4. Schoeck, *Envy*, 416–17.

5. Roberta is impressively precise in her use of the words “jealousy” and “envy”: Jealousy is wanting to protect what is rightfully yours; envy is wanting what belongs to another.

6. Roberta identified this issue of how much she limits herself as a major area to be explored. In a follow-up e-mail, she wrote the following: “When you asked me, ‘How do you think being the target of envy has affected you in your development?’, it really triggered a whole new level of awareness in me about some major untouched territory. I’ve always known that this issue has been an integral factor in the general chemistry of ‘me’ but it wasn’t until yesterday [during our interview] that I realized how much I have been avoiding dealing with the pain of it all. Based on the level of heart pain, charged rage, hysteria and sadness that has been coming in waves since we spoke yesterday, I know that this is something huge. In one brief conversation we were able to uncover something that is clearly being placed on display for me to deal with. This dynamic is so deeply upsetting to me at a root level that I am now astounded at the level of denial that I have been in about it. Aside from being thrilled that I now have a thread to follow to bring some peace and healing to the matter, it is quite humbling for this particular ‘know-it-all/perfectionist’ to have suddenly discovered such an obvious elephant in the room.”

7. G. Foster, “The Anatomy of Envy: A Study in Symbolic Behavior,” *Current Anthropology* 13, no. 2 (1972): 165–202.

8. Ibid., 166.

9. Ibid.

10. W. Parrott and P. Mosquera, “On the Pleasures and Displeasures of Being Envid,” in *Envy: Theory and Research*, ed. R. Smith (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 117–32.

11. Ibid., 129.

12. M. Kearney, “A World-view Explanation of the Evil Eye,” in *The Evil Eye*, ed. C. Maloney (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), 176.

13. G. Wood, “The Fortunate Ones,” *The Atlantic* 307, no. 3 (April 2011): 72–80.

14. Ibid., 78.