

On My Mind: The season of envy



For many Islanders, the coming of the summer season can be painful, not just because of the increased work burden, the crowded roads, and the longer lines at the Post Office and the supermarket, but also because summer brings an influx of the rich and famous and is thus the season during which envy is provoked. For some people, it rankles that exclusive beaches that have been free to roam during the off-season are now gated; then there are the private jets zooming overhead, and the parties to which year-rounders are not invited, or at which they are relegated to the role of server. For many there is the overwhelming pressure to work long hours while others are living apparent lives of leisure. And then there is the envy of others' homes for those who become homeless in the summer, when they have to move out of their winter rentals or rent out their homes to make ends meet, especially when they see so many large houses that are occupied only a fraction of the year.

Of course Vineyard part-timers, visitors, and second-home owners also experience envy. Second-home owners may envy those who have their third or fourth homes here. And some seasonal Islanders envy those of us who get to live in this natural splendor year-round, and are insiders to the “real Vineyard.” No matter how much you have, there are others who have attributes and things that you are missing — extravagant possessions for example, but also good health, or a certain kind of intelligence.

The New York Times recently published an article titled “The Upside of Envy,” by Gordon Marino, a professor of philosophy (see bit.ly/UpsideEnvy). Marino quotes Aristotle as describing envy “not as benign desire for what someone else possesses but ‘as the pain caused by the good fortune of others.’” Some psychoanalysts would add that the pain is made larger by the sense that “that good fortune should be mine.” There might even be the added wish that at least the other could be divested of it.

Marino also quotes Nietzsche as saying, “Envy and jealousy are the private parts of the human soul.” Envy is not an emotion that people talk about easily. I have often heard people refer to the discomfort they feel when other people envy them. Moreover, acknowledging the experience of envy in ourselves, along with the twin emotion of anger at the other person, fills us with shame, and by and large we keep these feelings secret.

It is interesting to compare envy and jealousy. While some sources claim that the two have become synonymous, others say that jealousy is a reaction to the fear of losing something (usually someone). Envy is a reaction to an inner sense of lacking something that someone else has. Whatever the distinction, jealousy seems to be a more socially acceptable emotion than envy. I frequently hear people talk about feeling jealous, even when technically they are referring to envy. Perhaps this is because jealousy often feels benign (“You’re going to the Bahamas? I’m so jealous!”), whereas the word envy is avoided, perhaps because it is often accompanied by a sense of aggression toward someone else (“You’re married to someone I wish I were married to, and I hate you for it”).

It reminds me of how a friend approached me at my 50th birthday party and said, “This party is so special and beautiful; I may have to kill you.” However much he was joking, he later stopped returning my phone calls. Envy is characterized by the longing to defeat or eliminate the person who evokes the envy.

My own embarrassing experiences of envy are hard to write about, even though envy seems to be a near universal emotion. I am reminded of a time that I was not

included in a small birthday party thrown by a friend for another friend. I felt that it was my right to be there. It hurt my feelings to be left out, and I envied those who were included. I was somewhat surprised by having feelings I'd have thought I would long have outgrown, but as psychoanalyst and vice chair of psychiatry at Weill Medical College of Cornell, John Barnhill, M.D., wrote in an email, "Unfortunately, envy, like a Supreme Court seat, may be a lifetime appointment, ever lurking in its black robes, waiting to render judgments."

Envy is one of the most painful emotions. It is both amplified by depression and precipitates depression, and it can be toxic. I once knew a man who at 80 was consumed with the idea that he had married the wrong woman. He longed for the idealized wife of a friend. Bitterness plagued him. Because of the awkwardness, the relationship with the other couple dwindled. His wife sensed his resentment of her and avoided him. His marriage became more distant. As a result of his increasingly deficient friendships and marriage, his envy and longing (for what he perceived his friend to have) intensified.

This story exemplifies what psychoanalysts call "malignant envy." What makes it malignant is that it is self-perpetuating. Some people who suffer from envy want so badly what others have (and they lack) that it consumes them with anger. The anger leaves them feeling isolated, defeated, and helpless, which results in their being less able to get what they wanted in the first place. The cycle continues when, as a result of their obsession with what they lack, they fail further to make positive headway or sabotage themselves, and their envy is amplified.

Success and the acquisition of possessions, power, and fame might temporarily relieve envy. But I am reminded of Citizen Kane, who got lost and lonely in a vast swarm of adult toys, when what he really wanted was the normal, contented innocence of childhood symbolized by his sled, Rosebud. Schadenfreude, the delight at other people's suffering, can bring relief by being what Dr. Barnhill calls "the robust, pleasure-inducing flip side of envy." Herbal and traditional psychopharmacology can also mitigate the psychic pain of envy. But none of these solutions satisfies the root cause of envy, which generally relates to the deep-seated emotional sense that something internal is missing.

As Professor Marino points out, envy is a painful emotion that presents us with the opportunity for exploration and personal growth (this is the "upside of envy" he refers to in the title of his article). When I think about the pain that I felt at being left out of my friend's 60th birthday party, I also remember how painful it was for me as a small child when my siblings left me out of my older brother and

sister falsely told me that I was adopted, and that there was no room for me in their games. Remembering the far more distressing feelings of exclusion that I experienced as a child put not being invited to an adult birthday party into perspective, especially when I reminded the child part of myself that of course I I was always a member of my family, and I had, and will continue to have, friends and playmates.

It is also helpful when I remind myself and my patients that the feeling of envy is the experience of only a part of us. There are other parts that feel a sense of abundance, sufficiency, and confidence. Bringing those other parts into consciousness helps to prevent the envious part from taking over.

Other lasting solutions include finding meaning in one's life and putting a high value on connections with community, friends, nature, and for some, God or the universe. In cultivating those self-transcending relationships, and sometimes sharing the sense of what is lacking, there is fulfillment and comfort.

Mindfulness practices that keep us in the present can be nurtured, and are enormously helpful (see bit.ly/inthepresent). Seeking the joy of each moment — whether playing a game, working on a potter's wheel, or doing the dishes — offers a sense of fullness in the moment and relieves envy.

Though life on the Vineyard can evoke envy, contemplating the reality of how much we have (relative to so many people in other impoverished or war-torn parts of the world) can be soothing. Doing service and performing acts of kindness (random and otherwise) is accompanied by a sense of productivity and purpose, and offers relief from the sense that something is lacking in our own lives. Ultimately, when we feel envy, it is a message from our inner world that there is work to be done and that there are parts of ourselves that need to heal.

Phil Weinstein, a semi-retired local literature professor, wrote to me, “Envy is our reaction to the unhappy fact that there are attributes and things we are inherently missing. That's why getting more ‘stuff’ or defeating others who have what we lack won't reach into this native and incurable lack. But envy can be addressed, even though not cured. An inner strategy might be more effective — something along the lines of stoical recognition that something is always missing, and greater tolerance toward the ‘parts’ of ourselves that nevertheless continue to want.”

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