

Envy: A Longing For Wholeness

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Envoy is one of the most difficult emotions to experience and integrate. Yet there is no passion so strongly rooted in the human heart. Envy is the felt conviction that "anything I need will be withheld from me, so I will spoil or destroy the one who has what I lack." The capacity for envy is in everyone, but people's susceptibility to it varies greatly and is determined early in life. This article is intended to help those who suffer from envy. For both the envier and the envied, making sense out of the chaos that this emotion breeds is a tremendous challenge that often ends in defeat, leaving behind a painful confusion that never gets resolved. Recognizing envy and understanding its meaning is a necessary first step for those who must deal with envy's disruptive consequences. Without this kind of awareness we can easily become unwitting victims of our own or others' envy.

The Christian tradition, recognizing the evil inherent in envy, ranks it as one of the seven capital sins. Psychoanalysts give envy a primary place in analysis because they believe it underlies many of the problems in human relationships, causing rifts between spouses, siblings, friends, and nations. Despite the importance given envy in both Christian spirituality and psychology, most of us rarely recognize our own envy or, if we do, are loath to acknowledge it. Instead, we treat it as a poison that can be locked away in a cupboard, out of sight and out of reach, where it can do no harm. Perhaps this

reflects the human tendency to hide the dark aspects of ourselves, particularly those that make us feel small and ashamed. But, like it or not, envy is present in the daily lives of ordinary people.

The other day I found a package in my mailbox. When I opened it I found a Christmas present from a family in the parish. Attached to it was a note from one of the nuns who lives in the parish convent: "Sorry this is so late. My fault" (name signed). Since this was the middle of the year, I was quite shocked. I live only a few blocks from her, and she had held on to that present for months, depriving me of the feelings of love and gratitude intended by the givers and preventing me from expressing my appreciation to them in return. I felt outraged that she would do such a thing. At the same time, I suspected from previous dealings with her that this was the only way she could express her envy and that I was impotent in the face of her unconscious acting out. I also sensed that she was a deeply troubled woman who hid her pain behind a persona of childlike goodness, quick to respond to the needs of people in order to feel valued but never really being taken seriously by others. Underneath the mask of sweetness she seemed angry and hurt, a victim of her own envious despair. Her withholding of the gift is a graphic example of how envy tries to spoil other people's good fortune.

All of us fall into envy in one way or another and are contaminated by its poison—sometimes as en-

viars, other times as the envied. And yet, as common and potentially harmful as envy is, it is the least discussed and least understood of emotions. As is true for the shadow side of life in general, envy is most destructive when it runs its natural course, untamed by conscious recognition and moral choice. In its raw form, uninfluenced by concerns for human love and relatedness, envy can destroy relationships of any and every kind. Psychiatrist Carl Jung, who wrote extensively about the destructive power of unexplored emotions, believed that becoming aware of these emotions and understanding their meaning can transform them into constructive energies for life-affirming goals. If we look closely at the emotion of envy, we discover two things. First, envy expresses both a deep longing for, and a despair of ever receiving, the good things of life. The envious person tries to take from others what he or she longs for. Second, envy is always found wherever gratitude is absent. While gratitude produces love, envy generates hate. Recognizing envy for what it is can be an opportunity for growth and healing.

INVOLVES HATEFUL INTENTIONS

The root of the word *envy* is *invidere* or *invidia*, meaning "to look with malice or resentment . . . to begrudge." Webster's dictionary defines envy as "a painful or resentful awareness of an advantage enjoyed by another joined with a desire to possess the same advantage." To complete this definition, psychologists would add: "and the desire to destroy the one who is seen to possess the advantage." Envy is based on a belief that goodness is a limited commodity. If someone else has a lot of it, there is less for me. Jealousy and envy are often confused. Envy is the pain at seeing another have what I want for myself, whereas jealousy is the fear that I will lose what I have. The envious person feels angry when another person enjoys something desirable and wants to take it away or to spoil it. Jealousy, however, is mainly concerned with love. The jealous person fears losing a loved one to a rival.

The case of a middle-aged man who shared his story on a retreat may make the distinction between jealousy and envy clear. While mortified to have to own up to feelings of jealousy and envy, he felt that they were interfering with his ability to pray. Frustrated, he confessed that he is usually so angry that he cannot even go through the motions of prayer. And it was clear to him that jealousy and envy, like destructive arsonists, were responsible for continually fanning the flames of his anger. He admitted that he is so jealous regarding his wife that he is at times in torment when he discovers her talking with another man. His wife is aware of his possessive jealousy, which has driven their marriage to the brink of divorce. He is also envious of other men, with whom he continually compares

himself. He resents their superior training and education, larger cars, better positions, better looks, skills, popularity, and so on. Any of these can inflict keen suffering on him at any given time.

Portraying the drama that envy can create in human relationships, literary works supply helpful data for exploring the dynamics of envy. For example, the biblical stories of Cain and Abel, Joseph and his brothers, and the prodigal son, as well as the fairytale of Cinderella, illustrate the destructive potential of envy and reflect its hateful intentions. Cain, consumed with envy because Yahweh favored his brother, Abel, was driven to fratricide (Gen. 4:1-8). Joseph was the victim of his brothers' jealousy when they saw that "Israel loved Joseph more than all of his other sons . . . and [they] came to hate [Joseph] so much that they could not say a civil word to him" (Gen. 37:3-4). Moreover, Joseph's dreams portending a future of prominence and power ignited the hatred of his brothers and converted their jealousy into murderous envy. The elder brother in the parable of the prodigal son demonstrates how a person's perception that someone else is receiving more of "the good" can result in resentment and envy. In response to his father's plea for understanding, he argues: "Look, all these years I have slaved for you and never once disobeyed your orders, yet you never offered me so much as a kid for me to celebrate with my friends. But, for this son of yours, when he comes back after swallowing up your property—he and his women—you kill the calf we have been fattening" (Luke 15:29-30). Finally, the fairytale of Cinderella exemplifies another facet of envy—that one's natural beauty and endowments can evoke envy in those who feel inferior. In this story, a beautiful young woman becomes the target of attack by her envious stepmother and stepsisters, who take delight in making her suffer.

To fully understand the perplexing emotion of envy, it is necessary to see how it originates in a recognition of something good. Whenever we perceive something outside ourselves to be a good, we are attracted to it. We feel a desire to be close to the valued object or to possess it. This is the case whether the good is another person, a material object, a beauty of nature, or a valued trait such as happiness or generosity. Envy is intrinsically related to goodness. It stems from a deep longing for the good and a corresponding despair of attaining it. What we each come to value and desire as good is determined by our own unique personality. What is desirable to one person may not be so to another. Envy enters the picture when people despair of ever achieving the good things they desire. Such frustration and despair are fertile soil for envy, which flourishes wherever hope is lacking. The suffering people experience is manifested in the envy they feel when they see another succeed, or in the pleasure they secretly take at another's failure.

DYNAMICS OF ENVY

Envy is the result of not recognizing and feeling the depths of the pain that being human can involve. To be human is to have pockets of emptiness that endlessly hunger for fulfillment. Saint Augustine's prayer, "Our hearts are restless, O God, until they rest in You," expresses the truth about the deep yearning of our being that leaves us always incomplete and forever pining for more. It is precisely this infinite dimension of our desires that keeps us longing for fulfillment. When we are not aware of this and do not consciously embrace our human condition, we become frustrated and angry. Envy enters our hearts when we deny the depths of our yearning as creatures destined to find completeness only in divine love. Envy makes us think that "if only we had such and such, we would finally feel complete." But eventually, as experience repeatedly bears out, disillusionment sets in, and we come to hate the very thing we thought would satisfy us. Instead of accepting limitation and loss as part of life, the envious think that others always have more and that no one ever gives to them. Envious people fixate so much on what others have that they fail to focus on what they themselves need and want. This lack of self-awareness impedes their taking responsibility for their own lives. They come to believe that others are to blame for what they are missing, and they get angry. Blaming others activates feelings of victimization and self-righteous revenge in the envious, who now want others to pay for making them feel so bad. What begins as their own suffering gradually becomes something that someone else has done to them. The emptiness and longing that they once felt are replaced by resentment and rage. And those who possess what they desire become the enemy whose happiness is at their expense.

ORIGINS IN EARLY LIFE

Envy is thought to have its roots in early childhood when we are at our neediest as helpless and dependent infants. Incapable of taking care of any of our own needs, we are most vulnerable to emotional and physical deprivation. Child psychoanalyst Melanie Klein believes that envy is born out of this total sense of dependency and that infants spontaneously feel envy toward the mother, whom they experience as all-powerful and able to give or withhold what they need. Thus, Shakespeare's intuition is not without psychological foundation when he states in *Romeo and Juliet* that a person can be stricken early "As is the bud bit with an envious worm, / Ere he can spread his sweet leaves to the air, / Or dedicate his beauty to the sun."

How envious we are as adults goes back to our experience of mother as giving or withholding. According to Klein, when the scale of need satisfac-

tion versus need deprivation is tipped in the direction of satisfaction, the infant survives the envy stage with a healthy capacity to give and receive love. When the scale is tipped in the opposite way, due either to the insatiability of the infant's needs or to severe maternal deprivation, the child's predominant emotional experience is that of being empty rather than full. This experience, Klein believes, damages one's capacity to love. A sense of defeat and despair grows, eventually resulting in a personality that is prone to envy. Early in life, then, we learn through our experiences of need satisfaction and need deprivation either to appreciate the good or to hate it and attack those whom we perceive as possessing it.

DEFENSES AGAINST ENVY

There are numerous defenses that we can use to deal with envy. In her classic work *Envy and Gratitude*, Klein suggests that there are so many as to make it impossible to list them all. Most of these defenses are unconscious and serve to protect us from the painful exposure and retaliation we fear our envy will evoke. The most common of these are familiar to all of us, although we may not have thought of them as disguises for envy.

Idealization. Strongly exalting loved ones and their gifts can be an attempt to lessen envy. Often we feel envious of a person we admire, especially when that person seems to have and be all that we are not. If the envy is very strong, however, this overvaluing may in time turn into hatred because it makes us feel inferior.

Devaluation. Spoiling and devaluing are inherent in envy. Once I have devalued something, my envious feelings disappear. This inevitably happens to anything or anyone we idealize. Sooner or later the idealization breaks down and gives way to disillusionment. How soon an idealization breaks down depends on the strength of the envy behind it. For some people, this tendency to spoil characterizes their important relationships throughout their lives, and they go from one relationship to the next, repeatedly disillusioned and disappointed.

Confusion. Inherent in envy is a sense of despair about ever being able to attain what one most needs and wants. Thus, someone who is overwhelmed by futility can experience great difficulty in making choices, both in weighty matters such as vocational and career decisions and in lesser matters such as what to select from a restaurant menu. Indecision and unclear thinking, which are characterized by not being able to arrive at conclusions, are sometimes rooted in envious despair about ever being able to successfully achieve one's desires. In this way, envy can result in inactivity or procrastination.

Poor Self-Image. Devaluation of self or low self-esteem is another way in which envious feelings are avoided. This type of spoiling and devaluing is most characteristic of people who are prone to depression. It may result in a lifelong inability to develop and successfully use our gifts, or it may arise only on certain occasions (e.g., when there is danger of rivalry with an important person). By devaluing our own gifts and depriving ourselves of success, we both avoid the pain of feeling envy and punish ourselves for it.

Greed. Envy, stemming from severe early childhood deprivation, leads to a neurotic inability ever to feel satisfied. Persons afflicted in such a way feel that "what I have and who I am is never enough." To compensate for this feeling, they may be driven to want or to take all that they can get, whether in the form of material or spiritual goods. Perfectionism and professionalism can be manifestations of this tendency when they involve an endless pursuit of reassuring successes and achievements.

Making Others Envious. Stirring up envy in others by flaunting one's own success or possessions is a way of reversing the situation in which envy is experienced. The desire to make others envious and to triumph over them express both the hostility and the deep helplessness that characterize the inner world of the envious. An attitude of superiority or a tendency to brag about one's good fortune are common masks for envy.

Hatred and Indifference. Another frequent defense against envy is to stifle feelings of love and to fuel feelings of hate. The envious person is confused by the mixture of love, hate, and envy that inevitably arises in close relationships and cannot tolerate the ambivalence that results. One way to avoid this inner conflict is by denying the love. This may be expressed in either outright hatred or in the appearance of indifference. Withholding warmth and other manifestations of human kindness is a subtle form of revenge against those we envy.

Withdrawal. A variation of indifference is found in the allied defense of withdrawal from contact with others. Excessive independence often masks a fear of envy and defends against it by avoiding experiences that will give rise to both envy and gratitude. The inability to ask for or to receive help from others is often seen as a sign of strength rather than a problem with envy.

Destructive Criticism. Malicious gossip, backbiting, and other forms of tearing people down are among the most common, everyday expressions of envy. The envious person feels unhappy at the sight of others' happiness and finds satisfaction and even joy in their misfortune. Discrediting or maligning

the reputations of others is a widely recognized expression of envy.

Victims of Envy. A professionally successful and popular nun recounted the horror of being the scapegoated victim of her dysfunctional community. What finally convinced her that envy was at the heart of the problem was the group's refusal to cooperate when a trained facilitator was brought in. No one would talk. After months of unsuccessful meetings she realized that unconscious envy is impossible to deal with and asked for a transfer.

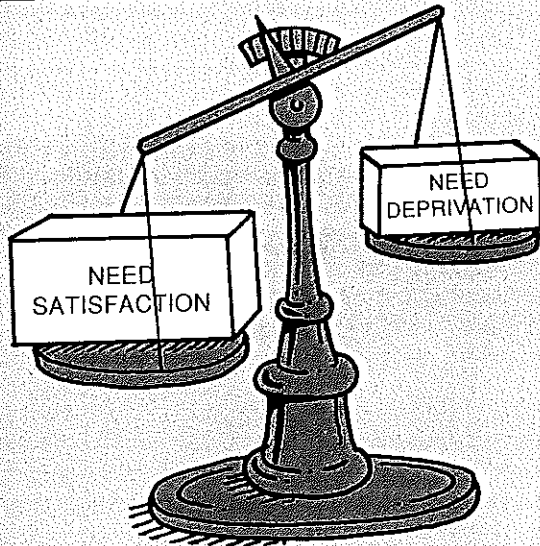
The above example illustrates how the envied person can be victimized. He or she feels attacked, threatened, and helpless. The envied may try to talk to the envier, to reason with him or her, even to try to prove that there is really nothing to be envied. As a last resort the envied may withdraw completely from any relationship with the envier. Victims of envy finally realize that there is nothing they can do to help the situation, because it is not a fault or a particular virtue that is provoking the hatred but their very being.

Victims of the envious attacks of others may react with a variety of responses. If they feel angry about being persecuted, counterattack is the most likely reaction, and they can become as destructive and hateful as the envier. Another response is to allow the envy to infect them. This happens if they internalize the blame projected on them and then feel guilty for being who they are. This was the case with a dynamic pastoral associate who was the unwitting victim of the envy of other staff members and came to believe that he was as bad as his envious colleagues asserted. The result was a complete denial of the parts of his personality that had brought about their envy. Only after several years of therapy was he able to undo the damage and to regain the courage to be himself. His painful experience taught him what all of envy's victims need to realize: to capitulate to the envious perceptions of others is to jeopardize one's very sense of self and to betray valuable parts of oneself. The temptation to abandon oneself is strongly felt by victims of envy because of the suffering that this kind of persecution brings. Much courage is required to embrace the parts of oneself that trigger envy in others. Often it seems easier to disown or devalue one's talents or successes in an attempt to defuse the painful onslaughts of the envious.

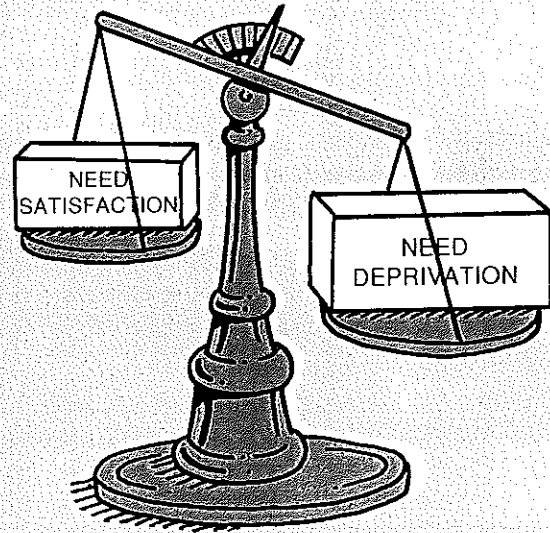
ENVY IN GROUP LIFE

Special attention should be given to the effects of envy in group life, since most of us live and work in groups of one type or another. Many years of facilitating groups of all kinds lead me to believe that unconscious envy is often at the heart of group conflicts. Seldom is a group created equal; inequality of natural gifts is inevitable. Such inequality,

Infant's Experience Affects Adult Envy



Infant perceives mother as giving; develops capacity to give and receive love.



Infant perceives mother as withholding; develops inclination to react with envy.

however, need not generate envy if the individuals are secure and confident enough to appreciate that each person has something valuable to offer. When this is the case, "We do not have to be or do it all," as Jungian analysts Ann and Barry Ulanov point out in their study of envy, *Cinderella and Her Sisters: The Envied and the Envyng*. "We can depend on others to supply what we lack, and be glad for their abilities and talents," they write, "for together we make up a whole, and a desirable one."

When low self-esteem characterizes a group, we can expect that envy will rear its ugly head and be directed at any member who stands out because of some success or good fortune. Thus, celebrations of promotions, jubilees, weddings, anniversaries, and birthdays can occasion envious comparisons. Those who feel that no one ever gives to them or treats them as special may feel particularly resentful when others are honored.

Envy poisons group life. By polluting the atmosphere with their resentful feelings and undermining others' efforts to live cooperatively, envious individuals in a community have a destructive influence on the whole group. They can sow seeds of dissension by secretly spreading rumors that foster mistrust, pitting people against each other and creating triangles.

Coping with the problems that come with group living requires more than faith and good intentions. If group members do not possess the skills for effective communication and conflict management, they will not be able to avoid the damage that envy can cause. Several envious people in a community can destroy the life of the whole group. A common way this occurs is through scapegoating: a few people consciously or unconsciously collude to designate one member as "the problem" and to convince the others of this. Systems theorists have demonstrated this dynamic quite convincingly in their work with families who have a "problem child." By treating the family group as a system, they are able to unearth the alliances and conflicts that exist in and among its members. By helping each family member learn how to communicate about his or her needs and feelings, they eliminate the need for a scapegoat. In religious communities, the tendency to create group norms such as "being nice" and sweeping conflicts under the rug paves the way for scapegoating by preventing members from voicing their feelings and airing their conflicts. An example of this occurred in a community that resolved its conflicts by scapegoating a different member every year. On the surface there was a pretense of unity and cooperation. Those outside

the community thought it a model group. The truth, however, was revealed in the scapegoating. The group was never able to develop a meaningful prayer life or to communicate on more than a superficial level.

Envy in group life can show itself in less dramatic ways than scapegoating. Gossip, negativity (toward authority or peers who stand out in some way), and the withholding of affirmation and support are common ways in which group members can express their envy of each other. The inability to receive help from other group members or to express gratitude genuinely may also mask feelings of envy. Finally, envy in group life is sometimes reflected in the negative way that younger members may be treated by their elders. It is often painful for the aging to accept the increasing signs of their diminishment. Failure to embrace these inevitable losses creates resentment that drives a wedge of envy between the old and the young, preventing them from enjoying the good that they have to give each other.

PROJECTING ONE'S SHADOW

Envious persons refuse the call to actualize their God-given potential. Their preoccupation with what they do not have and their obsession with what others have blind them to what is their own. The unique gifts that are theirs go unrecognized and are thus lost to them. The very things that could give them substance and enhance their sense of being fall into the shadow, the psychic storehouse for all the disowned aspects of the personality. And because whatever is in the shadow gets projected onto others, the envious see their own neglected potentials reflected in those around them. This is why they resentfully believe that others have what belongs to them. Psychologically, it is true—not because others have taken it but because the envious person has unconsciously projected it onto them.

A couple of examples might help to illustrate how this happens. A woman attending a faculty party with a friend finds herself feeling miserable as the evening progresses. She notices how relaxed and vivacious her friend is and how others naturally gravitate toward her. In contrast, she sees herself as a wallflower, self-consciously shy and fearful, and wishes she could be more spontaneous. Sometimes she resents her friend for always being the center of attention. She judges her as insensitive and selfish. But deep down, she knows the truth: she is envious and would give anything to be her. The moral of this story is not that the wallflower should try to imitate her extroverted friend but that she needs to explore the unconscious fears that prevent her from moving out toward others as she secretly desires.

In different cases of envy, people find themselves

obsessing over others' material possessions. A self-made businessman, for example, is envious of his neighbor who owns a larger business and a new Mercedes. He feels inferior to his neighbor, whose wealth and power exceed his own. That he is a successful husband and father seem unimportant to him because he believes that a man's worth is measured by money and prestige. Because of the symbolic importance he has placed on these things in recent years, he has lost his appreciation of the family life that was once his first priority and source of happiness. That which formerly provided a sense of fulfillment and satisfaction has been lost. To overcome his envy, he has to turn within and reconnect with what is most important to him.

Envy can trap the envious in a vicious circle because those around them unconsciously reinforce their low self-esteem. When we are with those who do not value themselves, we begin to devalue them too. Their self-deprecation has a way of coloring our perception of them. We tend to shy away from envious people whose deficient or inflated self-image makes them poor company. Their unhappiness may make us feel guilty and apologetic because we think that we should not be happy or take pride in our accomplishments. At times, we may also find ourselves uncomfortable around them because we sense that they covet who we are and what we have.

A SPIRITUAL VIEWPOINT

While psychology and literature offer valuable insights into the nature and dynamics of envy, a spiritual point of view offers some hope for the healing of envy. Looked at spiritually, envy represents a refusal to accept the human condition, particularly one's finiteness as a creature. While few of us find self-acceptance easy, the envier finds it impossible. The experience of being limited, of being imperfect and incomplete, is intolerable to the envious, who feel that they have nothing because they do not have everything. Focusing on what others have that they lack, the envious succumb to self-betrayal by preferring the being of others to their own. The spiritual failure of envy lies in the fact that self-rejection is also a rejection of God, who uniquely fashions each of us, right down to the number of hairs on our heads. As theologian Johannes Metz states in *Poverty of Spirit*, "self-acceptance is the basis of the Christian creed. Assent to God starts with [our] own sincere assent to [ourselves], just as sinful flight from God starts with [our] flight from [ourselves]." Ann and Barry Ulanov identify Satan as the archetypal envier because he could not accept his rightful place in the order of creation. That he was not God was intolerable to him, so he turned against God, creating a kingdom of his own wherein he could reign. Making the same point, Milton, in *Paradise Lost*, de-

clares that envious rebellion entered the world through Satan: "The infernal serpent; he it was, whose guile, / Stirr'd up with envy and revenge, deceived / The mother of mankind."

Another sin associated with envy is the sin of sloth, or laziness. "Envy, which springs from an emptiness of being," state the Ulanovs, makes us "lonely, weak and slothful about own gifts." In rejecting the being God has given them, enviers neglect the responsibility of developing their own gifts. Anyone who has spent years in developing a talent or honing a skill knows the discipline involved. To cultivate seriously our gifts and talents in preparation for a career that matches our potential requires hard work.

TRANSFORMATION OF ENVY

While it is important to analyze the psychological roots of envy, the healing of envy requires that we see its spiritual dimensions. At its core, envy harms our relationship to God as well as our relationship to ourselves and others. As a radical refusal to accept ourselves as we are, envy is sinful. Satan is the archetypal envier because he could not accept himself. Dissatisfied with his state, he allowed his envy to sever his relationship with God. Defying his creaturehood and striving for divine status created an attitude problem that he was unwilling to face and change.

The healing of envy requires a fundamental shift in attitude. First, envy must be seen for what it is—a sinful and spiritually destructive reality that calls for genuine conversion. Second, freedom from envy can come only when we recognize that as Christians we are meant to be always in longing until that day when God becomes our all in the heavenly Jerusalem, where there will be no more tears and mourning. Christian spirituality invites us to see the poverty that we experience as creatures not as a negative void to be lamented but as a rich vacancy for God, who alone can satisfy our being. Third, concrete efforts must be made to examine the conditions that lead to envy. Only an awareness of how envy plays itself out in our personal life can bring about the capacity to escape its deleterious effects. For some of us what is needed is merely a redirection of our gaze to highlight the giftedness and goodness that we actually possess. Since envy is admiration gone sour, the solution to envy may be as simple as reawakening our capacity for wonder and appreciation. For others, however, whose envy is deep-seated and rooted in severe childhood deprivation, the help of

a therapist may be required. Both the wallflower and the businessman mentioned earlier may eventually find themselves in this position. Like the woman in Luke's gospel who is in search of a lost coin, they must have the determination to search actively within for what they have lost.

Envy can be a catalyst for transformation. When the needs and desires that it conceals are acknowledged, envy can point us in the direction of the good that we long for. Learning to detect in the swirl of envious feelings the precise need that longs for satisfaction is a critical step in discovering the grace hidden in the experience. Clear recognition of what it is that we need can direct our efforts in positive and constructive action. Envy is not something to be ashamed of, but rather a valuable messenger that should be heeded. Shame leads to denial, and denial obscures the message. When we can see our envy as a longing for wholeness, we can respond to ourselves with compassion and love. Forgiving our envy opens us to seeing the goodness that is ours. Thus the transformation of envy begins. Grace comes to us when we begin to appreciate the good that is already ours, even if what we possess does not include every possible good in human life. When we can do this we come alive to the fact that God has indeed been gracious to us. As our experience of the good expands, so will our sense of gratitude, and envy will start to shrink. Then, with the psalmist, we can pray: "It was you who created my inmost self, and put me together in my mother's womb; for all these mysteries I thank you: for the wonder of myself, for the wonder of your works" (Psalm 139:13-14).

RECOMMENDED READING

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