

JEALOUSY - THE TRUE GREEN-EYED MONSTER

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From recent media attention on envy, I've been made aware, once again, of a collective misunderstanding.

I raced to Grimms' text of Snow White, surely the archetypal 'green' story, and found the Queen to be suffering 'von der Neid.' I wasn't surprised to discover this translated as both envy and jealousy, though I can't solely blame the German language nor the translators for the confusion. Thanks also to religious instructors who forbid not only deeds and words as sinful but also thoughts and feelings, the true green-eyed monster is alive and kicking under the protective umbrella of its lesser-of-two-evils cousin.

So, what's the difference – oh yes, it matters alright. As it matters that feelings and thoughts are forbidden; the stronger the suppression, the more likely the acting out (see below.)

I've been practising as a Therapeutic Counsellor in Exeter for five years. Recently I've facilitated Introduction to Counselling Skills courses for WEA, and I'm currently setting up group workshops to explore addictive/harming behaviours. I'm coming to the end of five and a half years' resingledom, getting married in September. I'm also privileged to have become a member of the West Country Association of Writers. I welcome comment by email: janebarclay@onetel.com

Snow White's story is about jealousy: the passionate hatred of one for another, transmuted into the urge to devour, destroy, kill. This is the only way the Jealous one knows, in a bid to exact revenge for betrayal, by theft of what's rightfully his/hers.

Show me a single older sibling who hasn't hated the new arrival, and/or parents - till the feeling's squashed by scared adult/s who don't know the difference between feeling and doing. Watch how the child acts out, redirecting that urge onto the family pet, best friend, valuable vase etc.

This is usually derogatively named attention-seeking, which of course it is. The targets are all marginally safer than killing either baby or Mum/Dad, which would leave the child alone and terrified. Next comes guilt, from the inevitable punishment, not so much for breaking or hitting something or someone but for feeling hatey. At best the adults will insist that s/he really loves the sweet baby, which is extremely confusing: 'Hmm, well, if Mum says so, it must be so....'

The child naturally hates the object that threatens. What's really needed is reassurance that there's plenty of love to go round. Sadly, for many parents this isn't the case. Brought up on depleted rations themselves, they do indeed have a limit; and often have the extra child as a way of trying to get more.

By adulthood, the notion of having not been loved enough is usually too awful to bear, getting translated into beauty, wealth, material goodies. Life becomes an endeavour to compensate. Sound familiar?

The Wicked Queen/Stepmother isn't even after love - the result of bad behaviour being punished by withdrawal of love, is mistrust in others to supply what's needed most. Far safer to be the procurer of the next-best thing: power - in this case represented by beauty. The Queen has no concept that there's enough admiration for both herself and Snow White. One simply has to go; of course, it's the 'baddie' (the Jealous one) who eventually tumbles to her death.

Consider the possibility of envy being a constructive 'I want,' different from its destructive cousin. To be like someone else is subtly different from the impossible task of being someone else. Instead of putting down Mrs X for her perfect figure and pacey lifestyle - acting out disowned jealousy - how about working out how to be more like her? Envy can inspire not just admiration but emulation too. Ideally, the small child will experience enough love and attention enough of the time

to risk separating from its parents and develop a sense of individuality; s/he'll feel loved enough, despite a sibling's arrival, despite Mum and Dad's relationship with each other. S/he'll be supported through natural jealousy and withstand the urge to destroy -

Bullying can start at a scarily young age. (Anyone who's even momentarily overpowered another will know the victory's hollow, and short-lived; sole survivor is a lonely place, and invariably calls for another 'fix' in a vain attempt to fill the hole.)

So, what if s/he hasn't been? It's hard work, swimming against mistrust in enough, against disbelief in one's power to become oneself. But, IT CAN BE DONE. It's a matter of try and see, step by tiny step, letting love in until it starts to be experienced as enough - in current time. The early losses can never be compensated for, the mistakes and pain all come from trying. The glow that comes from a good experience, 'Hey, I made that choice,' is how we relearn to trust ourselves. The tragedy of failing to differentiate between feelings and actions (intentional ignorance?) is the sense of badness taken in from being punished for feeling what are judged 'bad' feelings.

If only folk were tolerant of feeling jealousy and encouraging of acting on envy. If only adults would recognise and therefore stop dumping their own unresolved issues by sentencing Envy to the 'bad' drawer and forbidding Jealousy to exist at all.
