

Along the track

Comparisons

On a long drive recently I listened to talk back radio. For over an hour there was a very spirited discussion which tried to answer the question; Do we have to make comparisons to be happy?

Comparing isn't always a bad thing. If observing and analysing situations or other people can help us learn, to understand others or gain insight and if that helps us count our blessings and see the world from a more positive frame of mind, then it's a good thing. But so often we compare the wrong things. We live in a world that is great at measuring and comparing the externals of life, fame and achievements, clothes, cars, houses, our pay, looks and beauty, or the number of Twitter followers. There's much more to life than that. Often our own gifts and strong points are not obvious at first sight. Sometimes our gifts and talents lie deep and unnoticed and the same applies to others. Simply comparing externals is rarely a good measure.

If we are going to get into comparisons, the starting points should be recognising what is good in our own life, looking out for what is here to celebrate. Sometimes the going gets tough and life throws us some hard times – all the more reason to look for the things to celebrate rather than comparing with others who appear to be getting it easy. A better question is not how am I going in relation to others but rather: "Is my life meaningful? Where do I find joy and satisfaction?"

When we compare ourselves with others we tend to compare our worst with their best. People 'appear' to be better off than us and seemingly live the perfect life, but that's rarely the case. They just lead different lives. That should not lead us to be self-satisfied or smug. Sometimes we may even feel threatened by those who appear to be more gifted than ourselves. But we can all improve, none of us has 'arrived', none of us has reached perfection. Appearances can also be very deceptive.

If comparing our experiences, problems, or blessings against those of others causes us to be negative, critical, dissatisfied, or self-righteous, it is certainly not helpful. For some reason, social media aids such feelings and often outbursts of rage; if we're not happy, everyone should hear about it!

We all feel let down at times, cheated or treated unfairly, ignored, overlooked, not given what we think we deserve. We can come to resent others and their good fortune. But that is that more a reflection of our inability to praise others, to be happy for their good fortune. Some writers suggest that admiration is a lost virtue. We can no longer find it within ourselves to genuinely praise others, or admire them or their

achievements. They suggest that we are too often soured by resentment, cynicism, judgment, and jealousy.

St Paul wrote an extraordinary letter to the people of Ephesus. In some ways it 'distills' Christianity to its essence. He wrote:

'Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.'
(Ephesians 4:31,32).

Bitterness is a very corrosive influence. It eats at us, it has the capacity to destroy relationships, to devalue what we are doing. Kindness and compassion help us override jealousy and anger, frustration and hurt. They help us look beyond our own petty hurts and jealousy. When we feel ourselves becoming resentful and cynical, it is good to take time to compliment others, to show genuine admiration for who they are, for what they are doing. No matter who we are, we all need praise, we all need a compliment occasionally if we are to grow and mature. We all grow by giving and receiving a compliment occasionally. Creating a culture where people are valued, admired, congratulated and applauded can make an enormous difference.

Everyone wants to be happy, it's in our DNA. Yet many wrongly believe that happiness comes from having enough money, fame, personal comfort, worldly success, or even just good luck. It doesn't. That may cushion the ride, but it doesn't bring happiness. That comes from how we see the world and what we see as our purpose in life. It comes from how we interact with others. The kindness and compassion Paul wrote about recognises the value, the giftedness and dignity of others (and our own) and how we respond to that. It recognises that our highest calling in life is to love, which means we want the best for others.

So, when was the last time you gave someone a heartfelt compliment?

Regards
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