

It's Alright for you

I do it regularly and it always ends badly. I look at others' success and think it must be easy for them, because it's difficult for me.

This week it was my neighbour's manicured garden. Not a weed in sight or a pot out of place, AND she has two bouncy boy-children. Meanwhile, over the fence, my garden is looking a bit sad and the lawn has waited three weeks for attention. I think that at my age I should have this garden maintenance stuff totally sorted and as it clearly is not, I must be a hopeless case. So much for being house proud, so much for working from home... blah, blah, blah and off I go again. Of course, giving myself a hard time doesn't necessarily get the grass cut or the leaves swept, rather it just makes me feel guilt-ridden and miserable.

Comparisons are like that. They take my situation and yours and make one of us better or worse. Sneaky things, they pop up in almost every corner of life – from how much we weigh, to how much we earn. From how brilliant the grandchildren are, to where we go on holiday. While the need to benchmark ourselves on others seems ingrained, it is one of the most useless and destructive thinking habits we can have. Driven by the fear of not being good enough and powered by marketing machines, comparisons tell me that my life would be so much better if only I could be like someone else.

Last week, a friend told me that she's done with worrying about what everyone else thinks. She's decided to paint the fence bright yellow and put garden gnomes on the front lawn. She has always been on the visible side, so that came as no surprise, but the irony that amused us both was the rest of the conversation, where she commented that she always keeps her trees trimmed, while the neighbour's trees are disgraceful – tall and raggedy. Comparisons anyone?

I can pretty much guarantee that someone reading this will insist that we need to have standards to aspire to. That others set examples which encourage us to reach further. Perhaps even that I should take inspiration from my own neighbour, and get out in the garden right now to make sure I'm not letting the neighbourhood down. Certainly we all need role models to encourage us in the right direction. The best do so unconsciously, without drawing attention to the gap between

you and them. It is their living example that makes us want to follow them, not the words they use to describe or promote their achievements. And while they are often positive, some of my best life lessons have come from anti-heroes. Those whose example reminded me of the direction I definitely didn't want to take. A poor-me colleague, who always blamed everyone else when things went wrong. A neighbour, who derided the Chinese family down the street. We all have shadow sides though and sometimes I wonder what others learn not to do, from me! Aspirations make me aware of the gap between where I am and where I want to be, not where I think I should be.

It's that 'should' that causes the problems, when the gap between us becomes a way of making one of us wrong. If one garden is tidy and the other isn't, then it must be laziness. Rather than inspiring to action, it turns us into both judge and jury, with the result that we close up, shut down and retire hurt. Most unhelpful.

So are comparisons ever useful? Certainly – and mostly when used on ourselves. Is my garden in better shape than it was this time last year? Am I doing better today than I did yesterday? If the answer is 'yes', then three cheers and a pat on the back. I'm doing fine.

If the answer is 'no', then what can I do about it? What step, no matter how small, can I take to make things better? What can I do for myself? Who can I ask to help? There's almost always something, because it's not over until you are over. The psychologist Daniel Gilbert, wrote that 'Human beings are works in progress that mistakenly think they're finished.' There's always more to be done, and always the possibility for change.

So I'm not a lazy gardener, just aware of my preferred style. I love fallen camellia petals and golden leaves. As a fan of lush lawns and soft edges, autumn is my joy. The beautiful garden I took on last December is slowly evolving to me, and that's just how I like it. Room for improvement? Sure, but on my terms, and without looking over the fence.

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