

Constructive use of jealousy

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My husband and I were walking, enjoying our new city, with our friend, Ryan Kemp-Pappan. He was helping us move into our home in Chattanooga and we were discussing all manner of things when the subject of jealousy came up. My husband and I began to list the people, organizations and events that made us jealous.

“Wait,” Ryan asked. “You guys still get jealous?”

Of course, I get jealous. I try not to, but I hope that I’ve also begun to recognize and constructively use the emotion. Here are some dos and don’ts that I practice to make sure that the little green-eyed monster doesn’t take over my life.

I do try to recognize it in myself. Jealousy usually comes up when I’m talking about someone else’s work and I say something critical about it. For the most part, unless a person’s art is offensive, I’m not one who likes to pick apart a ministry, a book, or an article. I believe that writing a book is like running a marathon—it takes a lot of hard work and there’s usually not a lot of pay-off for the person at the end of it. So men and women ought to be celebrated for accomplishing it, not criticized and berated.

But when I start to get critical of someone’s work or position, it’s often because I’m jealous of the person. Then I stop and confess, “Actually, I’m only saying this because I’m jealous.”

I feel much more spiritual when I don’t admit that I’m jealous. It’s not an attractive emotion and I’m sure that my shadow side will disappear if I never shine any light on my pettiness. But, somehow it doesn’t work that way.

I do try to make jealousy into a game. Sometimes jealousy provides motivation. Especially when I’m sitting in front of my computer, I’m alone, and I need a little more incentive than another cup of coffee. There are a couple of people with whom I secretly compete. They are people whom I’ve never met, but I keep up with their

careers and use the competition like I would as a runner trying to get a better time.

I don't compete against other women. Even though it is easier to compare myself to other women, I work hard against any sort of jealousy of other women, because sisters need to stick together. If you are a woman, a person of color, LGBTQ, disabled, or part of some sort of minority group, then we have enough working against us in the world. We need to connect with one another and promote one another.

I do try to recognize it in others. Every once in a while, friends will say dismissive things about me, like, "You know you only got that ____ because you're a woman." It stings. But then I recognize it for what it is and I can move on.

I do try to use jealousy to identify my calling. About eight years ago, I opened up a shiny conference brochure and felt something that I never had before: I was angry at the faces smiling back at me. I didn't know those people, I liked and respected their work, and I didn't know why they were suddenly annoying me. It took me a long time before I realized that I was being called into writing and speaking for the larger church. I think it would have been a much less frustrating and confusing path if I would have learned to recognize my jealousies and my calling from the beginning.

Now, I hope I'm a bit more in tune with those nasty feelings--trying to recognize them, avoid them, or funnel them into something more constructive.