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MYTHICAL ME

FINDING FREEDOM FROM CONSTANT COMPARISON



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CHAPTER ONE

THE MYTHICAL COMPOSITE WOMAN

*How much time he gains who does not look to see
what his neighbor says or does or thinks, but only at
what he does himself, to make it just and holy.*

MARCUS AURELIUS



Now consider that January day as one of the most important of my life, but I didn't know it at the time.

The day started with an ordinary carpool.

My husband and I had been married fifteen years. With our three sons, we had just moved to a beautiful new neighborhood. Several friends from church lived around the block from us, and they kindly invited me to ride with them to a community Bible study at a church across town. Grateful to be included, I hopped into my friend's van.

That evening I told my husband about the Bible study and about that ride across town. Sprinkled through my description of the study of Genesis were comments like these:

“Belinda is so kind and friendly. I wish I had her sense of humor.”

“I wish I could be more like Ann. She's incredibly organized.”

“Boy, it would be nice to be like Shanna—she's so poised and beautiful! I wish I had her posture and carriage.”

Finally, my husband interrupted me. “Richella, you compare yourself with everyone you meet. You pick out the best attributes of each person and measure how you stack up against them.”

His words rankled, even as I realized that he might be right.

The time spent with my three friends had given me the opportunity to observe some of their strengths, which I quickly turned into the chance to see that I was weaker in those areas. That carpool had become an occasion for me to see that I wasn’t as friendly, as organized, as poised, or as pretty as I wished.

But what my husband said next really stung.

“You’ve created for yourself a mythical composite woman, and you think she is the standard you should meet. But that woman doesn’t exist.”

A mythical composite woman? What on earth was he talking about?

When I pressed him for more information, he explained that what I’d done that day with my three friends was typical for me. He told me I was constantly observing people around me, always noticing their outstanding attributes.

“Well, of course, I notice their outstanding attributes. I have a great appreciation for people,” I defended myself.

“But then you pick out each one’s greatest traits and assume that you should share those. You want this person’s kindness, that person’s poise, this one’s intelligence, that one’s sensitivity. And you do it with body parts too: you admire this woman’s face, that woman’s waistline, that woman’s legs. You determine each person’s strength and measure yourself against that strength, so you always come up short.

“You’re comparing yourself to this composite woman, and I’m telling you that she doesn’t exist. You’re holding yourself to an impossible standard. No one could be as perfect as your mythical composite woman.”

I hated to admit it, but he was right.

Having lived with me for fifteen years, Jack had picked up on a pattern I had never discerned. An avid observer of people, I always noticed the best in the folks around me—handsome features, shining talents, strengths of character. I didn't see that I compared myself to the greatest attributes of those around me.

That day started with a carpool; it ended with a lot of soul-searching.

THE ROAD TO CONSTANT COMPARISON

My inclination to compare myself to others didn't develop overnight. Although I had never noticed it in myself, my husband had observed my tendency toward comparison long before he pointed it out to me. Only after I realized the truth of his words did I admit that I had a habit of comparison, but I had no clue what to do about it.

Besides, I had a busy life to live: work to do, three small children to care for. I continued to struggle along, hyperaware of my friends' strengths but mostly unaware of my own. Although I lived a full and active life, doubt and discontent plagued me. Friends and mentors would encourage me to relax, not to worry so much, to have more confidence. One teacher even inscribed this note in the front of a gift Bible: "God has great plans for you. May God bless you as you develop and grow in your walk with him. Meanwhile, don't be so hard on yourself."

But being hard on myself seemed like the only logical response to all the ways I could see that I didn't measure up. I began to wonder if perhaps others should be harder on themselves. (No doubt I was a joy to live and work with.)

Eventually, in a time of deep personal and relational difficulty, I realized I needed professional help. I sought the services of a therapist who helped me to investigate my actions and motives more thoroughly than I could do alone.

Not surprisingly, the roots of my issue lay in my childhood. While that may sound trite, it was true in my case. I was born with Klippel-Trenaunay Syndrome, an extremely rare disorder that affects several

body systems. Klippel-Trenaunay Syndrome is characterized by a red birthmark called a port-wine stain, overgrowth of soft tissues and bones, and various malformations of veins. The condition is so rare that my parents could never learn exactly what was wrong with me.¹ They took me to specialists who ran all kinds of tests, but no one could diagnose my condition. Physicians now know that this syndrome is caused by a mutation in the PIK3CA gene, but when I was born, next to nothing was known about it. Only after I was an adult, when I had a child of my own, did I learn the name of the disorder.

All I knew was that I was deformed. And I knew that all too well.

In my own house, in the neighborhood, at school, on the playground, in the Sunday school room, at the pool, at Scout meetings—wherever I went, I compared the way I looked with the way everyone else looked. No one else looked like me.

I had the largest birthmark in the world, or so it seemed to me. My right foot, leg, hip, and trunk were covered in a massive port-wine stain. To make things worse, that same part of my body was also enlarged and misshapen. My right thigh was two and a half inches larger in circumference than my left thigh.

Every now and then, my friends and I would have a conversation about birthmarks. One had a streak of hair that was a different color. One had a wispy discoloration on her neck. Another had a small brown spot on her arm. But nobody else had a birthmark like mine.

When I wore long pants, no one could see my birthmark. But when I wore a dress, shorts, or a swimsuit, I felt like a freak. Just when I'd tell myself that my birthmark didn't really matter, another person would stare, point, laugh, or cringe at the sight of it.

I learned the hard way that people can be cruel, even if they don't mean to be. After all the pointing and whispering I endured as a child, I grew accustomed to stares and questions. I learned to handle people's curiosity without too much chagrin. A look of concern followed by "Did you get burned?" or "Do you have poison ivy?" I could usually answer with a smile. But even after I grew up, some remarks cut deep.

For several years I worked in an office where women nearly always wore dresses and skirts. A coworker asked if my birthmark bothered me. Caught off guard by the question, I gave a half-hearted “I guess I’m used to it” reply. “Why don’t you just wear tights?” my colleague queried. I was certain the suggestion was intended to be kind, so I shrugged and smiled, secretly wishing to crawl under my desk.

I particularly remember one summer day when I was about thirty years old. I was grocery shopping, pushing my little ones in a cart, when a woman stopped me, pointed to my birthmark, and shrieked, “What is wrong with your leg?!” You could have heard her voice two aisles over. Outwardly, I kept my cool and politely answered her question. Inwardly I wanted to run over her with my shopping cart.

For many years I didn’t realize just how much I had internalized my insecurity about my appearance. But there’s no denying that when I admired the appearance of other women, their legs were the first thing I noticed. No matter how my mythical composite woman might look on any given day, she always—always—had perfect legs. Never once did she have a birthmark.

THE COMPARISON TRAP

My birthmark was just the beginning of the story. Early on, dealing with my birthmark set my course of comparing myself to others, always finding fault with myself, wishing that I could change the parts of myself I deemed less than worthy. What began with my birthmark became a pattern of behavior that would follow me for many years.

Never able to accept myself, I continually compared myself with those around me. I found no satisfaction, let alone contentment or joy, in the state of my body, mind, or spirit. Try as I might, I could never live up to my own ever-changing standards.

In the years since that conversation with my husband, I’ve learned over and over just how astute his observation was and how miserable I had made myself. For a while I thought that I must be the only

person beleaguered by this kind of tendency; surely no one else would subject herself to such torment.

As time passed, though, I began to notice that others seemed to struggle with comparison as well.

A young associate of mine was succeeding in graduate school, but she often felt that she should be more organized like her best friend, a strong test-taker like her classmate, a good writer like the star student of her class.

A dear friend with little children worried that she should be authoritative like her sister, as creative as her first-grader's teacher, and more spontaneous and fun-loving like her neighbor.

A colleague in ministry fretted that he should be a better scholar like his seminary professors, as sympathetic a listener as his counselor, and that his congregation should be as large as the church down the street.

We all labored under the assumption that we were less than acceptable, that we ought to be like other people, that we should be different and better. Our judgments could be illogical, even irrational. We might compare our amateur efforts against another's professional expertise, our beginner's status against someone else's advanced standing. We weighed ourselves in the balance and always found ourselves wanting.

In observing myself and my friends, I realized this way of living was utterly exhausting. Trying to live up to so many different standards wasn't helping us to meet those standards; it was wearing us out.

Longingly, I would read these words of Jesus: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:28-30).

Always comparing myself to others was a heavy burden. Jesus was offering a light burden. I realized that I would have to free myself of the load of continually comparing myself to others if I hoped to take

up the light burden Jesus promised. But how could I put down this burden? I'd had so much practice in the life of comparison. It was the only way I knew.

I searched for guidance on how to combat the problem of constant comparison. I found that well-meaning teachers sometimes addressed the topic, but their advice usually ran along these lines:

- “You shouldn’t compare yourself to others, for you never know the truth about anyone other than yourself.”
- “You can’t compare yourself to anyone else, for you are one of a kind.”
- “Be yourself; everyone else is already taken.”
- “You are God’s creation, and God made only one of you.”
- “People are like snowflakes; no two are exactly alike. So you can’t compare yourself with anyone else!”

All this advice might be true and wise, I know. Sometimes it encouraged me; other times it just irritated me.

The worst part was that it didn’t help.

I wanted to stop comparing myself to others, but I couldn’t break free from admiring one person’s achievements, someone else’s personality, another’s skills, yet another’s relationships. And don’t get me started on how I looked at other people’s appearances.

Despite my best efforts, I couldn’t heed the advice I heard. I was unable to live up to even one of those catchy slogans. I was haunted by the admirable attributes of other people, certain that I could never match their worthiness. No matter how well-intentioned the teaching or pithy the advice, I found that most of it didn’t help me change my thoughts, feelings, or actions. I might listen to a speech or read an article and feel inspired, but in no time I’d slip right back into my old habit of constant comparison.

It was as if I were stuck in a steel trap of comparison. The more I struggled to free myself from it, the tighter the jaws of the trap clenched.

My husband had tried to help me stop comparing myself with others. My therapist had helped me to understand the roots of my tendency to compare. I'd read articles and listened to speeches and made resolutions. I knew intellectually I should stop comparing myself to others, but try as I might, I couldn't break the habit. I couldn't shed the burden.

So I began to look more deeply than ever at the issue of comparison, hoping that if I could understand it, I could dismantle and unload it. I studied, prayed, and asked questions, wondering why I—and many of my friends—were so prone to comparing.

I realized that some kinds of comparisons are quite useful. We use them every day in one form or another and find them helpful. Why, then, does comparing ourselves to others sometimes become life crushing and soul draining? And if it's so destructive, how can we stop it?

I was determined to find out.

MYTH MAKING

With a level of honesty that was unfamiliar and often uncomfortable, I realized that my tendency to compare myself to other people had distorted my vision. I wasn't seeing clearly, and as a result I had developed a number of distorted beliefs. In continually comparing myself to others, I had trained myself to believe things that weren't true.

I thought about myself a great deal, particularly about my shortcomings, and I firmly believed many *myths about myself*. Among other things, I believed that I had to be perfect, that there was no way I could rest, and that I had to make it on my own.

My tendency to constant comparison also resulted in problems with what I understood about the Lord. I had developed *myths about God*. I believed God demanded perfection, that he was disappointed with me when I failed, and that he expected me to try to fix myself.

And comparing myself to the folks around me had led to deep-seated beliefs about other people and my relationships to them—I

believed *myths about others*. Although I admired and esteemed many people, it never occurred to me that they might value me as well, that they could find me attractive, or that they would want to be in relationship with me.

Well-schooled in all those myths, I never realized the damage they wreaked in my heart and soul. Relentlessly comparing myself to other people and striving to be a composite of all their best characteristics exacted a toll on each friendship I held and damaged my relationships with my family, my friends, and God.

My habit of comparing myself to others was so pervasive that it affected nearly everything in my life. I felt as though I were lost in a maze, unable to see a way of escape. Still, I clung desperately to the hope that there could be a way out. Surely, I believed, there must be a path to freedom, if only I could find it.

As it turns out, the path to freedom isn't a myth. There is a way out.

That path isn't always easy to follow. Sometimes I make great strides forward; sometimes I slip backward. Mostly I inch along. But I've come a long way since that morning carpool. And though my problem was deeper than I'd imagined, finding the way out has offered freedom I'd never imagined.

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

At the end of each chapter, you'll find a few questions for personal reflection or group discussion as well as an exercise to take you deeper into the chapter themes and spiritual practice.

1. When have you felt that you were stuck in a comparison trap?
2. Have you tried to escape your own comparison trap? How?
3. Have you ever held yourself to a mythical composite ideal of who or how you should be? If so, describe how that mythical composite person looks and acts.
4. How often do thoughts of comparison enter your mind? For one week, keep a journal or take a few minutes for nightly

review of the day, paying special attention to when and where these thoughts came to you. Don't berate yourself for these moments. Just take a deep breath and offer them to God. If you are meeting with a group, talk about what you are noticing.

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