

SECTION 5

DEFENDING AGAINST DIMINISHMENT

23. HIDING OUT

Remember that wild pig you spooked while you were with that early group? Your value to the group was pretty shaky at that time. If the other members had known that you had made a big mistake that affected their survival, they might have pushed you out of the group to die. So, to retain your membership, you concealed your mistake. Got away with it, too!

The only difference today is that most people have forgotten the reason why they conceal their errors and shortcomings. Very few are aware it originated out of fear of losing social approval.

The shortcomings and errors that people try to conceal are the same ones that would have caused you to lose your membership in an early group. The failings members of a modern group try to conceal are still inability, incompetence, and incompatibility. They also hide factors that lead to these failings, such as illness, old age, and bad temper.

Everyone has some shortcomings and makes some mistakes. Most modern shortcomings and mistakes do no serious harm either to the survival of the group or to its members. Some mistakes have only a short-term effect or are easily corrected with no permanent damage. Moreover, the penalties for all but the most serious errors are relatively light. Unless a crime is involved, you can reverse most errors by admitting responsibility and making amends for any harm you caused. Nevertheless, to avoid losing social approval, most people continue the ancient practice of covering up even the most trivial failing.

Concealing an error doesn't undo it. Instead, even a minor concealed error might fester into a series of increasingly serious problems. Moreover, the person who conceals an error lives in constant fear that it will be discovered. In almost all cases, later discovery of your error is worse than admitting it immediately. The Watergate scandal that caused President Nixon to resign is a good example of converting a relatively minor error into a disaster. So, it's usually best to accept the embarrassment and penalty for the error promptly and put the incident behind you.

Nevertheless, most people prefer to lose some social approval by concealing their shortcomings and errors instead of risking the more serious loss that would result if they were known. Their behavior is summed up in the book title, "If you really knew me, you wouldn't like me."

To conceal the shortcomings that they feel would, if known, reduce their level of social approval, most people adopt one or more of the following techniques:

Reduce the chances of exposure - Some people chose a career that keeps their contact with others to a minimum, as in a monastery. Not only is talking discouraged, but even nonverbal communication is reduced because everyone has the same kind of bedroom, clothing, and recreation. The less you communicate, the less likely you are to

reveal your shortcomings. Other choices include some kinds of research, isolated weather stations, and studying old books.

Develop an unpleasant personality – You can keep people from discovering your shortcomings by being unpleasant to them. This might seem to be going to extremes, but a lot of people do it. They use obscenities, fly into rages, or smell bad to keep others from getting too close. Or they quote Aristotle or Milton to keep you away. Less sophisticated types use shotguns to drive away anyone they think is spying on them. Their actions are different, but their objective is the same; you're not going to find out their failings.

Be too busy - This category does not include those people who are truly busy doing useful things for themselves or for their community. It refers to those who keep themselves so busy with trivia that they have no time to interact with others who might discover their failings. They might even gain a bit of social approval by being so busy that they have no time for social activities.

Under- and over-transmit - The entire language of some people seems to consist of only “Yep” and “Nope.” They never say one word they don't have to. The less they say, the less chance you have to learn of their failings.

Surprisingly, the opposite technique is equally effective and much more common. Some people never stop talking because they are afraid you'll bring up something that will expose their failings. They seldom complete a sentence because you might start to say something during the pause. Others tell jokes, relate war stories, or chatter about trivia. Still another variation is steering the conversation to sex to stop others from bringing up a topic they find threatening.

Reduce reception - Some people can see that having certain kinds of information will require them to do something that might reduce their social acceptance. So they do everything they can to avoid receiving that information. Through their behavior, supervisors let their subordinates know that they don't want unpleasant problems brought to their attention. If a supervisor doesn't learn that his assistant is harassing the young woman in the mailroom, he won't have to do something about it and so might do the wrong thing.

A young couple find an excuse to avoid attending a social event where the other people might think less of them because of their clothes or manners.

A common practice is to walk out of situations where your failings might be disclosed, whether it's a family spat or a United Nations debate. Another technique is automatically rejecting any information that might require you to reexamine your beliefs. This is typical of some scientists, clerics, and professors, but also occurs in anyone who has convictions instead of opinions.

A favorite way to avoid reception is to kill the messenger who brings the bad news. This doesn't help with the first messenger, but it will prevent others from bringing you bad news after that. A modern example is giving whistle-blowers a hard time.

Pretending to know something - Have you ever asked someone how to get somewhere and been sent off in the wrong direction? It's a common practice of people who are afraid they will be considered incompetent if they don't know something. The person who refuses to ask directions when he's lost is doing the same thing.

These are all desperate defenses against discovery of real or imaginary shortcomings or errors. Any attempt to force these people to disclose whatever they are hiding is seen as a threat to their survival, so they will either withdraw further or attack you.

With the possible exception of those who are good at entertaining others with jokes or trivia, all these defenses lose some social approval. Yet these people would rather suffer this loss than let others find out about whatever they are hiding, which they fear will lead to a still greater loss. It's like pleading guilty to a misdemeanor to avoid being charged with a felony. The irony is that most of them aren't guilty of anything.

The more you think about this behavior, the stranger it seems to you. You understand and agree that concealment was necessary in the old days. There was always the possibility of death for failing to meet the membership requirements. Any discomfort due to concealing your mistakes was better than that. But times have changed. Sure, there is still some loss of social approval for personal shortcomings and errors. But the loss is seldom serious enough to be worth the misery of hiding out all your life to conceal them.

What happens when a person's failings can't be concealed will be examined in the next chapter.

24. DEFENDING YOURSELF

Would you mind being the bad guy in this chapter? It will make the material easier to present and to be understood.

Defending Against Your Failings - You've made a serious mistake of some kind. In the old days, it would have caused you to be expelled from the group. Even today it will certainly lose some social approval. It might cost your job as well as your position as a director of the country club. You must decide how you're going to defend yourself against this diminishment.

Your first thought is to conceal your mistake, but you realize immediately that this won't work. Too many people already know something about it. As you desperately cast about for a defense, your experiences in your early group come to mind. What would you have done then? The same defenses will probably work now. So you settle down to think it through. As your best defense will depend on how much others know about your failing, you decide to get this information first. You also prepare a list of defenses that you'll use, based on how strong the case against you is.

Denial - The information others have about your mistake might be spotty, just bits and pieces, rumors, and speculation. That's not too serious. You'll be able to deny that whatever you are accused of. Of course I didn't do that! I'm surprised you could even dream it was me.

But you will also want to make sure that the sparks don't continue to smolder or they might become a fire later. So you try to put the sparks out with, "How do these rumors get started anyway? Everybody knows I wouldn't do anything like that!" Then you'll raise the risk for anyone who might want to pursue the accusation, with "People who accuse an innocent person should be punished!"

Discredit the accusers - If the evidence is too strong to be eliminated by denial, you might be able to cut off the accusation by silencing your principal accusers. You'll start by attacking the validity of the evidence, as with, "He's an old man who can't see very well. It's just a case of mistaken identity."

You might also be able to attack the motive of your accusers, as with "Everybody knows he's been trying to hurt me since I beat him in the school board election," or "He's just saying that because he wants my job."

If this doesn't work, you'll attack the accuser's character, his morals, or his past errors.

Twist it - If you find that you can't deny the accusation or discredit the accuser, you'll try to make your failing more acceptable. You'll try to make it look like an innocent mistake that the other guy took the wrong way. "It didn't happen that way at all.

I was trying on suits when I got to talking with my friend and walked out without thinking about it. I didn't mean to leave without paying."

Minimize its significance - If you can't make the accusation go away, you'll try to show that your failing really isn't important. "What's the big deal all about? Everybody cheats on expense accounts. I just happened to get caught."

Blame others for it - If the situation can't be denied, explained, or minimized, you'll suffer a major loss in your social approval. If it comes to this, you decide in desperation that you'll blame someone else for your failing. The woman tempted you into the affair. Or you wouldn't have gotten involved with her if your wife had been nicer to you. If you're a television preacher, you can claim the devil made you do it.

Plead for sympathy - You might be able to reduce the severity of your penalty by softening up your judges. You couldn't help yourself. You grew up in a bad neighborhood. You were spoiled by your parents or abused by a relative. Only the innocent should be allowed to throw the stones.

If everything else fails, you'll plead for mercy. "Can't you give me a break? I don't want my wife and kids to know I did something like that!"

Punishing yourself - Even though they're not accused of anything, some people feel that their shortcomings or errors are so serious that, if known, they would be kicked out of the group. So instead of defending themselves, they become the judge and jury for their imagined failings. They pronounce themselves guilty and sentence themselves to make exceptional contributions to the group for the rest of their lives. Then they serve their sentence without ever feeling that their extra contributions are sufficient to make up for their secret failings. We know them as compulsive workers, do-gooders and perfectionists.

Evaluating Your Defenses - Being smart, you tried to select the best defense for each set of circumstances. Most people don't do this. They use the same defense whenever they are attacked, regardless of the seriousness of the accusation or the chances of conviction. Raymond always makes a long speech about how other people let him down. Jill always apologizes, even if you don't know what she's apologizing for. Tony always fights his way out of his problems. Sometimes these defenses are used even when the person isn't being attacked. Makes others wonder what they're hiding.

Each type of defense has a different effect on your social approval. You always lose some social approval when you deny the accusation or try to discredit the accuser. Even if you're successful, most people still suspect that where there's smoke, there's fire. Moreover, when these defenses fail, the results are much worse than admitting the charges. It can turn a minor setback into a disaster. If President Clinton had admitted his involvement with Paula Jones, there never would have been an investigation into the Monica Lewinski debacle.

Pleading for sympathy, trying to minimize the accusation, or trying to explain it away all lose social approval because they are, in effect, admissions of guilt.

Attacking the accuser works if you really are innocent of the charges. If you're guilty, however, you'll lose still more social approval for causing trouble.

The worst possible defense is blaming someone else for your failings. That person doesn't want to be diminished and so will fight back. Besides, the rest of the group doesn't like to see anyone diminished by being blamed unfairly. So you lose social approval both for the original failing and for unjustly diminishing someone else.

The best you can do when you are attacked is to come out even by quietly and calmly disproving the charges. You do even better if you avoid the mistake, or having made it, recognize that, in most cases at least, there is no need to conceal it.

Defending Against Unfavorable Comparisons - You also need to defend yourself against another common form of diminishment, that of the unfavorable comparison. Since you cannot avoid being dragged into and losing some involuntary comparisons, you can try to destroy their validity in one of the following ways:

"It wasn't me" - Although this defense might seem most unlikely to succeed, it's quite common. The comparison was made when you were less competent than you are now, so it's no longer true. Or you just weren't yourself that day; you'd do better now.

Your competitor had an advantage - The other fellow was bigger or older or younger. Or the other kid's father helped him with his homework.

The judge was unfair - The selection committee is prejudiced against your ethnic group. Your supervisor had it in for you; the company never fired anyone just for a poor attendance record.

The criteria weren't valid - You'd have had that promotion if your boss knew what really counted.

Other factors worked against you - The high altitude affected your running more than it did the other contestants.

These protests are usually nothing more than futile attempts to escape from losing a comparison. Nevertheless, they do show some of the ways in which a comparison might be unfair. Many, perhaps most, comparisons are incorrect, invalid, or don't measure what they are supposed to measure. Nevertheless, your desperate attempt to invalidate them shows how much effect they have on your social approval and therefore on your happiness.

The next chapter will describe how to avoid some common failings so that you won't need to defend them.

25. SORRY, NO OFFENSE MEANT

Why all the fuss about saying “Please,” watching your table manners, and addressing some people as “Sir” or “Madam”? Why can’t you say what you think when some old fuddy-duddy is sounding off? Why do you have to make up a good excuse when you don’t want to accept an invitation to some dull party?

You read in your local paper that a teenager killed another boy for showing disrespect. It seems the victim said something nasty about the killer’s girlfriend. But why such a violent reaction to words that didn’t harm anyone physically?

This seemingly senseless murder makes you think back on your experience in your group of our ancestors. Your strongest memory from that time is the constant quarrels among the members. Somebody was always fighting with somebody else about something or other. You remember when Kaa said that Tah was a poor hunter because he couldn’t throw his spear far enough. Although these were only words, the effect was dramatic. Tah’s social approval was dropping fast among the members. If only one member had to be abandoned at that moment, everyone, including Tah, knew it would be he. Since his chances of surviving had become poor anyway, Tah physically attacked Kaa to make him “take it back,” that is, to undo his diminishment. Not only were both men badly hurt, but the group suffered because it lost their services as hunters for weeks.

So words aren’t just harmless sounds. When they diminish someone’s social approval, they become “insults.” Insults are words or actions that diminish someone by implying that he is not worthy of membership in the group. As expulsion from an ancient group greatly reduced that person’s chances of survival, an insult caused, and still causes, an intense emotional response, sometimes resulting in a physical attack on the insulter.

Although diminishment is no longer equivalent to death, this drama has continued into recent times. In some groups, insults have to be avenged one way or another, by fair means or foul, so that the person’s status in the hierarchy is restored. At one time the person insulted could demand an opportunity to reverse his diminishment through a duel with sabers or pistols. Attempts to reverse insults still result in fistfights in every schoolyard. And sometimes an insult still results in death. Machiavelli said, “Never insult anyone. It doesn’t hurt them but makes them more determined to hurt you.”

The early groups of our ancestors could not afford to lose their members through these fights over diminishment. So they gradually forced their members to behave in ways that reduced the chances of diminishing each other. This behavior is now known as “being polite.”

So politeness is not some useless set of rules set up by a committee with nothing better to do. It’s the way you behave with other people in order to avoid diminishing them intentionally or unintentionally. Different subgroups have somewhat different rules for polite behavior, but they all have the same objective of not diminishing other people. However, people seldom do anything that is strictly for the benefit of others. The real

reason you're careful not to diminish others is so that you won't provoke them into attacking you.

Some of the areas where politeness is particularly important are:

Greeting others - An exchange of greetings is much more than a formality. It's the way you show that you accept the other person as a member of your group. The more warmly you are greeted, the stronger your feeling of being accepted. As this increases your feeling of security, it makes you feel good. At the other extreme, you have an intense feeling of discomfort when someone greets you coolly, and you might panic if your greeting is ignored.

Acknowledging your place in the hierarchy - You behave toward superiors in ways that show that you recognize and accept their higher status in the hierarchy. You greet them before they greet you. You stand while they sit. Of course you expect the same signs of their lower status from your subordinates. Nevertheless, you are careful to show the proper respect for them, especially in the presence of others.

Rejection - Everyone suffers rejection now and then. And "suffer" is the right word for it. It's painful because every rejection carries with it a residue of your fear of expulsion from the group to die. There's not much that politeness can do to help with big rejections, such as being divorced by a mate or being fired from a job. Nevertheless, many smaller rejections that can be made less painful by politeness.

When you can't avoid rejecting another person for some reason, you want to do it in the way that diminishes that person the least. It's important to tell him why you did it. No matter how hurtful your reason might be, he'll imagine an even more hurtful one. It's also important to limit the rejection to a specific item so that he doesn't feel rejected completely as a person. In most social cases, your explanation should show that the rejection is not personal:

"Our house isn't big enough to hold all the neighbors we'd like to invite."

"I can't get a baby-sitter for that evening."

Excluding someone from an activity is also a form of rejection. You can reduce its negative effect by generalizing it:

"Sorry, we aren't hiring anyone right now."

"We're inviting only the immediate family to the reception."

Refusing an invitation is still another form of rejection. Not showing up after acceptance is even worse. However, thinking up an unusual factor beyond your control might take the sting out of it:

A prior commitment of equal or higher priority ("I always spend Tuesday nights with my mother")

Natural events ("It was snowing so hard I couldn't get out.")

Force majeure ("My parents won't let stay out that late.")

If this is the true reason for the rejection, so much the better. Otherwise, "a white lie" can be used to soften rejection. "White lies" are used to benefit the other person, in contrast with "damn lies," whose purpose is to benefit the transmitter. Offering a sincere compliment often helps offset a rejection. An invitation that includes the receiver in some group activity is even better.

Criticism - Even when you mean to be constructive, any criticism of another person exposes his failing and so threatens his social security. Your objective is to get him to change his behavior with the least damage to his ego. Explain why the change is necessary and how it will help him. Keep your message as impersonal as possible, especially by controlling the nonverbal items that might offend him. It's also important to deliver the message in private to avoid disclosing his shortcoming or error to others.

Point out that your dissatisfaction applies only to a specific behavior and is not a general criticism of him or her as a person. Where appropriate, you can offset part of the diminishment with a compliment, but be sure to keep the compliment separate from the criticism. Otherwise they will form a mixed message, which can be more harmful than criticism.

Disagreement - It's best to allow most things you don't agree with to pass without comment. The world won't lose much if it doesn't have your opinion on every subject. Nevertheless, there are times when you feel you must disagree. Try to disagree with the specific statement or action without diminishing the transmitter. If possible, add a compliment or some other sign of acceptance to offset the disagreement, such as "I know you're usually right on these things, Harry, but I think we should..."

You have a little more elbowroom in disagreements among friends, but be careful even here. It helps to offer your thought as another way of looking at the subject and not as a contradiction of what others think. You can also clearly label your disagreement as a personal opinion, as by "Well, what I think about it is..."

Too often disagreements end up with someone feeling diminished and therefore hostile. Every now and then you might find that someone else's opinion seems more likely to be correct than the one you offered. To avoid being diminished, some people in this situation go to ridiculous lengths to defend the indefensible, even to verbally attacking the other person. Yet this loss in social approval is easily avoided by graciously acknowledging that the other person is right. Politeness also is required when the situation is reversed. When you are right, let the diminished person back down with dignity instead of rubbing in your "victory."

Contradiction - Except for commentators on talk shows and a few other boors, people seldom contradict each other directly. This type of diminishment is so powerful that it is resented even when it is only implied, and sometimes even when it is not intended.

Why did Gus get so mad at you last night? You were just expressing your ideas about the increase in crime. You learn later that just before you arrived he had expressed some strong opinions that were different from yours. If others accept your ideas as right, they will reject his as wrong. So, without intending to, you contradicted him.

After a few scars, most people conclude that they can never know when they might be contradicting others, so they avoid strong statements on any subject. Others answer a question with a question as another way to avoid an unintended contradiction.

Unfavorable comparisons - You tell Joe that you think he is a better violinist than Henry. That is quite a compliment as Henry is the second violinist in the local orchestra and Joe is in the fifth chair. Joe is quite proud of your compliment and tells his friends about it. One of them passes it on to Henry. Unless it is well known that you have no ear for music, Henry will feel diminished. You have made an unfavorable comparison that will threaten his status if certain people hear about it.

To make the situation even worse, suppose the person who reports your comment to Henry garbles it by omitting the word "violinist." What Henry hears is that you think Joe is a better person than he is. This diminishes Henry even more. Because of the possibility of misinterpretation, most polite people avoid making personal comparisons in public.

Open-ended comparisons - Some messages don't appear to be comparisons because they don't contain all the items being compared. In fact, the transmitter might not intend a comparison. Nevertheless, the receiver's brain adds the missing items and so converts the message into an unfavorable comparison.

Your wife's feelings are hurt because you think she has poor taste in clothes. Since it is unlikely you told her that, where did she get this idea? Well, when she introduced you to one of her friends, you complimented the woman on her dress. No point in trying to explain that you just happen to like that style and color. Much simpler to get your wife a little gift instead.

The effect is similar with a criticism instead of a compliment. When you say, "Hoboken is a dirty city," you mean to compare its cleanliness with that of other cities. Nevertheless, someone might interpret it as "Since I live in Hoboken, he thinks I'm dirty" and so might feel diminished.

Negative association - Why should a joke about some imaginary member of an ethnic group, social class, or a given occupation offend anyone?

Some jokes are not-so-subtle variations of the open-ended comparison. If you have something in common with the central character of the joke, you become associated with him. Now the joke is about you. So when the punch line shows the character to be inferior in intellect, integrity, or anything else, you feel diminished.

Almost everyone feels diminished if you diminish anything associated with him, such as his children, his job, or his possessions. In fact, some people feel diminished when they learn that their favorite athletic team lost a game.

So politeness is simply behavior to avoid diminishing other people. Although the way to handle the situations described so far is rather obvious, there are some tougher ones ahead! Moreover, as will be shown, being polite also has its dark side.

26. FOOLS RUSH IN

The previous chapter showed that polite behavior is much more than a social nicety. It evolved to help you avoid diminishing other people. In addition, you avoid losing social approval for starting trouble. Of course you wouldn't do or say anything that would diminish others intentionally, but most people don't carry signs telling you what offends them. So how can you be sure you're not offending them unintentionally?

As you can never be sure that some action or comment, however trivial, won't hurt someone unintentionally, some people avoid all activities that could conceivably offend anyone in any way. These include:

Sensitive subjects - Some topics offend some people even though no diminishment is involved. There are two things you can do to minimize the chances of touching a person's sore spot. You can avoid all obviously sensitive areas such as religion, politics, money, morals, and values. Also, to avoid causing unnecessary pain, you won't mention death when you talk with elderly people, or the joys of marriage with someone who has just lost a partner. Some people are offended by dirty words and any talk about sex or elimination. Others don't like details about surgery. To be sure you aren't offending people unintentionally, avoid these subjects entirely or use words that are less offensive. Or, when you see that the conversation is making someone uncomfortable, you can change the subject.

Disclosing someone's secrets – Have you ever wondered why it's considered impolite to ask an older person's age? What difference does it make? Not much today, but advancing age indicated declining ability to contribute to the survival of an early group. Uncovering a member's advanced age might reduce that person's chances of survival. So it's still impolite to ask a person's age long after the conditions have changed.

Candidates for high political office have had their careers destroyed by disclosure of their mental problems, lack of integrity, or sexual misconduct. Disclosing juicy tidbits of information about members of your social circle can hurt their reputations. The person who discloses the secrets of others gains some status over the person diminished, but he usually loses even more social approval for causing trouble.

Just as some animals freeze when they detect a predator, some people freeze when the conversation threatens to uncover their secrets. Others become agitated. The closer the conversation gets to the concealed information, the more threatened they feel. If the conversation does touch a sensitive area, even innocently, it sets off a panic alarm in their brains. They might first try to escape the threat by changing the subject. Sometimes they create a diversion, such as spilling a drink on the rug. If that doesn't work, they might attack the speaker verbally or physically or storm out of the room.

This fear of having their secrets exposed is the reason why most people don't like anyone who is "nosy." They suspect that person is trying to uncover information that will

embarrass them. So, to be on the safe side, polite people don't ask anyone a lot of personal questions.

How you ask questions - Most people feel diminished if they don't know something they think they should know. They feel even worse you expose their failing. So they try to conceal it. An example is asking someone for directions to a nearby location. You can ask the same question in different ways. "Do you happen to know where ABC Street is?" is very different from "Where's ABC Street?" The first question indicates that the receiver isn't expected to know the answer. He gets some approval if he does know it and loses nothing if he doesn't. Failure to answer the second question exposes his ignorance. Chances are he'll tell you where it is even if he doesn't know.

Most people avoid asking questions that show they don't know something they should know. A common example occurs when someone talks about a certain situation as though you should already know what he's referring to. This is usually an innocent oversight but sometimes it's an intentional attempt at diminishment. You can tell this is its purpose if you ask and get "You mean to say you never heard of...?"

Since most people don't like to admit they don't know something, they try to follow the conversation without understanding what's going on. A considerate person will start off the subject with something like, "Do you happen to be familiar with..." If he doesn't, a reasonably brave listener will ask the speaker what he's talking about.

Giving advice or help - What could be more welcome than your giving free advice or help to someone who needs it? So why do most people resent it? Well, suppose you've been struggling with the problem for some time yet someone else solves it instantly? Who would move up in status and who would move down?

To avoid diminishing others, polite people avoid giving advice or help unless the recipient asks for it. However, this shouldn't stop you from offering it, especially if you do it in a way that doesn't make the recipient feel diminished by the offer. You might say that you ran into a similar problem recently. And be sure it's clear that you don't expect that person to accept your advice unless he or she wants to.

Ambiguity - It is difficult to communicate accurately even when you try hard to do it right. Sometimes you don't say exactly what you mean. Sometimes others misinterpret what you say. These are natural errors inherent in the way we communicate. They cause problems because most people think they understand what is being said even when they don't. So some shrewd people use this natural uncertainty in communication to avoid hitting someone's sore spot unintentionally. They are purposely vague or ambiguous. The oracle of Delphi in Greece is the ideal example. It was notorious for making vague predictions that could be interpreted any way you liked.

Some people also use vagueness and ambiguity to attack or manipulate other people. If challenged, it permits them to back off safely, if not gracefully. "When I said 'heavy' I wasn't talking about someone cuddly like you, but people who are really fat!"

Comparisons others make with you

There's one source of diminishing others that you can't avoid. Even though you are minding your own business and trying not to offend anyone, other people will be constantly comparing themselves with you. If they feel superior to you, they will feel good about it, so there's no problem. But if they lose the comparison, they feel diminished. For example, if you mention that you went sailing, they might feel diminished because they don't have the money or the skill to sail.

As with any threat, the person feeling diminished will attack it or flee from it. If they resent your superiority, they will attack you directly or, more likely, they will attack you indirectly by bad-mouthing you to others. Or if they feel that they can never win the comparison, they will avoid you. You can usually, but not always, prevent these responses by treating everyone as an equal, which they will interpret as "He's a nice guy."

Carried to extremes, you pay a heavy price to avoid diminishing others unintentionally. Some people are so afraid to say or do anything that might offend others that they become painfully dull and boring. Others are so concerned with every offense they make unintentionally that they punish themselves for it for days, weeks, and even years.

No doubt you've noticed that you ignore or minimize the errors of people you like, while the same errors by people you don't like are magnified. So, the best way to handle the problem of unintended offenses is to be liked. You can usually avoid the big errors that diminish others intentionally. You can also be polite and vague enough to avoid most of the small ones. Beyond that, if you show that you genuinely accept other people, you'll be sufficiently well liked so that your occasional small errors won't matter.

In the next section we'll examine how the behavior of your ancestors still affects your buying and selling.