



For most people, comparison comes as naturally as drawing a breath. (fizkes/Shutterstock)

## **FAMILY & HOME**

# Apples and Oranges: The Dangers of Comparison

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“Comparisons are odious.”

The earliest known use of that old adage dates from around 1440, when John Lydgate wrote in his “Debate between the horse, goose, and sheep” that “Odyous of olde been comparisonis, and of comparisonis engendyrd is haterede.” The [line](#) “comparisons are odious” also appears in the works of such writers as Shakespeare, Cervantes, and Christopher Marlowe.

Our spelling has undergone some obvious changes in the last 600 years, but does the sentiment behind “Comparisons are odious” remain valid? Do comparisons engender hatred?

Let's take a look.

## Everyday Distinctions

For most of us, comparison comes as naturally as drawing a breath. When we're shopping for paper towels at the grocery store, we compare the price and the overall quality of the various rolls on the shelves. When we go to buy a car, we compare dozens of details before making our purchase.

The "compare and contrast" essay remains a perpetual favorite among teachers and national test agencies. The Advanced Placement English Literature test frequently gives students two poems and asks them to compare and contrast them in such areas as theme, clarity, and structure.

In the last year, three of my children have moved from one house into another. Comparing their new homes to the old seems both natural and harmless to me. Most of us make comparisons in the political realm, socialism versus freedom, libertarianism versus conservatism, and so on. To do so is right and just, and helps determine what sort of government we possess.

On some occasions, even our judgment of others does no harm. For argument's sake, suppose I see two women seated together in the coffee shop I frequent, one a lanky beauty with dark hair, the other blonde, dowdily dressed, and a little overweight. Initially, I judge the first to be more beautiful than the other. When I hear the golden laughter of the blonde woman, however, I think to myself, "Someday she's going to meet a guy who will fall in love with that laugh."

It's when we judge people on a less superficial level that we enter a dark wood.

## Selfies

Let's start with ourselves. When we constantly compare ourselves to others, a friend or a family member, we may find them a model for emulation and self-improvement, but we are just as likely to become critical of our own lives. The man in his late 20s working as a clerk at a drugstore may look at his boyhood friend, now an attorney, and become depressed by his own lack of success. The

quiet teenager who spends an evening as a wallflower at a school dance while her vivacious best friend is the center of attention may believe something is horribly wrong with her compared to her friend.

I have several adult acquaintances, middle-aged and older, who to this day look at schoolmates or close friends who have made a success of their lives, and berate themselves for what they regard as their own diminished stature. They cannot see themselves as I see them, men and women with good hearts who are doing the best they can in a tough world.

Such self-comparisons can run in an opposite direction as well, and become equally damaging. Several times in my younger years, I heard stories of men and women I knew who had betrayed the trust of family or friends in one way or the other, or who had failed to meet some unwritten code. “I would never do that,” I would say to myself and even to others, but then came that day of reckoning when I did hurt some people. “Pride goeth before a fall” is the danger here, and today, older, wiser, and much more beaten about, I try harder to withhold criticizing or judging others in my life.

## **To Each His Own**

When we compare one person to another, we can also reap horrible results. The mother who says to little Johnny, “Why can’t you behave yourself like your sister Sally?” has just sliced her son to the quick. When a commentator tells us President Donald Trump is another Adolph Hitler or Benito Mussolini, he not only engages in a completely bogus metaphor, but he also makes a fool of himself, displaying both a lack of historical knowledge and a lack of proportion. Good parents in particular are aware that each of their children has a completely different makeup from the other siblings. Here is Johnny, rambunctious, loud, and demanding, while Sally enjoys peace and quiet, and tends to be a people pleaser. Their young brother, Steve, has trouble making choices, hangs back a little from kids he doesn’t know, and regards the world with wary, nervous eyes.

Mom and Dad understand their children possess different temperaments, and adjust accordingly to the needs and character of each child.

## **Condemnation**

When I told a friend I was writing about comparisons, she wrote the following to me in an email: “I think it [comparison] applies to judging people. As we are each entirely unique, judging eliminates all but one or two characteristics of a person. When we love a child, we love the whole child, and it’s painful to hear others judge that child—because they can’t see the whole. They are ignorant.”

Most of us are prone to this form of comparison and condemnation, mostly from ignorance. Some people today, for example, negatively compare the present to the past. They look at men such as George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, and condemn them as monsters for owning slaves while ignoring their gifts and accomplishments. Such judges are all too often blind to their own flaws and those of their culture. One example: These critics may savage our ancestors as racists, all the while speaking of concepts like “white privilege” and “white fragility,” which are racist in and of themselves.

To paraphrase my friend who wrote the email, all too often we don’t see the whole person. We are ignorant, and in this case ignorance is not bliss.

## **The Solution**

If we accept those around us, as my friend wrote, as “each entirely unique,” and ourselves in this same way, the urge for comparison and its sometime companion, condemnation, diminishes. If we reserve the judgment that often comes with comparison, we can avoid doing harm to ourselves and to others. Lydgate wrote that comparison engenders hatred. Perhaps. But it’s far more likely that comparison makes those who judge a little smaller in spirit, a little darker in soul.

That prolific author, Anonymous, gave us these words: “The only person you should try to be better than is who you were yesterday.”

That’s the best prescription for healthy comparisons.

*Jeff Minick has four children and a growing platoon of grandchildren. For 20 years, he taught history, literature, and Latin to seminars of homeschooling students in Asheville, N.C., Today, he lives and writes in Front Royal, Va. See [JeffMinick.com](http://JeffMinick.com) to follow his blog.*