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Why Are Other People So Fascinating & So Annoying?

“The difference between stupidity and genius is that genius has its limits.”

—ALBERT EINSTEIN

Nicotine Nirvana: Welcome to the Smoking State

Where have all the smokers gone?

They aren't allowed in restaurants, they've been barred from offices, and many hotels are now smoke-free. As best I can tell, half the smokers in America are trapped in a little glass room at the airport, defiantly puffing away while the rest of us scurry by, trying not to make eye contact.

I'm not a big fan of cigarettes, but I'm actually starting to feel sorry for all the smokers being publicly shunned. Spending your life huddled beside the dumpsters out back with only Joe Camel or the Marlboro Man to keep you company is no way to live.

Quitting is the obvious answer. But anybody who's ever watched a cancer patient hack up half a lung and then try to

bum a drag from the oncology nurse knows it's not always that easy.

Instead of sentencing smokers to a life of stolen tokes in the parking lot, here's a better idea: Let's create an all-smoking state. It would be nicotine nirvana. All smoking, all the time.

Think about it. No more sneaking down to the loading dock to grab a cig before the big meeting. In the smoking state, it's just like the old days. Plunk your ashtray down in the middle of the table, and puff away while a blanket of smoke hangs over the room. No more huddling outside in the rain because your finicky in-laws are allergic. In the smoking state, the whole family lights up right at the kitchen table. Smoking churches would bring the faithful one step closer to heaven. Forget stealing a few quick drags in your car before the service begins. Pews would come equipped with butt cans and lighters. And the minister could keep one lit on the pulpit, gesturing with it during the sermon just like Dean Martin.

The big issue, of course, is deciding which state gets the "honor." At first I thought Virginia—after all, it's the original home of Big Tobacco. But then I realized there's a better solution: Louisiana. Picture it—we could solve two national problems at once: find a home for all the smokers and rebuild the Gulf Coast all in one fell swoop.

Imagine construction workers flocking to the Big Easy. What nicotine-addicted roofer wouldn't want work in the land of smoke and honey? Forget bothersome breaks. If workers could lay tile, roll carpet, and hang sheetrock with a cig dangling from their lower lips, rebuilding could be done in half the time. Steakhouses could ship their outlawed cigarette

machines south. With nicotine dispensers on every corner, bayou residents could pick up a pack of smokes with the morning paper. The tax revenue alone would be astronomical.

Of course, there are a few challenges. For one thing, America's 47 million smokers won't all fit in Louisiana. So, if the idea really takes off, we may have to annex another state. There's also the tricky issue of healthcare. But this could be just the PR opportunity Big Tobacco's been waiting for. They could prove once and for all that smoking really is glamorous by picking up the healthcare costs for the entire state. However, with an entire state puffing away, there will undoubtedly be more deaths. Since much of Louisiana is below sea level, burials could be problematic. But mandatory cremation could ease the smokers' passage to the Big Ashtray in the sky.

Of course, there are children to consider. I feel sorry for smokers, but we can't subject kids to second-hand smoke. So residents would have to agree to a no-child policy. You pick up a birth control patch as you head into the state, and if you change your mind, you get your nicotine patch at the state line on the way out.

You know, now that I think about it, maybe this isn't such a good idea after all.

I mean, Louisiana already has enough problems without having to dispose of thirty-seven tons of cigarette butts. And if we couldn't figure out a way to get its people out of a hurricane, I doubt we'll be able to figure out how to administer a state-wide oxygen tank program either.

So unless another state wants to volunteer to go up in smoke, I guess Joe Camel and the Marlboro Man will have to stay trapped in the little glass hut at the airport forever.

The Six Friends Nobody Needs

Are you the friend everybody loves to hate?

We've all got a friend, or even friends, who just don't get it. No matter what the situation, they always turn it around, so it's about them. The common denominator in bad friend behavior is their self-absorption. But the symptoms manifest themselves differently depending on the folks involved.

I'm always in favor of giving people the benefit of the doubt, but here are six friends none of us need. You can cut them or cope, depending on the severity of their behavior.

1. THE WHINER. There's always a problem, and it's always happening to her. Nobody knows the troubles *she's* seen, but you better believe we're gonna hear about it. If your mother's dying in a hospital bed, but your friend's just had a fight with hers, guess who's going to monopolize the conversation?

Before you write her off, take a deep breath and remember whining is usually a bid for attention from somebody who doesn't know how to get it any other way. Next time she starts, tell her you'd rather hear about what's going right with her life. And if she doesn't have an answer, direct her to this great, new website: FindATherapist.com.

2. THE LEECH. He invites you over for "a few beers," and when you get there, you find yourself refinishing his deck. Or she asks you what you're doing tomorrow and when you say, "Nothing," she says, "Great, I need somebody to watch my kids." If they're not borrowing your best blouse or your power tools, they're asking you to feed their dog. They can't (or won't) handle their own lives, so they parcel off portions of it to everyone else.

The answer: Say "no" early and often. They'll either quit

asking so much, or they'll drop you, and you'll know they prefer having a servant over having a friend.

3. THE YAKKER. Thank God for caller ID. These people missed their calling as a carnival barker. Is she a friend or a walking monologue looking for a place to land? You could put down the phone for an hour, and she wouldn't miss a beat.

You can try giving her a muzzle (and if any of my pals are reading, for the record, I think I would look good in pink). But the most effective strategy is to imitate her behavior. Since Yakkers often assume that talking over people is a natural conversation style, they may actually be wondering why you've waited so long to jump in.

4. THE BUSY BEE. She's the PTA president, party organizer, and domestic diva—and you are nothing more than a mere blip on her overscheduled radar screen. You may think she's too busy for you, but the person she's really too busy for is herself.

Most overachievers got the message early on that they're the sum of their work, and nobody will like them if they slow down. You might want to remind these people what friendship really means. Imagine the look on their Type-A faces when you say, "I find your innermost thoughts fascinating, but your massive to-do list bores me to tears."

5. THE ADVISER. This one offers a steady stream of unsolicited feedback, just like the mother-in-law from hell. Whether they're trying to prove how smart they are or start their own counseling business, this friend has the answer for everything.

Lots of nodding and murmurs of "I'll think about it," are an easy out. But if he or she is really getting under your skin,

say, “I’m so glad I have you to tell me what to do. My life would be a mess if you weren’t trying to run it.” Smile while you’re saying it, and they might not hit you.

6. THE BRAGGER. The message: Been there, done that, *and done it way better than you.* When she’s not talking about her children, her house, or her husband, she’s describing her banking career or her fabulous tennis game. Male Braggers often are tolerated more than women, but I find them equally annoying. They don’t understand the difference between friendship and competition.

All they really want is kudos from you, so just let them have it. Fawn on about all their accomplishments, and when you’re ready for them to shut up, tell them how you just love having an awful backhand because it helps all those insecure people feel better. And thank heaven for Salvation Army or your kids would be running around naked.

Life is too short to have—or to be—a bad friend. If you found yourself on the list, straighten up and fly right. And if this list reminds you of anybody you know, dump away.

Your Trash Talk is Our Wicked Pleasure

“If you can’t say anything nice about somebody, come sit by me.”

When Olympia Dukakis uttered this wicked line in *Steel Magnolias*, she spoke for everyone who’s ever indulged in the secretive thrill of dishing.

Who doesn’t enjoy hearing a little gossip?

For some reason it’s delightfully wicked to hear trash talk about somebody else. And the more sordid the details, the faster it will get repeated. A neighbor’s nasty divorce might make juicy fodder for the Labor Day cookout, and if an affair

was involved, people will still be talking about it on New Year's Eve.

Companies struggle to communicate their corporate goals, but if someone overhears a screaming match between two VPs, it will be repeated verbatim at every meeting for years to come. The full text of the fight probably will show up on e-mail faster than you can click "send/receive all." And while I may not be able to get anybody to return my calls when I'm looking for church volunteers, if I left a message saying, "You are not going to believe what I just found out about the minister and his wife," my phone would start ringing off the hook.

We might not want to inflict emotional drama on others, but we sure want to hear about it when it happens.

The word gossip comes from the Old English *godsibb*, meaning *god sibling*, which referred to the four godparents who were present at the baptism of a child.

However, I suspect that discussing a child's spiritual development wasn't nearly as captivating to the pub crowd as chatting about how much grog the out-of-town relatives were chugging before the ceremony even began.

People have been talking trash about each other ever since the neighbors passed time during the big rainstorm by making fun of that goofy guy Noah stockpiling lumber down by the lake.

Whether it's the court jesters whispering to each other about the gluttonous, skirt-chasing antics of King Henry the VIII or today's adult-conversation-starved moms who stay late after PTA to catch the gossip—everybody wants the inside scoop. We're often so enthralled by the antics of others that we'll purposely pick the slow line at the grocery store just so we'll have time to scan the tabloids.

I used to try to pass myself off as a faux intellectual and spiritual seeker, but when I began asking my hairdresser for fifteen minutes more under the dryer just so I can find out how many plastic surgeries Cher has had, I knew the jig was up. I was just as addicted to the juicy morsels as everybody else. Now, after years of secretly pimping *People* magazine at the salon, I've come clean, and my subscription hits my mailbox every Friday afternoon. Can I really be expected to work when there's vital information about Brad, Jen, and Angelina sitting on my desk?

I'm not alone in my reading habits; four of the top ten U.S. magazines (by revenue) are tabloids: *People*, *National Enquirer*, *Star Magazine*, and *US Weekly*. My neighbor says she likes to read about celebrity gossip so she can feel informed. I often try to rationalize my own listening to personal gossip with the excuse that if I know what's going on with people, I will be able to offer better support. We can justify our actions all we like, but the moment when we get the down-and-dirty is nothing but wicked pleasure. It makes us feel both superior and in-the-know.

Gossip appeals to our inner voyeurs. And when it's really juicy, it provides a welcome diversion from the mundane matters of our own existence. But if suddenly we all started leading wildly exciting, emotionally fulfilling lives, would the *National Enquirer* go down the tubes? I doubt it. We are wired to want to know other people's business. Judging the actions of others is often how we establish our own moral compasses. And let's be honest here—going around repeating only nice stuff is kind of boring. Maybe if we all felt loved and adored for who we are, we could turn a deaf ear when somebody broadcasts the nasty news about somebody else.

But until then, perhaps we can just not take pleasure in it. If you want to dish the dirt in a nice way, I think I can make some space on the sofa—right beside me.

What's Wrong with These People?

“Can you believe she gets away with acting like that?”

“I guess Mr. Perfect thinks the rules don't apply to him.”

“Who died and made her Queen of Sheba?”

We all know people who push our buttons. They don't operate by the same rules as we do, and their behavior drives us nuts. There's the self-centered brother-in-law who ignores his family and spends his weekends at the golf course or vegged out on the couch. The stuck up co-worker who brazenly barges into the boss's office demanding a raise, while the rest of us slave away in silence. Or the drama queen sister-in-law who not only rewrites the past and gets away with it, but always manages to ensnare the entire family in her movie of the week.

What's even more annoying than their irresponsible bossy, stuck-up, flighty, overly emotional, rigid, repressed, judgmental, blankety-blank ways is the fact that nobody ever calls them on the carpet for their bad behavior. So week-after-week, month-after-month, year-after-year, we watch them get away with it.

A friend of mine was lamenting how her loopy sister-in-law continues to wreak havoc on the entire family by forcing them to constantly dance around her needs and emotions. Whether it be meals, vacations, or holidays, the sister-in-law's drama was always center stage. But as I commiserated with her all-too-familiar scenario, I also sensed an undertone of the green-eyed monster at play.

“Are you jealous?” I asked.

“Jealous?” she replied, aghast. “You’ve got to be kidding me. Why would I ever be jealous of her? I’d never act like that.”

“But doesn’t it seem unfair that she gets away with it, and everybody likes her anyway?”

Bingo. Score one for the amateur shrink.

My friend’s jaw dropped, and her eyes flew open wide as she exclaimed: “Oh my God, I *am* jealous. It’s not fair; it seems like she’s cheating, and everybody keeps validating her behavior.”

In the race to win the love and respect of others, we’ve all got our own script of how we think people should act. Whether it’s silently sweating through years of thankless work, accomplishing more than the neighbor’s kids, always deferring to everybody else’s needs, or expressing our feelings freely—we’re convinced that there’s a single template for being loved and adored. It’s usually a combination of what impressed our parents most, what society reinforces, and, in my case, a little too much TV.

When someone blatantly disregards the very virtues we think of as requirements, it’s maddening. And if others continue to like the offender anyway, it often feels like a slap in the face.

“How can everybody be nice to him or her when I’m over here doing things the right way, and nobody is even noticing?”

And woe to the family members who have the nerve to actually love the evil troublemaker. It’s downright unfathomable that those closest to us can’t see the malefactor for what she or he really is. But unfortunately the rest of the world

didn't get the same memo as we did about how to prove your worth as a human being.

So, while you're fuming that your wimpy sister-in-law never steps up to the plate and embraces your boisterous family's unspoken pact that strong women are supposed to run the show, your husband's genteel brood is probably wondering when that bossy woman he married will start acting like a proper wife and keep her opinions to herself.

Someone else's failure to adhere to our personal standards is irritating, but what often hurts the most is the secret belief that if we acted like that ourselves, we would be shuttled out the back door faster than Grandma could scratch us out of her will.

Jealousy is a natural emotion when it seems like other people don't have to jump through the same hoops as we do in order to be loved, but their differences are only an affront to our virtues if we let them be.

They may be button-pushers, but they're your buttons.