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Dear Colleague:

Anatoly A. Sobchak, the Mayor of Leningrad, says that economic development in the Soviet Union is hampered by jealousy or resentment, and he tells the following story to clarify what he has in mind.

God comes to a lucky Russian peasant one day and offers him any wish in the world. The peasant is excited and starts dreaming his fantasies. "Just remember," God says, "whatever you choose, I will do twice as much for your neighbor as I do for you." The peasant is stumped because he cannot bear to think of his neighbor being so much better off than he is, not matter how well off he becomes. Finally, he gets an idea and he tells God, "Strike out one of my eyes and take out both eyes of my neighbor."

Well, if God had asked me I would put on my Sunday best face and say, "Please, give me generosity," and thus get the best of both worlds. God will have to pat me on the head for requesting virtue rather than material wealth. But, of course, if I am generous my neighbors will be twice as generous, which means that every time I give my neighbor a sack of flour or whatever I'll receive twice the amount in return, and in no time at all I will be the richest man on the block. Moral: sometimes a bit of bourgeois cunning goes further than peasant jealousy.

Jealousy and resentment are perhaps the most destructive of human emotions. Hatred seems more surgical--you destroy your enemy without also destroying yourself in the process. Jealousy and resentment, by contrast, bring down not only the other but also self: they spread destruction and bitterness everywhere, or, what is not much better, the pall of gray over existence. Democracy risks resentment, says Alexis de Tocqueville. "I am as good as you are"--a wonderful affirmation at the levels of politics and metaphysics--can, experientially, degenerate into an inability to admire virtue or excellence in another, which amounts to an inability to enjoy life.

Best wishes,

