

IN DEFENSE OF OURSELVES

If you are in my office, that alone says something about you. First it says that you do not settle for the way things are. If you are not happy about something, you seek out ways to change it. You yearn for something better. In addition, given the demographics of my clients, you also have in some ways made accomplishments in your life. There are a group of words that could be used to describe people like ourselves: ambitious, competitive, achievers, and even controlling and self-centered.

I have chosen these particular words since they have to most people a negative connotation. Oh, he's ambitious, controlling, and competitive. Does not sound like a very kind, warm, caring sort of person, not someone we would want to spend time with. Yet from a list of people who are admired by one and all for their achievements in business, science, politics, or sports, there is probably not a person who is not ambitious, controlling, and competitive. You can not achieve the "good" that life has to offer unless you have these traits. You can not get to a position of achievements that people admire unless you possess most of these traits.

Several aspects of life are a zero-sum game; meaning there is only a certain amount of the "good" available, when it is used up, there is zero left for others. That can mean a house with a spectacular ocean view—there is only so much land offering that view available. The "good" could also mean a relationship with someone who you and most likely others find desirable. There are only so many people like that available. When all the ocean-view land is used up and all the most desirable mates are taken, the pool of availability has been reduced to zero, a "zero-sum game," there is not enough around for everyone to win.

In such a system therefore only a certain number of people will be able to obtain the good and the others will find themselves settling for less. Since more people want the good than can have it, a competition must necessarily occur. So if you are not ambitious or controlling you will have little chance of managing the events and people around you in such a way that you obtain the good. If you are not competitive then the others will zoom past you and have taken up all the good leaving you to look around and wonder what happened. Last but not least, if you are not self-centered you will spend your time helping others obtain the good with nothing left for you.

A harsh way of viewing the world, I guess so. A realistic way of viewing the world, I think so. In the common vernacular the traits, competitive, controlling, ambitious, and self-centered are not used to speak well of someone. Yet to obtain a position in our society in which we can live the lifestyle we want, a lifestyle that is admired and desired by many who paradoxically enough would throw these words out as criticisms, it is necessary that we have these traits.

Now let's not jump onto the bandwagon about money, power, and fame can't buy you happiness and then talk about a loving relationship, respect and admiration of others, and a sense of pride about our character. Life is just not that simple. Was Bill Gates a voracious competitor, winning a kill or be killed battle for dominance of the Personal Computer, you betcha. Is Bill Gates through his charitable giving going to set new standards for largesse and helping the have nots in the world, you betcha. In a zero-sum game you do not achieve wealth, power, and fame unless you do what it takes, with no self-reflective hesitation compromising your actions to win in an intensely competitive dog-eat-dog world.

Life is more complicated than the simple-minded painting of people with a broad brush of positive or negative character traits. Every day we are forced to make both career and relationship decisions that stress our sense of our own character. As children we are taught not to lie, to share, and other laudable traits. Yet here we are about to close the biggest deal we may ever face or cement a relationship with a dream companion and we know what we must say and do to close the deal but can we say it and do it. Does the concept of a “white lie” really exist? Is there a gray area between honesty and deception? Life is not easy, we sometimes find ourselves on the horns of dilemmas we never imagined we would have to face.

In the movie *Hombre*, Paul Newman plays a white man raised by Apaches and is shepherding a group of white travelers in the old West. Some of them speak contemptuously of the Indian’s habit of eating dog meat. Newman’s character says something along the lines of “talk is cheap, just wait until you’re starving.” Sure enough the travelers fall on hard times and avoid starvation by cooking and eating little Muffy.

Of all the tools in this toolbox, this is the one that is the most philosophical, raising questions of moral choices and shades of gray. Perhaps I am searching around for a way to show that we should not prejudge until we have faced the same dilemmas that the ones we judge are trying to resolve. I have often thought that the emotional wringer of life-changing events such as divorce, career or health crisis, the ups and downs of raising children, and the death of loved ones is something that can not be adequately described one person to another. Only by actually living through these experiences can one fully appreciate the true level of gut wrenching emotional agony they can inflict. In a zero-

sum game, those who achieve in one aspect of life or another and live in a house at least partially made of glass should not throw stones at the glass houses of others.