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what's wrong out there?

Negativity is pervasive in our world today, as you will readily see if you go online, turn on your television, pick up a newspaper, or listen to the daily conversations that take place around you. On a personal level, think about your own negative thoughts, feelings, and conversations with others, and the challenges, issues, and conflicts in your life that you worry about.

If you stop and pay attention, much of what we see, say, hear, think about, and witness is focused on “bad stuff.” We love to talk about what’s wrong, to gossip about the faults or apparent misdeeds of others, to obsess about our

own problems, and to complain in general. So before we get into the principles of appreciation that allow us to focus on the good stuff—as a way to create a greater sense of happiness, peace, and fulfillment in our lives and those around us—we have to take an honest look at the insidious nature of negativity.

Appreciating ourselves, acknowledging others, and focusing on what we're grateful for, in and of themselves, are pretty simple. We all know how to do these things to one degree or another. However, although these actions are simple, they are not so easy to do given how much we focus on the most stressful and challenging aspects of our own lives and of life in general.

On both a cultural and personal level we tend to place a disproportionate amount of our attention and energy on what we perceive as bad or wrong. Why do we do this? The answer to this question is complex. We'll look at the first part of the answer here in Chapter One; Chapter Two discusses the second and more personal aspect of this answer.

In this chapter we'll look at some of ways negativity shows up in our lives, our relationships, and the world around us. It's important for us to start here, because as we confront our own negativity in an honest way, we're actually able to deal with it effectively and then move beyond it. Looking at our negativity directly and owning it is the first step in transforming it.

Our Obsession with Our Problems

So many of us are obsessed with the problems, issues, and conflicts in our lives. We often love to talk about the challenges we have at work, in our relationships, with our children, and more. Think about much of what gets talked about when we get together with our family members or good friends. Whether it's health issues, conflicts with others, financial challenges, political issues, or complaints about life, other people, or ourselves—we tend to focus a lot of attention and energy on our difficulties.

Even people who aren't comfortable talking about some of these things out loud will often think about and worry about their problems, issues, and stresses. One of my coaching clients, Sherry, said, "Mike, I hate to talk about my problems—like the things I hate about my boss, the challenges I have with my husband, or the fact that both of my kids are getting in trouble at school these days. However, I can't stop thinking about these issues. I have dreams about them, worry about them, and find that they dominate my life each day."

Thinking about and talking about our problems, issues, and challenges can be very positive and productive for us to do. However, the process is positive only if our thoughts and conversations about our difficulties help us move through the negativity, make positive changes, and let go. Most of the time, however, we simply obsess about our problems, which makes them worse. This obsession leads to more

negativity and problems, which ultimately have a debilitating impact on our lives.

Negativity Toward Others

If you spent an entire day monitoring your thoughts and conversations, how much of what you think and say about other people would be critical?

Although the answer to this question will vary for each of us, sadly much of what we think and say about other people is negative. We tend to focus on what we don't like, what gets on our nerves, or what annoys us about other people. If you walk into a conversation that's already going on about a person who is not present, the conversation will often be one of criticism, judgment, or gossip.

Why is this, and what impact does this negativity have on us, our relationships, and our environments? There are a variety of reasons that this occurs and a myriad of impacts that this interpersonal criticalness has on us. The bottom line is that it's pervasive, and it gets in the way of our ability to express any real appreciation or gratitude for the people around us. Let's look at some of the ways this negativity manifests itself in our daily lives and why appreciation of others can be difficult or challenging for many of us.

Judgments

Have you ever noticed how many judgmental thoughts you have? We have opinions about everyone and everything.

Most of them we don't even have to think about. My brain can be like an automatic judgment machine if I'm not careful: "I don't like that, I don't agree with that, that's stupid, she's weird, he's ugly, what's wrong with him, why does she eat like that, what's he wearing, I hate people who drive like that, she's too pushy, he's too aggressive, that guy needs to lose a few pounds, what happened to her face, why is he so arrogant, calm down," and on and on and on.

These judgmental thoughts come and go all day long for most of us. The problem is not only the thoughts themselves but that we think they are "true." Many of us have a hard time distinguishing between our opinions and the truth. Just because we think something is right or wrong doesn't make it so. I know this is a simple concept, but many of us forget it, and we continue to believe that our opinions are facts.

Given the negative nature of our culture, our obsessive focus on the bad stuff, and the encouragement—direct or indirect—to think about and talk about the things and people we don't like, many of us are stuck in a trap of negative and judgmental thinking all the time. The worst part about it is that we often don't even notice our judgments; we don't realize they're running our life and coloring our experience of everyone and everything. It's like when the air conditioner is on and making lots of noise, but we can't hear it because we've gotten used to it. It's only when it shuts off and gets really quiet that we are able to realize how loud it was in the first place.

Our judgments and opinions have a huge impact on our life, the way we see things, and our relationships. For example, imagine that you have a strongly negative opinion of the president, which many people do, regardless of which president it is. You and your negative, judgmental opinion may sit down to watch the State of the Union address on TV. Given your feelings about the president, what do you think your impression of the speech will be? Most likely, you'll pay attention to all the things you don't like, don't agree with, and think are stupid about the speech, the ideas presented, and the president himself (or someday soon, herself).

Someone else watching the same speech with a more positive opinion of the president will probably have a different experience and come to a very different conclusion. The speech is the same in either case, but our judgments of the person delivering the speech have a huge impact on how we perceive it.

This same phenomenon holds true with our loved ones, friends, family, coworkers, and others. Our opinions and judgments determine how we see them. In other words, we always find what we look for. Sadly, we're often looking for what we don't like.

There's nothing wrong with our having opinions about things and people—we all do and we always will. The problem isn't with our opinions themselves; it's the attitude of righteous judgment that we attach to them—thinking we are Right with a capital “R” about all our assessments. And given that many of us have a tendency to focus our

attention on the things that we don't like about other people, we paint ourselves into a negative corner with our limiting judgments.

Gossip

Many of us love to gossip—talking about someone else in a hushed, secretive tone; repeating bad things we've heard that may or may not be true; and enjoying it, laughing about it, chortling together with other like-minded folks. On a cultural level, we see this all over the place. There are TV shows, magazines, and newspaper articles devoted to gossip. On a personal level, we all know someone (or many people) who love to talk about the “dirt” on everyone else. Let's be honest: some of us know that we are that person.

Gossip really falls into two categories—our negative mental judgments about others spoken out loud, and the retelling of negative stories or rumors about someone else. Either way, we see, hear, and participate in gossip all the time.

When I was fourteen I got my first job as a busboy at the Mexican restaurant up the street from my house in Oakland, California. It was a big deal for me, and I was excited to be making some money for myself. I wanted to buy a car when I turned sixteen, and this job was my ticket. I remember being a bit overwhelmed by the training process—lots of details to learn and things to take care of.

The head busboy, in charge of training me, was a seventeen-year-old guy named Pete. Pete had been there for over a year, was a senior in high school (I was just a freshman

at the time), and seemed to have the whole place figured out. I looked up to him and was glad he was showing me the ropes. On my very first night of training, I followed him around, and he told me all the things I needed to do and learn to be successful in the job—clean off the plates, set up the tables with glasses and silverware, bring chips and water to the new tables, and so on.

On our first break, Pete took me out back and started telling me all kinds of things about the other people who worked in the restaurant—the managers, waiters and waitresses, other busboys and busgirls, cooks, bartenders, hostesses, and even dish washers. Some of these people I'd already met that night, but many of them I had not. He told me who was cool, who was mean, who was weird, who was having sex with whom, who drank too much, who was good at their job, who wasn't, and all kinds of other juicy details. I loved it and really appreciated his giving me all this inside information about everyone else.

I now call this the “off the record” training. This is the part of the training process that we get at almost every job, where someone or a group of people “downloads” all the gossip—all the dirt about our coworkers or teammates and also many of the informant's judgmental opinions.

If you've ever worked for an organization, joined a group of any kind, or started a new job, you know exactly what I'm talking about. When I mention this example in the keynotes and seminars I deliver for organizations, it always gets a huge laugh of recognition. It's a very real and specific example of gossip and how it shows up in groups.

Although gossip may seem harmless, it's ultimately one of the biggest issues that divide groups. I believe that gossip to an organization is like cancer to the body; it slowly eats away at the fabric of the team until the team itself dies.

In families and personal relationships, gossip is equally as harmful. We may all have a “crazy” uncle, or someone who we think talks too much, eats too much, or wears funny clothes at our family functions. However, when we share our negative opinions about our family members to our friends and other family members, we actually make things worse.

Comparison and Competition

Competition is another significant cause of negativity toward others. Whether or not you consider yourself to be very competitive, we live in an extremely competitive society, and since we were little most of us have been taught—directly or indirectly—to compare ourselves to others and compete with our siblings, our friends, our classmates, and our teammates. We learned to believe that if we could run faster, get better grades, jump higher, or play music better, or if we were taller, prettier, stronger, then we'd be able to win, succeed, and be happier for the rest of our lives.

Well, as we all know, this “training” didn't pay off or really hold true. Comparison and competition don't help us be more successful or happy—in many cases, just the opposite is true.

One of the most intense examples of comparison and competition I ever experienced was my very first spring

training with the Kansas City Royals. I signed my pro baseball contract with the Royals in June 1995 at the age of twenty-one. I came to spring training that next March feeling pretty good about myself, confident in my ability, and excited about my first full season of professional baseball. Getting to the spring training facility the morning before our first workout was very exciting for me. In my locker hung an actual Kansas City Royals big league uniform. It was a few years old and was no longer being used by the big leaguers, but it was the real deal. And on the back it said ROBBINS in big, bold letters. I was excited!

We were told to meet on the practice field for a full-group meeting. The group was made up of just pitchers and catchers—we had to report to camp a few days early to get our arms ready and in shape before the rest of the guys got there. All of us pitchers were in white uniforms, and all of the catchers were wearing blue uniform tops with gray pants. It was easy to tell us apart.

As the meeting began and some of the coaches started talking to us, I noticed that my attention moved away from the meeting and on to the group. I was amazed by the large number of players there. I didn't know most of these guys, but many of them looked like "studs" to me. (Stud in baseball jargon is used to describe a really good and talented player.)

My curiosity and competitive nature kicked in, and I decided to count how many pitchers were at that meeting with me. I counted seventy-five. I couldn't believe there

were that many, so I counted again. Yep, seventy-five pitchers, just in minor league camp. And they told us that there were another twenty-five pitchers “across the street” (at major league camp).

I'd been in many competitive baseball environments up to that point in my life and career, but none had been quite like this. This was for real—this was pro baseball, and my dream and future were on the line. As our spring training games started, I noticed that I was rooting against the other pitchers. I didn't do it overtly, but underneath my positive exterior, I would laugh when someone pitched badly, and there was even a part of me that got embarrassingly excited when someone got cut or even hurt. Each time that happened, I knew that there was one less pitcher for me to compete against. It was sick, but true. That environment, coupled with my intense desire to win and succeed, turned me into a comparing, competitive monster.

Many of us are quite proud of our competitiveness and our drive to succeed. We have, unfortunately, confused competition with success. Wanting to succeed, pushing ourselves, and enjoying winning are wonderful things. Wanting to beat others, wishing bad things on our competition, and critically comparing ourselves to other people can be damaging, negative, and hurtful. When we relate to others from this place of comparison and competition, someone has to win and someone has to lose. This naturally sets up a negative dynamic that makes appreciation, acknowledgment, and gratitude difficult, if not impossible.

Lack of Appreciation

Whereas judgments, gossip, comparison, and competition can be overt forms of interpersonal negativity, lack of appreciation is more subtle, but it's just as pervasive and has a huge impact.

The U.S. Department of Labor came out with some statistics a few years ago that cited the top reasons why people in the United States choose to leave their jobs. *The number one reason cited in the survey was lack of appreciation.* Of the people who leave their jobs, 64 percent say they do so because they don't feel appreciated or valued. According to Gallup, 65 percent of people in the United States say that they receive no praise or recognition in the workplace.

On a more personal level, most of the fights, arguments, and disagreements we have with our friends, coworkers, family members, and especially with our significant others come down to one fundamental issue: one or both of us isn't feeling appreciated. Lack of appreciation is the source of most of the problems and issues we face in our relationships, and it is a key aspect of interpersonal negativity.

A client of mine named Susan came to me to work on her relationships with other people, specifically her husband, Jim. She told me that over the past few years she and Jim seemed to be growing apart and that the excitement, passion, and love she'd felt in the early years of her marriage were starting to die out. She was sad, scared, and angry about it, but didn't know what to do.

Susan was a self-admitted “good girl” who avoided confrontation, arguments, or disagreements of any kind. She and Jim didn’t fight, and they weren’t overtly hostile to one another at all. He worked a lot, and when he wasn’t working, he spent time doing projects around the house, taking their kids to activities, and coaching soccer. Susan said that even though she wasn’t very happy with him, Jim was a “good man, husband, and father.”

As we talked further about it, what became clear was that Susan no longer felt adored, appreciated, or cherished by Jim as she had when they first got married. It had actually been many years since she’d felt that way, and it wasn’t until now that she discovered it was the lack of appreciation that was causing her feelings of disconnection from Jim.

When she looked deeper, Susan was also able to see that she had stopped appreciating Jim. Although given her personality she wasn’t overtly critical of him, she acknowledged that she rarely complimented him or expressed her love and appreciation in any demonstrative way anymore. She said that because she hadn’t been feeling close or excited about him and their marriage, she didn’t want to send the wrong message and have him think that things were going well when they clearly weren’t, in her opinion. Through our coaching sessions Susan realized that she had pulled back and was withholding her appreciation.

Susan and Jim are not unique; this is what happens in many relationships. We forget—accidentally or on purpose—to acknowledge and appreciate our significant other, and it

leads to resentment, disconnection, and pain for one or both of us. Whenever my wife, Michelle, gets upset with me, I know that somewhere behind her frustration, anger, or sadness is a feeling of a lack of appreciation.

Think of your relationships, both the ones you consider “good” and especially the ones you consider “bad.” If you look at them closely, you’ll probably see that there’s a lack of appreciation on your part or on the part of the other person. You’re likely to find that the lack of appreciation is the real issue, not whatever specific thing you have been focusing on.

Justifying Our Negativity Toward Others

We have rationalizations for all our judgments and even for our gossip and competition with others. It’s all about them, those other people. If they didn’t do those annoying things, we wouldn’t have to judge them, make them wrong, or talk about them, right?

We’re obsessed with being right at all costs. Have you ever been in an argument with someone, and right in the middle of it realized that the other person was actually right and you were wrong? I know that for me this can be a humbling and humiliating experience. Oftentimes I’ve actually continued to argue even though I knew I was wrong, simply out of pure pride, ego, or spite. I’m sure you can relate to this in one way or another.

Sometimes our justifications for being critical or negative toward others are even more “noble” than arrogant righteousness. I was hired by the owner of a big apartment

building to coach the manager who ran the day-to-day operations of his building. The owner had been getting a lot of negative feedback about this manager, Bradley. Many of his employees and tenants felt that he was too gruff, cold, and critical.

When Bradley and I first met to discuss the situation, he told me, "I'm not here to be nobody's friend. Each person in this building is either someone who gets a paycheck from me or someone who pays me rent. They ain't going to like me no matter what, so why bother wasting my time kissing their butts or being nice to them?"

It was obvious how with that kind of attitude, Bradley was rubbing people the wrong way. He clearly felt justified in his attitude and actions as he told me all about his past employees who had done bad things and the tenants he'd evicted for various dramatic reasons, and all of his justifications made sense to me. However, what Bradley couldn't see was that his lack of appreciation and his overt criticalness were actually contributing to the problems and to the tension that everyone felt in the building. Even though he felt justifiably victimized by his "bad" employees and tenants, Bradley was actually participating in and creating greater negativity through his attitude and expectations.

After a few months of our working together, Bradley began to see that his attitude toward the people around him was contributing to the negative situation in his building. As he was able to alter his approach and perspective toward others, things began to change in a positive way.

Like Bradley, many of us blame other people for our judgments, instead of taking responsibility for our opinions, addressing difficult situations directly, and dealing with people up front when we have an issue or a problem with them. We think people should speak, act, and think the same way we do. When they don't, we feel justified in our self-righteous judgments, gossip, criticism, and negativity toward them.

The Impact of Our Negativity

So how do our obsessions with our problems, judgments, gossip, comparisons, competition, lack of appreciation, and justifications affect our lives? This is an important question for us to ask and to answer honestly in our journey of growth and discovery. The answer to this question varies for each of us.

Suffice it to say, your negativity has a major impact on you to the degree that you engage in these patterns of thought, feeling, and behavior. In other words, the more you do these negative things, the more they affect you, those around you, and your relationships with them.

It's very difficult to have meaningful, loving relationships with people whom we judge, criticize, and gossip about all the time. It is virtually impossible to empower or inspire people if we make them wrong. As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. insightfully said, "We have no morally persuasive power with those who can feel our underlying contempt for them."

It's essential for you to be honest with yourself about your own interpersonal negativity. We all engage in this to some degree or another. When we can bring our negativity toward others into the light, tell the truth about it, and look at the impact it has on us and those around us, then we can start to do something to alter it.

Being honest and truly facing our negativity allows us to deal with it and is the first essential step we must take in moving beyond it. If our negativity stays unconscious or if we continue to feel righteously justified about it, then it becomes dangerous and very damaging. Don't beat yourself up about this, but simply notice it.

Questions to Ponder About Your Negativity

The following questions are intended to make this issue more real and specific for you and your life. Think about them or write down your answers in a journal or on a piece of paper.

1. Which type or types of negativity (obsession with problems, judgments, gossip, comparison, competition, or lack of appreciation) are your "favorites"?
2. What impact does this negativity have on you and your relationships?
3. Which of your negative opinions are you willing to "poke holes" in for the purpose of seeing other and possibly more positive perspectives?

If you're not sure about the answers to any of these questions, I encourage you to ask some of your close friends, your family members, or your significant other. If you ask them to be totally honest with you, they'll probably have very specific and enlightening feedback that will help you see how your own interpersonal negativity affects your life, your relationships, and them in particular.

The Culture of Negativity

In addition to our obsession with our own problems and our negativity toward others, we also must acknowledge the enormous amount of negativity that exists within our culture and its impact on us. Although cultural negativity may seem like it's "out there," our outside world is just a reflection of our inner world, a mirror. Everything going on around us has an impact and has to do with our personal journey. There are many ways cultural negativity manifests itself. Let's take a look at just a few specific examples of the negativity that shows up around us and how the "external" messages we hear and see in our society have a personal impact on us.

Violence and Scandals

The news media—on television, radio, and in print—are dominated by stories of violence, scandal, and negativity. These stories are "sexy." They sell newspapers and magazines, lure us into going online, make us tune in and watch,

and get us talking. In today's world of ever-expanding twenty-four-hour cable news, political talk radio, and Internet bloggers, the competition by the media and the focus on "shock value," controversy, and negativity seem more intense than ever.

Think of some of the top news stories of the past decade or so—the O. J. Simpson murder trial, the Bill Clinton–Monica Lewinsky affair and subsequent impeachment hearing, the 2000 presidential election, the steroid scandal in baseball, the Laci Peterson murder, the Enron scandal, 9/11, Hurricane Katrina, just to name a few. I'm not saying that these stories weren't important to report. However, the degree to which they were covered by the media and the insatiable nature of some people's desire for information about these stories were completely out of proportion to their intrinsic value and importance in our lives.

Here are two fascinating statistics that exemplify the media's increased obsession with negativity and violence. Between 1990 and 1998, the murder rate in the United States decreased by 20 percent. During that same period, the number of stories about murder on network newscasts increased by 600 percent.

When there's a terrible accident, murder, kidnapping, school shooting, violent storm, public argument between celebrities, or other act of violence or scandal, the media consider it to be top news.

There is, of course, a certain amount of genuinely disturbing information that is important to hear about—a war, a downturn in the economy, a storm warning, or other

bad news that we need to know. The overall result of these negative messages, however, is that anyone tuning in or reading various news sources can get the impression that the world is in a perpetual crisis and that everything is terrible everywhere.

Meanwhile, there is all kinds of good stuff going on in the world. Every day, people wake up, go to work, and do their best to be loving, useful, selfless, loyal, and devoted to their loved ones, families, work, friends, and community. But sadly we rarely see anything about this in the media.

The Culture of Fear

Barry Glassner, a sociology professor at USC and the author of the best-selling book *The Culture of Fear*, says that “In the U.S., our fears are so exaggerated and out of control that anxiety is the number-one mental health problem in the country.” He points out that much of what we’re taught to fear in our culture is actually unfounded and not even based on real statistics or research.

Glassner believes that we’re often manipulated by politicians, advocacy groups, marketers, the news media, and others who have specific agendas and are highly skilled at tapping into our primal fears in order to get us to do what they want us to do (vote for them, support their cause, buy their products, or watch their shows).

Whether you fully agree with Glassner’s theory or not, it’s clear that we live in a world filled with messages of fear. Think for a moment about all the things we are encouraged to fear—terrorism, economic uncertainty, violence, illness,

pesticides, global warming, cholesterol, carbohydrates, criminals, anthrax, aging, and drunk drivers—just to name a few. If we actually made a list of all the things we've been told to “watch out for” by our friends, teachers, coworkers, and family members, as well as everything we've read, heard, and seen through the media, it would make our heads spin.

Constant Complaining

Do you know people who love to complain? You may actually know them really well. One of them may be sitting in your chair right now! Many of us get off on complaining.

People will often strike up conversations with total strangers and say something like, “Can you believe this awful weather we're having? When is this annoying rain going to stop?” It is socially acceptable and totally expected that people are going to get together and commiserate with one another about problems, issues, and complaints.

In the business world, complaining is rampant. When I speak to corporate groups about this issue, almost everyone agrees that there's an enormous amount of complaining that goes on within their organization. People complain about their management, fellow employees, workload, benefits, pressure, politics, other departments, clients, the industry, the economy—you name it.

Think for a moment of all the things you and those around you complain about—gas prices, traffic, crime, weather, youth, politicians, media, entertainment, food, parking, other people, and so much more. Have you noticed

that most of what we complain about doesn't actually get any better? Even the act of complaining, which some of us call "venting," rarely makes us feel good; it just contributes to more complaining and more negativity. Ultimately, these complaints lead to the deeper problem of cynicism.

Cynicism

Have you ever been made fun of for being too happy? This has happened to me thousands of times throughout my life. I've always found it to be quite strange. Why would we make fun of other people for being too happy? Isn't happiness what most of us are striving for in life?

I often hear people ask in a cynical tone, "What are you so happy about this morning? What did you put in your coffee?" There seems to be some unwritten rule in our society that you aren't allowed to be too happy, or there must be something wrong with you. There are two quotations that come to mind that speak to this point.

In the hilarious movie *The Princess Bride*, Westley (the hero) says to his love, Princess Buttercup (while he's still hiding behind his disguise as the "Dread Pirate Roberts" and she doesn't yet know his real identity), "Life is pain, Highness; anyone who says otherwise is selling something."

On the great TV show *Cheers*, one of my favorite characters of all time, Norm, has a classic line as he strolls into the bar in one particular episode. He comes in and says his usual, "Afternoon everybody," to which the crowd in the bar replies with its customary, "NORM!" As Norm makes his way to his personal bar stool, Woody asks him, "How's it

going today, Mr. Peterson?" Norm replies, in his classic deadpan way, "Woody, it's a dog-eat-dog world out there, and I'm wearing Milk Bone underwear."

Even though our fictional friend Norm is saying this on a sitcom to get a laugh, sadly his joke reflects an attitude and perspective shared by many in our culture. This speaks to the cynical nature of our collective thinking. Many people actually live their lives as if other people were out to get them.

Cynicism kills ideas, teamwork, possibilities, hope, and definitely appreciation. It damages relationships, breaks up organizations, and leads to conflicts of all kinds. Think about the cynicism that exists around you—at work, at home, and in general. Often we don't even notice it because it has become so commonplace in our culture.

Cynicism is a product of our negative focus and obsession. It's seen as cool, hip, and even sophisticated to be cynical. Open, happy, positive people, groups, and organizations are often seen as naïve dreamers, as unrealistic or "Pollyanna."

Negative Ads

Over the past few decades we've seen a major increase in the use of attack ads in political campaigns. Although many people are outspoken about their dislike of these negative ads, the reality is that the candidates continue to run them because they work—or at least so we're told by the "experts."

If we look at other forms of advertising, we see that it's not only the politicians who use negative ads to defeat the

competition and sell themselves. Fear, pain, and negativity are used all day, every day by Madison Avenue and companies selling a variety of products. We're bombarded with images and messages telling us what's wrong with us, what we should watch out for, and that if we don't buy this particular product we'll be doomed. These ads often denigrate the competition and put down other products that are pretty much the same as the one they are promoting.

If you watch TV for an entire day and flip through a few magazines from time to time, you'll see ads for hair loss products, teeth-whitening solution, weight loss pills, depression medication, exercise machines, makeup, skin care products, and much more. All these ads are aimed directly at our fears and insecurities. And they work. We all have been influenced by these ads, have purchased some of these products (whether or not we needed them), or at least have been left with a negative feeling about ourselves or about life.

The Blame Game

We live in a culture that is full of blame. There are examples of it everywhere. The number of lawsuits continues to rise. People are suing each other left and right. Democrats blame Republicans; Republicans blame Democrats. Environmentalists blame big business; big business blames environmental activists. Workers blame management; management blames workers. Men blame women; women blame men. Children (of all ages) blame their parents, and parents blame their kids. On and on it goes.

A sad example of the blame game occurred in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Katrina was described by many as one of the worst and most devastating natural disasters in the history of our country. Thousands of lives were lost, and damage in the billions of dollars was incurred. For most of us sitting at home watching the events unfold on television, the days that followed the hurricane were scary, sad, and difficult to witness. The people displaced by the hurricane, especially those in New Orleans, were left without food, water, shelter, or much support. Many people in the news media, as well as outspoken advocates, politicians, and community leaders, began immediately calling for support and passionately criticizing the government—local, state, and national—for its lack of response.

By most accounts, the response time was slow, and the relief effort was not well planned or executed. However, as the dust began to settle, it seemed clear that no one was willing to step up and take responsibility for what happened. The mayor blamed the president; the president blamed the mayor and governor; politicians were pointing fingers to other politicians, agencies, and even to the citizens who did not evacuate or follow the prestorm recommendations. All in all, a tragic situation was made worse by the fact that none of the leaders involved were willing to admit any fault or take responsibility for what happened.

Whether we're politicians, corporate executives, celebrities, professional athletes, or just regular people, we're encouraged, trained, and coached (directly or indirectly) in our society to deny, blame, and point fingers. There seems to

be yet another unwritten rule in our culture that says, “Don’t take responsibility unless you get caught or absolutely have to.” This blame game is everywhere and has a big cost.

The more personal reason that the blame game exists is that it’s much easier for us to blame others, society, and the world than it is for us to take responsibility for our own lives and our own happiness.

The Impact of Cultural Negativity

So how does all this cultural negativity affect us? The answer isn’t simple or easy, and it’s different for each of us. We all feel the impact in a variety of unique ways:

- Some of us can’t stand the place we work because it’s so critical and negative.
- Some of us feel overwhelmed, even paralyzed by the violence and tragedy of the world.
- Some of us struggle to overcome what we perceive to be the unfair personal obstacles preventing our happiness and fulfillment.
- Some of us feel trapped by all the negative images, the fear, and the cynicism that we experience on a daily basis.
- Some of us allow all the negativity around us to keep us down and to hold us back from expressing our love to others, our appreciation for ourselves, and our gratitude for life.

At the same time, there are actually some people who don't let all this negativity get to them. Either they've done the internal work necessary to have a genuinely positive outlook on life or they simply choose to be in denial about the bombardment of negativity that exists in our world.

I hope you're getting the picture about how pervasive the attitude of negativity is in our culture. However, I don't share these examples as a way of upsetting you or freaking you out, or to add to all the complaints and blaming that already exist in abundance throughout our culture. I bring this up just to point out that this cultural negativity exists and that we must address and confront these issues effectively if we are going to live a life of appreciation and truly be able to focus on the good stuff. What we see, hear, and engage with on a cultural level—both positive and negative—has a profound impact on us personally.

Questions to Ponder About Cultural Negativity

As we move into Chapter Two and then into the five principles of appreciation, begin paying close attention to all the negative media, the personal blaming, and other dark stuff that you're bombarded with at home and work. Ask yourself how all this negativity affects you personally. The following questions, like the ones earlier in this chapter, are for you to ponder or write answers to, as a way of making

the issue of cultural negativity more real and specific for you and your life:

1. What kind of cultural negativity are you most aware of on a daily basis?
2. How negative are the environments in which you live and work? Rate them on a scale of 1 to 10, 10 being the highest level of negativity.

Home

Work

School

Intimate relationship

Other

3. During what percentage of your day are you engaging in activities and conversations (looking at information on the Internet, watching the news, reading the paper, listening to the radio, complaining with others) that focus on the negative aspects of our culture and society?

As you consider your answers to these questions, you should be able to see clearly how much impact cultural negativity is having on how you view the world, how you see others, and how you relate to yourself personally. Fully understanding the pervasive nature of this cultural negativity is an essential step in being able to move beyond it so that you can truly focus on the good stuff and live a life of appreciation and gratitude.