

Your HEIGHT:

What It Means When You Feel Discomfort Around Someone Much TALLER or smaller Than You

It really isn't another person's height that bugs you when it's very different from yours. It's the way that person's height makes you feel about your own — that's the real issue.

by Ralph Keyes



Other attributes, besides height, make one person superior or inferior to another.

If you've ever wondered how much your life's prospects depend on your height, rest assured you are not alone. Though practically everyone has had such thoughts, they're hard to express openly. Should the relative length of grown bodies really make a difference in the way they interact?

Perhaps it shouldn't, but it does.

People are constantly making assessments of each other based on height alone. ("She's a big woman and can take

care of herself." "Little and fragile." "Big and strong.")

Consciousness of relative size comes out in odd ways, many quite innocent. When a tall man sweeps a small woman off her feet in warm embrace, for example, he may not consider that a statement about who's bigger, but she does (ask any little woman). When a smaller person backs off from a taller person, this could simply mean that the taller person doesn't use deodorant. More likely it means that the shorter party is trying to make eye contact without developing a stiff neck. For the same reason, tall people tend to spend a lot of time seated when they're with smaller companions.

Your daily life is made up of so many such micro height adjustments that you're probably not even aware they're taking place. Yet the reactions of other people to your height and your own reaction to theirs affects almost everything in your life.

Research has shown, for example, that the relative length of bodies can dictate choice of friends: Like heights tend to cluster. When it comes to selecting a marriage partner, height has been found near the top of the list of traits both parties try to match.

Height perception is affected by level of eye contact:

No settings are more conducive to height consciousness than long waiting lines, crowded elevators and milling cocktail parties. In such settings not only are there lots of other bodies with which to compare your own, but such comparison can literally become a pain in the neck. This is due to the level at which your eyes meet others'.

Three very important phrases in the English language remind people regularly of the relationship between height and eye contact. These are:

- look up to,
- look straight in the eye, and
- look down upon.

Obviously such phrases have less to do with physical than with psychological interaction. Who looks up to whom, who



One height is as good as another. Different heights have different merits and deficits.

deals eye to eye, and who gets looked down upon are very important issues in our society. For this reason uneven eye contact is the source of lots of humor, sort of. Nervous jokes are common about "eyeball-to-shirt-button" confrontations between short people and tall ones.

Using level of eye contact as a means to judge height is much more important to grown-ups than to kids. Since circumstances usually prevent your standing back-to-back to compare your size with

another, comparing the angle at which your eyes meet another person's is your only means of doing so.

Among both humans and animals, "gaze behavior" is an important means of sorting out who stands where. Those who are supposed to be above others have historically been given a boost in the form of thrones, platforms or pulpits from which they look down; bowing, curtsying and prostration provide insurance that the looked-down-upon will in fact be looking up.

Gaze level has a lot to do with how women and men relate. The political clout of New York's Bess Myerson, for example, has not been hurt by the regularly noted fact that, being nearly 6 feet tall, she "looks men in the eye."

My wife and I once were fooling around with a pair of glitter platform shoes that had 4-inch heels — about equal to the difference in height between us. Her wearing them, we figured, would put us on equal footing. This sounded like fun. Sitting down, Muriel strapped them on. Then she stood up to look at me — straight in the eye. Do you think that after years of studying height I was prepared for this experience? I was stunned. Mortified. Looking directly at a pair of eyes I'd looked down at for fifteen years was unnerving beyond description.

Height is not the thing that makes people superior or inferior to another.

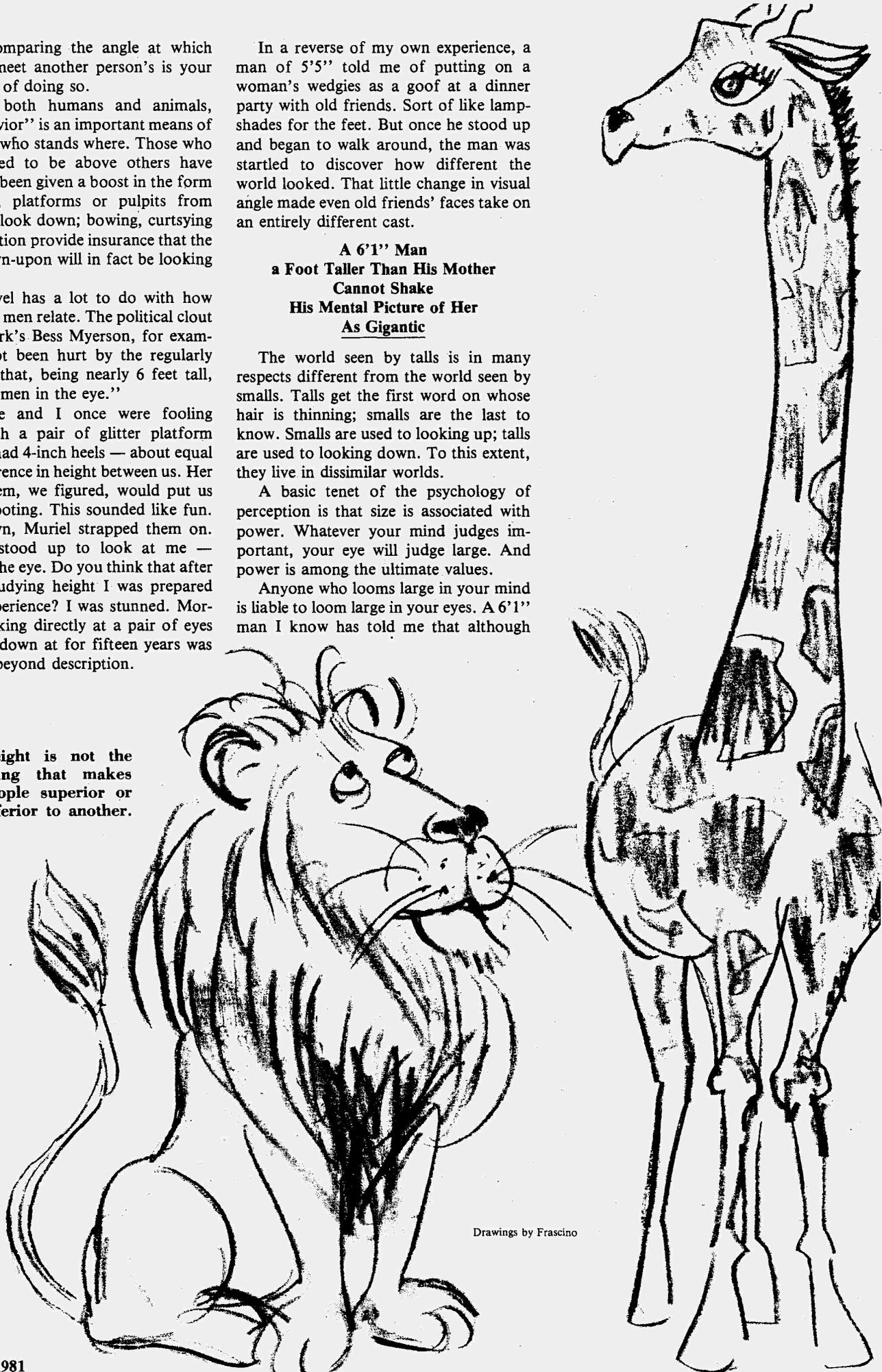
In a reverse of my own experience, a man of 5'5" told me of putting on a woman's wedgies as a goof at a dinner party with old friends. Sort of like lampshades for the feet. But once he stood up and began to walk around, the man was startled to discover how different the world looked. That little change in visual angle made even old friends' faces take on an entirely different cast.

**A 6'1" Man
a Foot Taller Than His Mother
Cannot Shake
His Mental Picture of Her
As Gigantic**

The world seen by tall is in many respects different from the world seen by smalls. Talls get the first word on whose hair is thinning; smalls are the last to know. Smalls are used to looking up; talls are used to looking down. To this extent, they live in dissimilar worlds.

A basic tenet of the psychology of perception is that size is associated with power. Whatever your mind judges important, your eye will judge large. And power is among the ultimate values.

Anyone who looms large in your mind is liable to loom large in your eyes. A 6'1" man I know has told me that although



Drawings by Frascino

he's now nearly a foot taller than his mother, she remains so powerful in his life he cannot shake his mental picture of her as gigantic.

On the other hand, in the opinion of psychologist Sidney Portnoy, a feeling of jeopardy makes smaller people wary of taller people.

For his Temple University Ph.D. thesis, Portnoy brought together people of different heights, grouped them variously by size, and observed how they interacted while performing a given task. His original hypothesis was that smaller men (5'2" to 5'7") would be likely to go along with the opinions of taller men (6'1" to 6'4") when they were grouped together. This did not prove to be the case. Among themselves, the smaller men had little trouble agreeing on the issues presented to them. But when taller men were added to their group, they grew noticeably ill at ease and argumentative. "It appears," Portnoy concluded, "that being with others of similar height boosts one's positive feelings about oneself and, conversely, being with others of a different height causes one to have doubts about oneself . . ."

According to Portnoy, such feelings are understandable. In fact, they're not entirely foreign to him personally. Not long ago he taught a workshop that included a participant who was 6'9" tall. Standing next to this man, looking up more than a foot, the psychologist found himself quite uncomfortable. "I felt threatened with his towering over me," he recalled. Taking note of his reaction, Portnoy made a point of discussing it with the taller man — while both were seated. This eased the problem. But Portnoy told me he still would rather not stand directly next to someone so tall: Psychological reactions aside, it's just too hard on the neck muscles.

**Tall People Realize
That the Commentary
to Which They've Been Sentenced
Comes from Those
With the Least to Say**

Tall bodies for some reason are considered public property — much like the Statue of Liberty — and are treated with about as much sensitivity. It's never been appropriate to comment on nose size. Whistling at women has declined over the years. But not commentary on tall bodies.

"No one ever made an interesting or amusing observation about his height," Thomas Wolfe once wrote of a fictional character in his story "Gulliver," "and ten thousand people had their fling about it."

I've heard this sort of thing repeatedly from tall people. It's not the incessant commentary about their height that is so

annoying; it's the stupefying boredom of it all. Were anyone to say something original or witty or different in any way, the constant chatter thrown their way might at least be entertaining. But soon after reaching their full height, tall people realize to their horror that the lifetime's commentary to which they've been sentenced comes from those with the least to say.

John Kenneth Galbraith calls the ceaseless observations made about his height "passive admissions of inferiority." Intuitively recognizing them as such, he thinks the tall person has no need to respond, for the commentators are already handicapped enough.

Which isn't to say that a big person won't occasionally lose patience and respond with something like: "Just that much nearer heaven!"

**"You Get
a Lot of Attention"**

Just as a tall person's body is public property, so is a short person's psyche.

In his early thirties, Mark Moore is one of the younger associate professors on Harvard's faculty. The day we visited in his book-cluttered office, the curly-haired Dr. Moore had already been pondering what it means psychologically to grow up small. Married to a woman even shorter than his own 5'3", he's the father of two children destined genetically to be short. One of the children had just begun first grade. According to her father this six-year-old girl is intelligent, attractive and mature for her age. Also, she's quite small. Watching his daughter trying to deal with her classmates' reactions to her size had revived Moore's own memories of himself at that age. "You get an awful lot of special attention," he said, "because you're adorable and because you look precocious. And a great deal of loyalty. But on a funny set of terms. The terms are that the other person is allowed to treat you like a baby or a child. This is part of their attraction to you." In the case of his daughter, her classmates were eager to defend her, but they also wanted to carry her around like a doll. "You can imagine," continued Moore, "that is quite gratifying to her, but at the same time it's humiliating. Seeing her go through all these things is rekindling a lot of my own anger about all this."

In elementary school, Moore remembered, he was always put first in line because he was shortest, got pushed around a lot, and, like his daughter, was fawned over as long as he was willing to play the mascot. Adults in particular were given to making comments like, "Gee, I'd like to put you in my pocket and take you home." Such experiences confront all short people from an early age with a

choice between accepting other people's affection on their terms, or risking rejection on one's own.

Although a schoolboy athlete, Mark Moore found when he got to Yale that the only position he could fill was coxswain to the crew. The name tells the tale. Moore winces at the memory.

So Moore left sports behind, concentrated on his studies, earned a Ph.D. from Harvard, served for a time as a consultant to the Justice Department, and ultimately found a bright future at the nation's leading university. Yet for all his success, Moore has remained puzzled about how to manage his size. Ignoring it is one option; but others don't. Those with whom he consults, especially, register all sorts of confusion in their faces when meeting this tyke — obviously wondering if he's up to the job. At a training program he conducted for senior government managers, Moore was asked by many where they could get their laundry done before they realized he was their teacher. Ignoring such a gaffe means letting others stew in their own subsequent embarrassment.

Defensiveness is a second possible approach ("Whatsa matter? You think I can't handle this job or something?"), though not a particularly attractive one.

Then there's the third option, to which Moore most often resorts: Making light. One might call this the Paul Williams gambit. What it calls for is beating others to the punch line. On a platform in front of a new class, Moore will often begin by observing that "although people are complaining about the amount of pressure they're under, I haven't noticed it." Then

he adds: "Of course, I was six-foot-two before this program started."

It's a quandary. Kidding around about your height can be taken two ways. Ideally, explained Moore, people get the message that you're not hung up about it. But they may get the message that you're very hung up and have a neurotic need to raise the issue, which is expressed by your joking about it. This is the dilemma.

**People of Average Height
Wonder
What All the Fuss
Is About**

One question I often hear — usually from people of average size — is: What's all the fuss about? Why don't smaller and taller people just ignore their height and be happy? Unfortunately, this is seldom a real option — at least not a good one. Since people generally assume big people to be powerful, for a tall person to just sit quietly is to be perceived as strong. Since people assume small people to be weak, for a small person to just sit quietly is to be perceived as impotent. And for a short person, "just ignoring" her height risks being literally overlooked. Like most people, a short person wants to have her presence noticed. The smalls' options for accomplishing this are fairly limited: Be funny or be feisty.

There is an alternative to feistiness or funniness for coping with shortness. This alternative is for the short person to pretend that she isn't. Denying shortness involves elaborate visual artifice.

J. Edgar Hoover was a classic practitioner of this approach. No more than

5'7" (and a stout defender of that height as a minimum for his agents), the late FBI director gave strict instructions to employees within the Bureau that if asked, they were to say that Hoover was "just under 6 feet." Hoover also paid careful attention to how his physical surroundings made him appear. The sofa facing his desk was cut extra low so that visitors would sit beneath him. Adding further to Hoover's eye-level advantage was a riser under his chair that was hidden behind his massive desk.

The problem with the J. Edgar Hoover approach to coping with shortness is that it stems from self-contempt.

Joel Grey once told me that he'd never resorted to lifts. "I never wore elevator shoes," explained the Oscar-winning actor. "Never."

Since he's in the public eye, Joel Grey has no choice but to deal with reactions to his size. Grey at times has opened his nightclub act with these words: "Before I begin, I want to clear up the two questions about me that are on everybody's mind. The answer to the first question is five-foot-five inches. The answer to the second is April eleventh, 1932, and one hundred nineteen pounds."

From his vantage point, Grey is painfully aware of the psychological distance separating bigger people from smaller people. Partly he's aware because bigger people tell him that in his trim presence they feel clumsy, ungraceful.

**"My Dearest Ambition
Was to Be
'Little and Clinging' "**

Having so many boys' eyes at chest level is just one among many horrors tall women recall about the time of life when they first spurted above everyone else. Early adolescence is generally the severest time of tall-girl trauma. Just when such a young teen wants most not to stand out in any way, her body betrays her. "I remember a country walk, with my first love," said one woman of how it felt to be tall nearly half a century ago, "and trying to walk in the ruts of the grass-grown road, so that I would be shorter than he was. My dearest ambition was to be 'little and clinging.' "

Tall women are caught in a chink in American values. On the one hand femininity has traditionally been associated with daintiness. On the other hand the culture at large says bigger is better.

Most women are shorter than most men. Over 90 percent of all American women are under 5'7", but only 25 percent of American men are that short. (U.S. average is 5'4" for women; 5'9" for men.)

Tall women quickly discover that smaller people of both sexes assume them

strong. This can pose something of a dilemma. A big woman may not want to be seen as a potential match for Muhammad Ali. On the other hand, she's not unappreciative of the advantages involved in people's fear of her size. The temptation is to work both sides of this street.

Pairings of tall women and smaller men have always been a source of public curiosity. Equating size with strength as some people do, it's impossible to see such a couple and not wonder who dominates whom. When a cartoonist wants to suggest a henpecked, childish husband, the obvious shorthand is to make the man smaller than his wife. From Maggie and Jiggs, through Thurber's couples, to Andy Capp, relative size is basic for suggesting where men and women stand with each other on the funny page.

The ongoing taboo against women dating men shorter than themselves is among the strictest of this society. In a study of dating attractiveness, a team of social scientists once assigned University of Minnesota freshmen dates by computer on a purely random basis, with a single exception. Whenever a taller woman was randomly assigned to a shorter man, her IBM card was deliberately shuffled back into the deck. Though the researchers gave no explanation for their only depar-

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ture from chance, the taller-woman/smaller-man taboo obviously was too big to buck.

Repeatedly during interviews I've heard stories illustrating this taboo. My favorite is that of a woman who as a teenager made marks on the front door-jamb indicating her height in different pairs of shoes. As her date walked in the door she made a quick visual check of which mark he reached, then scurried upstairs to choose shoes accordingly.

Flouting the dissimilar-height taboo takes courage.

Mismatched couples are often good for a laugh by people without feeling for others. Some mismatches even laugh at themselves. Yet "when you're making love, body length doesn't matter that much," said a 6-foot woman economist

who's had lovers of various heights. "With a smaller man there's no problem whatsoever. Things are equal when you're lying down." She went on to say that her best physical relationships had actually been with smaller men. "To generalize, I don't find large men active enough. They tend to be sort of phlegmatic. Tall men generally are slower-moving — even in pursuits they enjoy."

Speculation about what it's "like" between small women and big men is less feverish than about the reverse pairings. But such couples told me that they have discovered possibilities unconsidered by bodies more closely matched.

Actually, the boring truth of the matter is that sex between partners of disparate height is not all that different from any other kind. The reason is simple. As is apparent in any room full of seated bodies, height variation above the hips isn't nearly as great as that below. Most difference in height involves the legs. Thus, with rare exceptions, the only real difference in sex between partners whose height is matched and those whose isn't is that when mismatched partners make love lying down, the toes don't touch.

**"I Just Tell Them
to Pull Some Tricks"**

Even when short women make it big their success is recognized with a titter. "Barely 5 feet tall," said *Newsweek* of the head of Waterman Pen, "blond and attractive Francine Gomez seems more like a pretty china doll than the chairman and chief executive of a well-known French corporation."

Taller working women have special problems keeping everyone comfortable about their height. This often calls for imagination, and strategy. Meeting a smaller client being shown into one's office, for example, may make it necessary to lean over and shuffle papers on a desk before looking — up — with a greeting. Colleagues pose a different set of problems for the tall woman. "It's very important to sit for your boss but stand over a subordinate," explained a 5'9" media executive.

As part of his training seminars at Union Carbide, Harry Scharlatt includes a section on "non-verbals." This always is a popular workshop, he told me — especially the part on equalizing height differentials. "Basically I just tell them to pull some tricks," explained Scharlatt with a grin beneath his blond mustache and devilish blue eyes. "Give that person looking down on you a smaller chair. Stand up while that person is sitting down. Wander around the room. Sit on the desk. Anything that gives you any kind of height above the taller person. If

you can't get it, back away from the person so you've got more distance. Or put a barrier between you. Put your desk between you and the person coming in. Then height's not as important anymore, because you're not so close."

Happily, sports are one aspect of American life in which prospects for people of all sizes seem to be getting better. The growing popularity of auto racing, gymnastics, skiing, long-distance running, racquetball, soccer and cycling are all encouraging signs. Unlike football or basketball, such sports will always have room for smaller participants, no matter how hard traditional American athletes may try to alter this reality. Growing numbers of facilities across the country are becoming hosts on weekends to small women competing gymnastically. Kids' soccer teams across the country today rival or even exceed in popularity those of football. During a three-year period in Charlotte, North Carolina, one park's football program declined from 200 to 75 participants; during the same period, the number of kids playing organized soccer in that city as a whole went from 0 to 500.

If such trends continue — if our preference for sports that favor tall is balanced by the rise of sports that favor smalls, or better yet, favor no size in particular — people of all heights will come

out winners.

**Around Talls,
It's Easy
to Slip into Feeling
Like a Kid**

It's important to keep in mind that the discomfort you may feel around someone much taller or smaller than you are has less to do with the other person than with your own feelings that are triggered by that person's height.

It really isn't another person's height that bugs you when it's very different from yours. Who cares? It's the way that person's height makes you feel about your own — that's the real issue. Around tall, it's easy to slip into feeling like a kid without realizing what's going on. Looking up so far can release that mixture of awe, fear and envy left over from the time when everyone you looked up to controlled you.

It could even be that your height relative to others' at certain early, impressionable times of your life influences your adult style more than the height you have ultimately achieved. If both are the same — if you're relatively small or relatively tall at all stages of life — then your style will be congruent with your size. But if your position on the ladder shifted, your style may be incongruent. There are

average-sized adults who at one time towered over their classmates and consequently still feel gigantic, just as there are 6-footers who once were the shortest in their class and to this day can't get used to looking down on anyone.

Consider the experience of Helen Hayes. To her early mortification, Hayes never grew much over 5 feet tall. She hated being so small, thinking a great actress must be a woman of stature.

At first the critics agreed with her. For an early stage portrayal of Cleopatra, Hayes was lambasted — less for her lack of talent than her lack of size. The young actress was advised to limit herself to parts more in keeping with her frame.

She did just the opposite. Rather than resign herself to ingenue roles, Helen Hayes simply learned her craft so well that she could credibly portray any character of any size. The culmination of this effort was her successful portrayal on Broadway of Mary, the 6-foot Queen of Scots.

At either end of the spectrum I've found people far more conscious of the drawbacks of their size and its style than the rewards.

Discovering how much tall envy about smalls has been a revelation to me. In his essay "Troubles of a Big Guy," Albert Payson Terhune said he envied smaller people, especially "the clothes they can wear becomingly and that I cannot wear without looking like a section of a circus parade . . . I don't believe there is a Big Guy on earth who in the depths of his soul does not crave to wear loud ties and louder clothes and 'extreme' hats. His heart yearns for them. But his common sense, if he has any, tells him his only sartorial hope is to look as inconspicuous as possible."

The problem seems to be that at any height, a person is more conscious of the drawbacks than the rewards, which are easy to take for granted. And every height has rewards.

And every height has drawbacks. But it's helpful to know how little your height-related feelings have to do with relative size, and how much to do with the attitudes engendered by size. Understanding how little your "height problems" have to do with size allows you to face the real problems of power that underlie such "problems." Then you can start exploring alternatives to envy of someone else's height. Along the way, you may even find rewards for being the size you are — whatever size you are.

The best reward for confronting a height issue directly can be discovering that height itself was never really the issue. □

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