Social Intelligence, by Daniel Goleman

One day, late for a meeting in midtown Manhattan, I was looking for a shortcut. So I walked into an indoor atrium on the ground floor of a skyscraper, planning to use an exit door I had spotted on the other side that would give me a faster route through the block.

But as soon as I reached the building's lobby, with its banks of elevators, a uniformed guard stormed over to me, waving his arms and yelling, "You can't walk through here!"

"Why not?" I asked, puzzled.

"Private property! It's private property!" he shouted, visibly agitated.

I seemed to have inadvertently intruded into an unmarked security zone. "It would help," I suggested in a shaky attempt to infuse a bit of reasoning, "if there were a sign on the door saying 'Do Not Enter.' "

My remark made him even angrier. "Get out! Get out!" he screamed.

Unsettled, I hastily beat my retreat, his anger reverberating in my own gut for the next several blocks.

When someone dumps their toxic feelings on us - explodes in anger or threats, shows disgust or contempt-they activate in us circuitry for those very same distressing emotions. Their act has potent neurological consequences: emotions are contagious. We "catch" strong emotions much as we do a rhinovirus - and so can come down with the emotional equivalent of a cold.

Every interaction has an emotional subtext. Along with whatever else we are doing, we can make each other feel a little better, or even a lot better, or a little worse - or a lot worse, as happened to me. Beyond what transpires in the moment, we can retain a mood that stays with us long after the direct encounter ends - an emotional afterglow (or afterglower, in my case).

These tacit transactions drive what amounts to an emotional economy, the net inner gains and losses we experience with a given person, or in a given conversation, or on any given day. By evening the net balance of feelings we have exchanged largely determines what kind of day - "good" or "bad" - we feel we've had.