

“The End of Perfection”  
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I knew as soon as I walked in to the building that I had found the right health club for me. There is a banner across the wall right when you first come in that reads in large letters: “Progress, not perfection”. Reading those words for the first time was like receiving religious absolution. A declaration of forgiveness that delivered me from my internal admonitions. There are very few mirrors gracing the walls of my health club and even fewer of those annoying posters of perfect-bodied people posing with dumbbells. The people on the exercise machines look like regular people, not models. This, I thought, is the perfect place for a recovering perfectionist to work out.

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It wouldn't surprise me if religious people had more of a tendency towards perfectionism. Many religions have a story about humanity's fall from some perfect state and have as a goal a returning to this state either in this life or beyond. The Christian scriptures state explicitly that we should be perfect as God is perfect. We are, after all, made in his image. Jesus and, especially in Catholicism, his mother Mary serve as models of faultlessness. In Islam Mohammed channeled Allah's words and recounted them flawlessly in the Koran. In Buddhism Siddharta Gautama attained enlightenment and can show us the way to spiritual perfection.

Our own tradition has historically challenged us towards perfection as well. The inherent goodness and perfectibility of human nature was a widespread message preached by our Unitarian and Universalist forbearers. William Ellery Channing, a 19th century Unitarian minister, said, “Our supreme good is the perfection of our being... Nothing can make us truly happy but our perfection.”

At the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century while most mainline Christian churches preached sermons contrasting human sinfulness against God's perfection, Unitarians and Universalists preached a theology that said that within everyone are the seeds of divinity. And that the goal of religion is to help cultivate those seeds in the course of our lives.

Now that our theology has moved further from the Christian mainstream most of us believe that our salvation lies not in earning the mercy of an Almighty God but rather in morally perfecting our lives – becoming better people.

Unfortunately, too often what happens is we become so hung up on the fact that we are not living up to some self-determined, unattainable standard that we make ourselves miserable. All this striving to be perfect trips us up, makes us depressed, because *perfection is a illusion*.

In our reading earlier we heard about a man who, though he is very kind and generous, honestly feels like he is the worst person in the world. It doesn't matter how good we are we still beat ourselves up that we are not doing enough.

There is a difference between excellence and perfection. It is a very fine line. Striving for excellence pushes us to improve our skills and often produces great results. But I think many of us have lost the ability to detect the difference. And so we get mired in perfectionism.

I'm an expert in this area. I have been cursed with perfectionism since before I can even remember. My mother told me recently that in first grade I refused to join a soccer team at school because I didn't already know how to play. No amount of explaining or cajoling on the part of my parents could convince me that none of the other kids did either. I dug my six year old heels in because I didn't want to suffer the embarrassment of not doing something perfectly.

As an adult I still struggle to keep this tendency in check. Several years ago I finally signed up with a tutor to help me overcome my unrelenting frustration with writing. She asked me what happened when I sat down to write. I told her that I would stare at the blank screen for twenty minutes. Then I would type a sentence or two and then delete everything because it didn't capture what I wanted to say quite right. Then I'd go back to staring at the blank screen all the while growing more and more angry that I just couldn't write! She laughed and then gave me some great advice. She told me to think like a sculptor. A sculptor doesn't start off with fine tools carving minute details into the clay, but rather uses broad strokes with larger tools at first as the form of the object begins to take shape.

Writer Kathleen Norris said, "Perfectionism is one of the scariest words I know. It is [...] a serious psychological affliction that makes people too timid to take necessary risks, and causes them to suffer when, although they've done the best they can, their efforts fall short of some imaginary and usually unattainable standard."<sup>1</sup>

I can tell when I am caught in the downward spiral of perfectionism when things that I would normally find inspiring leave me dispirited. The success of my friends or colleagues in one area or another seems to shine a spotlight on my own shortcomings. I hear a brilliant lecture and rather than inspired I find myself feeling dissatisfied with my own lack of insight.

A meditation teacher once taught me to listen carefully for that small voice inside me that tells me how awful I am; how I'm not measuring up; how I could have done it better, whatever it was. When I start to feel depressed or despondent about my abilities I now listen for that voice and hear it for what it is: simply the voice of my inner critic.

One of my friends has gone so far as to name her inner critic. She calls it Maude. She will say things like, "Maude thinks I did a terrible job with my client. But I'm ignoring her."

Imagine if a person followed you around your house and when you did the shopping and to work and never stopped their constant barrage of insults. You would never put up with it. Yet this is how powerful and insidious the inner critic can be for some of us. Maude is only satisfied with her own version of perfection even though my friend recognizes there is no such thing as perfection.

It sometimes helps me to remember that our inner critic does not really want to cause us harm. It functions like all our defense mechanisms to protect us from potential pain or humiliation.

Perfection as a personal goal is not only unrealistic but I'd go so far as to say it can be downright destructive. Many religions hold up visions of immaculateness and purity in their saints that are simply unattainable by real people. Little Catholic girls are taught to strive to be as pure and virginal as the Mother Mary. Inevitably, as they grow and experience life they

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<sup>1</sup> Norris, Kathleen. Christian Century 02/18/98

fail. Falling short of these unrealistic expectations many of the girls learn to feel guilt and remorse when really their only offense is being a fallible human being.

It wasn't all that long ago when I finally got that there aren't actually any other people out there somewhere who are perfect. What a relief! As much as I admired one or two traits about a person sooner or later I'd discover a flaw. One by one all my heroes came down off of their pedestals. What a relief it must be for these people as well. The few people who are perceived as perfect often suffer from feeling like they are not being "seen" or are burdened with impossible expectations.

Perfection is not really that desirable a thing when we get right down to it because it excludes so much of what is true and real and so much beauty. So much of what is *human*. Computerized music is never as moving as a breathtaking live performance. The good stuff really is in the flaws. That is what makes us interesting and lovable, what makes us who we are.

There is a scene in the movie, "Good Will Hunting", where a therapist is talking with his client a young man named Will. The therapist asks Will why he hasn't called the girl who was interested in him.

Will says, "Right now she's perfect and if I call her maybe I'll find out that she isn't perfect."

The therapist replies, "Let me tell you a secret. This girl, she isn't perfect. And neither are you, pal. The thing to find out is if you are perfect for each other."

He goes on to tell a story about all the things he loved and misses about his dead wife. It turns out more than anything he misses the things people would consider her imperfections, her peccadilloes. They were the good stuff.

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Back to the title of this sermon. I intended a double meaning. On one hand I think it's time for the concept of perfection to be seen for the illusion that it is. But I also wanted to ponder the question, "Assuming it were possible, what would be the goal of our perfection?". What is it we think would happen if we were to suddenly become absolutely perfect? Would we at last be worthy of love? Free of all guilt? Pure and blameless? Would we finally be good enough?

Let me ask you, why is it that people love you? I suggest to you that it is not that you are loveable despite your imperfections, rather it is that you are loveable because of your imperfections. All those little idiosyncrasies that make up the whole of who you are. And let me tell you, you are not letting people down because you are not perfect – that's not what they want from you.

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So many of us were raised with religious mandates or parental expectations demanding perfection that were so deeply ingrained in us that they take years to shake off. And no matter what we do the inner critic – our own personal Maude – will always be with us. The challenge is to honor its intention to protect us without allowing it to dominate us. It may help to quiet its critical voice by not feeding it messages from religion and from advertising that tell us that we are not beautiful, good or smart enough.

Choose consciously which messages you listen to. Pick a health club that makes you feel good about yourself. Pay attention to the voices that affirm your worthiness. Listen to Mary Oliver when she says, “You do not have to be good. You do not have to walk on your knees for a hundred miles through the desert repenting. You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves.”

This is something that I know is true: that here we all are; flawed, broken and incomplete. Yet there is nothing we have to do, no height we have to reach, no amount of penance we have to perform, to earn our inherent Belovedness. And this is the way it is supposed to be. We are not meant to be perfect. We are loved and worthy in our current state of imperfection. That is power of grace.

In his song, “Anthem” Leonard Cohen writes, “Ring the bells that still can ring. Forget your perfect offering. There is a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in.”

Amen.