

“Striving for Perfection”
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I’ve been at my parent’s home in Pennsylvania for the past week and a half celebrating the holidays. One of the things my mom wanted me to do while visiting was to go through all of the boxes of school paperwork that she has saved since I was in the first grade. For as many times as I told her over the phone, “Trust me, mom, just throw it all away,” she wouldn’t do it until I saw all of the papers, pictures, art projects, tests and reports for myself. The turkeys made out of my kindergarten hand were cute and the book reports and tests from history courses a nice reminder of all that I knew I would never remember but one thing did stand out: my fourth grade spelling tests. These stood out because my mom had saved all of them from the entire year. As I flipped through each one she proudly pointed out the 100% written on each page in bright red. But there was one, one single solitary test that had a different mark on its right hand corner – 95%. I actually remember that test – I remembered the word I had spelled wrong – innocent. I had mistakenly spelled it with an s instead of a c. I remembered that day because I remembered how I had beat myself up for weeks over that one simple word, that one test. I remembered because it was my goal at that moment to be perfect. I would study and study and study those words for hours because I needed to get that 100, needed to have another perfect test in my folder. Because even if other areas of my life were less than stellar, less than ideal, this was one area that I could be flawless, seamless, perfect.

Desires for perfection always arise around the beginning of a new year. Many of us still make New Year’s resolutions in which we strive to improve ourselves in some way – either small and workable or more likely, completely unattainable and destined to be forgotten by February. I usually resolve to never let white sugar

once again cross my lips, to walk on that treadmill at least 30 minutes every single day, to practice yoga every night before bed, to read at least one hour a day and to make sure that all sermons are written and done by Friday evening. But not this year. This year I'm going to resolve to do something much more attainable – I'm going to resolve to be imperfect.

Many religious traditions exhort us to strive for perfection. In the Christian Scriptures, the book of Matthew exhorts us to “be perfect, as your heavenly father is perfect,” a reminder that we are created, after all, in the image of God. We can look to Jesus as a model of perfection. In Buddhism, we find, Siddharta Gautama, the enlightened one, who can show us the way to spiritual perfection. Even our Unitarian and Universalist forebears emphasized the perfectability of our natures. William Ellery Channing, 19th century Unitarian minister, said “Our supreme good is the perfection of our being... Nothing can make us truly happy but our perfection.” And to make matters even worse our Unitarian ancestors threw out the one brilliant way that Christianity has to deal with the perfectionist streak – original sin. The doctrine of original sin served as a reminder that no matter how hard we tried, we were inherently flawed, all of us, each in our own way. Because of original sin we could never *truly* be perfect as our creator is perfect. But Unitarian theologians dismissed the doctrine of original sin and therefore brought the goal of perfection a little closer. They believed in the constant improvement of the human spirit, as James Freeman Clarke encouraged with his words, “I have faith in the progress of the human race onward and upward forever.” And as our movement moved in the direction of secular humanism, human perfection and our belief in inherent goodness became a core belief of our faith. The humanists taught us that salvation doesn't come from an powerful, all knowing God but rather from ourselves – in living up to our responsibility to become better, more morally perfect people.

And it isn't only in our communities of faith that we find these messages that push us toward perfection. Our culture is constantly giving us the message through commercials, television shows, books, and magazines that we can be perfect. I must confess that when I am home on a weekday morning I will turn on the Martha Stewart show. There is something alluring and attractive about her recipes, craft ideas, and organizational tips. I think it's because the underlying message here is "just do this like I do and you can have the perfect home, the perfect meals, the perfect hobbies, the perfect life." When I arrived home yesterday there was an offer to try a free trial issue of her magazine, *Martha Stewart Living*. It was a tantalizing invitation to perfection. These are some of the messages in bold print on its pages: You deserve the life you want, this is success you can feel and share, this magazine will help make your dreams come true, you'll have all that you love, and all good things will come to you. There was even a quote from a man in Richmond VA that said, "You bring ideas and projects to make each of our lives just a little bit brighter, a little bit closer to perfection. And believe me it works." Watching the Martha Stewart show and reading her magazine shows us all the ways in which our life isn't perfect now but it holds out the illusion and the promise that someday it just might be. Someday we just might be perfect.

This message of perfection isn't only coming to us in television and magazines; it rears its head in many other places as well. In 2003, the president of Duke University commissioned a study of the status of women at the school and the results were astonishing. Female undergraduates talked of a culture at the college of "effortless perfection," in which they were expected to be attractive, well dressed, in great shape, and academically able.

What a great phrase, “effortless perfection.” We all know that it’s an oxymoron because even the illusion of perfection requires an enormous amount of work. And perfection, and the time and effort we put into striving for it, comes at a great cost. A Sufi story telling of Mulla Nasrudin’s conversation with a friend who was about to get married is very revealing of these costs:

“I’m very excited,” said the friend. “Mulla, have you never thought of marriage yourself?” Nasrudin replied, “I did think of getting married. In my youth in fact I very much wanted to do so. I waited to find for myself the perfect wife. I traveled looking for her first to Damascus. There I met a beautiful woman who was gracious, kind, and deeply spiritual, but she had no worldly knowledge. I traveled further and went to Jerusalem. There I met a woman who was both spiritual and worldly, beautiful in many ways, but we did not communicate well. Finally I went to Cairo and there after much searching I found her. She was spiritually deep, graceful, and beautiful in every respect, at home in the world and at home in the worlds beyond it. I felt I had found the perfect wife.” His friend questioned further, “Then did you not marry her, Mulla?” “Alas,” said Nasrudin as he shook his head, “She was, unfortunately, waiting for the perfect husband.” (Soul Food 217)

Kathleen Norris tells us, *“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. Internally, it functions as a form of myopia, a preoccupation with self-image that can stunt emotional growth.”* (Christian Century; 2/18/98)

When our striving for perfection slips into perfectionism, the very things in our lives that might bring us joy – family, friends, jobs, hobbies – bring us torment because everywhere we look we see not the beauty but the flaws, the faults, the deficiencies, the imperfections. Perfectionism brings us exactly what we might expect: unhappiness, disappointment, difficulty with ourselves and others because we want them to be flawless and our expectations will come up short every time. Instead of focusing on the good and being grateful for what we have and what we have done instead we are unsatisfied because we know it isn't exactly perfect and we think only of our limitations and shortcomings.

But what if we accepted those limitations or imperfections and understood that they are part of our being human, decide to forgive ourselves and move on. What if instead of listening to all the calls for perfection and instead listened to words like these from Stephen Manes in his work *Be a Perfect Person in Just Three Days!*

Congratulations! You're not perfect! It's ridiculous to want to be perfect anyway. But then, everybody's ridiculous sometimes, except perfect people. You know what perfect is? Perfect is not eating or drinking or talking or moving a muscle or making even the teensiest mistake. Perfect is never doing anything wrong – which means never doing anything at all. Perfect is boring! So you're not perfect! Wonderful! Have fun! Eat things that give you bad breath! Trip over your own shoelaces! Laugh! Let somebody else laugh at you! Perfect people never do any of those things. All they do is sit around and sip weak tea and think about how perfect they are. But they're really not one-hundred-percent perfect anyway. You should see them when they get the hiccups! Phooey! Who needs 'em? You can drink pickle juice and imitate gorillas and do silly dances and sing stupid songs and wear funny hats and be as imperfect as you please and still be a good person.

Good people are hard to find nowadays. And they're a lot more fun than perfect people any day of the week.

If we go back to those religious traditions we can see this goal of perfection in another light. What about Jesus' famous teaching from the Gospel of Matthew, "Be ye perfect even as your Heavenly Father is perfect?" What did he mean by that word "perfect?" Some translators say that the Greek word used there is better defined as "whole." Be whole, even as God is Whole. And Eastern religions bring us a radically different meaning of "God." Instead of striving for the perfection of some faraway, distant, separate being, we see that spiritual awakening – reaching perfection – is awakening to what one already is – what you already are – in all of your beauty, grace, divinity, flaws, imperfections, wholeness.

Jack Kornfield in his work, *After the Ecstasy, the Laundry*, writes about this kind of perfection:

In mature spirituality we have to find perfection in non-perfection. The Zen founder Seng-Tsan teaches that enlightenment dawns only when we are 'without anxiety about nonperfection.'

In other words, there is perfection – and happiness – available in every moment. We just have to stop and become aware of it.

Kornfield tells a story of Robert Fulghum, a former Unitarian Universalist minister and author who spent a significant amount of time at a Zen temple in Kyoto.

Fulghum had a last interview with the abbot, Zen Master Kohara Roshi. Instead of focusing only on the meditation or koan practice, the master emphasized that there was nothing to become. Then he spoke about his own life, about the stress involved in running such a large old temple, about the poor quality of the young priests, about his difficulties in fund-raising and ‘dealing with my wife and children, who are not’ – he smiled – ‘as holy as I am.’ He went on, ‘Sometimes I would like to get a little place in Hawaii and just play golf.’ He smiled again.

‘It was this way before I was ‘enlightened,’ you know. And now it is the same after enlightenment.’ After a suitable pause for Fulghum to digest this wisdom, the master bade him to go home, where...he had been a ‘thirsty man looking for a drink and all the while standing knee-deep in a flowing stream.’

If we are unable to find perfection in our ordinary lives, says Kornfield, we are in danger of having our ‘spirituality’ put us at odds with our life. The images we have been taught about perfection can be destructive to us.’ (Kornfield, 206, as adapted by Linda Hoddy 1/2/05)

Ralph Waldo Emerson taught us about perfection when he wrote, “*Do we go into the garden wishing that the pansies were taller than the daffodils, or thinking that the roses would be fine if only they didn’t have thorns? Do we go into a kindergarten and wish that the children would fit into some model of perfection we hold, or can we see that variety makes the beauty of gardens and humans, that our spiritual task is not to make perfection but to awaken to the perfection around us.*” (Kornfield, 208)

What a wonderful thought – a liberating thought – we don’t need any of those resolutions to make us perfect – we don’t need to strive for any of those things –

we can find beauty and hope and comfort and peace in the way things are. And we can find ourselves being grateful for what is already right, good, and perfect.

So as we begin another year may we resolve to rest in our imperfections. To acknowledge their presence and rest in the power and possibility of loving what is, of knowing that we are loved just as we are, changing and growing, remembering that in the center of our beings we are whole, complete, good, no resolutions necessary. May we awaken to the perfection already around us and be at peace.