

The Problem with Perfection

By Mel Schwartz

The desire to be perfect burdens many people and dooms them to unhappiness. At first, we might think that trying to be perfect is a good thing. Let's take a deeper look at that notion. Perfection suggests a state of flawlessness, without any defects. Seeking perfection at a particular task might be achievable and certainly students can strive to attain a perfect grade or you can try to accomplish a perfect job at something. Yet, the goal of being perfect in life is altogether a different story. A machine or electronic device may operate perfectly; at least for a while. Yet, over time it will begin to wear down and require repair. Humans, however, we never intended to be perfect. That's part of the definition of being human. Consider the expression, "I'm just human."

In our culture we move relentlessly toward greater emphasis on achievement and goal orientation. When we do so we seem to lose the capacity for wonder and awe. Could you imagine looking at a magnificent rainbow and complaining that one of the colors wasn't perfect? Not only would that be ridiculous, we'd also be ruining the splendor of the moment. And yet that is exactly what we do when we judge ourselves for our imperfections. We forget that as humans we're part of nature, as well. As such, we would benefit if we came into acceptance of the natural state of life, which by the way happens to be imperfect.

I have often counseled people who were plagued by their need to be perfect. I have come to learn that their pursuit of perfection is really a disguise for their insecurity. It becomes a statement that I'm not good enough just as I am. When we do that, we judge ourselves. Ironically, if someone ever could achieve this impossible state of perfection, it's likely that very few people would tolerate him or her. For the perfect individual would be a constant reminder to all others of their shortcomings. Not to mention that they probably wouldn't be much fun to be with. Who would really tolerate, let alone enjoy being with someone who was perfect?

Usually we strive toward being perfect to compensate for a sense of inadequacy. People who want to be perfect usually have an exaggerated sense of their own shortcomings. They typically received messages earlier in life that they weren't good enough. So they decided that only by being perfect would they be beyond reproach. Perfectionists tend to think that other people are somehow better or superior to them, so they need to be without flaw just to catch up. This is a terribly damaging myth.

Individuals who seek perfection are also more sensitive to the judgments of others. In fact, these judgments are most often imagined. Everyone has an opinion, but elevating someone else's opinion to the status of being a judge is really silly. After all, someone else can't really judge you unless you confer upon them the power of being a judge.

The only perfection is in being present, yet the perfectionist is never present

The closest thing to perfection is in the ability to be fully present. Without any distracting

thoughts, measuring or grading ourselves, we're free to really be in the moment. It's in that moment that we're truly alive. Yet, the perfectionist isn't typically present as they're either busy critiquing the past and replaying their every decision or worrying about the future. So you see the perfectionist is never really present. Isn't that ironic?

The pursuit of perfection limits our ability to be present and literally robs us of the vitality of life. It is unachievable, unimaginable and frankly undesirable, so why pursue it? Your time would be far better spent in delving into how to shore up the insecurity that catalyzed the desire for perfection in the first place.

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