

“Forget Your Perfect Offering”

Joanna Lubkin | Arlington Street Church | April 10, 2016

I’ve always loved music. As a kid and as a teenager, I took all sorts of instrumental lessons — piano, clarinet, guitar, and an ill-fated attempt at the oboe. Being able to express myself through music, especially being able to make music with other people, was so important to me.

But I didn’t want to play — especially not in public — until I knew it would sound good.

So, of course, that meant that, you guessed it, I pretty much never played. I just got more and more discouraged about how I wasn’t any good at those instruments. It didn’t help that my closest friends were all incredibly talented musicians, and I found myself asking, “Who am I to think I can offer anything that good?”

My passion for creating music stayed strong, but my willingness to create it was being surpassed by a growing resignation. “I just can’t,” I thought. Now, I really regret that I didn’t stick with the lessons.

I now quote comedian B.J. Novak: “Regret is just perfectionism plus time.”¹

I asked my ministerial colleagues about whether they’d experienced this phenomenon, and Rev. Amy Zucker Morgenstern wrote, “Shall I just fax you a few dozen pages from my diary? Here’s one example: one of my best friends got married five years ago. The friend who organized the shower (to which I couldn’t go) requested that everyone send the couple a recipe. Rather than just send a recipe, I was going to make a work of art of that [blessed] thing: illustrated, hand-lettered, with poetic asides about the metaphorical significance of saving vegetable peelings for stock . . . Long story short, I haven’t sent the recipe yet.”

When I was preparing to have my first job interviews, my dad gave me the tip that when the interviewer asks the question, “What’s your greatest weakness?” I should respond with the weakness that isn’t really a weakness: “I’m a perfectionist.”

I’m coming to see that while perfection is a laudable goal, perfectionism can paralyze us.

Let’s parse that a little bit. Author Brené Brown writes, “Perfectionism is not the same thing as striving to be your best. Perfectionism is the belief that if we live perfect, look perfect, and act perfect, we can minimize or avoid the pain of blame, judgement, and shame. It’s a shield. It’s a twenty-ton shield that we lug around thinking it will protect us when, in fact,” she concludes, “it’s the thing that’s really preventing us from [soaring].”²

¹ From B.J. Novak’s book, *One More Thing: Stories and Other Stories*

² From her article, [“Want to be happy? Stop trying to be perfect.”](#)

A great way to practice setting down that shield of perfectionism, the paralysis of not trying something until you know it'll come out just right, is to sing in a choir.

My high school choir director, Mrs. Santerre, changed my whole approach to music when she told us, "Sing your mistakes loudly. We need to be able to hear them in order to fix them."

She didn't say "if" we make a mistake; when learning a piece, it's nearly guaranteed that we will. What she said was, "Let us hear them, and let us grow because of them."

How might it be in our lives if we were willing to make our mistakes out loud? How might it be if we were willing to let people see us grow because of them?

Allow me to preach to the choir over here for a moment. We get the blessing of practicing this week after week. We work our tails off in rehearsal, we practice, we do our best — and then Sunday comes. Whether we think we're ready or not, Sunday comes, and it's time to sing what we've got.

We could live week to week in perpetual terror of our mistakes being heard by the congregation, of missing an entrance, of flubbing up a tricky section. That sounds totally miserable. It also sounds like a quick path to burning out. Instead, week after week, we get to practice finding joy and satisfaction in offering whatever it is we have to offer.

Which is an opportunity I now extend to you all. My friend Lyndsey Scott taught me this great adaptation of Leonard Cohen's "Anthem." It's call and response, so that means I'll sing a line, you sing it back to me. Don't worry, the choir will help you out.

Forget your perfect offering
Just sing the song that you can sing
There is a crack in everything
That's how
The light
That's how
The light gets in

... ..

The 18th Century French philosopher, Voltaire, wrote that perfect is the enemy of good. I might put it this way: "Don't let the perfect get in the way of the good."

I first heard that teaching from an amazing community organizer named Meir Lakein. I was a new fellow with the Jewish Organizing Initiative, a one-year community organizing training. It was our first weekend together, and we were getting an intensive primer on community organizing.

Meir led us through these sessions which broke open our hearts, inviting us to really see — and be angry about — the injustices in our world. I remember feeling like a fire had really been set in our hearts to gather people together to bring about a better world.

I felt overwhelmed by the scope of how broken our world was, by how much work there was to do. I heard my groupmates dreaming big, visioning huge actions that could produce huge, society-altering wins. Just as the energy in the room was getting to be almost unbearably intense, Meir paused and said, “One of the most important things to remember when you’re doing justice work is to not let the perfect get in the way of the good. // Hang onto those dreams of the world as it could be, and keep working until you get there. But don’t let it paralyze you, or keep you from seeing the value in smaller wins. Justice work is done one small step at a time, and you need to celebrate each step in the right direction. Otherwise,” he concluded, “what’s the point?”

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One of my favorite spiritual teachers, Martha Beck, identifies as a “recovering perfectionist.” She offers up the ways she’s found to reduce her anxiety about her imperfections — including her imperfection at ridding herself of perfectionism.

I encourage us all to try doing the following four exercises — imperfectly.

Exercise One: Personify Your Inner Perfectionist

Beck writes, “I’ve been using the term *perfectionist* as though it’s something you can be. Actually, I think it’s something people have, like [bunions]. Separating your innate personality from your perfectionism frees you to confront it, rather than get lost in it. To that end, I recommend giving your perfectionism its own name and face.

“Scribble a picture of it, name it something ridiculous [mine’s named Brunhilde], and do something insulting to this picture whenever your perfectionist acts up. By just externalizing and rejecting your inner critic, you ... [rob it of its power].”

Exercise Two: Embrace Creative Hopelessness

“Your perfectionism will tell you that it is your ticket to perfection, your one chance at a flawless existence. This may be true for you. If your brand of perfectionism has created a life free of mistakes or shortcomings, by all means, carry on. But if you’re anything like me, perfectionism usually paralyzes you before you begin, stiffens you until you screw up, and sends shame howling through your consciousness even if you do well. It’s time

to wake up and smell this dark-roasted little truth: Perfectionism never delivers on its promise of perfection. It does not work.

“Some psychologists use the phrase ‘creative hopelessness’ to describe the moments when we realize that our psychological strategies are useless or counterproductive. [Giving up] the delusional hope that we can or must be flawless ... allows us to seek happiness in the only place it can be found: our real, messy, imperfect experience. To arrive at creative hopelessness, write down your reason for maintaining your perfectionism. It [may] be something like this:

“If I try hard enough and I’m very careful and I follow all the rules, everything will go right and everyone will love me and I’ll feel good all the time.”

“Now ask yourself the following question, made famous by our good friend Dr. Phil: So, how’s it working for you?”

“The most common response I get when I ask this question, whether I’m addressing myself or a client, is laughter. Releasing our doomed, anxious hope for perfection opens us to the joy available in our actual lives ...

Exercise Three: Do Something Badly

“Gradual, safe exposure to whatever makes us anxious is always the most powerful way of eliminating anxiety. In order not to be cowed by imperfection, you must not only accept the imperfect, but seek it. I never sit down to write an excellent first draft, or even a good one. [Following Anne Lamott’s advice, I give every first draft the same working title in big, capital letters: TERRIBLE, HORRIBLE, NO GOOD, VERY BAD FIRST DRAFT.] My goal is always to create something readers wouldn’t even want to scrape off their shoes. Adopting this objective gives me permission to do the lousy job I’m sure to do on any initial attempt. It gets me through the excruciating process of going from Nothing to Something. No matter how odious it may be, turning it into Something Better is usually less work, and you may even turn it into Something Good. The first step toward achieving excellence is imperfection.

“Try this: Choose something you’ve always wanted to do—paint, jog, whatever. Now set out to do this thing *really* badly. Your inner perfectionist may erupt in violent protest. Thank her for sharing, then reward yourself for daring to do a terrible job. An even better option is the buddy system: Commit with a friend that you’ll both do something really terribly, then praise each other for following through.

“If [we] have the guts to do this, [we’ll] find that contrary to conventional wisdom, people love [us] when [we’re] openly imperfect.”

Exercise Four: Just Keep Showing Up

“‘Ninety percent of staying in shape,’ says one of my professional-athlete clients, ‘is getting to the gym.’ I’ve heard high-achieving people say the same thing about pretty

much every human enterprise: Successful musicians just show up, day after day, to practice their instruments. Successful business-people show up for their customers. Successful writers show up at the blank page. Ask any of them and they'll tell you that most days, they come nowhere near perfection. What makes them winners is not instant excellence but the sheer dumb repetition of showing up.

“The same is true of the even more significant task of sustaining human relationships. Consider the people who have most blessed your life — are they the folks you remember as perfect or those who were simply, consistently there for you? You don't have to be perfect for your friends, your children, or your beloved; you just have to show up.

Beck concludes, “Long experience as a profoundly flawed person has taught me this unexpected truth: that welcoming imperfection is the way to accomplish what perfectionism promises but never delivers. It gives us our best performance, and genuine acceptance in the family of human—and by that I mean imperfect—beings”³

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Here and now, this is my wish for us:

Let's not let the perfect get in the way of the good.

When we catch ourselves asking, “Who am I to offer the world my imperfect offering?”
Ask instead, “Who am I *not to*?”

The world needs our gifts, messy and imperfect as they may be.

Forget your perfect offering
Just sing the song that you can sing
There is a crack in everything
That's how
The light
That's how
The light gets in

³ Adapted from “Ready...Aim...Oh, Well: Why You Need to Embrace Imperfection” in the July 2003 issue of O Magazine