

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie
Arlington Street Church
2 February, 2020

The Perfect is Enemy of the Good

If you want to take a deep dive into the case against perfectionism, look up the Golden Mean, the Pareto Principle, or the 80-20 rule, all of which point to the certain disaster of very imperfect humans trying to achieve perfection. I've been there, over the past two weeks, and here's the CliffsNotes version.

The perfect is enemy of the good — a rough translation from French Enlightenment historian and philosopher Voltaire. Throughout human history, philosophers from the Buddha to Confucius to Aristotle exhorted us to guard against extremism in every way. The perfect is enemy of the good. It is also enemy of the never-begun (because we despair of doing it perfectly) and enemy of the completed (because even if we can begin, we can't quite bring ourselves to finish).

Let's be quick to note that perfectionism is not the same as the pursuit of excellence. Going over that tipping point from the pursuit of excellence to perfectionism is fueled the compulsion or obsession to do something perfectly ... which can freeze us in our tracks and paralyze us from doing anything at all. The perfect is friend of the stuck. Who wants to be stuck?

This is from my colleague Meg Barnhouse, senior minister at the First UU Church of Austin, Texas.

"I have some kind of disorder when it comes to ... wrapping presents," she writes. "I get sleepy as I'm wrapping because I know I'm not doing it right. 'Right' to me means the best it's ever been done, doing it so well that people will be talking [at their next birthday] about what a wonderful wrapping job I did. I imagine wrapping my gift with cloth that is hand stamped, made of silk from caterpillars that were hand-raised with Vivaldi playing in the background. In comparison with the inner perfectionist to whose standards I hold myself, Martha Stewart is merely adequate.

“In the real world,” she continues, “I adopt an attitude of despairing carelessness. Why try when I won’t be able to come close? Layered over the despair is a sense of irony. I get it that the present will look ... ordinary, even though my feelings for the recipient are far from ordinary. If I had hand-raised the caterpillars to classical music, made the wrapping from their silk, and learned the ancient stamping and knotting techniques that would make my wrapping into a work of art, the present still wouldn’t match the love with which I mean to present it....”

She concludes, “I get ... that perfection can never happen. I’ve heard of Chinese artists who deliberately put a tiny imperfection in an elaborately carved jade ball because perfection is an insult to the gods. I would never have to put one in deliberately. I don’t think they do either, really....”¹

*

As we all know so well, *imperfection happens*. It is our birthright. And we would be happier, funnier, and more exuberant if we accepted it — accepted ourselves — exactly as we are.

There’s an advertising adage I love that says, If you can’t fix it, feature it. Our worship team started saying it years ago after a Sunday morning when, as the service got underway, I realized the chalice had never been brought out. Our beloved ministerial intern, Dan Kane, slipped away during the introit and, like the good, former altar boy he was, processed it in as the introit ended. Just in time for the chalice lighting, solemnly, dramatically, he lifted it like a host and placed it on the pulpit.

Later, as we laughed our heads off, he said, “I figured we’d be covered if it looked like we’d done it on purpose.” If you can’t fix it, feature it.

*

I love the Japanese Zen aesthetic — its spareness and clean lines. On his first mediation retreat in a Zen temple, my friend Rich Borofsky, taken aback by what he experienced as the monochromatic coolness of the monks and teacher and the coldness of the temple, said, “Where’s the mother?” Rich was looking for the warmth of home. What he got, instead, was a kind of unnerving perfection.

For me, uncluttered space inspires a quiet mind — Buddhists call it an empty mirror. But there’s an old story that hints at something quite different — a story Zen students are invited to contemplate. A monk was tasked with cleaning the

¹ Rev. Meg Barnhouse, “Silk,” in *Did I Say That Out Loud?*, pp. 45-47

temple's rock garden. He worked for hours in concentrated meditation, pulling the weeds, correcting the edging, and raking to create fastidious lines swirling around the rocks. As he was finishing, his master appeared. At this, the monk took a handful of autumn leaves, scattered them on the ground ... and was enlightened.

It turns out the Japanese have a penchant for things catawampus—catawampus meaning askew, awry, or crooked. Asymmetrical is the rule in tea ceremony; tea cups and sake cups only come in sets of odd numbers; and Japanese holidays are all on odd-numbered days. And actually, there's an entire aesthetic founded on catawampus; it's called, charmingly, *wabi-sabi*. Wabi-sabi is centered on a celebration of incompleteness, imperfection, and transience. Author Richard Powell writes, “Wabi-sabi nurtures all that is authentic by acknowledging three simple realities: nothing lasts, nothing is finished, and nothing is perfect.”² In books of Japanese art, wabi-sabi pieces are defined by their “flawed beauty.”³

And then there's *kintsugi*, translated as “golden joinery” — the art of repairing broken pottery with lacquer that has been mixed with platinum, gold, or silver. The breakage and repair are a cherished part of the history of an object; something to highlight rather than disguise. The seam of the break is beautiful; what is broken becomes beautiful. Ernest Hemingway wrote, “The world breaks every one and afterward many are strong at the broken places.”⁴

Here's Rev. Meg Barnhouse again:

“I know that I don't care if a present isn't wrapped perfectly when I am given one, so I bet no one is inspecting my wrapping job. They are busy feeling good that they are loved and cherished, glad that they live in a cocoon of friends and family that holds them, not perfectly, but holds them....

“The tyranny of perfectionism is so heavy when it's unexamined, so easy to shrug off once you look at it full on. Why should I despair? I'm doing well enough. In this world, all we have to do is learn to love and be loved. That takes the whole time. Nothing else is important.

² Please see Richard R. Powell, *Wabi Sabi Simple*

³ Please see Taro Gold, *Taro Gold's Living Wabi Sabi*, pp. 20-21

⁴ Ernest Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms*

“Maybe my wanting to have a shimmering silk ribbon made from my own caterpillar farm is just a way of distracting myself from love.... My heart makes silk [in which] those I love can wrap themselves, fall softly into, rub absently across their cheeks. Right now, it still has a few rough places, but I’m working on it [...] sometimes to Vivaldi. The voice of perfectionism becomes a distant and tinny demand. Why should I despair when I am wrapped in a symphony of silk from the hearts of so many [loved ones]? What gifts I have been given! What gifts I still have to give.”⁵

This past Monday marked the 75th anniversary of the Soviet Red Army’s liberation of Auschwitz, the German concentration camp in occupied Poland. 1.3 million people were sent to Auschwitz: 960,000 Jews; 74,000 non-Jewish Poles; 21,000 Romas; 15,000 Soviet prisoners of war, and up to 15,000 other Europeans were murdered there.

One of many commentaries on that atrocity was written by my friend and colleague, Peter Fleck, who, with his wife, Ruth, escaped the Nazi invasion of Holland. He wrote: “Beware of [perfectionism,] because it may indicate that you are no longer dealing with reality but are acting out a fantasy. The Nazi nightmare was such a fantasy. Its ideal was the blond, blue-eyed [Aryan] youth whose racial purity — whatever that may have meant — was supposed to guarantee the virtue of his actions and to save the world. Its ... liturgy was the mass demonstration in which hundreds of thousands were manipulated into perfectly staged manifestations of tribute to the man-god Hitler.”⁶

Perhaps not surprisingly, Peter Fleck wrote a book called *The Blessings of Imperfection*. He was an enthusiastic proponent of what he called “the messiness of it all.” Some of you will remember the story he loved to tell about his daughter and her son, my friends Andy and Ben.

When Ben was little, they lived in Iowa farm country, and Ben was the proprietor of an imaginary farm. One day, he said to Andy, “Mom, you know what happened last night? Last night, the vet came to the farm, and you know what he did? The vet cut a little piece off the cow’s hoof and now she has a calf!”

Andy, a good Unitarian Universalist parent, heroically seized the moment to introduce her four-year-old to just how a baby calf would actually come into being.

⁵ Meg Barnhouse, *op cit*

⁶ G. Peter Fleck, *The Blessings of Imperfection*, p. 21

She told a somewhat long version, finishing triumphantly, “So Ben, that’s how it really happens!”

Without missing a beat, Ben looked Andy right in the eye and said, “Not on my farm.”

*

American lyricist Oscar Hammerstein said, “I don’t believe any of us can enjoy living in this world unless we can accept its imperfection. We must know and admit that we are imperfect, that all other mortals are imperfect, and go on in our own imperfect way making mistakes and riding out the rough and bewildering, exciting and beautiful storm of life until the day we die.”⁷

Rev. Meg Barnhouse says, “Let love rule, and the compulsive craving for perfection will die.”⁸

Beloved spiritual companions,

The perfect is enemy of the good:
 enemy of the never-begun,
 enemy of the completed,
 friend of the stuck.

Imperfection happens.

If you can’t fix it, feature it:
 catawampus
 kintsugi
 wabi-sabi

Life is messy.
Rejoice!

May we enjoy
 the blessings of imperfection.

⁷ Oscar Hammerstein, quoted in questformeaning.org/quest-artical-gratitude-may-2011/

⁸ Please see Meg Barnhouse, “Holiday traditions, tangled up like lights,” 12/21/17. Please see uuworld.org/articles/traditions-tangled-lights