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 Arlington Street Church  
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## Imperfection is Beauty

Improbably, it was Marilyn Monroe, whose body was so profoundly objectified as a perfect female specimen, who said, “Imperfection is Beauty.” I thought of it again this week as yet another person told me they remain so distracted right now they can’t concentrate. or remember anything, find anything, or even remember what they’re looking for. Usually, at any given moment, some of us are feeling this way, while the rest of us are apparently holding it all together. When the off-kilter percentage swells to the majority, everything gets a little catawampus. I say if we just stop fighting it, we’ll come out feeling a whole lot better. This morning, I encourage us to embrace our higgledy piggedy times — so much danger; so much opportunity! — and consider the possibility that imperfection is beauty.

In my engagement with the very subjective experiences of perfection and imperfection, I’m guided by an old Zen Buddhist teaching tale. One autumn morning, a monk was doing his temple chore of cleaning and raking the gardens. After many hours, everything was perfect — every flower bed weeded and neat, every branch trimmed, and every stone in the walkway clean. He had even combed the moss! Just then, he saw his teacher approach. Quickly, he moved to a beautiful, young maple tree in the center of the garden and shook the trunk ever so slightly. A scattering of leaves fell to the ground. And in that moment, as all the teaching tales end, the monk was enlightened.

When was the garden more perfect — with or without the fallen leaves? And when was it more beautiful? We could spend a long time unpacking this story. It all points to the Japanese love of wabi-sabi, a celebration of the reality that “nothing lasts; nothing is finished; and nothing is perfect.”<sup>1</sup>

As Marilyn Monroe implied, perfect and beautiful are not synonymous. In fact, flaws and rough and growing edges are often what amplifies beauty. If you’ve

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<sup>1</sup> Richard R. Powell, *Wabi-Sabi Simple*

ever watched a workout video in which the trainer moves from exercise to exercise and never breaks a sweat while you're huffing and puffing or just prostrate on your mat, you know that vague suspicion that that trainer is actually a robot. When we pretend we're not being crushed — whether by a workout or by life — we hide what makes us human. We distance ourselves from each other in the struggle and the messiness of life. It turns out that what we all really crave is authenticity: real feelings, real pain, and real joy. We prefer the pig without the lipstick.<sup>2</sup>

When our older daughter was born, her Peruvian birthmother pierced her ears and threaded them with red thread. When I asked her about the thread, she told me it was because our baby had a “strong glance;” the red thread would ward off the evil eye. Obviously, something was lost in my translation from Spanish to English, but I think what she meant was that our child was so perfect, so beautiful, she was tempting the gods.

A “curious guy” named Jamie Ross collects Navajo rugs with English words and letters woven into the designs. Years ago, author Jason Fried spent an hour looking at Jamie's rugs, and was struck by the fact that a lot of the rugs had mistakes in them. Woven right into the patterns were stray lines or shapes that didn't match the others. Jamie said there are many explanations. One is that the Navajo intentionally weave in mistakes to remind us that human being aren't perfect. But he prefers the explanation that “what was intentional [was not the mistakes but] the desire not to go back and fix them.”

The Navajo, he said, see mistakes as moments in time. “The mistake,” says Jason Fried, “is ... woven into the fabric of time. It's good to be reminded of it when you look back.” Jamie Ross “compared it to climbing a mountain. If you climb a mountain, [you're] sure to [make] a few missteps along the way. But you keep going. You don't stop and start over if you trip ... or take the wrong path.... It happened, it's part of the climb. And when the climb is done, you've finished.... You don't call the climb a mistake. Likewise, the Navajo don't call a rug with some off-stitches a mistake. If the rug is finished, it's a successful rug — ... an honest rug.”<sup>3</sup> Flaws distinguish handmade from factory-produced, and handmade is always more precious.

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<sup>2</sup> Thanks to rocket scientist, law professor, and author Ozan Varol. Please see [theladders.com/career-advice/why-imperfect-is-more-beautiful-than-perfect](http://theladders.com/career-advice/why-imperfect-is-more-beautiful-than-perfect)

<sup>3</sup> Jason Fried, “A mistake is a moment in time,” 12/1/12. Please see [signalvnoise.com/posts/3347-a-mistake-is-a-moment-in-time](http://signalvnoise.com/posts/3347-a-mistake-is-a-moment-in-time)

In an interview with entrepreneur and investor James Altucher, writer and musician Derek Sivers told this story. “Back in the ‘90s, there used to be a great magazine called *Musician* ... and ... along with the magazine, ... they would include ... a sampler CD [of] 16 artists [you’d] never heard before, one track each. I used to love to get the CD and just put it on in the background while I was doing other things.

“One day, there was this one track that jumped out at me.... The singer was singing,

Used to be I could go up to Barstow for the night.  
Find some crossroad trucker to demonstrate his might.  
These days it seems like nowhere is far enough ...

and her voice cracked. And then she [sings,]

So I’m leaving Last Vegas today,  
leaving Las Vegas.

“And I remember when her voice cracked like that, I stopped what I was doing.... She left that in. That was ... brilliant. And then it made me pick up the CD and who was that? It turns out it was Sheryl Crow. She was an unknown artist at [the] time.

“I so admired that decision to leave in that crack in her voice; ... it’s like that little fault is what made me like her. There were 15 other artists on that CD that I will never remember, but I remember that one that left in the crack.”<sup>4</sup>

It turns out we like our stars relatable. We like each other relatable.

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There’s a way in which perfect is boring; perfect adheres to the norm. Imperfection can be spicy because it stands out and gets noticed. Counterintuitive choices and broken rules can make something unique and memorable.

And then there’s this: “Perfect is the enemy of the good.” This aphorism is often attributed to French Enlightenment writer Voltaire, but just about every sage from Confucius to Shakespeare said it in one way or the other: Perfect is the enemy of the good. When we set our sights on the perfect something — possession, relationship, achievement — we are stressed, anxious, depressed, and quick to

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<sup>4</sup> March, 2016. Please see [sive.rs/2016-03-altucher](https://sive.rs/2016-03-altucher)

judge. And chasing after perfection doesn't propel us forward — it holds us back. It doesn't allow for improvement or change or growth. "Iteration, adaptation, and learning ... are enabled by imperfection."<sup>5</sup> The more comfortable we get with the messiness of imperfection, when we can learn from our mistakes rather than trying to bury them, the happier we'll be.

And now, of course, I just have to retell the story of Benjamin Clardy.<sup>6</sup> At the age of four, he had an imaginary farm. One morning, he said to his mother, my friend Andrea Fleck Clardy, "Mom, you know what happened last night? Last night, the vet came, and you know what he did? He cut a little piece off the hoof of the cow, and now she has a calf!"

Andrea, a good Unitarian Universalist parent, seized the moment and launched. "Actually, Benjamin, that's not the way it happens." And she proceeded with the facts of procreation — the long edition. "You see," Andrea finally concluded, "that's how it *really* happens." Benjamin considered his mother with a long stare. "Not on *my* farm."

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Being human — or being a cow, for that matter — is messy. Vietnamese Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh writes of falling in love, "You only think of the other person.... You can only think of the object of your love. That is why we speak about it as a kind of accident: 'falling in love.' You fall down. You are not stable anymore because you have gotten into an accident."<sup>7</sup>

I find myself drawn to spiritual teachers who are sweating it out, feeling the fear, raging the rage, and right out there about it — Jesus cracking a whip, turning over tables, and clearing the temple of money-changers; American Tibetan Buddhist nun Pema Chödrön snapping in irritation and throwing something at her lying, cheating, now ex-husband. No perfection; just the longing for a better version, and the willingness to try.

When we make a mistake, we don't have to scramble for cover. We can talk about it, get curious about our feelings of inadequacy and insecurity, do our best to

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<sup>5</sup> Please see [medium.com/an-idea-for-you/5-reasons-to-embrace-your-imperfections-d364b36722](https://medium.com/an-idea-for-you/5-reasons-to-embrace-your-imperfections-d364b36722)

<sup>6</sup> Benjamin's grandfather was my friend and colleague of blessed memory, Rev. G. Peter Fleck, author of *The Blessings of Imperfection* (hence the "of course!").

<sup>7</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *Anger: Buddhist Wisdom for Cooling the Flames*

repair the damage, laugh, and feel our deep interconnectedness with every other human being who's ever made a mistake. Every time we fall short, every time we get up and try again, every time we do our best to fix it up and move on is a good day. When we embrace imperfection, we are freed to find beauty and meaning, and to accept ourselves and each other exactly as we are.<sup>8</sup>

I'm thinking of a sad story, but one that has been deeply instructive for me. Some of you know the work of David Foster Wallace. I first encountered it through his 2005 commencement address at Kenyon College, a speech later made into a book and then a video called *This is Water*. David was brilliant and tortured by depression, alcoholism, and drug addiction. In 2008, at the age of 46, he ended his life in suicide.

John, one of his Amherst college classmates, told me that he and David were in a class together. John had worked unbelievably hard on a paper. The professor returned it with all kinds of commentary written in red down the margins and, on the last page, an A-. John proudly showed David his paper. David looked at it, but he could hardly look at John. Without saying a word, he produced his own paper and handed it to John. There was no commentary — not a single mark on it until the very last page, where the professor had written, “I don't even know what to say. A+.”

Staring into the middle distance, David Foster Wallace said to John,  
“Do you know how lonely this feels?”

In the end, perfect — nothing to strive for, no room for growth, nothing to change — perfect is unspeakably lonely.

Let's end on a more cheerful note. On a Sunday morning years ago, Dan Kane, our intern minister of blessed memory, was serving as the worship coordinator. Moments before it was time to light the chalice to open the service, we realized the chalice had not made it onto the pulpit. Dan slipped out during the introit and, just in time, reappeared. Holding it before him like the bread of heaven, he processed the chalice to the pulpit slowly and deliberately, and placed it carefully, lovingly onto the pulpit. It was a performance worthy of his years as an altar boy. And just before I began to read the words for the chalice lighting, he grinned at me devilishly and said, “If you can't fix it, feature it.”

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Beloved spiritual companions, I close with Rainer Maria Rilke's *G\*d Speaks to*

<sup>8</sup> Inspired by Robyn Griggs Lawrence (he, him, his), *Simply Imperfect: Revisiting the Wabi-Sabi House*

*Each of Us.*<sup>9</sup>

G\*d speaks to each of us as [G\*d] makes us,  
then walks with us silently out of the night.

These are the words we dimly hear:

You, sent out beyond your recall,  
go to the limits of your longing.  
Embody me.

Flare up like flame  
and make big shadows I can move in.

Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror.  
Just keep going. No feeling is final.  
Don't let yourself lose me.

Nearby is the country they call life.  
You will know it by its seriousness.

Give me your hand.

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<sup>9</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, G\*tt spricht zu jedem nur, eh er ihn macht (G\*d Speaks to Each of Us)  
from *Rilke's Book of Hours: Love Poems to God*, translated by Anita Barrows and Joanna Macy