

Dreams of Perfection

A Sermon Delivered on April 7, 2019
by
The Reverend Axel H. Gehrman

“The perfect is the enemy of the good.”

-- Voltaire

Unitarian Universalist Church
of the Monterey Peninsula
490 Aguajito Road
Carmel, CA 93923
(831) 624-7404
www.uucmp.org

Call to Worship: by the UU minister Rev. Sunshine Jeremiah Wolfe. Sunshine identifies as genderqueer and transgender, enjoys silliness, board games, music of all kinds, and thunderstorms. Sunshine writes:

This is a congregation that gathers in faith.
Not faith in one religion or one god or any one way.
We gather in faith of the power of diversity,
the power of love,
and the hope of a world transformed by our care.
We gather in faith in ourselves and those around us.
Not a faith that requires perfection [of us.]
Rather, a faith that in our shared imperfection
we may learn to stumble and fall together.
Faith that we will help one another to rise and to try again and again.
We are Unitarian Universalists.

Meditation: by the UU minister Rev. Richard Gilbert, a piece entitled “Life is Always Unfinished Business”

In the midst of the whirling day,
In the hectic rush to be doing,
In the frantic pace of life,
Pause here for a moment.
Catch your breath;
Relax your body;
Loosen your grip on life.
Consider that our lives are always unfinished business;
Imagine that the picture of our being is never complete;
Allow your life to be a work in progress.
Do not hurry to mold the masterpiece;
Do not rush to finish the picture;
Do not be impatient to complete the drawing.
From beckoning birth to dawning death we are in process,
And always there is more to be done.
Do not let the incompleteness weigh on your spirit;
Do not despair that imperfection marks your every day;
Do not fear that we are still in the making.
Let us instead be grateful that the world is still to be created;
Let us give thanks that we can be more than we are;
Let us celebrate the power of the incomplete;
For life is always unfinished business.

First Reading: by the Christian author and poet Kathleen Norris, from her book *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* (p. 55). This is from a chapter entitled “Perfection,” and it begins with a few words from the Gospel of Matthew attributed to Jesus: “You must be perfect – just as your Father in heaven is perfect.”

Perfectionism is one of the scariest words I know. It is a marked characteristic of contemporary American culture, 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. Martha Stewart might be seen as the high priestess of Perfection: one dare not let the mask slip, even in one's home, where all is perfect, right down to the last hand-stenciled napkin ring.

I had never before thought to compare Jesus Christ to Martha Stewart and am fortunate that the gospels themselves can rescue me from my predicament. The good news about the word "perfect" as used in the New Testament is that it is not a scary word, so much as a scary translation. The word that has been translated as "perfect" does not mean to set forth an impossible goal, or the perfectionism that would have me strive for it at any cost. It is taken from a Greek word meaning complete, entire, full-grown. To those who originally heard it, the word would convey “mature” rather than what we mean today by “perfect.”

Second Reading: by Mary Oliver, a poem entitled “The Poet with His Face in His Hands”

You want to cry aloud for your
mistakes. But to tell the truth the world
doesn't need anymore of that sound.

So if you're going to do it and can't
stop yourself, if your pretty mouth can't
hold it in, at least go by yourself across

the forty fields and the forty dark inclines
of rocks and water to the place where
the falls are flinging out their white sheets

like crazy, and there is a cave behind all that
jubilation and water fun and you can
stand there, under it, and roar all you

want and nothing will be disturbed; you can
drip with despair all afternoon and still,
on a green branch, its wings just lightly touched

by the passing foil of the water, the thrush,
puffing out its spotted breast, will sing
of the perfect, stone-hard beauty of everything.

Dreams of Perfection

A Sermon Delivered on April 7, 2019

By

The Reverend Axel H. Gehrman

For the past few months Elaine and I have been keeping an eye on the real estate market in the greater Monterey area, on the lookout for a house. A few weeks ago we found the perfect place: a house in the heart of Seaside, just the right size, the right location, and the right price - perfect for us. And just this week, we had our closing, and are, once again, homeowners. We are very excited.

I think our new house is perfect. But I also know that not everyone would see it that way. Our home inspector, for instance, might see it as not-quite-perfect. At least that's what I gather from the 81-page report he wrote, describing dozens of items around the house in need of repair, starting at the top with a worn out roof, and ending with ancient plumbing down below. Yes, we will need to fix a few things before we move in....

But even when all our home-improvements are complete, I doubt our perfect house will look like the places depicted in Martha Stewart's magazines and websites. Compared to those perfect images, our house will always seem inadequate and hopelessly imperfect. (But for us it is perfect.)

* * *

What is perfection? The word sounds so definitive. It seems to point to some obvious ideal, something objective and unchanging, some great goal we are called to accomplish. But I don't think that's the case. Perfection is in the eye of the beholder. And we each carry our own variations in our imagination.

What might it mean to be perfect? Maybe it means to do it all, as Ann (our Worship Associate this morning) said: to be a loving partner and parent, and hard worker and volunteer. Or maybe it means to focus on a single ambition: to be an accomplished artist or athlete or academic, to be an excellent cook or carpenter or computer programmer, to be a successful politician, airline pilot – or heck – preacher.

Whatever our dreams of perfection may be, they seem designed to lead us toward a better life. And yet they often end up doing just the opposite: they leave us feeling imperfect, unsuccessful and sometimes a complete failure.

When our longing for perfection leaves us feeling unhappy, depressed and depleted, we are suffering from a pervasive affliction called perfectionism. The psychologist Tamar Chansky writes of one case:

“Tessa, a young attorney, has perfectionism about her job that is leading to a need for antacids and sleeping pills. Every aspect of her work, every single email or phone call, is as stringently handled as her court argument preparation. The level of attention is simply unsustainable and beyond even what the partners in her office encourage as they see the dark circles under the eyes of a promising lawyer in their practice. Many perfectionists don’t want to be perfectionists, but they fear letting it go because *not* being a perfectionist means you’re mediocre, sloppy, or a failure.”

She continues:

“On the surface, perfect sounds like the prize. But scratch a smidge below that elusive shine and what you quickly see is the trap and the impossibility of perfection. Clutching to a goal of perfection is a sure way to keep yourself in a constant state of irritability and frustration, which, in most cases, doesn’t stop with you. So the no-cost bonus of perfectionism is that you share its misery with the people around you.” (p. 265)

* * *

Perfectionism is a psychological affliction, detrimental to our mental health and a threat to our personal relationships. It is so widespread that sociologists have identified it as a distinguishing feature of our country’s dominant culture. In a book entitled *Dismantling Racism* Kenneth Jones and Tema Okun say perfectionism is one of our culture’s most damaging characteristics – damaging to both people of color and white people.

They list several hallmarks of perfectionism in organizational settings, for instance: When little appreciation is expressed for the work that others are doing, and appreciation is directed to those who get more of the credit anyway. When it is more common to point out how a person or a project is inadequate, rather than adequate. When making a mistake is confused with being a mistake. When there is a tendency to identify what’s wrong, and little ability to identify and appreciate what is right.

Jones and Okun also suggest antidotes to perfectionism. They say: We should develop a culture of appreciation, in which people are recognized and their efforts are celebrated. We should understand that everyone makes mistakes, and that mistakes offer opportunities for learning and positive results. When offering feedback, we should also speak to things that went well before offering criticism, and be sure to offer specific suggestions on how things could be done differently.

* * *

When we are in perfectionist frame of mind, making mistakes feels horrible. A mistake seems like proof that we are a failure. But, of course, that isn’t the only way to make sense of our mistakes.

Just this past week at our Worship Associates' meeting Camille (our Music Director) shared a different approach to mistakes. She had introduced it to her music students to great effect. This new approach is based on the work of Ben Zanders, the music director and conductor of the Boston Philharmonic. Zanders boldly insists that his students make a special occasion out of mistakes. As a teacher and coach, he tries not to spotlight mistakes, saying: "There it is – see, you messed up." Instead he actively trains his students that when they make a mistake, they're supposed lift their arms in the air, smile, and say, "How fascinating!" He recommends that everyone try this.

And that's just what we did last week, with Camille's guidance. When we were taking turns practicing public speaking, and when one of us misspoke, instead of pausing awkwardly we said, "How fascinating!" It really changed the energy of the group. (Thanks, Camille.)

* * *

Striving for perfection is an idea found in many religious traditions. The Christian scriptures say it plainly in the Gospels: we should be perfect as God is perfect - we are created, after all, in the image of God. Jesus serves as a model of perfection. Similarly in Buddhism, Siddharta Gautama, the enlightened one, can show us the way to spiritual perfection. And in Islam, Mohammed was able to perfectly convey God's will in the words of the Koran.

Perfection is also a prominent idea in Unitarian Universalism. Our UU forebears preached a message that emphasized the perfectibility of human nature. William Ellery Channing, a famous 19th century Unitarian minister, said, "Our supreme good is the perfection of our being... Nothing can make us truly happy but our perfection."

At the time, most mainline churches imagined human sinfulness in stark contrast to God's perfection. Unitarians and Universalists, however, said the seeds of divine perfection dwell within each person, and we are called to cultivate them in the course of our lives.

Our belief in human goodness and the perfectibility of human nature remained a central tenet of our faith, even as we moved further away from the Christian mainstream and in the direction of secular humanism. Humanism teaches us that our salvation lies not in securing the mercy of an all-powerful God, but rather in recognizing the responsibility we ourselves carry, to become better people. Humanists believe our salvation lies, above all, in the moral perfection of our lives.

* * *

Striving for perfection can lead to an unhealthy, unhappy perfectionism. But that's not the only way to approach it.

I like the way Lao Tzu put it. Lao Tzu lived in China six centuries before Jesus was born. According to some scholars, he worked in the archives of the royal court, and was a contemporary of Confucius. His name translates as “Old Master,” and in later years some followers worshipped him as a god. He is considered the founder of Taoism, and believed to be the author of the Tao te Ching. In it he writes (in Chapter 45):

True perfection seems imperfect,
yet it is perfectly itself.
True fullness seems empty,
yet it is fully present.

True straightness seems crooked.
True wisdom seems foolish.
True art seems artless.

The Master allows things to happen.
She shapes events as they come.
She steps out of the way
and lets the Tao speak for itself.

Kathleen Norris says, perfection has less to do with conforming to some imagined ideal, and more to do with becoming fully ourselves. She says, moving toward perfection means learning how to be more mature, mature enough to give ourselves to others. Learning to grow up, and be fully ourselves, comfortable in our own skin, in charge of our own life, ready for whatever may befall us, whatever may come. Norris writes:

“When I think of perfection in this sense, I am far from Martha Stewart land. I am thinking of [a friend], Catherine LaCugna, a professor of systematic theology who, when doctors informed her that there was nothing more that they could do for her and that cancer would kill her within a few months, did not run away to nurse her wounds but continued teaching. She told only a few close friends that she was near death, and she went on living the life she had chosen. She was able to teach until a few days before she died.

I can scarcely imagine what it meant to her students, when they found out what she had done. When they considered that they, and the dry, underappreciated work of systematic theology that they had been engaged in together, had meant so much to her. Now, whenever I recite the prayer that ends the church's liturgical day, "May the Lord grant us a peaceful night, and a perfect death," it is her death that I think of. A perfect death, fully acknowledged and fully realized, offered for others.”

* * *

If we long for perfection, rather than whirling through the day at a hectic, frantic pace, we might be better off, learning to pause for a moment, take a breath, and loosen our grip on life. Our lives are, after all, unfinished business. From beckoning birth to dawning death we are in process, and always there is more to be done.

We don't need to cry aloud because of our mistakes. The world doesn't need any more of that sound. Instead, let us learn to listen for the sound of the thrush, who sings of the perfect stone-hard beauty of everything.

Instead, let us be grateful that the world is still being created.

Let us give thanks for everything about us that is incomplete and imperfect.

And let us learn to stumble and fall together,

Sustained by the faith that we will help one another to rise and try again and again.

So be it. Amen.

Sources

Tamar Chansky. *Freeing Yourself from Anxiety: 4 Simple Steps to Overcome Worry and Create the Life You Want*. Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2012.

Dennis Jones and Tema Okun. *Dismantling Racism: A Workbook for Social Change Groups*. www.dismantlingracism.org, 2016.

Stephen Mitchell. *Tao Te Ching: A New English Version, with Forward and Notes, by Stephen Mitchell*. New York, Harper & Row Publishers, 1988.

Kathleen Norris. *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*. New York: Riverhead Books, 1998.