

## Sermon Transcript

### “Perils of Perfection”

Teresa Schwartz

March 4, 2007

An overachiever’s hyperspeed, high-stress lifestyle was causing migraines, backaches, heart palpitations, and climbing blood pressure. Alarmed, her doctor told her she needed to slow down and learn to relax.

The overachiever asked, “Like do yoga, meditate, take long walks, vacations, that kind of thing?”

“Yes,” her doctor replied.

“Fine,” answered the woman impatiently, “Just give me a schedule of all the things I need to do, and I’ll start right away.”<sup>1</sup>

This person seems to be suffering from what the famed psychiatrist Karen Horney called, “The tyranny of the ‘should.’”<sup>2</sup> People who are perfectionists feel a tremendous compulsion to complete the many ‘shoulds’ on their endless lists of tasks to be done.

They may think there are a right and a wrong way to do things. When Joe, a retired Marine Corps drill sergeant, takes his boys fishing they have a routine for preparation, for fishing and for cleanup. It is time-efficient, neat, organized. The boys think the “fishing ritual” is overdone and they resent having to comply.<sup>3</sup> As the daughter of a former drill sergeant, I get it.

Or, take Jean W., a 29 year-old woman, “who was terrified of doing something — anything — wrong. She thought people would think less of her if she made a mistake. For example, when her boyfriend invited her to meet his family—an intellectual group of people—she worried about saying something dumb and felt tense and defensive all week beforehand. Ironically, she then found it hard to concentrate at work, resulting in the silly slipups she’d feared making. Her anxiety also led her to stammer and stutter her way through the gathering at her boyfriend’s house.”<sup>4</sup> Again, I sympathize. My father-in-law is an x-ray astrophysicist.

Now, we all know there are things we should do. We may feel natural anxiety in certain social and family situations. But for perfectionists this burden is more than a heavy workload: they believe their entire worth is wrapped up in not only what they do, but how well they do it. I know this all too well: I’ve been one for most of my life.

We perfectionists are people who have a great fear of failure, fear of making mistakes, and fear of disapproval, so you better love this sermon! Perfectionists typically have all-or-nothing thinking, believing they are worthless if their accomplishments are not perfect.<sup>5</sup> And, being perfect is impossible, so deep down perfectionists feel worthless.

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.workingworld.com/magazine/viewarticle.asp?articleno=214&wn> = accessed 2/27/07.

<sup>2</sup> Arnold A. Lazarus, Clifford N. Lazarus, “Be Your Own Shrink,” *Psychology Today*, Nov/Dec 2000. Accessed at [www.psychologytoday.com](http://www.psychologytoday.com) on 2/20/07.

<sup>3</sup> Monica Ramirez Basco, “The Perfect Trap,” *Psychology Today*, May/June 1999. Accessed at [www.psychologytoday.com](http://www.psychologytoday.com) on 2/20/07.

<sup>4</sup> Lazarus and Lazarus.

<sup>5</sup> Accessed at [www.couns.uiuc.edu/Brochures/perfecti.htm](http://www.couns.uiuc.edu/Brochures/perfecti.htm) on 2/20/07.

Perfectionists tend to have anxiety and low self-esteem. Perfectionism is a risk factor for obsessive-compulsive disorders, eating disorders, and clinical depression.<sup>6</sup> Perfectionists usually learned early in life that people valued them because of how much they accomplished. Love — in some way — was conditional.

We perfectionists tend to procrastinate, because we want to know the ‘right’ way to do something. Some perfectionists may never have what looks in the world’s eyes like high accomplishments, because they may be too paralyzed even to begin. In fact, I couldn’t possibly have started this sermon until what I deemed was the *perfect* book arrived from amazon.com: [Perfecting Ourselves to Death](#). I waited. I waited. Finally, I checked the website, to find I had merely looked at the book, but failed to put it in my cart before I placed my order! So much for being perfect!

Perfectionists are driven by both a desire to do well and a fear of the consequences of not doing well. Some psychologists believe there is a healthy, adaptive side to perfectionism — think of a brain surgeon or Michelangelo’s art. I want my brain surgeon to be as perfect as possible.

But there’s an illusion that drives the pursuit of perfection. It’s a secret fantasy that **if only** this next thing goes right — this report, this job promotion, this wallpaper — this sermon — then everything will be okay. People will like me. I’ll be at peace with myself. I’ll never know financial insecurity. Things will be OK. **If only....If only** I file my taxes perfectly, if I feed the parking meter, if I scour the kitchen until it’s spotless, I could just stop worrying and relax.

The dark side of this fantasy is the corollary — but if I *don’t* do this job well, if the kitchen isn’t clean, if my taxes are audited, if I don’t get the promotion, I will be a failure. No one will love me. I’d be worthless.<sup>7</sup>

Given this tremendous pressure, perfectionists may avoid letting others see their mistakes, and then other people never perceive them as human. Anne Lamott writes:

“Now a person’s faults are largely what make him or her likable. I like for narrators to be like the people I choose for friends, which is to say that they have a lot of the same flaws as I. Preoccupation with self is good, as is a tendency toward procrastination, self-delusion, darkness, jealousy, groveling, greediness, addictiveness. They shouldn’t be too perfect; perfect means shallow and unreal and fatally uninteresting. I like for them to have a nice sick sense of humor and to be concerned with important things, by which I mean that they are interested in political and psychological and spiritual matters. I want them to want to know who we are and what life is all about. I like them to be mentally ill in the same sorts of ways that I am; for instance, I have a friend who said one day, “I could resent the *ocean* if I tried,” and I realized that I love that in a guy.”<sup>8</sup>

Me too. (Just don’t tell my husband David this is why I love him!)

I am not alone. I know you perfectionists are here today. And the good news is that we’re in good company. Martin Luther was a perfectionist. He wrote:

“I tried to live according to the rule with all diligence, and I used to be contrite, to confess and number off my sins, and often repeated my confession, and sedulously performed my allotted penance. And yet my conscience could never give me certainty, but always doubted

---

<sup>6</sup> Accessed [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Perfectionism\\_\(psychology\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Perfectionism_(psychology)) 2/20/07.

<sup>7</sup> Ramirez Basco.

<sup>8</sup> Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird*, New York: Anchor Books, 1994, p50.

and said, "You did not perform that correctly. You were not contrite enough. You left that out of your confession."<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps some of you think Luther was nuts, and now you have proof. His drive certainly is seen in his high-quality writing. But it was his faith that offered him a transforming experience. Later he wrote,

"Sometimes it is necessary to drink a little more, play, joke, or even commit some sin in defiance and contempt of the devil in order not to give him an opportunity to make us scrupulous about small things. We will be overcome if we worry too much about falling into some sin....What do you think is my reason for drinking wine undiluted, talking freely, and eating more often if it is not to torment and vex the devil who has made up his mind to torment and vex me?"<sup>10</sup>

The peril of perfectionism is idolatry. It is the belief that our lives, our world, and our very selves are ultimately in our control. It's the worship of an illusion, with our hopes hanging on the tyranny of the "should." In a life that is largely insecure, we may cling to what little control we have. We may try to control things that are out of our control, like other people. But ultimately, a power greater than ourselves is at the helm.

Perfectionism is a religious issue. But our faith tradition gives us mixed messages. As Unitarian Universalists, we've long stood on the side of works rather than faith in our own salvation, supported by the American mythology to pull ourselves up by our bootstraps in an indefatigable feat of self-reliance. The Bible tells us that we are earthen vessels, but it also tells us to "Be perfect as your heavenly father is perfect."<sup>11</sup>

When we look more closely, however, the Hebrew word translated as perfection is *tamim*, which means to "bring to completeness," which implies a process, living in right relationship with God and with others.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps it should read, "Be bringing yourself to completion as God is bringing God's self to completion."

Ultimately, our faith is the antidote to perfectionism. We believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person. But do we believe that of ourselves? Are we people of just as much worth if we lose our jobs, if we foreclose on our mortgage, if we never finish school? I'm here to tell you the counter-cultural message: we are. Love isn't contingent upon accomplishment. Accepting — and even loving — our very flaws is how we reach out to one another and have a satisfying life, a life worth living.

The church, this community, is where we can come when we are broken.

But, in his book, *Perfecting Ourselves to Death*, Richard Winter writes,

Unfortunately, many churches give the impression that their first priorities are performance and appearance. The man who is struggling with addiction to alcohol or pornography, or the woman who is struggling with a difficult marriage or anorexia may take one look at an immaculate church building full of well-dressed, secure, smiling people and think that this is no place for them. If only this visitor could see beneath the surface and realize how good people are at covering up the mess of their faults and failures.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Richard Winter, *Perfecting Ourselves to Death*, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005, p 70-2.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Matthew 5:48

<sup>12</sup> Winter 130.

<sup>13</sup> Winter 145.

We are a church of the successful, friends. Individually and collectively we have achieved much. At times, we may feel that we're not good enough to be here. You know there is no creed requirement to be here, but I'm here to tell you that there is no admission requirement, no salary requirement, no soul requirement, and no dress requirement to be here. This is a place where we can come, in our brokenness, in our imperfection.

[In the coming weeks] You will find boxes of tissues in your pews. While I hope you won't need them too often for tears of boredom in a sermon, I hope you will see them as a compassionate invitation to bring our whole selves into this sacred space. For it wouldn't be sacred with only parts of ourselves. We wouldn't be real.

And here are the words, not of the Bible, a minister, or a psychologist, but of an old balding stuffed animal, Old Skin Horse of the *Velveteen Rabbit*<sup>14</sup>:

"What is REAL? " asked the Rabbit one day, when they were lying side by side near the nursery fender... "Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out-handle?"

"Real isn't how you are made," said the Skin Horse. "It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real."

"Does it hurt?" asked the Rabbit.

"Sometimes," said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. "When you are Real you don't mind being hurt."

"Does it happen all at once, like being wound up," he asked, "or bit by bit?"

"It doesn't happen all at once," said the Skin Horse. "You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't often happen to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get all loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand."

May we above all, have the courage to be real, imperfections, bare seams, tears, warts and all. May this be the place where we love one another into all of our realness, our humanness. May it be so, and amen.

---

<sup>14</sup> The excerpt from *The Velveteen Rabbit* was cited in Winter 172-3.