

The Blessings of Imperfection

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N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

Meditation from Steve Maraboli, “Perfectly Imperfect”

We have all heard that no two snowflakes are alike. Each snowflake takes the perfect form for the maximum efficiency and effectiveness for its journey. And while the universal force of gravity gives them a shared destination, the expansive space in the air gives each snowflake the opportunity to take their own path. They are on the same journey, but each takes a different path. . . . Some snowflakes collide and damage each other, some collide and join together, some are influenced by wind... there are so many transitions and changes that take place along the journey of the snowflake. But, no matter what the transition, the snowflake always finds itself perfectly shaped for its journey.

I find...[a] parallel of nature in snowflakes and us [humans]. . .
We are all individuals taking different journeys and along our journey, we sometimes bump into each other, we cross paths, we become altered... we take different physical forms.

But at all times we too are 100% perfectly imperfect.

Reading

“Some Things In Life Are Worth Doing Badly” by Linda Weltner

My husband plays the tuba badly.

No, wretchedly. Execrably. With unforgettable inexpertise.

After my husband played “When Irish Eyes are Smiling” at my older daughter’s wedding, as a way of welcoming our son-in-law’s Irish family, his father created an award for Jack that read, in part

“for a performance which demonstrated an originality so stark that it stunned the audience, rendering them incapable of meaningful response.”

This did not hurt my husband’s feelings.
He knows the impact his music has.
This is a man for whom practice means playing all the notes,
right or wrong, at least twice.
His tuba, purchased at a yard sale for \$100,
looks as if it’s been run over by a truck.

His entire repertory consists of five songs which run the gamut from “Happy Birthday” to “So Long, It’s Been Good To Know You.”

Still, the phone rings and people ask him to do a gig at some special event, an occurrence which happens more frequently than I might hope.
He doesn’t get nervous or decide to polish up his technique a bit.
He glows. He basks. He’s unabashedly delighted. And delightful.
At his first note, audiences burst into hysterical laughter,
and the more earnestly my husband attempts
to render a recognizable melody, the harder they laugh,
until they leap to their feet, choking and cheering.

I understand why he’s in demand.
What has been harder for me to accept is how my husband can be perfectly capable of enjoying his tuba solos without ever aiming at competence.

This is not the way I was brought up.
Whether it was swimming, tennis or ballroom dancing,
my mother made sure I began with lessons.
The pleasure in doing a thing, I was taught, was in doing it well,
and so my whole life has been about mastery,
whether I was skiing, sewing, or cooking.

I never enjoyed trial and error.
I wanted to do things as they should be done.
I disliked looking awkward or amateurish.
And to my way of thinking, mistakes took the pleasure out of things.

If I felt I’d end up doing something badly, I politely refused to begin.
That seemed a perfectly sensible way to operate,

until I started dancing for exercise three months ago.

At the beginning, I gave myself time to learn the steps,
but I'm no longer a novice.

What's happened now is that newcomers are catching on
while I'm still struggling.

I've come to the reluctant conclusion
that these complex patterns of movement we do
may never come to feel like my second nature.

[And] you know what? I don't care.

I can't believe it myself. I feel like stopping people on the street and informing
them, "You don't have to be good at something to love it."

I want to tell my daughters, "Forget about having to meet your own high
standards before you can have a wonderful time."

I've learned that it's possible for me to tune in to how good it feels
to move without having to submit my performance to my superego for
approval.

Oh, what bliss it is to slip my pleasure right by that little inner overachiever!

Reading

According to Japanese legend ,
a young man named Sen no Rikyu sought to learn
the elaborate set of customs known as the Way of Tea.

He went to tea-master Takeeno Joo, who tested the younger man
by asking him to tend the garden.

Rikyu cleaned up debris and raked the ground until it was perfect,
then scrutinized the immaculate garden.

Before presenting his work to the master,
he shook a cherry tree, causing a few flowers
to spill randomly onto the ground.

To this day, the Japanese revere Rikyu as one who understood
to his very core a deep cultural thread known as wabi-sabi...

the art of finding beauty in imperfection and profundity in earthiness,
of revering authenticity above all.

By Robin Griggs Lawrence, Utne Reader, May/June 2001

Sermon: “The Blessings of Imperfection”

In a moment of succinct and sober reflection,
the playwright Samuel Beckett once quipped:
“My mistakes are my life.”

There’s something to that—
to the idea that the detours and the digressions,
the u-turns and those moments in the ditch,
add up to the true journey of our lives—as much or more
than the time we might spend on our actual, intended path.

At least it certainly feels that way sometimes, doesn’t it?
That our life is a series of wrong turns and backtracking and being stuck.

But, is that accurate? Does it really tell the truth of who we are?

In his poem, “Ask Me,” William Stafford holds out the hope
of another way to judge our days upon this earth.

“Some time when the river is ice,” he writes, “ask me
[the] mistakes I have made. Ask me whether
what I have done is my life. . .”

Though he doesn’t quite come out and say it,
Stafford seems to point to the sacred possibility
that we are, ultimately, *more* than our mistakes—
that the real measure of our lives involves something besides
an exhaustive inventory of our failures and our short-comings.

This is an idea that sits at the heart of the Universalist side of our heritage—
the belief that we are all worthy, even with out imperfections.

It is a radical premise, as my colleague Victoria Safford explains,

[that] beneath all reason...despite all evidence to the contrary,

[beyond] all your nagging doubts, that you are inherently worthy,
beautiful, infused with dignity, just right,
and, just like any other thing in nature,
any tree, any animal, any mountain or microbe,
your inherent inheritance is immutable.

It cannot be removed, destroyed, disputed or worn away by erosion or
corrosion; it cannot be corrupted or co-opted
no matter what other people say about you, or what you say yourself,
nor by what you've done or left undone,
[or] what the record shows about your life.

In some traditions this original beauty, this dignity, this worth,
might be called your soul; in others it is more akin
to your bone structure or your skin color or your DNA,
so basic and irrefutable is it, beyond even your own power to deny.
It is so simple, [she says,] and [yet] so [very] hard to grasp.

And, so it is.

As a minister, I often see, up close, the difficulty so many of us have
in fundamentally believing ourselves to be of worth, to be worthy,
by virtue of nothing more than the simple act of being alive.

How easy it is to focus in, instead, on our flaws,
to frame our sense of self with regret and guilt and shame,
rather than to take in the whole picture, the whole of who we are—
and to know in our bones that we are, indeed, *enough*,
“perfectly imperfect,” though we most certainly are.

Like those snowflakes—perfectly shaped for their journey through the sky.¹

Like even those roses Emerson described as perfect
in every stage of their existence, be they in bud, in bloom,
or when nothing more than a tangle of leafless twigs.²

I think we can all appreciate this—

¹ A reference to the Meditation reading.

² A reference to R.W. Emerson's "These Roses" from *Self-Reliance*, #565 in *Singing the Living Tradition*, used as responsive reading earlier during the service.

that there is at least a strange beauty to behold
at every stage of the life cycle of a rose,
from the forming of its roots, to its flowering, to its demise into decay.
A rose has more than one moment of perfection.

The question is whether we can honour such stages in ourselves and in others?

For most of us, I'm guessing it's easy enough
to recognise the shining moments of our lives—
those moments as near to perfection as any we've known,
when we find ourselves in bloom—
those moments touched by sheer joy or overwhelming gratitude,
those moments spent basking in the sublime grandeur of this world,
or in the steady love of the people who shape and share our lives.

More difficult, I'm guessing, though,
is finding value or the sometimes hidden beauty
in those moments that are far from perfect—
the times when we see only the shortcomings, wrong turns,
and opportunities lost, the times when we feel like leafless, lifeless twigs.

When we see ourselves—when we see our lives—in this way,
looking too much to our imperfections,
we can easily feel less than whole—
that something vital is missing from our lives.

Rabbi Harold Kushner in his book, *How Good Do We Have To Be?*,
relates a story by Shel Silverstein called “The Missing Piece.”

It's the story of a circle with a missing part—
a circle with a triangular wedge taken out, like a missing slice of pizza.³

Now, it was no surprise that this circle was in a constant search for wholeness
and went around looking endlessly for its missing piece.

But because it was incomplete,
the circle could only roll so fast,
so it very slowly made its way through the world.

³ My retelling is based on the version used by Rev. Patrick O'Neill in his sermon “The Missing Piece: On the Blessings of Imperfection,” 14 September 2008, First Unitarian, Brooklyn.

As it rolled so slowly, though,
it found it had plenty of time to admire the flowers.
It had the chance to chat with butterflies and enjoy the feel of the sun.

Along the way, the circle found lots of replacement pieces,
but none of them quite fit.

Some were too big, and some were too small.
Some were square, and some just generally shaped all wrong.

So the circle left all of them behind and kept on searching.

And then one day, the circle found the piece that was a perfect fit.
The circle was overjoyed, because it could now be whole,
complete at last, with nothing missing.

It put the missing piece into place and began to roll.
But, now being a perfect circle, it rolled faster than it ever had before—
far too fast to notice the flowers, and far too fast to talk to the butterflies.

When the circle realised how very different the world looked
as it whizzed by at such a frantic pace, it stopped,
and decided to leave its missing piece behind.

The circle then slowly rolled away
and continued its search for another missing piece.

Rabbi Kushner says that the lesson of the story:

is that, in some strange sense, we human beings are more whole when
we are incomplete, when we are missing something.

People who have everything are in some ways poorer for that.
For they will never know what it feels like to yearn, to hope,
to nourish their souls with the dream of something better.⁴

Or, as Benjamin Hooks once put it,

⁴ Kushner, p. 179.

The tragedy in life doesn't lie in not reaching our goals.
The tragedy lies in having no goals to reach.

It isn't a calamity to die with dreams unfulfilled.
It is a calamity not to dream.

It is not a disaster not to capture your ideal.
It is a disaster to have no ideal to capture.

It is not a disgrace to reach for the stars.
It is a disgrace not to try.

In our perfect imperfection, we yearn for wholeness,
often without recognising that our longing is, perhaps,
the very work of life itself.

It is the missing piece, the imperfection,
that helps us to see the world as it is,
and as it yet might be.

Albert Ziegler, one of the leading Universalist theologians of the last century,
felt that imperfection was revealed in this world
through the exercise of our free will—
through our capacity to choose between right and wrong,
to choose between what is considered helpful or healing
and what is clearly considered destructive.

He called the fact that we don't always do "as we ought to do."
the dilemma of our [hu]man imperfection.

But, as a Universalist, at odds with the orthodox beliefs of other traditions,
Ziegler felt that human imperfection wasn't really a dilemma to be solved,
but a natural condition to be accepted and understood.

The trouble, as he saw it, was
that "orthodox [religions] supposed a completed universe,
a perfect, finished creation [from the very beginning],"
which left a major problem to address
given that imperfection has somehow crept into
and corrupted a supposedly once-perfect world.

But, as Zeigler saw it, far from some original perfect paradise that had been degraded by imperfection, he believed that

“creation is moving on, not running down; ...[that] the universe is [still] in process; [that] life did not begin in perfection, but in the working out of a perfect purpose [that] is still moving from chaos into order.”

“What is more natural,” he wondered, “than that there is imperfection, in the universe and in each human being.”⁵

I love how Zeigler’s insight here lines up with the deeper, older meaning of perfection.

Perfection, in our time, has come to mean a state of being without any flaw or defect, without any room for additional improvement.

Yet, maybe the most meaningful understanding of perfection comes from its earlier definition of something being complete, finished, done.

In that sense, we are clearly born into this world imperfect, and, I don’t know about you, but if perfection means being done, I’m not quite ready to call it quits. I’m not finished, and neither is the world.

In the meantime, our challenge is to live the life we are given, to make the most of what we have to work with.

There’s an old Jewish story about the rabbi Zusha, a great scholar of the Torah known for his emotional prayers and his deep piety.

Rabbi Zusha was on his death bed, and tears were streaming down his face.

⁵ Albert Ziegler, Foundations of Faith, quoted in Is Hitler in Heaven?, lecture by Rev. Edmund H. Robinson, General Assembly, June 2005, Fort Worth, GA.

“Why are you crying?” asked his disciples.

“Soon I will meet God,” said the old man,
“and He may ask me why I was not more like Moses.
If He does, I will have to say I was not blessed
with that kind of leadership ability, though I tried.”

“He may ask me why I was not more like Maimonides,
and if He does, I will have to say I was never blessed
with that kind of wisdom, though I tried.”

“But I’m so afraid of another question,” continued Rabbi Zusha.

“What if God asks me, when I meet Him face to face,
the most terrible question of all:
Zusha, why in your life were you not more like Zusha?
This why I am crying.”

May we live into the fullness of who we are and who we are meant to be.

May we embrace our imperfections as the invitations they are—
to growth, to understanding, to compassion, to change.

And, may we set aside our striving for perfection,
that we might live deeply until our days are done,
and the circle of our lives, at last, made whole.

So be it.

Amen.