

ON BEING PERFECT¹

by

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From --

A Woman's Story
by Nancy Ore

**It is not enough
said her father
that you
 get all A's each quarter
 play Mozart for your kinfolk
 win starred-first in contest
you must
come home on your wedding night.**

**It is not enough
said her mother
that you
 smile at Auntie Lockwood
 take cookies to the neighbours
 keep quiet while I'm napping
you must
cure my asthma.**

**It is not enough
said her husband
that you
 write letters to my parents
 fix pumpkin pie and pastry
 forget your name was Bauer
you must
always
you must
never.**

**It is not enough
said her pastor
that you**

teach the second graders
change the cloths and candles
kneel prostrate at the altar
as long as there are starving children in the world
you must
not eat
without guilt.

It is not enough
said her counselor
that you
 struggle with the demons
 integrate your childhood
 leave when time is over
you must
stop crying
clarify your poetic symbols
and
not feel
that you are
not enough.

I give up
she said
I am not enough
and laid down
into the deep blue pocket
of night
to wait
for death.

She waited...

And
finally
her heart exploded
her breathing stopped.

They came with stretcher
took her clothes off

covered her with linen
 then went away
 and left her locked
 in deep blue tomb.

The voice said
YOU ARE ENOUGH
 naked
 crying
 bleeding
 nameless
 starving
 sinful
YOU ARE ENOUGH

And the third day
 she sat up
 asked for milk and crackers
 took ritual bath with angels
 dressed herself with wings
 and flew away.

In Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Womanguides*.
 Quoted in Lucinda Vardey, Ed. *God of all Worlds*.

In his ground-breaking book on psychotherapy from a communication perspective (Strategies of Psychotherapy, 1963), Jay Haley noted that all human communication attempts both to convey information and to influence or control the relationship within which that communication occurs, and that *symptomatic* behaviour communicates an attempt by the patient to control the relationship without having to accept responsibility for doing so. It is the job of the therapist, therefore, to interact with the patient in such a way that the patient is *not* able to control the relationship by behaving symptomatically, thereby not rewarding the patient for symptomatic behaviour, so that it has an opportunity to die out or “extinguish.” In *The Art of Psychoanalysis*, Haley comments that the patient begins by offering his symptoms while saying that he cannot help behaving the way he does, that he is not in control of his own behaviour. The therapist doesn’t deny this, nor does he deny the patient’s feeling that he ought to be in control. Instead, he accepts the patient as he presents himself, symptoms and all. But then the therapist suggests that there are

unconscious reasons for the patient's difficulty, placing the locus of responsibility within the patient but not within his conscious control, and defining the task as one of making the unconscious conscious. The idea of the "unconscious" enables the patient to express and talk about himself without owning the responsibility for what he says and does. This pattern of communication is, of course, the same as using one's symptoms to control the relationship: "It is happening, but I am not responsible for it." By assuming an unconscious, however, the therapist accepts and encourages the problematic behaviour while, at the same time, preventing the patient from using it to control him.

In due course, the bind that the patient is in becomes critical. He is constrained from getting out of it by quitting the relationship because the therapist has defined that as unconscious resistance to treatment. He cannot force the therapist to make decisions for him, because the relationship is always being defined by the therapist as supportive but nondirective. He cannot break out of the situation by aggression because the therapist simply accepts attacks by questioning their motivation. Haley suggests that, at this point, the patient can only escape from the bind that he is in by either ceasing to try to control the therapist symptomatically or by acknowledging that he is trying to do so, and the easiest solution is frequently for the patient to effect a cure.

Alan Watts (Psychotherapy: East and West, 1961), however, feels that the process is somewhat more complicated than this. In addition to the fact that the patient is trying to control the therapist through his symptomatic behaviour -- unconsciously, of course -- is the fact that he is trying to get help without having to become aware of himself. According to Watts, the patient is so disturbed by the discrepancy between his self-image and how he actually behaves that he dare not let himself become fully aware of it, although he wouldn't be coming for treatment at all unless he were at least dimly aware that this discrepancy is causing him some problems. In psychotherapy, therefore, the therapist (in effect) taunts the patient by suggesting that he cannot really conceal himself, while demonstrating an attitude of complete acceptance and respect. At the same time, throughout this interaction, the therapist is implicitly testing two premises which the patient has assumed to be correct. The first is that some of his actions are his own, and that they proceed freely from the choices that he makes -- which the therapist challenges by asking whether behaviour that the patient believes to be voluntary is really so. The second is that some of his actions are not his own, and that they happen against his will --

which the therapist challenges by attributing intent to involuntary behaviour, by suggesting, for example, that there is meaning in the patient's dreams. This places the patient in a double bind because it implies that however he behaves, either "voluntarily" or "involuntarily," he reveals himself to the therapist. Again, if he leaves the field, he is resisting. If he blocks, the therapist will gently imply that this too is revealing, and that there must be something which he is anxious to conceal from himself. And if he aggresses against the therapist, that too is revealing. With repetition, the patient eventually learns that all his attempts at self-concealment are absurd, and that his only escape is simply to be what he is without restraint. He does not simply learn to "be himself" as if that were something which one can do; he learns rather that there is nothing that he can do to not be himself.

Now, the Bible contains a number of injunctions to be perfect, but for purpose of illustration, one should suffice. From the fifth chapter of Matthew:

[Mat 5:45] Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbor, and hate thine enemy.

[Mat 5:46] But I say unto you, love your enemies; bless them that curse you; do good to them that hate you; and pray for them which despitefully use you and persecute you;

[Mat 5:47] That ye may be the children of your Father who is in heaven; for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.

[Mat 5:48] For if ye love only them which love you, what reward have you? Do not even the publicans the same?

[Mat 5:49] And if ye salute your brethren only, what do ye more than others? Do not even the publicans the same?

[Mat 5:50] Ye are therefore commanded to be perfect, even as your Father who is in heaven is perfect.

And thereby lies a tale because, while the idea of being perfect "even as God is perfect" is an interesting one, this injunction to be perfect has probably done more harm than good, as J.B. Phillips (*Your God Is Too Small*, 1952) has observed:

"Of all the false gods there is probably no greater nuisance in the spiritual world than the 'god of one hundred per cent'. For he is plausible. It can so easily be

argued that since God is Perfection, and since He asks the complete loyalty of His creatures, then the best way of serving, pleasing, and worshipping Him is to set up absolute one-hundred-per-cent standards and see to it that we obey them. After all, did not Christ say, 'Be ye perfect'?" (p. 25)

In religious circles, however, they call this scrupulosity, and it is considered to be a false virtue, and one to be avoided as an obstacle to spirituality. For in fact, *at any given moment in time*, no one can ever be anything other than what he or she is. We may *strive* to perfect ourselves but, like life, perfection is a journey rather than a destination, properly a verb rather than a noun. Except in the sense of being *perfectly human* -- and we are all good at that -- perfection is an ideal rather than a reality.

"The Hasidic tradition offers numerous stories intended to remind human beings that we are not in ultimate control, that we are not all-powerful, that we are not God." (Kurtz and Ketchum, p.21)

"When the disciples of the Baal Shem Tov [Israel, son of Eliezer, the founder of the Hasidic movement in the eighteenth century] asked him how to know whether a celebrated scholar whom they proposed to visit was a true *zaddik* [i.e., a rabbi who lives an exemplary life], he answered:

'Ask him to advise you what to do to keep unholy thoughts from disturbing you in your prayers and studies. If he gives you advice, then you will know that he belongs to those who are of no account.'" (p. 16)

Furthermore, with respect to perfection, even if we wanted to be perfect, none of us knows any more than where to begin, seeing "through a glass darkly" as we surely do; and few of us even know *that*, since few of us even know where we are to start with, poor ignorant creatures that we are. The best we can do is to realize that we are not yet perfect and, like the Man of La Mancha, dream "The Impossible Dream."

"This is my quest, to follow that star, no matter how hopeless, no matter how far, to fight for the right without question or pause, to be willing to march into hell for a heavenly cause. And I know, if I'll only be true to this glorious quest that my heart will lie peaceful and calm when I'm laid to my rest. And the world will be better for this, that one man, scorned and covered with scars, still

strove with his last ounce of courage, to reach the unreachable stars.”

(Lyrics by Joe Darion)

-- or as Robert Browning (Andrea del Sarto, 1855) said:

Ah, but a man's reach *should* [italics added] exceed his grasp,
Or what's a heaven for?

Of course, it isn't quite that simple. Men, in particular -- as opposed to women -- have a tendency to put their ideals ahead of everything else, to the detriment of people. As Robert Powell (1961) says:

“Basically ...all ideation [i.e., the forming of ideas] is harmful because concepts hypnotize us into faulty perception and wrongful thinking. It divides the individual against himself and separates him from the rest of creation.... And of course, it does not stop at that.... the self further divides itself into good and bad, godly and devilish, conscious and unconscious, etc. -- thus causing man to be at war with his own humanity. [Quoting from Hsin-hsin Ming, the oldest Zen poem, he writes]:

A split hair's difference, And heaven and earth are set apart!

(The Great Awakening, pp. 44-45)

“...when 'heaven and earth are set apart,' there is ever the struggle between what *is* and what *should be*....” (Op cit., p.46)

Furthermore,

“Where there is ideation, there is definition, where there is definition there are divisions and labels -- the labels then become slogans and banners; the banners so easily become 'causes' -- and then causes for war and all the other miseries such as concentration camps, brainwashings, nuclear weapons, etc.” (Powell, op cit., p. 47-48)

And as they used to say in the 1960's, “War is not healthy for children and other living things.” So perhaps it is fortunately that there is more to life than living up to ours or someone else's ideals,

“One day Mohammed was offering prayer at the mosque. Among the people praying with the Prophet was an Arab aspirant.

Reading the Koran, Mohammed recited the verse in which Pharaoh makes the claim, 'I am your true God.' On hearing this the aspirant was so filled with

spontaneous anger that he broke the silence and shouted, 'The boastful son of a bitch!'

The Prophet said nothing, but after prayer was over the others began to scold the Arab. 'Aren't you ashamed of yourself? You have surely displeased God because not only did you interrupt the holy silence of prayer but you used filthy language in the presence of God's Prophet.'

The poor Arab trembled with fear, until Gabriel appeared to Mohammed and said, 'God sends greetings to you and wishes you to get these people to stop scolding that simple Arab; indeed, his spontaneous profanity moved my heart more than the holy prayers of the others.'" (Kurtz and Ketchum, p. 30)

Thus, even our imperfections can sometimes help to keep us in touch with God. In fact, as Lehi said to his eldest son, Jacob (Book of Mormon, 2 Nephi 1: 81-115):

"... it must needs be that there is an opposition in all things. If not so, my first born in the wilderness, righteousness could not be brought to pass; neither wickedness; neither holiness nor misery; neither good nor bad.

...Now, behold, if Adam had not transgressed, he would not have fallen; but he would have remained in the garden of Eden. And all things which were created must have remained in the same state which they were, after they were created; and they must have remained forever, and had no end. They would have had no children; wherefore, they would have remained in a state of innocence, *having no joy, for they knew no misery; doing no good, for they knew no sin. But, behold, all things have been done in the wisdom of him who knows all things.* [italics added] Adam fell, that men might be; and men are, that they might have joy."

In 1991, Ragini Michaels published the results of a ten year modelling project which looked into the successes and difficulties of those seeking to define their identity from a spiritual perspective. In her introductory chapter, she writes:

"... I was eating breakfast with a friend, for probably the hundredth time, when he commented how repetitious life could be. That comment caused me to begin noticing many things -- how the sun rises and sets each day -- how the tide comes in and the tide goes out twice a day -- how the seasons continue to shift, every year the same process, summer-fall-winter-spring -- how the body requires that we eat and sleep each day. I began to realize that these

seemingly unimportant repetitions were demonstrating *patterns of change* that could teach me something important about how to live. What you will read here is what has arisen from exploring these experiences and these patterns.... The most basic pattern all of us experience is change -- that constant flow of life shifting and moving always, never static or still for more than moments in time. Even modern physics indicates the most seemingly solid substance is, in fact, in constant motion at the molecular level.

More outside our awareness is another basic pattern woven *inside* the flow of change. That pattern is being called the Facticity of Opposites. This pattern is the repeated manifestation of life taking shape through one form of expression and the change of that expression into what appears to *the mind* to be the exact opposite -- day into night, wet into dry, right into left, hot into cold.... Everything on the physical, mental and emotional levels of reality does seem to have a dual nature. We all experience both good and bad, beautiful and ugly, happy and sad, ups and downs. I began to wonder if this presence of Opposites (duality) truly was a facticity of life (an unalterable and undeniable reality). And if so, was there a way to relate more harmoniously to the presence of these Opposites in motion, rather than continuing to set up what I liked against what I disliked and constantly being in battle?" (Facticity, pp. 2-3)

"All of us have ideas and beliefs about how to live a happy life. For almost everyone of us, these include a basic unconscious belief that we need to get rid of the dark side of our human nature. If we can just get rid of the pain, get rid of the pressure, get rid of the argument, get rid of anything that is basically unpleasant, then... we'll find lasting happiness, peace or love. We seem to forget that spring only arises out of the winter, and the beauty of the stars can only be seen because of the night's darkness." (p. 4) ...

As Connirae Andreas (Core Transformation, 1994) says, when an individual embraces and cherishes any supposedly negative quality within himself, and enquires into the highest purpose which that part of himself is attempting to achieve, invariably it will be found that what is being sought is some positive state-of-being *such as* love, inner peace, or oneness with the universe or with

God. Adopting that being-state as a starting point² rather than as a goal that is still-to-be-achieved is transformative. And having the experience of having had that way of being-in-the-world from infancy, fully integrated into oneself throughout one's life is even more freeing and transforming; and both can be had just for the asking -- a gift of grace, as it were.

It is a bit like the story of Beauty and the Beast. Beauty joins the Beast only out of love for her father; but as she comes to love him as he is, he becomes loveable. His enchantment is dissolved, and he is transformed into a prince.

But hold on just a minute. Surely that only applies to those of us who are saints already! Surely it doesn't include people like any mass murderer whom you would care to name, and people like myself? Oh, but it does. It includes everyone. Each of us is perfectly human and each is exactly what he or she should be *at this moment in time* (given his or her heredity and the learning experiences that he or she has had since the moment of conception). And accepting that facticity is a good starting point for the journey towards any other goal, even one that is so far away as attaining to God's perfection.

1 Which is not without precedent: Thomas Gordon, for example, in his book, *I'm O.K., You're O.K.*, writes that everyone, by virtue of the knowledge and power differential between adults and children, comes out of childhood feeling not O.K. about themselves. The experiences on which those feelings are based cannot be erased, but they can be set aside; and he recommends that each of us begin afresh by consciously adopting the existential position of "I'm O.K." (rather than "I'm not O.K."), and that we build a whole new set of experiences based on that premise, so that any previous "I'm not O.K."-based experiences become relatively less important, and eventually insignificant, in our lives.

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