

FREE



BONUS

The Truths — about — Perfectionism

and Why 'Good Enough' Really Is



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THE TRUTH ABOUT PERFECTIONISM

(and why “good enough” really is)

What's wrong with perfectionism, anyway? Isn't it a great way to push yourself to achieve — to refuse to settle for mediocre or average? I get it. Nobody wants to think of themselves as “average.”

And you're right: we should reach for the stars. Pushing our boundaries tests the limits of our abilities and pushes us to do more. Parents and teachers always taught us to “always do our best,” didn't they?

But intellectually, we all know perfection is unachievable. For some people it even carries a religious weight to it — the idea of “the gap.” Perfectionists want to snuggle up as close to perfect as they possibly can, and the smaller that gap, the better they think they've done.

Perfectionism has been wrapped in a blanket of nobility. We tell ourselves we're aspiring to lofty heights. Perfectionists say things like “I have very high standards” or “I believe in quality over quantity.”

But perfectionism — at least the way I'm talking about it here — is less noble than it is a pain in the butt. Being shoved around by your own impossibly high standards means you end up disappointed in yourself again and again, second-guessing yourself at every turn.

Perfectionism doesn't just keep you from crossing the finish line — it can also keep you from ever starting.

And here's the sneaky part: perfectionism doesn't just keep you from crossing the finish line — one last edit, one final check on the seams, one more coat of paint — it can also keep you from ever starting. That's Analysis Paralysis: worrying about whether the sky will fall before you've even gone to the store to buy eggs.

Three Big Truths About Perfectionism

Truth #1: Perfectionism Is Just Fear, Gussied Up

It's fear wearing lipstick and pearls, but it's still fear. So what are we afraid of?

I once read a wonderful list, from Elizabeth Gilbert's *Big Magic*, of things that stop us from starting — or finishing. One line has always stuck with me: perfectionism is nothing more

than a deep existential angst that says, again and again, “I am not good enough, and I will never be good enough.” I can't say it better than that.

Truth #2: Nobody Cares

That's right — nobody cares. Everybody else is so busy living their own dramas and wrestling with their own perfectionism (probably) that they hardly have time to glance at your stuff. Even your boss just needs your work to be good enough to pass muster with their boss. People truly don't care.

Here's something I learned early on as a writer. I used to draft everything in longhand and think it was awful. Then I'd type it up, and it looked so much better — same words, same mistakes, but somehow nobody noticed.

Now, there are people out there who make it their life's work to point out the flaws in everyone's work. Why? Because they're so afraid they aren't perfect that they have to go looking for imperfection everywhere else. It's that comparison trap — is she fatter than me, do I have more wrinkles than her, are her speaking skills better than mine?

Truth #3: Good Enough Really Is Good Enough

When I was newly married — before kids, before any of it — I was determined to be the best housekeeper who ever lived, just like my mother-in-law. Never mind that my room had always been a disaster back at college. So I scrubbed, and cooked, and worked myself ragged. What did it get me? Tired. That's what.

Did my husband notice? Not much. Worse, I'd set a standard so high that he came to expect it all the time, and now I was locked into an exhausting routine that didn't make me happy. I wasn't overjoyed by shiny floors and folded laundry — I was just tired, and eventually resentful. Why did I have to do all the work around here? Blah, blah, blah.

People started noticing I was jittery and on edge. They'd tell me, “Let some things go. Let them slide.” My indignant reaction was always the same: “I can't let things slide. If I let one thing go, the rest of my life will follow, and everything will collapse in a heap — and then everyone will know I'm not just imperfect, I can't even manage daily life.”

Eventually, people caught on that I wasn't perfect anyway. So I began to let things slide. It was scary as heck. I kept waiting for the sky to fall. But pretty much no one noticed — refer back to Truth #2.

And eventually, I became a “recovering perfectionist” instead of a perfectionist. Do I slide back into old habits now and then? Yep — I did it while prepping this very piece. But I don't let it overwhelm me or stop me nearly as often anymore.

How to Conquer the Beast

So how do we actually get stuff done in spite of all this?

First, it starts with awareness. I had no idea I was being a perfectionist about those shiny floors when I was newly married — I thought that was simply how it had to be done. So before you can deal with your perfectionism, you have to notice it.

Ask yourself:

- Am I exhausted and reluctant to go back to this project?
- Am I grouchy and irritable?
- Am I anxious and on edge?

If the answer is yes, there's a good chance perfectionism is at play.

Then, remember Truths #1 and #2. Perfectionism is about fear — mostly, fear of what other people will think, how they'll judge us. So ask yourself:

- Who (or what) am I afraid of?
- Who might I offend?
- What's the worst that could happen?
- What would the aftermath of that worst-case actually look like?
- Could I handle it?

Some of this takes real soul-searching — maybe even some therapy (God knows I've had my share) — to dig down to the real reasons you're clinging to that impossible standard. Are you still trying to please a parent who isn't even paying attention anymore? Are you worried your boss will finally see through to some imagined “dark side”?

Or it might be as simple as saying: “I release being perfect, and I'm fine with being good enough — and being done.”

And finally, ask for help. Help is not a crime, and it might get you to DONE faster. Because DONE is better than perfect. Your gifts will never see the light of day if you keep waiting until they're displayed perfectly.

Get it started. Get it done. And move on — there's so much more to life than toiling over whatever has you stuck.

Live your life.