

The Imperfection of Perfection

Perfectionism is the voice of the oppressor, the enemy of the people.

It will keep you cramped and insane your whole life.

--Anne Lamott, 20th Century American Writer

Do you avoid trying something new because you're afraid you won't be good at it? Do you tend to notice and focus on another's mistakes? Do you beat yourself up when you make a mistake? "Yes," to any of these questions may mean that you struggle with the demon of "perfectionism."

Needing to be perfect is a no-win because it's impossible to attain. In fact, I just struggled with this inner demon in my own life. Recently, I wrote an article for an e-newsletter I send out each month. Taking my time, I vowed to myself that there would be no errors or typos (something that seemed to happen every month despite my attention to detail). So, I wrote and edited, then wrote and edited some more. After a final proofread, I felt confident that everything was, well, perfect. Feeling satisfied I hit the "send" button, confident that my quality creation would reach the thousands of people on my mailing list.

However, as I was waiting for the e-mail to be sent, I began re-reading the article and much to my horror, I discovered that I had accidentally deleted some significant words—words that changed the meaning of my message. Well, it could have ended there. I could have comforted myself by affirming that "we all make mistakes," or, "at least I have the courage to take risks," or something along those lines. But no, the voice of perfectionism (where in the world did it come from anyway?) wouldn't have any of it. It was relentless and cruel: "Now look what you've done! You just sent out something that looks unprofessional and reeks of poor quality. Just think of all the people who are going to receive what you wrote—and surely they'll notice your mistakes!" Yet another voice retaliated, "But what about all of the correct verbiage, won't people notice any of that?" "No!" shouted back the voice of perfectionism, "Would you?" Blah, blah, blah. It became clear my ego was at war with itself.

Feeling discouraged, I picked up a book of inspirational quotes and opened it. On the page I turned to was the "perfect" phrase for the moment at hand: "Mistakes are a fact of life. It's the response to the error that counts." Eloquent and uplifting, this profound statement was written by Nikki Giovanni, an American poet and she was absolutely right. It was obvious that my *response* was the problem, not the typos. As much as I had always prided myself on not

being a perfectionist, I realized that slowly but surely, I was adopting the patterns of one and I wasn't having any fun.

Perfectionism prevents us from taking risks, trying something new, living life to its fullest. And though it may seem to spur us on to producing a higher quality, in reality, it dulls our soul. Countless times I've heard people claim, "I would love to do _____, but I don't have any experience in that area/I'm too old (or young)/I don't have the education or training it requires," and so on. I have witnessed the demon of perfectionism hold more people back from fulfilling their dreams than anything else.

Yet if you're willing to live life fully, you're going to make mistakes. That's truly how we learn. After a decade of having written articles—each and every month—for a variety of publications, I still sometimes see typos once they're published. And even if I don't find any grammatical mistakes, I will sometimes criticize what I wrote, wishing I had stated a phrase or word differently. Again, the insatiable voice of perfectionism at hand. But then again, over the years, I can see how my writing has improved and how the amount of mistakes lessens with experience.

Being around people who look for fault is something I dislike and I certainly don't want to be that kind of person. Do you? Needing to be perfect stems from feeling not good enough. Ironically, the harder we try to be perfect, the less we feel that we are good enough. It's a vicious cycle that never ends. So, if you're ready to release of being perfect and are willing to accept your imperfection, try practicing the following:

1. Notice how often you scold yourself for making a mistake. Non-judgmental awareness leads to change and growth. It's the first step in letting go of the need to be perfect.
2. When you make a mistake, how would a loving friend react to it? Most likely with compassion and support. Practice giving that to yourself—it may be the greatest gift from you to you.
3. Ask yourself, "What would I do if I believed mistakes are good?" Then take steps toward doing it. Keep in mind how a little child needs to fall in order to learn to walk. Falling teaches the child how to *get back up* which leads to inner strength and courage.
4. When you make a mistake give yourself credit for trying and remind yourself that you're

still learning.

I once read a story of an instructor who split his class in half for a basket weaving assignment. Half of the class was told their grade would be based on the *quality* of baskets woven, while the other half was told they their grade would be based upon the *quantity* of baskets produced. Which half wove better baskets? The quantity group who improved through trial and error! And guess what? The quality group got stuck trying to achieve perfection. So the next time you're tempted to berate yourself for making a mistake, practice being compassionate so you may continue to grow and flourish in peace.