

The Importance of Being Imperfect

How many perfectionists do you know? Are you one yourself? You know the deal – you get a distinction instead of a high distinction and you worry that your parents will beat-up on you. You get a pay rise that is half of what others say was on offer and you feel that you have been badly done by and think that your family will not be proud of you. Where does the need to be perfect come from?



Harold Kushner, in his book “How Good Do We Have To Be?” suggests that when we were children, we may have misconstrued the advice being given to us by teachers or by our parents. He says that perhaps we misunderstood the sometimes awkward encouragement of significant adults who may have wanted us to study harder or work harder. Kushner believes

that they may have done so to stop us looking back at our lives in later years and being disappointed with what we saw. As we grow from children, through adolescence to adults, there is a danger associated with not going back and revisiting our childhood theories. The danger is that we continue to reinforce them ourselves, still blaming parents or teachers for making us feel inadequate, no matter how much success we have achieved.

I recently had a male client, now in his late-40s. Let's call him Mark. He told me of the dreams his parents had held for him when he was a child. They had chosen a career for him that they believed would be admirable in the eyes of the community and would reward him with financial security. To gain entry into university, though, Mark had to invest a great deal of hard work and dedication. He did just that, and he made the grades to get into the course of his parent's dreams. With good reason, his parents were very proud of him. But during his first year at university, Mark began to realise that he did share his parent's desire to enter this profession. He failed in his first year at university – and failed badly. Mark felt that the pride and support that his parents offered when he entered the course were withdrawn when the reality and the consequences of his results set in. Even today, nearly 30 years later, Mark feels guilty about how badly he had let his parents down.

Counsellor's Reflections

Strangely, though, in the years following, Mark did become a high achiever. He went back to university and studied hard at another course – a course that he had chosen. He found a job immediately after graduating and began to work hard at achieving the material evidence of accomplishment so that everyone around him could see how successful he had become. And Mark kept telling his parents of his successes as well still believing that he had to make amends for the earlier disappointment that he had brought them. He was also putting a lot of pressure on himself; setting very high goals each time he tried something new. He was losing his sense of humour and wanted to become quickly proficient at everything new that he tried. He wanted to succeed first time, every time. He described himself as a perfectionist on our first meeting.

But Mark was still haunted by the memories of his childhood. His relationship with his parents, today, is quite detached because he still believes that every comment they make about his life achievements is an underhanded criticism. I asked him to imagine what it would be like to entertain Kushner's notion that he may have misunderstood his parent's intentions in driving him to study so hard when he was younger. For Mark to consider that his parents might be, in fact, very proud of him for who is as well as what he has achieved, was very confronting.

I also asked him to consider how he would feel about attempting something new, knowing that there was little chance that he would succeed in his first attempt. The challenge we discussed was that of going out onto the golf course for the very first time. Golf is a game that is impossible to master on the first attempt, so I asked Mark, who had never played the game, to describe what his feelings would be. He answered that it would be degrading for him to be seen in public either swinging and missing the ball or hitting the ball way off the course. The key issue here, of course, was not how well he played the game of golf. Rather, it was how Mark would feel about being seen by others as someone who didn't have all the answers – a "work in progress". More importantly though, the test was how prepared was he to laugh at himself, and in fact, to actually enjoy the fact that he had found a challenge that, for some time to come, would have the better of him.

Mark shares one unfortunate trait with many other perfectionists. Because they feel constantly under the microscope, being measured as a success or failure, they have developed a defence mechanism that they believe will minimise their exposure to ridicule or criticism. If the perfectionist believes that a confronting challenge has a measurable probability of failure, most will not even try.

Much of our personal growth comes from making mistakes, and then learning from them. Perfectionists tend to learn more slowly because they miss out on so many of the positive learning opportunities that come out of not succeeding. In working with clients like Mark, time needs to be spent validating their childhood beliefs that nothing they did was good enough to satisfy their parents or teachers. It also allows them the opportunity to reflect on whether the pressure that they thought they were under may have just been a clumsy attempt by the significant adults around them to motivate them to perform to their potential.

In the words of Harriet Braiker, an American Psychologist, "Striving for excellence motivates you; striving for perfection is demoralising." So, be gentle on yourself as you move forward.