

The Blessings of Imperfection
 the Rev. Edmund Robinson
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Readings: *Foundations of Faith* by Abert Ziegler (Boston: Skinner House 1959) pp 40-41

Once upon a time, I set out to write my personal credo, the things I hold most dear, and this maxim was first among them: the perfect is the enemy of the good. I live by this and I think I will die by it. Jacqueline has heard me say it so many times, I think she's going to start imposing a limit on how many times I can use it as we are discussing the major issues in our marriage, like where to stack the everyday china in the kitchen. I want to talk about this on a personal and philosophical level this morning, and then to relate it to what we are doing this year in this church.

The last church I served as settled minister, in Chatham on Cape Cod would not exist today without the pioneering work of an extraordinary man named Peter Fleck. Peter was the St. Paul of Unitarian Universalism on Cape Cod; he went about preaching from Provincetown to Falmouth, spreading the good news about liberal religion, and he left to posterity several books of his sermons and essays. The title of today's sermon is from one of his: "The Blessings of Imperfection."

Peter started his sermon on perfection with a story his mother used to tell him, about a gnome who lived under a tree. All his life, he wanted a green hunter's bag. He dreamed about it by night and by day. Then one day he finally got a green hunter's bag as a gift. You would think he would have been ecstatic, but his reaction was, "It's nice, but it's not a green as I imagined it."

Peter points out how common this reaction is:

"All of us, at times, have experienced the sadness or disappointment upon the fulfillment of an ardent wish. The stream was not quite as clear as we had imagined it, the sea not quite as blue, the mountains not quite as overpowering, the woods not quite as dark, our marriage not quite as happy, our children not quite as accomplished."

Perfection would not be such a nasty word if we didn't pursue it, some of us relentlessly. If it just sat there hermetically sealed in its fortress of solitude, we wouldn't have to worry about it. But we take out after it. We have to have it. In our more competitive moods we measure everything to see if it is up to snuff with our standards of excellence. Let me recall an old friend who did just this whenever we had a dinner date with him. Were we going out to eat Indian food? He had to research the matter to make sure the restaurant we choose is the best anywhere around, and then we have to make sure we get the best item on the menu. Perish the thought that we could have less than the very best dining experience. Are we buying a dress, making a cake, applying for college, choosing a mate? We don't settle for the merely good. We hold out for the best.

It is in our most intimate relationships that the quest for perfection is most destructive. We know in our minds that there is no such thing as the perfect mom, but that doesn't prevent us from feeling bad because we're not her. Some of us have expected our spouses to be the perfect husband or wife, and have engendered a lot of unhappiness where if we had been willing to settle for good we might have found that our present partner filled that bill handily.

Many of us not only seek perfection in the person we choose to marry, but insist on perfection in the wedding itself. This is one of the reasons why weddings are such stressful times, they are so laden with expectations. When Jacqueline and I got married in 2000, it was her first marriage and while she knew not to expect perfection from me, she was naturally concerned that things should go well. In the month before the ceremony, however, our landlord decided to turn our home lives into chaos by replacing all the windows in our apartment and I got Bells Palsy which left me with a drooping mouth. Yet we had a fine wedding, a good one though far from a perfect one.

My experience with Bell's Palsy was like a lot of other people with this viral nerve disease. You go to the doctor, convinced you are having a stroke because half your face seems to have melted. And the doctor tells you some good news and some bad news. The good news is you're not having a stroke. The bad news is that you've got Bell's Palsy and there is no sure known for it. However, most people get most of their muscles back.

And so it was with me. In the months after our wedding, most of the muscle tone in my face came back. But I have had to live with a smile that is a little lopsided, and I don't like to look at myself in pictures for that reason. Many people don't notice this imperfection in my appearance, but I do.

Sometimes, it needs to be said, a form of perfection is possible; there are some areas of human endeavor in which it is possible to perform in such a way that the performance simply cannot be improved upon. When a pitcher pitches a no-hitter, that is by common agreement a perfect baseball game. But that is rare. Most often you will find the term perfect applied to something much more fuzzy, like art or the weather.

My personal mantra, "The perfect is the enemy of the good," actually originates with Voltaire in the eighteenth century; that philosophical gentleman was one of the fathers of the Enlightenment, from which descends not only science, the Industrial Revolution and the American Republic, but also Unitarianism and Universalism in America. Voltaire rendered it in French as "le mieux est l'ennemi du bien," which would literally be translated as the best is the enemy of the good, but I think perfect fits better.

What I want to do this morning, however, is not to prove the truth of this maxim but to try to grapple with the question why it is true. And whenever we ask why, we have a choice of several levels we can answer. Many of you would think about this question on a practical level, others on an ethical level and still others on a psychological level.

One of the levels on which Peter Fleck approached it was the evolutionary, and I am always up for an evolutionary explanation. He has this arresting quote at the beginning of his sermon from a book by Lewis Thomas called *The Medusa and the Snail*:

"... we know a lot about DNA, but if our kind of mind had been confronted with the problem of designing a similar replicating molecule ... we'd never have succeeded. We would have made one fatal mistake: our molecule would have been perfect... The capacity to blunder slightly is the real marvel of DNA. Without this special attribute, we would still be anaerobic bacteria and there would be no music."

You know, amoebas are some of the most common organisms on earth, and they don't have to worry about finding the perfect mate. When they want another amoeba, they just split. But the amoebas you see today are the same as the amoebas from millions of years ago, because without sexual reproduction there is no evolution.

Imperfection, in other words, is built into our DNA, and it is what has made possible spontaneous variation, which is a key ingredient of evolution. If the DNA molecule did not blunder from time to time, if it always made perfect copies, we would all be clones of the early life forms and would not have evolved as we did.

Thus imperfection, is a key component of the natural world, and has given us all the riches, physical, mental, cultural, spiritual, that we experience around us, which is why Peter Flack calls it a blessing.

But I want to approach the question this morning on a theological level.

The basic nub of what I have to say is this: our ideas about perfection spring from deep templates reflecting religious notions of salvation. In particular, we are influenced by the orthodox Christian notions of Original Sin so that, when we pursue perfection, we are actually trying to get back to the Garden of Eden. We may not believe any of the theological superstructure, but it is deeply ingrained in us because of our upbringing in Western culture.

Now the Garden of Eden story is in Genesis, in the Hebrew Bible, but the doctrine of Original Sin which was based on that story is a purely Christian invention – the Jews don't have anything like it. The Garden of Eden story is the second account of creation in Genesis. Peter Fleck in his sermon concentrates on the first account, the seven-day creation story, and he points out that when God completed his labors in each of the days, God saw that it was good. He didn't see that it was perfect, he saw that it was good. But in the second creation account, the Garden of Eden story, Adam and Eve are expelled from the garden, and God tells Eve that child-bearing shall be painful, and says to Adam that farming the land will be hard work. The final penalty is that

(Genesis 3: 19) In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

So God imposes four penalties for eating the apple: out of the garden, painful childbirth for women, hard labor for men, and death.

Now what does Christianity do with this story? Paul, in the fifteenth chapter of the first letter to the Corinthians, lays out an elaborate theory that sees Christ as the new Adam, and as in Adam all die, so even in Christ shall all be made alive. Christ, Paul tells us, has stood the Garden of Eden story on its head. Adam and Eve sinned and incurred the punishment of death on the whole human race, and now God gave his Son to atone for that and he will release us from the death penalty and lead us to everlasting life. This is the earliest text from which this basic idea comes.

Original sin, in other words, is rooted in an original state of perfection, from which humans have fallen away and need to get back to. As Crosby Stills and Nash sang about Woodstock, we've got to get back to the Garden.

This is pervasive in our culture.

Universalism, on the other hand, tells us that all of us are saved already. It does away with the idea that Jesus' death atoned for the sins of humanity. Jesus' ministry was to bring people, all people, to the saving love of God.

So orthodoxy measures down from an original state of perfection. Universalism measures up from the state of nature. Look at how far we have come since we lived in trees and ate raw meat. Nothing in the Universalist picture of the world is perfect except God, and the progress of the race is upward towards the greater good.

If we believe, really believe that we are saved already, or, to put it into terms today's UUs speak, that we each have essential worth and dignity, that belief relieves us from the pressure to be perfect. We don't have to get back to the garden.

Consider the Japanese aesthetic movement called *Kintsugi*. *Kintsugi* makes something new from a broken pot, which is transformed to possess a different sort of beauty. The imperfection, the golden cracks, are what make the new object unique. They are there every time you look at it and they welcome contemplation of the object's past and of the moment of "failure" that it and its owner has overcome.

The art of *kintsugi* is inextricably linked to the Japanese philosophy of *wabi-sabi*: a worldview centred on the acceptance of transience, imperfection and the beauty found in simplicity. *Wabi-sabi* is also an appreciation of both natural objects and the forces of nature that remind us that nothing stays the same forever.

In this respect, there is a convergence between Universalist and Buddhist values. The Buddha taught that it is a basic delusion of life to think that you are incomplete. We all do it. We all say, I won't really be a person until I

have such and such a degree, or until I marry Mr. Right or until I have laid up enough money for retirement or until I have a perfect figure or until my kid gets into the college of her choice. The Buddha says, you are all you need to be and you already have all you need. You are whole.

Orthodox Christianity is all about perfection. For example, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is quoted, in the standard translations, as saying “be perfect, as your heavenly father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48) But the Greek word translated as perfect, *teleoi*, actually means having reached its end or complete.

There is a lot of difference between being whole or complete and being perfect. Perfect means that it is the greatest thing that can be imagined, it has no flaws. Whole simply means that you have the sum of what it is, a whole loaf instead of half a loaf.

Another villain in the 2000- year old plot to make perfectionists unhappy is our old friend Plato. Peter Fleck points this out in his sermon. Plato taught that the ideal is more real than the real. The circle you can imagine, and that you can describe mathematically, is more real than any circle you can draw on a sheet of paper. Platonic ideas get melded with Christian ideas in the Gospel of John and a thousand years later in the thought of Aquinas and give us the notion of a God who is perfect and unattainable and humanity is a constant state of imperfection.

So why is the perfect the enemy of the good? Because the whole idea of the perfect sets up in us a recipe for unhappiness, a yearning for something which by definition we can never attain, when we are already, in reality, saved, beloved of God, we are already complete, we are already all we need. So now you know.

But the next question is, why is Edmund preaching about this at this time? I have two purposes in mind. The first is the general purpose of helping all the perfectionists among us – and we’re all there at one time or another – take ourselves off the hook. Ease up, lighten up. Give yourself a break. Cut yourself some slack. Forgive yourself. Laugh at yourself. You already have won.

The second purpose is to encourage us all to think of what expectations we all carry about the future of this church. Are we going to try for perfection or are we going to work until there comes a day when we look around us and say, as God said in the creation story, “it’s good.”

I once read a fine sermon on expectations of ministers preached by John Nichols, who was once interim minister in Brewster, to a church he was serving as interim while they were in search. At that time, the UUA would set up a website to which ministers and search committees have access, and each side gets to post its own descriptive document and eventually to see the documents posted by others. John cruised through the website to see what sorts of ministers congregations said they wanted; here is what he found¹:

“They want everything. They want a great preacher. They want a person of solid intellect, considerable passion and commensurate speaking ability. But this person must be comfortable speaking to and satisfying a congregation of humanists, pagans, Hindus, Buddhists and Christians.

“They want [a] dedicated and caring pastor, who also has solid administrative skills. They want a spiritual guide who will also understand fund raising and help them raise their annual budget but not by leaning too hard on people who are sensitive about money. They want a team builder who will be able to resolve staff conflicts by getting every staff member to agree and get along nearly all of the time.

“They want a harmonizer, a builder of community who is still able to lead in those new directions that will ‘grow’ the church, but not at the expense of any current member who need a great deal of the minister’s personal attention. They want a social activist who can represent the congregation to the community, but only on those issues around which everyone in the congregation agrees. They want someone who absolutely adores little children and teenagers and retired folks.”

It is a characteristic of religious liberals that we want it all. When confronted by an either/or, we instinctively try to convert it into a both/and. This is a good and praiseworthy habit, but sometimes it gets us into trouble. Listen again to the wisdom of John Nichols:

“... you will never find a minister who will fit even fifty percent of that profile. God or Nature does not distribute all of those prime ministerial qualities equally to any one individual. The minister who moves smoothly through crowds and loves being constantly with people will probably not be the preacher who will bring fresh provocative ideas to the congregation. They’re just two different personalities. They have different, almost opposite gifts, and those gifts do not reside together as strengths in any one individual.

“... [T]he idea of a complete [ministerial] package is an illusion. Everything we know about the development of personality reflects that having some qualities as strengths precludes having other qualities as strengths. Good ministers ... learn to maximize what they do well, compensate for what they do not do as well, and the congregation learns to fill in where the minister alone cannot meet every conceivable need. That’s why good ministers are successful. They have the help of the congregation.”

The bad news is you can’t get back to the Garden of Eden because there is no such place. We did not start from a state of perfection however much your Catholic or Lutheran or Episcopal childhood priest may have tried to convince you. You are not fallen. You are everything you need to be. As a church, you are small but you are vital and abuzz with enthusiasm. No ministerial candidate will be perfect.

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Here's a thought I will leave you with. Maybe God herself is not perfect, maybe she's evolving along with the rest of us. Try that one on for size.

My friends, each of us has much goodness, and we have room to grow in that goodness; we don't need to worry about perfection.

Amen

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