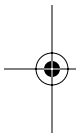
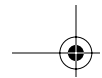


INTRODUCTION

Leafing through my files the other day, I found a Father's Day card that my son had given me when he was probably twelve or thirteen. It read, "Dear Dad, They say the sins of the fathers are visited upon the young. In view of the fact that I'm perfect you can't be all that bad yourself." I know only too well that I am not perfect. Yet in some areas of life I would really like to be much better than I am, and I meet many people who struggle to know whether this desire is a good thing or not. It has probably been at least fifteen years since I gave my first lecture on this topic. It was called "Perfectionism: The Road to Heaven or Hell?" This title gives a clue to the pressing dilemma at the heart of this subject: does perfectionism lead people to the heights of achievement and success, or does it cause untold suffering and misery? Perhaps it has potential for both!

Some of the perfectionist tendencies in my own life seem helpful, while some seem more of a hindrance. Each semester, I joke with my students as I give my lecture on perfectionism: "I am writing a book on this subject," I say, "but it is never good enough to be published."





In part, I am entirely serious: each time I prepare that lecture I find myself wanting to clarify a point here and add a few more PowerPoint illustrations there. Using this method, the lecture has, I believe, improved over the years. But when it comes to writing a book, is there a point at which this checking and delaying the final version becomes unhealthy and neurotic?

This morning, with a great sense of relief, after working through the whole manuscript during the last week, I completed a revision of the last chapter. But already, a few hours later, something in me is urging me to go over it yet again. I know I will find things that I do not like, that need to be rewritten. So at times, with typical all-or-nothing thinking, I feel like throwing it out altogether because it will never be good enough. I imagine my family, colleagues or friends reading it and finding endless things to criticize. I feel shame at not having spent more hours perfecting “Perfectionism.” But someday soon, I will have to meet my publisher’s deadline. And you now know, as you are reading this, I eventually had to accept less than perfection and let the book leave my hands.*

In my own family there is a strong influence of what I consider to be healthy perfectionism, shown in the value that is placed on hard work, high standards, punctuality, cleanliness, tidiness, moral integrity and maintaining good relationships. But what standards are normal? What is healthy? For some of us, perfectionist tendencies verge on the unhealthy, contributing to indecision, procrastination, obsessive behavior, depression and, sometimes, even criticism—almost contempt—for others who do not live up to the same standards. For most of us, a degree of perfectionism has been a good trait that con-

*Perhaps a new test for perfectionism could be based on the number of mistakes you find in this book!



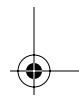


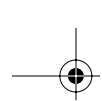
tributes to achievement and success and does not damage relationships. But the line is fine and the question recurs: when does trying to be good become bad?

In my years of psychiatric and psychotherapeutic practice I have seen many people who were troubled by different manifestations of perfectionism, from fear of failure and difficulty expressing emotions to severe obsessive-compulsive disorder. I see many men, women and teenagers with all sorts of conflicts about other people's expectations of them—and some troubled by God's expectations, burdened by shame and guilt, feeling that they can never be good enough for him. I have also met highly competent and gifted people for whom perfectionist tendencies were a great asset in their work but a disastrous obstacle in their relationships. Many students, clients and friends have shared their stories and have given permission for me to use them as illustrations.

So I am drawing from a number of different perspectives—personal and family experience, counseling and psychiatry practice, psychological and sociological research, and cultural reflections and theology. In the last fifteen years there has been great interest in perfectionism in the professional literature, and I have spent many hours reading the latest research. I have tried to distill the essence of these studies and to translate the results into nonscientific language without, hopefully, misusing or misinterpreting the conclusions. For anyone who wants more information, I have included references and sometimes notes at the end of the book.

In the first section of the book (chapters 1-3), I introduce the seductive sirens of cultural perfectionism. Having four children—three daughters and a son—I became very aware when they were in their teens of the cultural pressures toward perfection in advertising, in fashion magazines, on TV and in movies. I began to collect examples



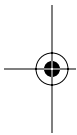


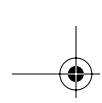
of advertisements to illustrate my lecture on perfectionism and discovered how frequently the word *perfect* is used in advertising and how often we are offered a quick cosmetic or chemical fix for imperfections in life such as facial wrinkles or anxiety. I have found most of my examples in the United States, but the global movie, music and advertising industries are spreading the same influences around the world, often adjusted and somewhat diluted in other countries. I then delve into definitions of perfectionism and introduce the debate over whether perfectionism is all bad or whether it can be said to have unhealthy and healthy sides. Finally, I describe several different types of perfectionism.

In the second section of the book (chapters 4-6), I focus on the many associations between unhealthy perfectionism and depression, anxiety, procrastination, anorexia nervosa, suicidal tendencies, obsessive-compulsive disorder and other psychological problems.

In the third section of the book (chapters 7-12), I look at genetics, family and cultural influences, shame and pride. In the later part of this section it should become apparent that our worldview and philosophy of life will have a profound influence on what we believe we are intended to be and do.

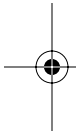
In the fourth section (chapters 13-15), I discuss practical strategies for change and for learning to live with imperfection. But I cannot end with techniques and strategies as solutions because the problem goes deeper into issues of identity, purpose, human nature and spirituality. To find the foundation of liberation from unhealthy perfectionism, and to discover what it means to pursue excellence and ultimately true perfection, we will explore the heart of Christianity. I hope you will follow me there even if you do not identify yourself as a Christian, as it will help you understand how Christian thought might contribute to healing from unhealthy





Introduction

perfectionism.[†] This section further evaluates the lessons of earlier chapters in a larger theological and philosophical perspective while drawing out the difference such new insights make to day-to-day living. I invite you to join me on this journey of exploration into the world of perfectionism.



[†]For historical reflections on perfectionism in relation to early Greek thought, Christianity and other world religions, see the appendix.

