

JUST PRACTICING

By Rev. Edwin Lynn

"A troubled man paid a visit to his rabbi," writes Robert Fulghum, "A wise and good old rabbi, as all rabbis try to be.

'Rabbi,' said he, wringing his hands, 'I am a failure. More than half the time I do not succeed in doing what I must do.'
'Oh?' said the rabbi.

'Please say something wise, rabbi,' said the man.

After much pondering, the rabbi spoke as follows: 'Ah, my son, I give you this wisdom: Go and look on page 930 of The New York Times Almanac for the year 1970, and you will find peace of mind maybe.'

'Ah,' said the man, and he went away and did that thing.

Now this is what he found: The listing of the lifetime batting averages of all the greatest baseball players. Ty Cobb, the greatest slugger of them all, had a lifetime average of only .367. Even Babe Ruth didn't do so good.

So the man went back to the rabbi and said in a questioning tone: 'Ty Cobb - .397 – that's it?'

'Right,' said the rabbi, 'Ty Cobb - .367. He got a hit once out of three times at bat. He didn't even bat .500 – so what can you expect already?'

'Ah,' said the man, who thought he was a wretched failure because only half of the time he did not succeed at what he must do. Theology is amazing, and holy books abound,'

The saying goes 'Practice makes perfect.' Ty Cobb practices. He was the best. But he was not perfect. For every 10 times he was at bat, he was put out 6 of them.

We live with the illusion of perfection, but it rarely exists in daily living. We need to be easier on ourselves. More accepting of who we are. We need to let ourselves off the hook by remembering the phrase, "Just Practicing."

Peter Fleck, in an article in the WORLD, based on his book entitled, "The Blessings of Imperfection", tells a Scandinavian tale from his youth, about a gnome who lived in a forest. The gnome had one big wish – someday he would receive a green hunter's bag. He thought about receiving his bag by day and dreamed of it by night. He

visualized the bag endlessly. Finally, one birthday his dream came true and he was given a green hunter's bag. But instead of being deliriously happy, he inspected the bag and commented, "It is a nice hunter's bag, but it is not quite as green as I imagined it." Fleck comments:

"All us of, at times, at times, have experienced the sadness of disappointment upon the fulfilment of an ardent wish. The stream was not quite as clear as we had imagined it; the sea was not quite as blue; the mountains not quite as dark; our marriage not quite as happy; our children not quite as accomplished. Reality did not measure up to our idea of reality. And when we say that, we have stated one of the principal tenets that only the idea of something is perfect and its realization, its expression in material, worldly terms, a mere shadow of that perfection."

Some take a very different view. They say life is not a dress rehearsal. Much of Christian tradition emphasizes the words of Jesus. "Be ye perfect". A phrase said in the context of a society which believed the end of the world was imminent. Perfection was believed possible, even necessary, if one hoped to go to heaven and live forever in the new kingdom. The kingdom never came, but some have self-righteously imposed this rigid standard of moral perfection on others since that time. As Josh Billings, 19th century humorist, said, "Some folks spend their whole-time hunting after righteousness and can't find any time to practice it." Or, and another said, "A perfectionist is one who take infinite pains and give them to others."

This is a dress rehearsal. Not a dress rehearsal for heaven where everything is supposedly perfect and probably very dull. Life is a rehearsal in Shakespeare's sense, that we are all players on a larger stage and our performance rarely goes perfectly. We are stumbling along doing our best. A professor of psychology used the slogan for his class "SOP" which stands for "Stamp Out Perfectionism". He feels the curse of perfectionism is the major cause of neurosis in our culture.

Such imperfection, according to Lewis Thomas, in this book "The Medusa and the Snail", is consistent with our human gene structure. We are built for mistakes. We are coded for error. Imperfectness is in our nature. He adds that mistakes are in our language. We do not say 'trial and rightness'. We say 'trial and error'. It is DNA's nature to blunder slightly. If DNA was a perfect molecule, we would still be bacteria.

We get trapped into striving for perfection in three ways – unrealistic standards, misplaced projection, and confusing the journey with the destination.

UNREALISTIC STANDARDS

Unrealistic standards are a major source of distorted perfectionism. We look at others with envy. We see what they have done, what are they doing, and what we think they will do. Forrester Church, aware of these comparisons, has created three ironic rules of perfectionism, the first being:

“Covet thy neighbor’s strengths, but overlook their deficiencies. Some seek the most ideal person they can find, or go even one step further and create a composite of all the best people they know. They think of the most attractive, most productive, most in love, wealthiest, happiest person, and create one ultimate image of perfection.”

Ogden Nash says it well:

“Indeed, everybody wants to be a wow,
But not everybody knows exactly how...
I hardly suppose I know anybody who wouldn’t rather be a success than a failure,
Just as a I suppose every piece of crabgrass in he garden would much rather be an azalea,
In the legal world all the little process-servers hope to grow up into great big bailiffim ns
sheriffim,
And in celestial circles all the run-of-the-mill angels would rather be archangels or at least
cherubim and seraphim.”

- 1. If we focus on just one individual, most us probably think of a particular person.** I know for myself, and I think for many other ministers, Bill Shulz, current president of the Unitarian Universalist Association, has many talents and strengths that are admired. Many ask why this young man gone so far? I found it interesting that Bill in a recent column in the WORLD, indicated that he has paid a price for his success. He has had little time for family, personal interests, and his own spiritual development since he began his quest for the presidency. He wrote, he hoped if elected to a second term, to be better able to balance his leadership role with his personal life.
- 2. Overlook thine achievements, and focus and be obsessed by one or two of your prominent wants or weaknesses.** For most of us life is going pretty well. We are decent parents, friends, lovers, active in the church, and good citizens. But there is always something that we could do better to be more perfect. We may need to lose some weight, or get into better shape. We think we really should be out there jogging, or going to the gym every day. Or getting to know the great works of literature or the nuance of the world’s wine. Or doing more for our community through service or holding public office. We could improve and our culture never lets us forget it. The implied message of media is “Be perfect – by using our products.” It is an impossible goal, which leads to much of the stress and frustration among us.”
- 3. Set unrealistic goals and remain stoutly fatalistic that your deficiencies cannot be changed, and therefore, know you will never reach your goals.** In the past week, many cultural role models, the perfect people, people of fame and fortune, have had considerable difficulties. Christina Onassis died a week ago. She was one of the richest women in the world, but her life was tragic. Because she had so much money, she felt an incredible pressure to be perfect in every way. She wanted to be beautiful, smart, creative, and caring. She fell and stumbled in every one of these areas making her life frustrating and often depressed. This week Barbara Walters held an anniversary television presentation reviewing her 49 shows of interviews of famous people. It was clear that even though many of them had well-balanced lived, faults and imperfections were much a part of these idolized personalities. As Cher one said, “Because people are good at their work, people assume that every other part of their life is equally

successful.” But the very fact that they are successful probably means that they have paid a price⁴ of putting in jeopardy other dimensions of living. An article on the front page of the Boston Globe about Madeline Kahn quotes her saying she could have been a star. I always thought that she was. But to her the real stars were Cher and Meryl Streep.

The ultimate in seeking perfection was Lawrence Kohlberg, a famous researcher, prestigious lecturer, and full professor of psychology at Harvard University, the ultimate position in the academic hierarchy. He made a significant contribution to psychology through the development of the stage theory of ethical development. He committed suicide in his 50's. He was depressed. Friends said he was frustrated because he felt his life had been a failure. He had not been able to equal the contributions of the psychological masters – Freud and Jung. I marveled. Kohlberg shows the infinite capacity of human beings to seek perfection. If one has delivered everything in this life, then, those so disposed, can search through all the history of mankind for standards of excellence that surpass their own in order to feel adequate.

We need to avoid unrealistic standards, seeing others clearly and ourselves more completely. We are “Just Practicing”

MISPLACED PROJECTION

Ty Cobb did batting practice hitting, and there is no question that work and effort led to his outstanding batting average. Many of the great achievements in any field have been the result of not only talent, but also effort. Michelangelo established standards for himself that no human could achieve. In many ways, it is said, he was wrestling with God, trying to shape order out of chaos. As great as he was, by his standard he often failed, resulting in many unfinished works. In another century, Van Gogh was a painter who initially had little apparent talent, but through dedication, effort, practice, to the point of obsession, was able to translate his vision onto his canvases. As has been well documented he paid the price of losing his stability for this all-consuming passion.

There is a difference between practicing for a sporting event and playing the event. There is a difference between preparing for a sermon and presenting it. But, because we can practice for specific events, doesn't mean that the same principle applies to the more general complexities of daily living. Life has too many variables. Change and variation are an integral element of all that happens. In baseball, there are many standardizations that provide definite limits to change. The pitcher may throw a curve ball or a fast ball, but he is always the same distance from the batter. The strike zone in which the pitch needs to be thrown is always the same with minor variation depending upon the umpire. In other words, there are more permanencies than variables. Life is the opposite. There are more variables than permanencies.

We are just practicing.

CONFUSION THE JOURNEY WITH THE DESTINATION

I can think of a number of examples when just as I think I have the perfect answer, the situation changes and my solution evaporates. There have been a number of formats for the Friday night candlelight

services. Years ago, we would hold a rather elaborate pot-luck dinner in the classrooms followed by the service. The dinner became such an enjoyable event that it was difficult to get people to come to the service, and when they did, after the drinking and eating, several would fall asleep and sometimes snore. We created the more modest gourmet dessert plan. I am always trying to think of ways to make the evening service more attractive. A few years ago, I thought that I had the perfect answer. We created a theme. I had readings from a collection of Swedish poets, which were both interesting and entertaining. We added desserts from Sweden, coordinated by Karin Scott. We had a big turnout and the whole thing was very successful. Aha, I thought, I have the answer! The perfect evening service. After some investigation, I decided upon the theme of France for the next service. French pastries would be ideal, perhaps some French music, and I would use French readings. I selected French poets. The poems were heavy and morose. It did not go well. Even though the evening was pleasant, thanks to the music and desserts, it was not the big success that the Swedish night had been. In fact, with the French poetry, I reached a new low in listener response. Just when I thought I had the perfect answer, it became very imperfect.

Another example. Most families have an image of an ideal Christmas. What I call the Norman Rockwell Christmas. There are many events in this picture. One of them is getting the Christmas tree. After several years of going to local tree lots, Marj and I decided to make the whole experience more meaningful for us and our young children, by going as a family to a tree at a farm. The first year was perfect. We tromped through the woods under a clear blue winter sky, planning in the snow, and found a beautiful tree. The same mood prevailed the second year. Marj and I thought we had found the perfect solution to getting the family tree. But the next year did not go so well. Due to a variety of circumstances, we were forced to go out on a day which was raw, windy and freezing cold. The farm had very few trees with branches on all sides; the only ones left were those that grew on the sunny side. We had spent so much time trying to decide among the limited offerings that the children became restless, tired, and cranky. Suddenly, the perfect Christmas tree cutting became very imperfect.

The ultimate in elusive perfection is child-rearing. Most parents feel that they are going to raise the perfect child. Especially with the first-born, they want to do everything right. But they are fearful and overly responsible, leading to a rigidity that may not be helpful to the child. In fact, I feel that the first-born are subjected to the standards of the parents' childhood, a standard that with rapidly changing societal mores may no longer be appropriate. In spite of these pressures, first-born usually mature to be very productive, even if they can develop a touch of neurosis. With the second child, we say, aha, now that we know what we are doing, we are going to get it right this time. Dare I say perfect. As you know, it doesn't quite turn out that way. With the second child everything is different. The family setting has changed, they are the second child with an older sibling, mother and father are older, perhaps more established, and the family may be in a different community. The second child can be a different sex, a different disposition, and have different desires and needs. They are different. We realize that we are not on our way to perfection, but starting another round of practicing. The journey is the destination.

Pete Seeger comments that during his folk concerts, he teaches a song but add by the audience knows it, it's over. Seeger adds, "The good thing about singing is that you can sing it over again." We are not so fortunate with child rearing.

We are just practicing.

CHURCH

The search for perfection also continues in the church. Religions since the beginning of time have expressed the ideals of perfection, but in the reality usually fall short of these lofty goals. There is the inevitable tension between projected ideals and daily events. Sidney Nuggent-Wilde said that the church is of necessity imperfect. The church is a place that encourages practicing not only in the specific skills of leadership and communication, but also by creating an atmosphere in which each member can practice being fully human, being a whole, holy person.

Peter Fleck writes:

“The church, the liberal church, in spite of its shortcomings, the imperfection that characterizes everything made by humans, is better, infinitely better, than no church. Maybe I should not have said ‘in spite of its shortcomings’ but instead ‘*because* of its shortcomings.’ For isn’t it true that in our churches, in these communities of the spirit, we have more resources than outside of our churches to accept each other’s imperfections, to reconcile our differences, to forgive and be forgiven, to comfort and be comforted, to love and to be loved? Isn’t that what the church is all about – because that is what life is all about.”

Even Ty Cobb, the greatest slugger of them all, only hit the baseball a little more than one out of three times at bat. The idea of the gnome’s hunter’s bag, or anything else, is never quite green as we imagine. Some say this is not a dress rehearsal. Be ye perfect. But perfection is not a part of this life. To that that pressure off ourselves:

- We need to avoid unrealistic standards. Seeing others clearly and accepting ourselves more completely.
- We need to avoid misplaced projection. Knowing practicing for specific events is very different than preparing for daily living.
- We need to realize the journey itself is the destination, understanding that people and event constantly change.
- We need to appreciate the church, our church, as a place of striving toward ideals, but also accepting our limitations. We are a place where each of us is encouraged to practice. When our days don’t go as we expect, or hope, or want, they are not perfect, or even close to perfect, let realize, each of us, you and I, are Just Practicing.