

Fear of Failure

A Sermon for the Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst

The Reverend Alison Wohler

November 12, 2006

Reading following Joys and Concerns:

We are fragile, we are not broken.

We are imperfect, we are not flawed.

We are curious, we are not confused.

We are vulnerable, we are not weak.

We are of this earth, and yet the divine lives in us.

When I feel as if I am going to break, I am the most human.

When I embrace my fragility, I let Grace into my imperfect world.

By Jill-Beth Sweeney Schultheis
In For All That Is Our Life

I read to you from The Book of Qualities about the character of Criticism. *For all his sensitivity, it was years before Criticism realized that other people also have feelings.* Here is Ruth Gendler's description, on the very next page, of Perfection:

Perfection is careful but not cautious. She burned her hands many times before she learned to pay attention. She says that hers is the most difficult job in the world. The post was vacant for nearly three years. Most people do not even make it past the first interview, and retirement is mandatory after nine years. About halfway through the fifth year Perfection started feeling like she was falling apart and dissolving into space. This recent episode humbled her. She had never realized how strongly we resist being broken open. She discovered that her greatest strengths grew out of her strongest weaknesses.

Perfection needs to keep moving. Otherwise she becomes swollen with her obsessions. She has learned to dance into the very center of her fears. She is not impressed by false modesty and the fronts we develop to hide our beauty. She is grieved by how fiercely we hate ourselves and yet refuse to change. She honors our flaws.

Why would Perfection honor our flaws? Perhaps because they make us real people – people who are balanced and whole. And true perfection would know this. Why is it we have such a difficult time trying to honor this balance in ourselves? This is a subject very close to the hearts of many of us.

Hello, my name is Alison and I am a perfectionist. I admit to it, but also claim, and I think rightfully so, that I have gotten better about it of late. It was sort of a matter of survival, given that I chose to go into ministry, and Unitarian Universalist ministry particularly. This is not a job where one can remain overly sensitive about scrutiny and criticism. There just is not enough time for that. But I do try to do my best. And I take to heart your appreciative comments and helpful suggestions.

I grew up with little experience in accepting my flaws and limits as I did not run into them very frequently in those early years. I was smart and tall and capable, pretty confident that I could do whatever I set my mind to – and to some extent that has been true. But I have been on a learning curve about perfection.

Sometimes we are lucky enough to realize when we are having one of those “aha” moments. I was talking to a psychologist (I highly recommend talking things through with someone professional once in a while.) when something she said made me laugh out loud that I had been so unaware of something about myself. She said “What’s the matter? Are you afraid someone might find out you’re not perfect?”

You’d think such a simple thing would not have felt like such a revelation! That’s when it hit me that being a perfectionist isn’t just a joke – something that is silly, that we laugh about, but doesn’t really cause any trouble. Worrying too much about making mistakes and what other people think of us can, indeed, cause a lot of “trouble” in our lives. As Forrest Church says (I am quoting him two weeks in a row!) in his book Freedom From Fear: “Perfectionism is a form of self-abuse.” And I would add, abuse of others, as well. “When we impose on others the same impossible set of standards that we inflict on ourselves, we jeopardize everyone’s happiness.” (p. 13) Trying to live the myth of the perfect mother, the perfect father, the perfect marriage, only ends up causing pain.

This is why empathy, compassion, acceptance and forgiveness are so very, very important. If we understand how hard it is to always do the perfect thing, how can we expect that impossibility of others? The reality is, though, that in our society, especially in corporate America, there is little tolerance for failure. We are trained, early on, that unless we perform efficiently and profitably, we will not be, and cannot consider ourselves to be, successful.

Where is the love? I have asked this question before. Where is our love for each other? And where is our love for ourselves? Looking for love is an important part of what we do here in our religious community. And it is one of the major goals of our religious education programs to instill in our children a sense of self-esteem, worth, value and purpose. With these in their psychic toolbox, our young people will be better equipped to deal with their imperfections and love both themselves and their, not-perfect-either, neighbors.

I read somewhere that one of the best ways to combat lack of self-esteem is to get out there and do things – build up a reserve of successes that convince yourself of your personal efficacy. The reasoning for this sounds good, but I’m not sure it always works.

I have quite a reserve of success stories on which to call for confidence, yet continue to worry about doing the *next* thing well. I suppose some of that could be called being “conscientious,” but part of being conscientious seems like perfectionism in disguise. Geneticists have identified what they call the “people pleasing gene,” but I think there might also be a “need for approval” gene. We want others to look on us favorably.

How do we deal with our imperfection and that sense of inadequacy – that dreaded feeling of being judged and found wanting?

The very first step is to stop identifying your value as a person with your faults – or your successes. It’s OK to feel bad that you did something wrong, but making a mistake does not make us a terrible person. Tell yourself this over and over – practice in the mirror if you have to – it’s that important. What you do is not who you are.

The supervisor of my Chaplaincy at The Cleveland Clinic told us that perfectionism is the fear of shame, of being shamed by our mistakes. That “need for approval” gene seeks what we so crave as a means of getting past the shame of our imperfections. The key to curing shame, according to Harold Kushner, the author of How Good Do We Have to Be? is to have “someone you trust and respect give you the message that you deserve to be taken seriously as a person.” (p. 50) The next step, and this is my caveat, is to believe them! For many in our world, that trusted someone is their God. There is a bumper sticker that simply says *God Loves You Anyway*. But for others of us the source of our self respect and love necessarily must be found somewhere within ourselves. This is very, very, hard. I’m sure you will identify with the fact that the greatest motivation for losing weight is fear of humiliation – not health or fitness – but the fear of being shamed in a society that has zero tolerance for being overweight. That’s why emphasizing, early on for our kids, their *inherent* worth and dignity, that first UU principle, is so important.

Another key to getting past our perfectionism and our fear of shame and humiliation, according to Forrest Church, is to think beyond ourselves. He quotes William Sloane Coffin as saying “there is no smaller package in the world than someone who is all wrapped in him (or her) self.” The mythical character “Narcissus was so paralyzed by fear – worried about his future, tortured by guilt, self-conscious about his inadequacies, dreading his fate – that he drowned in his reflections. Drowning in our reflections is a perfect metaphor for self-absorption.” (p. 128, Freedom From Fear)

One way I think we can deal with all of our fears, including our fear of being judged and found wanting, is to talk about them with each other. We do this one on one, and sometimes we do it in small groups. It can be very liberating to open yourself to another person. One of the very first things I did when I originally met the members of the Board of Trustees last fall was to introduce an exercise in vulnerability. I asked each person, and began with myself, to talk about something they liked about themselves and then something with which they were not so happy. This was both an exercise in releasing our fears and an exercise in humility. None are perfect. But all are valuable.

In the story Jane read to the children this morning there are examples of the fear of failure we are talking about today. The grandfather lies in the hospital bed, afraid that he will be less than what he was, worried that the less-capable him will not be good enough to be loved like he was before his stroke. The granddaughter is afraid of disappointing her grandfather by not playing the trumpet as well as he could. What they discover, and the lesson for all of us, is that we don't have to be perfect to be loved and enjoy our lives. It is always possible to feel the energy and the rhythm, as they called it, of doing fun and creative things together.

We do that here too. We do fun and creative things – together. We gather for dessert and conversation about social justice projects. We gather in small groups and share our lives and our thoughts and our journeys. We gather on Sundays to discover what it is we find most worthy of our attention. And I know you feel the love in this place and in our time together here. It's in your eyes, and sometimes in the tears on your faces. We don't have to be perfect in this place, we just have to *be* here.

There is a certain pain that is a uniquely human pain. Harold Kushner writes about the loss of innocence that came to humanity in the apple from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. “Before they ate from the Tree of Knowledge, [Adam and Eve] were as naked as the rest of the animals and like the animals, they felt no shame. But once they rose above the animal level and came to understand that some things are right and others wrong, they gained a sense of self-consciousness, a sense of being held to a standard in a way that no other animal is. It is not that being naked was immoral, rather that a person with a sense of morality knows the feeling of being scrutinized and judged.” (p. 35, How Good Do We Have to Be) Our pain has been in thinking we have to be perfect to get back into the Garden of Eden.

Life is not a trap set to condemn us for failing. We are not asked to be perfect, but rather to be whole. If we are wise enough to know what Ruth Gendler's Perfection knows, that our imperfection is what completes us. If we can somehow learn to feel that amazing overarching love that surrounds us all, regardless of anything we have done or neglected to do, then we can become the possibility that our humanity affords us.

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We are imperfect, we are not flawed.
We are curious, we are not confused.
We are vulnerable, we are not weak.
We are of this earth.

Blessed Be.