

The Perfect is the Enemy of the Good

by Francesca Ryan

This an expression I often repeat to my husband. He's good at a lot of things. He trained as a rocket scientist, then pursued a business career in Hong Kong. Later, he ran away to join the circus and re-trained as an actor. He still retains something of his engineering speciality, Failure Analysis. It's a matter of life and death, applied to rockets and airplanes. In ordinary life, it gives him a remarkable ability to 'work the problem.' He has a capacity for painstaking persistence and concentration. It pays dividends in so many ways. Yet it can get in his own way sometimes. There's no such thing as perfection in Art. This is particularly true of acting. No performance is exactly like another.

But do I heed my own advice about perfection? I admit to being selective about this. I sometimes use it to justify a sloppy approach. As children, our dad would remind my sister and I, "if a job's worth doing, it's worth doing well." As adults, she and I now recite a more facetious mantra. "If a job's worth doing, it's worth doing quickly." This particularly applies to housework. It can never be done perfectly; it needs constant re-doing. Increasingly, I feel this way about my own appearance. Maintaining a decent standard gets harder. Even looking reasonably groomed takes an effort falling far short of perfection. I watch my niece and her generation. It's much harder going for them. There is an obsession with a perfect appearance. Selfies of the perfect face, a perfect filtered life. Instagram has a lot to answer for.

Do we leave behind the need for outer perfection as we age? We may still strive to perfect ourselves on an inner level. *Let there be Light*. Spiritually and psychologically, we reject the darkness in ourselves. This comes at a terrible price. What is resisted, persists. We try to dump it. We project it away from ourselves. Our unbearable darkness lands on another person. What a relief. It's not in me, it's in you. Sometimes it's a whole group of people who must carry what we refuse to own. The painful consequence of our collective "othering" plays out in sectarian persecution. It becomes a cover for aggression. A justification of greed.

What if we could be more honest, more compassionate, about our own shortcomings? Could we bear to look in the mirror at our own darkness? If we acknowledged how painful that is, we could embrace the paradox of that pain. Our brokenness is an integral part of being whole. Of knowing our own wholeness. *God enters through the wound*, said C.J. Jung.

Centuries of cynical manipulation around sin (inherited and acquired) have elevated Judgement over Love. “They stole my Jesus” remarked a Roman Catholic friend, after years of damage done in the name of his Catholic education. A power drive for personal and organisational control had corrupted the teachings of his peace-loving Nazarene. “Suffer the little children to come unto me” became making the little children suffer, physical and mental violence. Manipulating a sense of guilt about imperfection doesn’t serve a spiritual cause. It serves the interests of patriarchal elders.

Judging oneself and others when we fail to be “perfect” is a crippling attitude. We fear we won’t be loved if we are imperfect. We will be judged wanting. Yet the truth is, we are all broken. That’s how the light gets in. A light that embraces our imperfection, allows us to be vulnerable. There is risk in that. Yet the risk is necessary. An invulnerable heart is shut to Love.

Maybe it’s worth trying to let go of our own unworthiness. Perfection is a hubristic pursuit. Persian carpet weavers used to leave a deliberate mistake in the rugs they made. Allah alone is perfect. We could allow the imperfect ‘good’ in us to be, just as it is. *Nobody’s perfect*, is the last line of the immortal comedy *Some Like It Hot*. Ironically, the movie’s final line wasn’t supposed to consist of those words. Wilder and his co-writer had them as a placeholder, hoping to come up with something better. Nothing else materialised. Dissatisfied, they shot the scene with the line anyway. Only when an audience roared with laughter did they realise; it was the perfect ending.

‘The Perfect is the Enemy of the Good’ - Voltaire