

THE BLESSINGS OF IMPERFECTION!

Our country would be more grown-up, if we weren't consumed with being all powerful and always winning. The chant of we're #1 is amusing and tolerable earlier this month at the Superbowl, but it's rather frightening, whenever spoken by our President or by the Chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Yet if America isn't *numero uno*, and no country truly is, then we have to live in the real world with the possibility of victories and defeats, in short, with imperfections.

The fundamental truth is that we humans are partners in "an interdependent web of existence"; so the only #1 worth touting is the well-being of the entire globe rather than any single piece of turf or ideology. It's always struck me as both odd, even embarrassing, to acknowledge that English is the only major tongue in which *I* is capitalized. In many other languages *You* is capitalized instead and *I* remains in the lower case.

As individuals, we're equally obsessed with the drive to be perfect. Our bodies are compared to muscled or shapely paragons, our minds are measured by IQ points, our souls must match up with the Mother Teresas and Albert Schweitzers of history. And when we fall sort of these unattainable ideals, and we always will, our psyches are tormented, perhaps even damaged.

I'll never forget asking an RE class of 5th graders awhile back: "If all the good people in the world were red, and all the bad people were green, what color would you be?"

And 10-year-old Jeannie thought mightily for a moment, then her face brightened and she replied: “Reverend Tom, I’d be *streaky*, and so would you!” And a little child shall lead us!

Any authentic religion needs to battle perfection, while singing the praises of imperfection. A liberal, make that liberating, faith invites us to be good not pure, to be whole not flawless, to keep evolving all our days and nights.

As Unitarian Universalists we proclaim that perfection is an unrealizable goal, even when you think of it in terms of eons and eons. Gutzon Borglum, the sculptor who created the tremendous Mount Rushmore Memorial, was once asked if he considered his work perfect in detail. “Not today,” he replied. “The nose of Washington is an inch too long. It’s better that way, though. It’ll erode to be approximately right in perhaps 10,000 years.”

And did you know that it’s only imperfect heartbeats that keep us alive? Cardiologists are discovering that the heart approaches a perfect symmetry and balance only...only a few hours before we die. So, as we live and love and cry and dance, our hearts always contain a slightly irregular rhythm.

But perfectionism isn’t only an unreachable goal, it’s an undesirable one as well. Personally, I find people who scramble to be perfect both boring and obnoxious where, like the New Testament Pharisee, they strut about, thanking God that they’re not like other folks. Religion, my friends, has for too long suffocated from what some wit called “the passionate pursuit of passionless perfection.”

And poet Adrienne Rich urges us “to return to imperfection’s school...no longer wandering after Plato’s ghost.” Rich wants humanity to quit chasing after abstract,

platonic ideals, be they of beauty or truth or anything, but rather to risk swimming the murky waters of real life: making the most of our imperfect relationships, flawed organizations, dysfunctional backgrounds, inexact sciences, and unfinished projects.

The truth is we're summoned to be good not perfect human beings, and, as such, we need to honor our failures as much as our successes. As Unitarian Universalist comic Steve Allen used to proclaim: "I'm loyal to a fault. That is, I've got a great many faults, and I'm loyal to every one of them."

In his superior book *The Medussa and the Snail*, biologist Lewis Thomas observes that we humans "are built to make mistakes, we're coded for error," that is, for being imperfect. We learn primarily by trial and error, not by trial and triumph. Progress requires error. This principle doesn't only apply to humans. It permeates the animal realm too. It's the very stuff of which evolution is made. Take the amphibians. The first one that crawled out of the water onto the land didn't do so because its feet were so strong, but because its gills were so weak. The imperfection of its gills made that first amphibian into an animal of a higher order.

Ben Franklin used to say that he had created about 200 inventions, but that since each success first required an average of 15 failures, he boasted that he had to his credit over 3000 failures.

Mistakes are our human way of doing something different, perhaps creatively new. As the jazz musician says: my job is to make my mistakes mean something! When we only do those things which please us, are safe and unafrightening, after awhile, fewer and fewer things please us. Over time, our circle of options diminishes, until we're prisoners in tiny manicured gardens of our own making. Contented and dull. The most

striking evidence of life anywhere is growth and growing entails making bundles of mistakes.

There's a Scandinavian story of a gnome who lived in the forest under the root of a tree. He had one big wish: more than anything else in the world he wanted to own a green hunter's bag. This gnome used to think about his green hunter's bag by day and dream about it at night. He had visualized it a thousand times. Then, one day, probably his birthday, the gnome received a beautiful green hunter's bag as a gift. His dream had come true; his ardent, all-consuming wish had been fulfilled. The gnome owned a green hunter's bag. Now you would have expected him to be outrageously happy. But instead, he moaned, "It's a nice hunter's bag, only it's not quite as green as I had imagined it!"

Isn't that the way you and I function, all too often? Our partnership is good but not quite as good as we had imagined it should be. Or our religious community is good but riddled with snags and tangles. Or our job is challenging but, alas, checkered. Or our adult kids, when are they going to shape up, when the truth is that no one ever reaches full "grown-up-hood"? Or the body type we've got is okay, but not quite what we would have ordered.

You see, no gift is ever quite as green as we imagine it would or should be, when our mindset is tyrannized by purity and perfection.

The gospel message of Unitarian Universalism this morning is real simple: we are good, very good, just as we are, and while we can make improvements along the way, we will never even approximate perfection, so let's drop any and all efforts to do so. We're placed on earth, during this single and wondrous lifespan, to be whole persons, defects

and all. We're neither immaculately conceived nor impeccably developed creatures, and never will be.

As recounted in the book of Genesis, during the week-long process of creation, Yahweh pronounces the results *tov* (Hebrew) or good, in fact very good, but far from perfect. "Good" in this biblical text means "entirely adequate to its purpose." This means that at its inception, before we earthlings systematically began to wreak excessive havoc, the ecosphere was well-arranged and sufficiently stocked. Adequate to sustain all forms of life. To claim that the creation is good means that we humans have everything at our disposal to live gratifying lives by ourselves and with other living things.

We're good, good enough, even if flawed and imperfect. As cartoonist Ashley Brilliant puts it: "I may not be perfect but parts of me are excellent." We Unitarian Universalists would go further, not merely parts of us are excellent, but the very core of our humanity is excellent, beautiful, good, adequate to be and do what we were created to be and do.

While in the Old Testament we're reminded that our entire creation is very good but not perfect, in the New Testament we're encouraged to be "whole as our heavenly parent is whole." For centuries the Greek word *teleios* (which really means whole) has been wrongly translated as *perfect*, so millions of folks have been swallowed up in a fruitless chase after perfection, creating both personal despair and resultant social violence.

Trying to be whole is a far cry from trying to be perfect. To be a whole person means to own both our good and evil propensities, to accept our total being, to know that

nothing human is alien to us. To be a whole person means neither to drown in nor to deny our demons but to face them, spar, even occasionally frolic with them.

Whole persons taste the full and bitter dregs of failure without grabbing for panaceas or rescuers. As whole persons, we resonate with that powerful line from a character in Dr. Zhivago: “I don’t much enjoy people who have never fallen or stumbled; their virtue is lifeless and of little value!” Amen!

Think, for a moment of wholeness in terms of our love partnerships. Relational math warns us that half a person times half another person (no matter how exceptional the involved individuals might be), produces $\frac{1}{4}$ of a bond. Instead, whole people choose to be with whole people. And whole persons are willing to divulge their weaknesses rather than hide them. Whole people are willing to dance upon the razor’s edge in service of a vital, robust, intimate bond.

The hopelessness of seeking perfection in love is illustrated by the Sufi story of Mullah Nasrudin, who wanted to marry and had set out to find the perfect mate. First, he traveled to Damascus, where he found a perfectly gracious and beautiful woman but discovered she was lacking a spiritual side.

Then his travels took him to Isfahan, where he met a woman who was deeply spiritual yet comfortable in the world, and beautiful as well, but unfortunately they didn’t communicate that well together. “Finally in Cairo I found her,” he said; “she was the ideal woman—spiritual, gracious, beautiful, and at ease in the world—perfect in every way.” “Well,” asked a friend, “did you marry her?” “No,” answered the Mullah, “because unfortunately she was looking for the perfect man!”

We're desperately and forlornly looking for the perfect job, the perfect partner, the perfect Fellowship, the perfect body, and these passionless Platonic abstractions don't exist in reality. We are good and imperfect creatures called to build and sustain good and imperfect relationships, jobs, and communities. That's our realistic and religious mission, so let's be about it...

One of my favorite stories, with which I'll close, illustrates the quest for a sense of wholeness that incorporates our warts and our weaknesses. This poignant story is found in Alice Walker's book *In Search of Our Mothers Gardens*, where Walker relates her experiences as a little girl when her world was good and she was self-confident. People thought she was adorable, and she felt love. She wrote: "it was fun being cute. But then one day it ended."

When she was eight, one of her brothers accidentally shot her in the eye with a BB gun. The injury, which wasn't attended to soon enough, caused Alice's eye to cloud over. "Where the BB pellet struck there was a whitish scar tissue, a hideous cataract, on my eye. When I stared at people, my favorite pastime up to then, they would stare back. Not at the cute little girl but *now* at her scar. For six years, I didn't stare at anyone, because I didn't even want to raise my head."

Then her favorite brother and his wife, understanding Alice's feelings of shame and ugliness, took her to a hospital, where the glob was removed. And Alice wrote: "There's still a small bluish crater where the scar tissue was, but the ugly white stuff was gone."

When Walker was twenty-seven, with a three-year-old daughter, she writes:
“Since Rebecca’s birth, I’ve worried about her discovering that her mother’s eyes were different from other people’s. Would she be embarrassed? What would Rebecca say?”

Well, everyday Rebecca watched a television program called “Big Blue Marble” that began with a picture of the earth as it appeared from the moon. It was bluish, a little battered looking, but full of light with whitish clouds swirling around it.

“One day,” writes Walker, when I was putting Rebecca down for her nap, she suddenly focused on my eyes. Something inside me cringed, got ready to try to protect my vulnerable self. For children can be cruel about physical differences, I know from experience...I assumed Rebecca would be the same.”

“But no-o-o. Rebecca studied my face intently...she even held my face maternally between her dimpled little hands. Then, looking every bit as serious and lawyer-like as her father, Rebecca said, as if it may just possibly have slipped my attention: “Mommy, there’s a world in your eye.” And then, gently, but with great interest: “Mummy, where did you get that world in your eye?”

“And, for the most part, my pain left then. Crying and laughing, I ran to the bathroom while Rebecca mumbled and sang herself off to sleep. Yes, indeed, I realized, looking into the mirror, there was a world in my eye. And I saw that it was possible to love it: that, in fact, for all it had taught me of shame and anger and inner vision, I did love it.”

Consequently, Alice Walker dedicated her book “to my daughter, Rebecca, who saw in me what I considered a scar and redefined it as a world.”

Yes, yes, folks as a religious people we know well that we're good but not perfect, that we're flawed not pure, that we move toward our destinations without ever quite reaching most of them, and, yes, we even know, when we pause to ponder, that there exist worlds of beauty and power nestled deep amid the very scars of our beings.

Tom Owen-Towle
February 22, 2009