

The Art of Being Imperfect

December 4, 2011

When I was a Seminary student, we had several visiting teachers of different faiths. One was a rabbi who worked at the Kabbalah Center in New York City. He began his first class with us by describing a room empty of everything except a bag of gold. The rabbi asked us to consider three scenarios surrounding this unclaimed money.

#1. A man walks into the room, sees the bag of gold, and, without a second thought, turns and leaves the room and gold behind.

#2. A man walks into the room, sees the bag of gold, and, knowing it could be used to help the poor people in his community, takes it and distributes the wealth (keeping none for himself).

#3. A man walks into the room, sees the bag of gold, and, knowing it will never be traced, takes it for himself. Later, realizing that he has stolen money, he returns the bag of gold to the room.

The rabbi asked us to go home and think about which of these men God would be most pleased with.

In class and on our own, we considered these scenarios. The first man seemed like the best candidate for God's satisfaction. He knew that to take something that doesn't belong to him is a crime. It didn't even occur to him to take the gold. The thought of acquiring something for himself didn't even enter his consciousness for a moment. This is what we're all shooting for, isn't it? After all, that's really quite a level of goodness or enlightenment, when a self-interested thought doesn't even come up as a blip in the radar. I heard someone say many, many years ago, that not even a THOUGHT escapes karma. So, surely he is the best man in the eyes of God.

-- But then, #2, who sees injustice in the world, is willing to take on a sin himself so that others can have their needs fulfilled. He's willing to risk the consequences in his earthly existence as well as in the afterlife, so that resources are provided for the most needy. He's sacrificing his soul. Maybe he could do things better, work for social change instead of stealing, but the ends justify the means, right? This is why Robin Hood is such a hero. Even Bernie Getz -- remember him? -- the subway rider who'd had just about enough of crime on the NYC subways and in 1984 turned a gun on the teenagers who were mugging him. Despite the legal consequences for Bernie Getz, everyone who was old enough to know his name still has a strong opinion -- usually favorable -- about what he did. Our second man is making a sacrifice for others, so surely HE is the best man in the eyes of God.

-- #3 we can just write off, right? So he brought the gold back, but he gave in to his baser instincts first. We're just lucky his baser instincts weren't murder or assault, actions you can't really undo.

We met with the rabbi the next week and debated this question for quite a while. He surprised us all when he told us that the best man in God's eyes would be the third. A man who made a mistake, repented, and corrected his mistake to the best of his ability.

The rabbi told us that God doesn't want us to try to be perfect. He wants us to see that we already are. There is nothing wrong with us. Nothing is broken.

We aren't called upon to be perfect all the time. But to know ourselves and to be comfortable enough with God so that we can humbly admit and change our ways.

There is a Turkish proverb that goes like this: no matter how far you've gone down the wrong road, turn back. It's never too late to admit an error and begin to undo it.

For several years I taught a self-esteem class at the Taconic Correctional Facility in Bedford, NY. This is a medium security prison, and the inmates are incarcerated usually for less than 7 years. The class I taught was once a week for six weeks, and built upon each previous week's lesson and homework.

We started in Week One with some very basic explanations about the way the subconscious mind works, and how we're programmed from a very early age to believe and perceive whatever our parents or authority figures tell us. We also fill in a lot of the gaps with our own (in)experience, and take on a lot of responsibility and blame for things that happen in the world. Teaching these students that they were set up for trouble made their eyes light up.

But I didn't let them off that easy. Once they understood how their minds worked, and that their backgrounds -- in general -- had predisposed them to a certain view of the world where they had to do whatever they could to protect themselves... once they knew how their minds worked, they instantly accepted the responsibility to create a change.

Once you know that you can control the direction your life goes in -- once you really KNOW it -- there's no turning back on that. You can't un-know that. You can't unring the bell. Once you know, you almost have a moral obligation to begin to make things better for yourself.

Like the third man in our story; once he knew he'd made a mistake, he was compelled to undo it.

Throughout the course of our 6-week class at the prison, I taught the inmates that accepting responsibility for the mistakes they made would empower them to move past them and begin to create a new life.

If you want to go to Los Angeles, you have to know where you are first. Once you know where you are, you know how to set your course for your destination; how you got to your current place is only relevant when viewed as a launching point for your goal.

There is no shame in being wrong. I believe we aren't letting God down if we are imperfect.

Jesus wasn't perfect. He had emotions like anger, sorrow and fear. He went away without telling his parents where he went and made them crazy, so they searched for him in a panic until they found him in the temple.

Think of a little child or a puppy who makes a mistake. You may be angry with him, but you understand that he doesn't have the capacity you have as an adult to understand something.

I believe God's relationship to us is like ours to a child or puppy. He knows we aren't perfect in our thoughts and deeds, and is always ready to forgive us.

Why don't we remember to be ready to forgive ourselves and others?

We sometimes expect perfection from ourselves, and we often expect it from others, too. I expect other drivers to be perfect, and have been known to have a minor outburst if someone cuts me off. But I've sailed across two lanes of traffic to make my exit, meekly waving my hand to the other honking drivers and cringing in apology.

I expect the civil servants at the DMV to be perfectly courteous to me. I expect the post office and the department store to run flawlessly so I don't have to wait in line. Really, I have quite a lot of expectations of perfection that I'd like to see in other people. I expect my sweetheart to get over his own insecurities, but to be patient with mine. If I'm honest with myself, I do this a lot.

I may be hardest on myself, though. I expect to succeed in everything I do. That's a good thing, it keeps me motivated and working hard towards my goals. But if I don't meet my own expectations I can be quite unkind to myself.

It's okay to make mistakes. There really is no other better way to integrate knowledge than to experience doing something incorrectly. You can't learn to ride a bicycle by reading about it. You have to try it. You actually have to fall off of it to understand how to balance on it.

I didn't really get this message growing up. My mother was a textbook perfectionist. She was never wrong. She has never once admitted to a setback, a failure, a mistake, or anything less than complete and total success.

When we were children, my sisters and I really believed she *was* perfect. And because we were reflections of her perfect mothering, failure for us was never an option. Mistakes we made were met with horror and embarrassment. As if we were born knowing how to start dinner, or intuit her needs, or know how to say "no" to boys we were starting to really like.

I grew up believing that making mistakes was a signal of failure. I knew deep down in my core that I was very far from perfect, and this secret knowledge ate away at me. In order to avoid

acknowledging that awful flaw, I lied, used drugs, drank more than was healthy, took crazy risks in some areas and hid in the background in others.

Slowly, slowly, I came to another conclusion. It took years of therapy, reading, praying, and self-examination to truly understand the bottom line and accept it: *I am not perfect. I have failed at perfection.*

There, I said it.

And as I waited for the lightening to strike me dead, I found instead a blessed, amazing, PEACE. I'm not perfect? Does that mean I don't have to have life figured out? I don't have to save every stray cat, every found penny, every weight loss client, insecure boyfriend? I don't have to save the world?

Oh, Thank God.

I am not perfect. You are not either. I have made mistakes, and I'll make more. I'll fall off the bike again. So will you. And if I am self-aware, and self-forgiving, I will find a better, more balanced way to go forward.

And I'll be patient with my neighbors, family, friends and strangers. I'll be patient with the president.

As a young adult I was often conflicted by the humility that is referred to frequently in the Catholic tradition, in which I was raised. "Lord, I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word, and I shall be healed."

"Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa." My fault, my fault, my most grievous fault.

And yet, we are made in His image.

I was conflicted because I didn't really understand why, as children of God, whom I was taught was my father and creator, we were such miserable wrecks! Debasing ourselves, referring to ourselves as sinners, lowly beings, not worthy to be in God's presence. How could I be so faulty, and still be made by one who is faultless?

In the past several years I've come to a new understanding of this question. I see now that if I recognize that I am imperfect, there is room in my heart for me to hear, see, and feel God's perfection.

I think about my mother, when I think about this new understanding. She had so much invested in this image of herself as perfect, which she built up to cope with whatever issues she had. I have no idea what they were, because she never spoke about her sorrows or vulnerabilities or

mistakes. But she must have had them. When she's always right, she's not listening. When she knows everything already, there is no wonder left to be enjoyed. When she demands perfection of herself and others, there are no happy accidents.

When I admitted to myself that I was imperfect, that meant to me at first that I was a failure. But as I prayed about this and meditated and came to know God in a new way, I finally believed about myself that just because I made mistakes, didn't mean I was a failure. Making mistakes just made me wiser, made me more efficient at learning.

What the admission of imperfection did for me was not release me from responsibility or accountability. What that admission and understanding really gave me was grace.

A good explanation of grace is found in the epistle to the Philippians: "For it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure" (2:13).

Another passage regarding grace can be found in the letter to the Hebrews: "Now the God of peace...makes you perfect in every good work to do His will, working in you that which is well-pleasing in His sight..." (Heb. 13:20-21).

Grace is not mercy. Grace is not a license to sin. Many understand that grace is unmerited favor, and that is true. Grace, however, is much more than unmerited favor. Grace comes from the Lord and is simply the God-given desire and the power to do God's will.

When we know we aren't perfect, and don't expect ourselves to be, we are open to hearing God's voice, being lead by God's will in our hearts. We are able to put the kingdom of heaven first, in everything we do.

When we know we don't know everything, we are able yet to be filled with wonder. We can fill our hearts with the wonder and perfection of God, and be moved to do His will.

We can also be much more patient with the imperfections of others.

So throughout the rest of the week, why don't you try to give way a little bit. If you catch yourself complaining about someone, stop yourself. For me, I've decided to stop complaining about a certain political party, and if I see or hear about something on the news that the lawmakers are doing, I say a prayer instead for the president, congress, and lawmakers.

Let yourself be mistaken. If you are humble and acknowledge to yourself that you are imperfect, you can more clearly hear the voice of God.

Acknowledge your mistakes and your imperfection. You're not debasing yourself. You're seeing yourself more clearly. Like trying to get to Los Angeles: look and see where you are -- every day if you have to -- and you will see your direction so much more clearly.

I'm not saying to repeat negative things to yourself, or to stop using the power of positive thinking or affirmations. I mean when you don't know something, or when you've made a mistake, hurt someone's feelings, expected perfection from yourself or someone else -- pause for a moment and admit to yourself your error. There is no shame in it -- there is a great, quiet space that follows, where you can hear the voice of God -- or your own conscience for that matter -- giving you direction to go forward.

Raised a Catholic, we had the sacrament of Confession, now Reconciliation. You were to admit your sins to the priest, who gave you a penance -- usually some Hail Mary's -- and told you, "Go and sin no more."

If you really understand and acknowledge your mistake, you integrate the new learning. We get closer and closer to God when we realize we don't know everything, and so we hear and feel God within us.

One of the things about the gnostic tradition, which I was schooled in, that I find so very appealing, is that we CAN see as God sees, love as God loves and feel as God feels. That's that unconditional love everyone's talking about.

In A Course in Miracles I read that if we could have only one prayer, let it be this:

"Dear God, release me from my sense of vulnerability, so that I can perform miracles."

Acknowledging imperfection allows us to release our ideas of perfection, and be truly perfect in God.