

Perfectionism

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Musical Prelude

Greeting

Hymn 1: *Green p. 162* “One Step at a Time”

Readings

Suchness [is] “the basis of all religious experience.” You might think that by now everyone would know what was meant by something this important. Not so. What’s the problem? It is... that one must personally experience suchness. Only then does one understand what it is....

“Real suchness is not a concept. It is an experience beyond reach of the intellect... [Look] at what seems to be an ordinary pebble. In the early milliseconds [of examining it], we will have already taken it away from itself. We will have processed its wavelengths and transformed them into a percept framed in our own personal terms of reference. Thought wandering, as usual, we might even go on to discriminate whether it was a light or heavy pebble, igneous or metamorphic, etc., etc. If its black surface and white quartz veins seemed aesthetically pleasing, we might succumb to the rock hound’s powerful impulse (almost primal, it seems) which drives the “collector’s need” to take it home. Or, if it were flat enough, and we had energies to burn, we might hurl it skipping along the water’s surface.

“What happened to the stone itself in all this? The pebble got lost. For its true suchness is none of these extra, human, layers. It is the stone, seen thoroughly but spared from being processed further. And seen not as *our* object. But *just as it is*, the thing-in-itself, uncomplicated by any of our autobiographical references. In suchness, viewing perceives that very stone,

and it relates directly to it. Immediate perception. Uncluttered by any personal reverberations.

“So what? What does it add to see things *exactly* as *they* are? ...[It] elevates them to the *same mater-of-fact but sacred status* which infuses everything else in the universe.... Suchness confers its unique, absolute perspective. It operates only when the human scale shrinks.

Primitive humans arrived late in this planet’s history. *Homo sapiens* evolved much later still, bringing sundry concepts, labels, dictionaries... Pebbles existed eons before all these other things did. Each pebble existed in its own way, in its *essential namelessness*. In itself, it had no need to prompt any human sensation, to be tagged by some label and fitted into any human scheme of things. Nothing about this basic situation changed simply because our species had arrived. We and the pebble are still integral parts of one and the same ongoing universe. *It is still a universe undivided*. It has never been split up by such artificial distinctions as minutes, first names, rock names, or place names. It *is*, in its suchness. It will still be so even when human beings are no longer around to see it, and to proliferate thoughts about it.

James H. Austin - *Zen and the Brain: Toward an Understanding of Meditation and Consciousness*

The manner of a thing’s being is that also if its excellence... if there is a thing possessing the whole virtue of existence, no nobility present anywhere else can there be absent. God is wholly his being and possesses existence to the full power of existence itself. Every excellence and perfection belongs to a thing inasmuch as it is; every defect inasmuch as somehow it is not. God is totally existence, and is therefore unflecked with any imperfection.

St. Thomas Aquinas - *Summa Contra Gentes*

"I tell you do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life? And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will God not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? ...Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself.

Matthew, Chapter 6, Verses 25-34

Hymn 2: [Green p. 296](#) “Dona Nobis Pacem”

Joys and Concerns

Musical Interlude

Prayer

Children’s Hymn: [Blue p. 9](#) “Quiet Moments”

Message:

About six months ago or so, I overheard a couple of friends discussing the personality differences between people who save things and people who throw things away, people who easily save, but eventually save, and people who easily throw things away. And both of them said that they were “throwers,” they weren't “savers.”

So I listened to this conversation with fascination and wonder, and I thought, how does a person join the ranks of the “throwers?” How could I find that magic spell that would allow me to not only capable of throwing something away, but be comfortable with it?

Now, this wasn't a huge issue in my life. I am not completely overwhelmed with stuff. Things are a bit messier and fuller in my life than I'd like them to be, and it's sometimes inconvenient to find things or put things away, but this wasn't like it was a quest, it was just a gentle wondering. So I held the question for a

few weeks, and a path was revealed to me in the form of a leading to do an internet search on how to throw things away.

And eventually, this turned up a book that I checked out the library called *Stuff, Compulsive Hoarding in the Meaning of Things*, written by Gail Steketee and Randy Frost. And it was a fascinating book, because it was a psychological study into

people who are serious hoarders, which I'm not, but there was a characteristic that jumped out at me that serious hoarders have that many people might find surprising, which is that hoarders tend to be perfectionists.

When I saw that, I just recognized myself immediately, and I started thinking about perfectionism, and what perfectionism is.

Now, on the one hand, it can be a positive thing. There's an internal motivation toward excellence. And in some ways, I was always kind of secretly proud of my perfectionism. It was the kind of thing you'd trot out at a job interview. They'd ask you what your greatest weakness was, and you'd say, "Oh, well, I tend to be a perfectionist."

"Oh," the answer, "Then you'll be good for this company."

So it's sort of a charming pseudo flaw. But I began to see, as I was thinking about this, that perfectionism can have a downside. It breeds anxiety. It leads to hoarding and other compulsive behaviors.

Then I realized that it even shouldn't even be called "perfectionism." It should be called "imperfection anxiety," because perfectionists don't think that we're perfect. Far from it, we are acutely aware of our flaws. Perfectionism is a response to pressure, whether it's perceived or actual, of expectations.

Of social expectations. We know that we're flawed. We're afraid that if we aren't perfect, if we don't act as if we're perfect, that we're going to be rejected sooner later.

And there are also internal expectations, that this self-concept we have of the ideal that we could be or that something else could be, combined with this awareness that we're flawed, that we can never be perfect. There's a drive to maintain control. There's a fear of rejecting ourselves.

I started to think about how perfectionism is related to clutter. There are two aspects of clutter accumulation. One of them is the inability to discard things and that other is the tendency to acquire more stuff. And perfectionism drives both of these because when we acquire things, we want to have a complete set. Perfectionism is characterized by a need for completeness, for fullness, a full refrigerator, for pantry, a full schedule, whatever.

And also, we want to have a “perfect” avoidance of need or of lack. So we acquire. “If I acquire everything that I may need, then I avoid the frustration and fear of lack, that something I wanted should become no longer available.”

And then on the other hand, perfectionism leads to clutter because we don't want to discard things. We don't want to be considered wasteful because we have this self-concept of ourselves as being helpful to the environment and we don't want to fill up the landfills. And we also can't abide the idea that if we throw something away, we might need it again because we should have been able to foresee perfectly the future than know that we shouldn't have thrown it away.

So I was thinking about all these things and I was led to another book: *Present Perfect: A Mindfulness Approach to Letting Go of Perfectionism and the Need for Control* by Pavel Somov, another psychiatrist. I learned more about perfectionism from this book. For one thing I learned that I am not alone as a perfectionist. Far from it!

He quotes two other researchers, Gordon Flett and Paul Hewitt, who say, “A strong case can be made for the claim that perfectionism is endemic to Western culture.” In other words, our culture breeds perfectionism.

I also got a new perspective on perfectionism from this book: that perfectionism is characterized by a rejection of reality. The *ideal* to a perfectionist is better than the *real*. Somov says, “As a perfectionist... you are never satisfied with reality as it is. The real world - the one and only world that there is at any given point in time - always pales in comparison with a better world that you can imagine. In any comparison of the real and the ideal, the ideal, by definition, comes out on top and the real loses out. No matter how great you are, you can always imagine yourself being even better. This conclusion is in the nature of imagination: fiction is always one step ahead of fact... Thus, perfectionism is a destiny of dissatisfaction....”

Somov also says that perfectionism is a rejection of the present. He says, “Many of us are in a race against time... In your fixation on meeting goals, you are speeding toward the future, dismissing the present as having only the significance of being a step on the way to a future moment of completeness and accomplishment.”

And certainly perfectionists, like many of us, are focused on any place but the present. When we focus on the past, we feel guilt for the imperfections of the past. When we focus on the future, we feel worry and anxiety and fear. I've even felt fear or anxiety that in the future, I'm going to feel guilty about what I'm doing now or did doing the past. So I'm going to feel regret in the future.

In a more positive sense, we look to the future and we think it's going to be better than it is now. So we have this anticipation of the future and all of this takes us away from the now.

I think I may have shared at least once with this meeting an experience I had maybe about a year ago of being on my way to an appointment and realizing when I was about five minutes away that I had about 50 minutes' worth of time. I had this extra time. And the thought that occurred to me... I just breathed and I thought, "Wow, this is what it feels like to have space in your life!"

So just this past week, another book has appeared on my horizon. A book by Richard A. Swenson entitled *Margin: Restoring Emotional Physical Financial and Time Reserves to Overloaded Lives*. I haven't read this book yet. I've skimmed it online, but I like the idea of it. I like this idea of *margin*.

So what is margin? When we write a paper or a letter, we don't write all the way of the edges. We leave a margin around it. Why? Because having a margin relaxes the eye and relaxes the reader. It would feel tense if the text went all the way to the edges.

And margin in life is the same thing. It's a space, it's a buffer. It can be a physical space like in our surroundings and our cupboards and our bookshelves and our flat surfaces in our house. It can be in our physical bodies when we don't fill them all the way full and we leave some space. It can be a financial space, space in our budgets. It can be emotional reserves to help us deal with an unexpected event.

And I think it can be spaced in our schedules, most importantly: space in our schedules for the unexpected, for getting adequate sleep, for having time to play and exercise and just to be.

Margin is, to me, the antithesis of perfectionism. Perfectionism wants to fill everything up and make it complete. Margin wants to leave space. Margin would give us, give our lives relaxation the way the space around the edges of a letter give the reader relaxation.

So how do we get Margin in our lives? How do we attain that? Well, I think the first step is it is in valuing it. As perfectionists, we value completeness, we value fullness. If our lives and our schedules and our spaces aren't full to overflowing, we feel like we've got a cram more in. And then on top of that, our compulsion to appear perfect to other people means that we feel like we can't say no. We can't turn something down unless we can truthfully say that our lives or our coverage or schedule or whatever is full. It's full. Sorry, I can't do it, it's full.

You know, when I first attended this meeting, about almost 10 years ago, I heard references to the Quaker Simplicity Testimony and I kind of bristled at the whole idea. At the time, I was sort of leaning more toward an Abundance Testimony! But I see now that to build Margin into our lives, we have to see spaces as a valuable commodity in itself. We have to see space, boundaries, margin, buffers... we have to see that as a form of abundance, like the margins around a page. And then once we've decided that we value it, we have to take the steps to get there.

A few years ago, I read *A New Earth* and *The Power of Now*, both by Eckart Tolle. And after I finished reading those, I bought a couple other books that I thought would give me insight. One was called *Love is Letting Go Fear* by Gerald Jampolsky, and the other one was called *Happiness Now* by Robert Holden. I think I must have been reading these simultaneously because I was dipping into both of them.

The next morning, I called my mother and I said, "What's the point of buying a bunch of books when they all say the same blankety-blank thing!?"

I have since come across countless other references continuing to hammer home the same message that, you know, everything from Thich Nhat Hanh's work on mindfulness to *A Course in Miracles*. Everything says the same thing: quieting the mind, being in the moment, leads to a personal experience of God.

Somov has in his *Perfect Present* book an exercise that he calls "watching the river." What you do is you take a piece of paper and a pen and you start to breathe. Try to stay aware of your breath. And then every time a thought comes by, you make a dot on the piece of paper. You watch it go by and look at that. And you do this for a while, five minutes or so.

When you're done, he says, to look at the piece of paper. The dots all represent thoughts. So he says, what's the white space where there are no dots? That's who you really are. You're not the thoughts you're watching.

His book has a lot more about mindfulness in it. Mindfulness, the way I'm coming to understand it is presence. It's being in the now. It's being aware of reality as it is. And it's accepting reality as it is. It's seeing the perfection, the completeness of life as it is.

Somov writes, "At any given moment, everything that can exist, exists. Reality is entirely complete. It has no holes. Nothing, absolutely nothing, is amiss."

Mindfulness is deliberateness. It's not blindly following an automatic response. And it provides these many moments of margin, these moments of space.

Conversely, having margin in your life gives you time to be mindful, which I think is why the ego or your self-concept or perfectionism resist mindfulness: because if you can never be perfect, then you have to constantly *do*. You have to keep filling the space and the time to avoid that scary awareness of your basic flawed nature.

Mindful awareness is beginning to allow me to recognize the areas in my life where I have left no margin, to recognize my “imperfection anxiety” on the spot. When I am stressed now, when I feel anxiety coming on, I can more often catch it and say, “It’s okay. It’s not me; it’s the perfectionism talking.”

I can examine which beliefs are telling me I need to be perfect in that situation. I can relax, accept what is, and enjoy the *now* in all its perfect, complete imperfection.

And when I see those I love being stressed – because many of the people in my life are also perfectionists – I can say, “It’s okay. You’re not expected to be perfect,” which helps them relax, too.

So I'm not perfect.

But I'm slowly figuring out that mindfulness is the bridge between perfectionism and margin. Let us value margin. Let us use mindfulness to get there. That can open up space in our lives to be like the lilies of the field. Give up some control. Trust God.

Silence

Hymn 4: [Green p. 137](#) “Teach Me to Stop and Listen”

Benediction

"Now may the Lord lift up the light of His countenance upon you and give you peace,
in your going out and in your coming in;
in your sitting down and your rising up;
in your work and in your play;
in your joy and in your sorrow,
in your laughter and in your tears;
until that day comes which is without dawn and without dark."

Announcements

Musical Postlude