

"Perfect Strangers: A change in mindset can unlock the potential that your perfectionism is holding back."

Article in Strings Magazine by Emily Wright

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In the context of adult learning, perfectionism can be described as a set of beliefs that drives a person to maintain unrealistic expectations, frequently to their detriment. Practice becomes self-flagellation. Lessons become an exposé. Performance, torture. Of the students I've had who have quit the cello, my guess is that at least half of them did so not because they were not making progress, but because the process was poisonous to their well-being. They were unable to witness their progress in the context of reasonable expectations, and in the end, it defeated them.

What I've learned is that the underlying motivators behind perfectionism are useful if they can be separated from the system of beliefs they are attached to. It's tricky, but possible. To understand how requires a little bit of sports psychology, a shift in context, and a parable from a 1970s tv show.

The science of striving

In most fields, perfectionism is regarded as maladaptive (aka leading away from propagation of the species, aka not good), but performance psychologists differentiate between high-level athletes' "perfectionistic concerns" versus "perfectionistic strivings". *Concerns* lead to things like crippling performance anxiety and negativity, while *strivings* make the stress of high expectations fuel for productivity and the "perfection" is measured by improvement. This internal motivation drives athletes and musicians to be better every day while fostering a healthier and more realistic goal- one that is actually possible.

Another compelling relationship lies within the kind of motivation that drives a player. In a study of elite college athletes (where there is a reasonable expectation of high performance), there is a positive correlation between a mindset of "hoping for success" and good performance, as well a correlation between "fear of failure" and especially what they term "fear of disappointing important others" and lower than average performance. In other words, playing to excel ends up manifesting high performance from high performers, and playing to avoid screwing up or stop repeating mistakes gives lower than average performance from athletes with high aptitude.

The main takeaway: if your goal is constant improvement, you are likely to

succeed and enjoy high achievement. If your goal is to be perfect, you are nearly guaranteed to feel like a failure even if you have done well and perform below actual aptitude.

A few things to remember

1. Perfectionist tendencies are usually a reflection of the very things necessary to succeed at something difficult- goals, standards, and a desire for improvement. Don't punish yourself for this stuff! It will only compound negativity unnecessarily and make objectivity impossible.

2. When it comes to the learning process, you are not an exception. Every player experiences upswings in progress followed by plateaus and the occasional sense that no, there never was progress to being with. This phenomenon is a natural function of improvement: your standards quietly evolve along with your playing. Results that sounded markedly better week one are tolerable week two, but come week three, it's time for another upgrade in refinement. Try to see this change in expectations as a signpost of success, not a constant thorn in your side.

3. It does not get easy, *you get good at something that remains difficult*. This reality works for you in two ways, by serving as a reminder that the task is one accomplished over a long period of time, and also giving you permission to feel measured doses of satisfaction when you reflect on the journey.

4. It is the nature of practice to sound less than your best. Practice is supposed to be an analysis of strengths and weaknesses, and then an attack on those weaknesses. You're doing something right if you can find things that need work. Keep in mind that critique does not equal insight. Analyze what is going on and be specific in your mission. Don't say "That sounds lousy", instead say "The tone disappears when I pass midpoint on the bow." Then you are in a position to experiment with possible remedies and actually fix what's wrong.

5. Lessons are a little like the dentist. While your hard work should be recognized, the main emphasis is prevention and drilling the problems you bring in. What good dentist would let you walk out with a cavity? Expect your instructor to go after the flaws, but also expect them to know the difference between a mistake caused by nerves or bad luck and one that stems from something fundamental. Music teachers listen to people fail *for a living*. Mimi Zweig once told me, "There's no judgement. It's just information." Teachers are here to help, and we expect (and require) you to make mistakes so we can figure out how best to proceed.

Breaking the cycle

The worst part is that perfectionists tend to also be introspective, so there's the added stress of recognizing this mindset in yourself and then feeling miserable for not being able to let go of it. It is reminiscent of the old Kung-Fu show where, in order to snatch the pebble from the Master's hand, the student has to not want it at all. Liberation lies in acceptance. If you can just see these tendencies existing solely as an extension of your desire to be excellent, it diffuses the unproductive aspects of your efforts, leaving you with a real chance of being able to enjoy the journey.

Perfectionism transforms simple mistakes into indictments and distracts you from what's really happening. What's really happening is a player trying their best to develop as a musician, and there are legions of teachers, students and friends here at *Strings* pulling for you, because we're doing the same thing.

Imperfectly.