The Perils of Perfection

It was a typical Saturday night near the end of junior year. We sat in Sarah’s basement late into the night venting about everything from school work to college to parents. But this night, as I tried to console one of my best friends Paula, she retorted, “Laura, I know you’re trying to help, but coming from you, you’re sort of rubbing it in. You’re too perfect.” Too perfect? Was that even possible? Perfection by definition means no flaws, nothing is wrong, so how is it possible to be too perfect? Yet starting in that spring of junior year, it was obvious that this idea of perfection, instead of being completely positive, was eating at Paula. She snapped at people whenever schoolwork was brought up, and put major pressure on herself to find a suitable semi date. Whenever Paula made a mistake, she would get into a  foul mood that could last for days. It became clear that in Paula’s case, perfection was a bad influence rather than motivation. Was Paula right? Is it possible to be too perfect?

In *A Prayer For Owen Meany* by John Irving, the narrator John makes an interesting comparison between ministers in his town and reveals something important about perfection. John, a pre-teen in Gravesend New Hampshire, had been exposed to two ministers: Pastor Merrill, the Congregationalist minister, and Rev. Wiggin, the Episcopalian minister. It is clear that one of these ministers is more flawed than the other. Rev. Wiggin seems to be far more “perfect” than Mr. Merrill, yet the tone with which John describes each minister does not favor the more perfect minister. Mr. Merrill is described with many faults. He loses his glasses often, and his family is described as pale, “sickly”, and “utterly forgettable” (Irving, 117). One of the most interesting things about Mr. Merrill is that he doesn’t even have perfect faith. Mr. Merrill is full of doubt, and this doubt plays an integral part in all of his sermons. Rev. Wiggin, on the other hand, does not have such flaws. Wiggin is described as “hale and hearty” (Irving, 117) and has a wonderful wife, along with a firm faith. It is clear that Rev. Wiggin is the more “perfect” minister, yet despite his flaws, it is clear that John prefers Mr. Merrill. John describes Mr. Merrill as “rising above” (Irving, 117) his circumstances. He calls him “endearing” and his sermons “reasonable” (Irving, 116). Rev. Wiggin is sarcastically called “captain Wiggin” and his grin is described as a “gash”, his smile as a “smirk” (Irving, 117). Wiggin’s sermons that focus on unshakable faith are called “boring”. It seems here that Mr. Merrill’s flaws and his ability to overcome them are what make him a good and lovable person while Rev. Wiggin’s lack or flaws make him seem inhuman and harsh. Oscar Wilde touches upon this idea as well in his book *The Picture of Dorian Grey* when one of his main characters, Harry, states, “women love us for our defects. If we have enough of them, they will forgive us everything” (Wilde, 183). Flaws, at least a few of them, seem to be a good thing in a social context. Flaws make us relatable. Without them, we come across as inhuman and harsh to others.

Paula was right. Being perfect isn’t as desirable as it may seem, but that doesn’t mean that perfection can’t be a good motivator. Perfection should be a good goal to shoot for; a target to aim for without the intention of actually reaching it, yet even in aiming for perfection Erica was having trouble. Was Paula just doing it wrong, or is there really no healthy way to aim for perfection?

Two characters in *The Picture of Dorian Grey* experience the faults of aiming for perfection. The first, Sibyl Vane, is an actress that Dorian Grey falls in love with at first sight. Every night, Dorian goes to see her and he describes her as “entirely divine” (Wilde, 58). He even asks her to marry him after just a few short nights. But soon, Sibyl’s perfection comes crashing down. Dorian see’s her flaws all at once, and when Sibyl falls from her pedestal, she falls hard. All of a sudden, Dorian cannot even stand her. He looks at her with disdain and finds her “absurdly melodramatic” (Wilde, 92). Within a day she has killed herself. Dorian himself has a bitter experience with perfection. A painter, Basil, who idolizes Dorian, creates a portrait of Dorian that begins taking on Dorian’s flaws, leaving Dorian perfect. At first, Dorian is electrified by his own perfection, but the flaws build up on the painting until it is so ugly that it sends Dorian into a fit of rage, killing Basil and himself. Both of these characters try to attain perfection by ignoring their flaws, allowing their imperfections to build up until eventually they explode into a horrible mess. In order to aim for perfection, one cannot ignore their flaws.

So how can we be motivated by perfection without ignoring our flaws? Wilde makes an interesting observation in *Dorian Gray.* “It is the confession, not the priest, that gives us absolution” (Wilde, 100). Wilde is referring to the Catholic practice of confession, a weekly procedure where one confesses their sins to the priest, repents for them, and then moves on. Wilde points out that it is not the priest that makes this practice helpful, but the actual practice of confession. Confession is an outlet ritualistically built into Catholicism to acknowledge, and then let go of, our sins or flaws. Upon further inspection, almost all religions have a practice similar to confession, even if it is not completely structured. When we asked a Moroccan muslim what to do in his religion when you do something wrong, he explained to us that you must have a personal conversation with God in order to achieve forgiveness. The goal of most religions is to better yourself as a person, to get closer to perfection. Yet no religions expect people to actually be perfect. In Islam, it is forbidden to draw the prophet, for “If you draw a picture of the Prophet, you will make a mistake.” (Macnamara) Muslims know that people make mistakes, and they do not ignore flaws. Religions all acknowledge that people are going to do things wrong, and contain a built in outlet to let go of our flaws.

One interesting country to look at in this situation is Morocco. Morocco is a peaceful country with a constitutional monarchy, but unlike many European countries, Morocco is not secular: it is a Muslim country. The king claims to be a descendant of the prophet Muhammad. Religion plays a huge role in the Moroccan identity. When we asked three Moroccans about their ultimate goals in life, all three responded with something about religion. Praying five times a day and having a strong personal connection with God is something that they each said was important to them. When I asked one interviewee if this was true of all Moroccans, he replied quickly and easily “absolutely”.  This strong connection with religion makes it easier for Moroccans to aim for perfection, for it allows for imperfections. Every Moroccan we met seemed happy and carefree. Evenings were spent laughing, playing games, and singing, and stress did not seem to be a part of the culture.

The muslim Moroccan government also allows for flaws. In a region currently full of violence, Morocco is surprisingly peaceful. Morocco is the only country in their region to set up a truth commission, where the government investigates its own crimes. People are also allowed to point out flaws in their government through peaceful protest without being attacked. One reporter describes a group of Moroccan protesters as “a group of people st[anding] outside the parliament politely waving signs.” (Applebaum) Perhaps inspired by their religion, the Moroccan government openly acknowledges their own flaws, allowing for the country to remain peaceful amidst a region of violent protests and overthrows.

Religion does not play a large role in the United States. Our government is secular, and if you asked any American about their ultimate goals in life, chances are the answer would have nothing to do with religion. Does this absence of religion mean that Americans cannot aim for perfection in a constructive way? Our government definitely allows for imperfection. The check and balance system acknowledges flaws, and peaceful protest is part of our constitutional rights. This definitely contributes to the extreme stability and peacefulness of our country.

Yet in our culture, it is much harder to aim for perfection without emotional consequences. Within the Newton South community, and many high schools across America, perfection is often related to one thing: college. Especially in the current generation, the college process puts extreme pressure on high school students to be perfect. An applicant to an Ivy League school with any chance of acceptance must have a handful of interesting extracurriculars, a course load full of AP and honors classes, and near perfect SAT scores and GPA. On top of this, they must have an interesting essay that sets them apart from all the other “perfect” high school students. Theoretically, this pressure should be a good thing. College can motivate kids to challenge themselves and try new things while in high school. But the reality of the matter is that the college process often causes kids to break down or burn out. Caitlin Flanagan, a college counselor in an elite California private school, describes students who she normally viewed as “confident” and “buoyant” “turn[ing] into complete neurotics the moment they crossed the threshold of the college-counseling office” (Flanagan). This process has no outlet for imperfections; each mistake a student makes on their way to college is seen as a catastrophic error. Students are made to believe that any tiny misstep will result in rejection from the school of their dreams. For example, the Princeton Review’s *College Admissions* advises, “misspellings in your application can make you look like a moron” (Flanagan). The college process forces students to focus on and overemphasize their flaws rather than attempt to move past them, leaving kids who feel like failures.

When kids do get rejected by the college of their dreams, which many inevitably do, American culture does not let them take this failure lightly. American culture puts a high value on brand names, and this practice leaks over into the college process. Many experts note that although there are hundreds of schools in the US that provide their students with an amazing education, there are a select few that students have decided are “the best”, and failure to get into one of these schools is a disaster. “The sense we’ve created [is that] the college admissions letter is the moment when your entire life is being judged “ (Stossel), and this sense means that when kids get rejected they “sit sobbing in the family kitchen” (Stossel). Although a college rejection, especially if accompanied by another acceptance, is just a minor imperfection, our culture has pushed students to blow this flaw out of proportion instead of moving on, which makes aiming for perfection a peril.

Cleary Paula was caught up in the college process idea of perfection. Because she had no outlet for flaws, each little mistake was a huge deal, and Paula spent a lot of her time stressed and irritable. This problem is not unique to Paula. In fact, many high school students and adults alike all over the country face a similar struggle with perfection. When Americans lost their strong connection with religion, they also lost a ritualistic method to accept and cope with flaws. What Americans need to do is not necessarily get religion back, but to find a new outlet for our flaws. If one has a healthy understanding of their flaws, they are safe to aim big  and achieve big without suffering emotional trauma.

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