When Perfect Isn’t Good Enough

Delivered at Unitarian Church of Evanston Lynnda White
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NOTE: You will find that the audio differs from the written text, because the text
is a guide and is not meant to be repeated verbatim. Several people speculated
that I planted the typo in the chalice lighting to provide an example of
imperfection that I could then refer to in the service. No. I was surprised by the
typo, and I am not editing the comments into the text of the sermon.

The person you see before you today has taken off a cape in order to wear the robes of
ministry. One of my Meadville Lombard colleagues used to say to me, “Lynnda, take off
the cape.” As I described projects I was working on, and I would realize that even
without going into a phone booth or rubbing my golden bracelets together—what ever
Superman and Wonder Woman did to access their super powers—I was trying to be
perfect, to achieve some super human task. I am well known for my tendencies toward
perfectionism, and it is something I have been working to change. If I don’t have a more
healthy perspective on who I am and what I want to do with my life, I cannot have an
effective ministry with others.

And I know that I am not the only person in this room who has struggled with the
addiction of perfectionism. And if you have some other compulsion with which you
struggle, today’s message may still have meaning for you.
Perfectionism: For some of us, it was a way of keeping the peace in our homes because we had an alcoholic parent we did not want to get upset; maybe we were the first one in our family to work toward a college degree; maybe as a woman or as a person of color, we felt we had to be better to get the recognition we deserved; maybe we wanted to be as successful as our siblings or our parents.

This is how it began for me: My father got sober after I left for college, but I spent my formative years trying to keep order and to shield my siblings from angry outbursts. How did it begin for you?

There are many possibilities for our reasons to want to be “perfect”, to be “good enough”, to be “special”.

You may have heard about a speech given at a high school graduation in which Wellesley High teacher David McCullough told the 2011 graduating class:

You are not special. You are not exceptional.” "But, Dave," you cry, "Walt Whitman tells me I'm my own version of perfection! Epictetus tells me I have the spark of Zeus!” And I don't disagree. So that makes 6.8 billion examples of perfection, 6.8 billion sparks of Zeus. You see, if everyone is special, then no one is. If everyone gets a trophy, trophies become meaningless.
There was a huge outcry from across the country. Teens responded vehemently saying, “Stop telling us we’re not special.” Depending on your demographic, perhaps you would agree with Mr. McCullogh or you may have been outraged if you were a teenager.

Those of us who have striven for perfection were screaming to be viewed as good enough, special. We accepted that the negative messages we were receiving were true, while disregarding the supportive messages that surrounded us.

Many religions tell us that we have the spark of the divine. The Qur’an notes that when Allah created the first human being, He breathed His own spirit into this new creation and that "humanness" has an element of the Divine in it. Numerous passages of the Qur’an refer to the realities of the Divine Spark, such as verse sixteen of sura fifty: *It was We Who created man.*

Hinduism says that there is a joyful-creative force residing in each of us as our consciences. There is even a name for the divine spark. It is Atman.

There are some Christian passages that equate to the idea of a divine spark. *Genesis 1:26* teaches that every human being possesses the image of God. “Then God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.”

Because we often think of Transcendentalism as the beginning of the humanist movement, it may come as a surprise to some of us in this room that the original
Transcendentalists believed divinity is internalized in all beings, allowing the unlimited potential of human ability to connect with both the natural and spiritual world.

In his essay *Self-Reliance*, Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote:

Not for nothing one face, one character, one fact, makes much impression on him, and another none. This sculpture in the memory is not without preestablished harmony. The eye was placed where one ray should fall, that it might testify of that particular ray. We but half express ourselves, and are ashamed of that divine idea which each of us represents.

Yes, the Transcendentalists believed we had a divine spark.

Many of you will recognize the lyrics I am about to read as a pop culture anthem supporting gay rights.

but My mama told me when I was young
We are all born superstars
She rolled my hair and put my lipstick on
In the glass of her boudoir
There's nothin' wrong with lovin' who you are
She said, 'cause He made you perfect, babe
So hold your head up, girl and you'll go far
Listen to me when I say
I'm beautiful in my way
'Cause God makes no mistakes
I'm on the right track,

Baby, I was born this way

That’s the gospel according to Gaga.

So, Muslims, Hindus, Christians, Transcendentalists—almost every religion—and Lady Gaga--tell us that we a have a divine spark. That we are indeed special.

Unfortunately, knowing we have a spark of divinity still isn’t enough for a lot of us.

These examples and scriptures say to me that we each are indeed special, but I think the people in this debate—Mr. McCollough who told a graduating class that they are not special, and those who told him to stop it--are missing the point. What no one seemed to notice was the flaw in McCollough’s thinking: we are each special, unique, distinctive, and it doesn’t take a trophy to prove that.

What we are NOT is entitled. None of us is entitled to the best education, the biggest toys, the best clothes, the most promotions. These are things to which we aspire and which are not guaranteed.

These are some of the things that cause us to want to be seen as perfect. When we don’t achieve them, we question whether we are ‘good enough’.
There is a theory called “good enough care”, introduced by psychologist D. W. Winnicott. Good enough care describes the quality of the way a child is touched, cared for, and from which there is created in the growing child a sense of trust or “belief in”.

Winnicott says “the way we are held—physically and emotionally-- helps us understand the concept of “everlasting arms”.

Maybe good enough care is what we come to associate with love, and if we are fortunate we learn from being held in love that we are simply good enough. We are born with a divine spark and we are good enough just as we are.

There are lots of losses associated with perfectionism, and two of the more important ones are (1) not being present to the life we are living and (2) presenting a false face to the world.

For many of us, somewhere along the line, we got the message that we were not good enough as we were, and we found different ways of dealing with that message. Some of us acted out, and some of us took it upon ourselves to prove that we were good enough by trying to be perfect—not to rock the boat.

Did you ever stop to think that acting out might have been more healthy? At least those emotions would not have been repressed, and we would have been living more true to the moment.
Pavel Somov, author of *Present Perfect*, presents a very simple formula: “Present = Perfect. Any moment—by virtue of its already being present—is beyond betterment and is therefore perfect…Perfection exists in reality, not in theory.” In other words, don’t lose precious moments with friends, families, partners by acting too much in the theoretical world of what might be, when they live in the real world of love, pride, and interdependence.

Another of the problems with perfectionism is that because we know we are bound to fail, we may feel the need to present a false face—

We are not our true selves. Maybe we do good, not for good itself, but because we think it promotes our vision of being what we think people want to see.

Emerson warns us:

> Men do what is called a good action, as some piece of courage or charity, much as they would pay a fine in expiation of daily non-appearance on parade…Their virtues are penances. I do not wish to expiate, but to live. My life is for itself and not for a spectacle.

Of course, this false front is a lose-lose proposition, because we can never achieve perfection no matter how we try, and we rob ourselves of allowing others to hold us in love, in the everlasting arms of acceptance.
By this point, some of you may be thinking, is Lynnda telling me that I don’t need to improve? If I am ‘good enough’ why should I work at self-improvement or try to make things better in the world?

What I am telling you is that you are the foundation upon which you can build. You are not hollow and need to be filled up. You are not broken and need to be fixed. You aren’t perfect and you don’t need to be, but you are special because you are unique and quirky and smart and creative and clumsy and silly at times.

What has it cost you, this quest for perfection? Stress, ulcers, heart disease, insomnia, cancer, loss of self-esteem, separation from friends and family. It simply isn’t worth it, especially when you are already ‘good enough’.

What has it cost you?

Personally, it has taken a while, but I know it isn’t worth it.

In this journey of ministry I am taking, I’ve had to let go of my thinking that I need to write the perfect paper or create the perfect project or even preach the perfect sermon. Those are things that can’t happen no matter how I try, and in fact, aren’t what I want to be about. I want to be about the business of working for a better world.

I can’t tell you how to overcome your addiction—there are plenty of books and experts out there. I can only hope to continue my own work in this regard. Of course, your
lessons are different from mine and your path will take you in different directions, and that is as it should be, but we owe it to ourselves and to our loved ones to be in the moment and to allow them to see the beauty of our true selves.

The first two lines of a favorite hymn are: How could anyone ever tell you, you were anything less than beautiful? How could anyone ever tell you, you were less than whole.

We can turn those words into affirmations:

I am beautiful. I am whole. I am enough just the way I am.

And as for me, I can take off the cape, because I don’t need to be Super Woman. I wear the robes of ministry.
Resources

http://www.emersoncentral.com/selfreliance.htm

https://sites.google.com/site/universalsync/chapter-ten

http://yjhm.yale.edu/archives/spirit2004/denial/ssubramanian.htm

Read more: http://www.myfoxboston.com/story/18720284/2012/06/06/full-transcript-youre-not-special-speech#ixzz2Brr28dG3


Read more: http://www.myfoxboston.com/story/18720284/2012/06/06/full-transcript-youre-not-special-speech#ixzz2BrqZu55v

http://www.tanzeem.org/resources/articles/articledesc.asp?id=144

http://www.gotquestions.org/divine-spark.htm
