



FROM PERFECTIONISM TO PROFICIENCY

Perfectionism carries two ironies. The first is this: Those who are trying to be perfect are getting in their own way WHILE they are trying to do really good work. The striving wastes time, energy and attention. Even if perfection were achievable – which it's not - the cost far outweighs the benefits.

The second irony of perfection is that it represents the end. When something is perfect, it cannot be improved upon. It is finished. It is over. A better way to say it is this: perfection is death.

For someone caught in the Perfection Game, not being perfect FEELS like death. Every mistake sends the message that something is very wrong. Besides that, going for perfection seems like such a good thing to do. Based on that logic, going for anything less than perfection feels like a consolation prize, or settling for second best. As a result, we find ourselves in the endless loop of going for perfection, making a mistake, beating ourselves up for it, wishing we would quit making mistakes, committing to do better and then starting all over again.

But what if we used mistakes differently? What if mistakes offered a benefit much greater than being perfect? I'm not talking about the proverbial adage to "learn from our mistakes." By this stage of my life, learning from my mistakes just feels like another form of punishment.

What I'm talking about is recognizing that mistakes open a doorway to our internal programming through the agitation they cause. In other words, when we start to feel uncomfortable, we can either go into whatever mistake subroutine we've developed over the years, or we can use the opening to access our old ways so that we can let go of them. We can use the moment to build our mental tools.

Seeking proficiency can turn the feeling we get when we make a mistake into the gateway to our personal transformation.

When I was an adult, I went back to taking piano lessons. This was not some long-held dream or bucket list item. No, this was more of an accidental way to deal with my lack of patience.



We had an old player piano that was way out of tune. It was something my new husband brought into the marriage against my wishes. In fact, I'm pretty sure I stood at the front door trying to keep him from bringing this old dirty thing into the house. It was REALLY old and dusty - and out of tune.

We got it cleaned up and every now and then, I would sit down and play. As a child, my parents forced me to take piano lessons. I could still play a few things, but they sounded terrible on this old thing. What was surprising to me as an adult was how much I enjoyed playing. Believe me, as a kid, nothing made me want to play, especially when my Mom nagged me (and nagged, and nagged and nagged) to practice. It was an obligation. Yet here I was as an adult liking it.

One day I decided to call a piano tuner. After he finished getting that old piano as tuned as it could be, he played. And oh, how he played! It was nothing like the classical music that had been forced on me as a child. He played the blues and I was in awe!

We started talking and I learned that piano tuning was a side gig for him. In his real life, he was a professional musician and he had played with many well-known people. He also gave piano lessons. He could teach me to play the blues!

Right then and there, I signed up. Here I was as an adult choosing to play piano. I practiced and practiced and practiced.

When I was a kid, I never played anything perfectly. I didn't care. As an adult, I really wanted to play perfectly. Notwithstanding my love of the blues, soon my goal was to play Pachelbel's Canon without missing a note. I was seeking perfection. Every day, I sat down to play. When I would make a mistake, it stopped my rhythm, and I would start over. I was so proud of myself for trying so hard! So much was going on in the background that I didn't understand at the time.

To start with, what I was calling pride in myself was actually me trying to please my piano teacher from childhood. As I was playing along, I would miss a note. Instead of continuing to play, I would freeze for a second and get mad at myself. Then I would start over from the beginning. My desire to be perfect was an exercise in proving myself to a teacher that had been dead for 20 years.

Difficult passages in the music created an even bigger dilemma. I didn't have the patience to break it down and really learn the notes. Interestingly enough, it was lack of patience that brought me to the piano. My husband would often keep me waiting before we would go somewhere. Nagging him to hurry up caused epic fights, so I started playing the piano to keep my hands occupied; the alternative was to strangle him for making me wait.



Thanks to striving for perfection and my lack of patience, I limited myself to the easy pieces of music. Rather than learning and improving, I lowered my sights to a domain where I could prove myself worthy.

During a lesson one day, I noticed that my new teacher was really pleased with something that wasn't perfect. I told him it wasn't good enough - ha! Me the student had higher standards than the teacher! I even mentioned that as a professional, he was so much better than me. Of course, he was perfect when he played. Then he said something that has stuck with me all these years. "I've never played a perfect piece in my life and never will. What we professionals have learned how to do is play through the mistakes. Every performance has a mistake. We just don't let our mistakes knock us off our flow."

He went on to say "I want you to learn to be a better musician, not to be perfect. Music is not about playing all the notes in the right place and at the right time. It's as much about the space between the notes. You can only improve your skills when you are willing to feel your way through the mistakes and keep playing."

In seeking perfection, I was losing proficiency. All my energy was going into proving myself instead of getting better and learning. When I gave up striving for perfection, I became a better musician.

Perfectionism runs rampant in our society today. Even in cultures – be it company, barn or other areas - that have the mantra "Done is better than perfect," individuals within that culture often struggle when they make mistakes or see others make mistakes. For many people, being asked to let good enough be good enough is like hearing fingernails on a chalkboard. It goes against everything they stand for. Even without external pressure, they feel internal pressure to get it perfect. The Perfection Game is essentially a way of life.

As a result, a huge amount of personal energy is dedicated to either fixing or covering up problems.

This is not to say that problems should not be fixed. It's just that there is something more important in play here, and when you grasp that, your whole world can open up.

When I decided to take riding lessons, we started on the ground, in the round pen. This was my first time to work with the horse, using pressure to communicate rather than intimidate. This is a very important distinction.

Fear drives intimidation. Intention drives communication.

My teacher Bruce Anderson breaks riding down into 4 phases: 1. Movement 2. Direction 3. Rhythm 4. Track/Path. He gave me a simple picture to complete. Get the horse moving. He



picks direction. “How hard can this be” I thought? “And I’m over the Perfection Game, coached by the Sport Mom Bitch living in my head. So I can do this. “

Let me just say this. Being over perfectionism in your thoughts is a VERY different game that actually being over it. Knowing something and being something are two very different things.

As I started trying to use the minimum amount of pressure to get the horse moving, I became very aware of just what I was up against here. Marley is a 1200 pound horse. He loves to eat grass. He would rather graze than run in circles around me. Whatever illusion of control I might have had should have evaporated when I realized that. But I was not so fortunate.

Every controlling instinct I have ever had flooded into my system. Instead of listening and hearing, I tried to “make” the horse do what I wanted. Mixed messages were flooding my system. “Go, no not that way, turn around, stop, go, no faster, slower”. The more my body locked up, the more confused the horse got. Instead of going with what he was giving me, I tried to anticipate and get ahead. The Sports Mom Bitch is screaming in my head “You’re getting it all wrong!” Not only did I not accomplish the task, I felt like shit while still playing the Perfection Game. Bruce picked his moments to interrupt me, saying things like “Use your mental tools. What is the horse telling you? Be the conduit.” In other words, he was throwing me a lifeline if I chose to grab it.

Now I’m at the choice point. Will I double down on the Perfection Game (this is so normal, it’s unconscious) or will I work on being the conduit?

Being the conduit? What does that mean? It’s my job was to have the picture; it was Marley’s job to tell me how to do that, by responding to what is happening. Not letting the past interfere. Listening and hearing. Feeling rather than thinking. Having the reward be my sense of accomplishment rather than the praise of someone else.

In other words, the opposite of everything I had been trained my whole life to do.

If perfection is a waste of time and energy - and equals death - why are so many of us caught up in it? It comes down to our conditioning. We have been trained and rewarded for this. And if we have been trained this way, we can retrain ourselves to be proficient instead of perfect.

The key to retraining ourselves starts with awareness of what is happening when we make a mistake. Inside the physiological sensation we get when we make a mistake are two parts: the signal and the noise. Whether the mistake is an opportunity or not depends on



where we choose to focus. The work here is learning to distinguish between the two, because at all feels like one big ball of discomfort.

Here's how I've come to think of it. We are often taught to "learn from our mistakes." It may be a useful mantra for some, but it **leaves the real opportunity on the table**. When we make a mistake, we get agitated. Sometimes we feel that, and sometimes we don't. In my case, I had so numbed myself out, it took a LOT of agitation before I felt anything. **It's when we are agitated that we can change our usual reaction to mistakes and pressure. And when we change our usual reaction once, we open the gateway to do it again and again, with practice.**

If we operate from the belief that we are supposed to be perfect, mistakes become our enemy. Our nervous system reacts to the mistake as a threat and our actions follow to diminish the threat. The nervous system gets the feedback that mistakes are a problem and will continually send the adrenaline response to keep you safe.

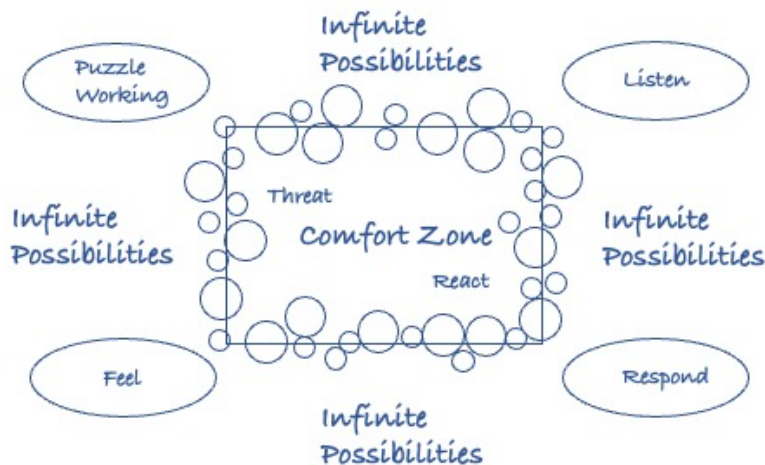
However, if we operate from the belief that mistakes are simply our internal guidance system saying something is off and that we need to listen to the signal to recover our balance, the nervous system reacts to the mistake as a signal for correction and our actions follow to restore the situation back to balance. The nervous system gets the feedback that mistakes are survivable, and you constantly retrain your brain to seek the action to restore balance rather than to do the impossible: be perfect.

It's natural to focus on the noise, which for simplicity, I will break down between internal and external noise. Internal noise shows up when we hear the inner critic (in my case, the Sports Mom Bitch) offering unsolicited advice about what to do about this awful mistake we are making. Chances are that the language you use on yourself was once language that was used on you. When it's happening in the moment, it's external noise. Have you ever been driving with a "helpful" passenger who asks you every few minutes if you see that car pulling into your lane? When your unpaid driving instructor matters to you, it's tempting to slip into the proving, perfectionistic mindset to either keep them happy or get them off your back. You might even buy into what they are saying.

The inner critic focuses on what you lack. You get more of what you focus on – so focusing on what you lack only creates a bigger gap. It takes you further away from your goal, while selling you a bill of goods that says it's helping you achieve your goal.

There's another alternative, which leverages the principle ***You get more of what you touch***. The alternative is to focus on the signal, and then turn your attention to assessing what moves you closer to the centerline. It's like playing the game Warmer Colder, with an experimental mindset. In our driving example, you might look at that car pulling into your

lane and realize that if you don't change something, you will collide. Then you either take your foot off the gas or apply brakes to the extent needed to restore flow.



The secret to using mistakes as opportunities is to welcome pressure and play in the froth, not for the sake of being uncomfortable, but for the sake of releasing the patterns of self-criticism, self-doubt and whatever has held you back. By welcoming pressure, we keep ourselves in the game long enough to allow the agitation to do its work. We can dance along the edge of our comfort zone, experimenting with different ways to do things. When I was working with Marley, Bruce saw me shrinking back into my comfort zone, where I either got paralyzed or over reacted. He kept saying "I don't care if the horse does the picture." What he didn't say was that he was giving me a chance to dance in the froth to practice connecting with the horse, letting him tell me how to do the picture. In other words, my job was to have the picture, it was Marley's job to tell me how to do that. When we each do our part, we operate in harmony.

When I got caught in thinking that I knew what to do, it disconnected me from Marley and made it all about me being right and looking good. (Not that this was a conscious thought; this is why upgrading our mindset is so difficult.) When I got all twisted up, my unconscious focus went from listening to the horse to trying to get back into my comfort zone. Bruce kept calling out to me to help me help myself change my focus to the signal, and when I did so, the noise fell away.



Taking this action under pressure leads to **transformation**, rather than information. Every time we pass through the frothy edges as shown in the figure above, we transform, which means literally to go across form, ie the shape of our personal comfort zone. When we reach the froth and retreat into our comfort zone, we stay “in form” That’s why so much of our knowledge stays in our head, rather than translating into our actions. We take in “information” ie. In-Form, rather than cross the frothy boundary to transform.

When we recognize that **the balance point is always moving**, we realize that chasing perfection is a losing and unfulfilling game. The alternative is to develop proficiency. In other words, how quickly can we restore balance? How well calibrated is our system to notice imbalances sooner, rather than waiting until they are glaringly obvious?

By changing the game from perfection to proficiency, we free ourselves from an impossible situation while at the same time, increasing the likelihood of living out our purpose, which is not measured by our arbitrary goals, but on our impact on others.