

## **Living with Intention: Perfection or Presence?**

Rev. Dr. Roger Jones, preaching

January 30, 2022

Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Hymns: #21 For the Beauty of the Earth; #123 Spirit of Life/Fuente de Amor; Life Calls Us On

Reading (posted after sermon): *The Long Road Turns to Joy*, by Thich Nhat Hanh

Personal Reflection by Ginny Johnson

### Sermon

Our Soul Matters theme for this month of January is living with intention. The point of living with intention is to give us direction and motivation for our choices and our actions. We do this for the sake of our own wellbeing. We join with others to be a force for healing in the world. Too often, however, the worthy aim of living with intention can be sidelined or shadowed by expectations for perfection. Sometimes these expectations are unspoken or unacknowledged. As we heard in Ginny's personal story, we can hear such expectations even when they are not present or intended. "Do the best you can," the parents told the kids. Their parents had meant to be affirming and accepting, but as she said, Ginny took it as an invisible goal, and an exhausting one.

Here's a definition of perfectionism. It is the pursuit of unreasonable standards for ourselves or demanding unrealistic performance by others. Perfectionism can be a compulsion to show ourselves to be winners, but it's a game nobody can win with enduring satisfaction. You have to compete over and over again; you can't win at perfectionism once and for all. This makes it a loser's game. Perfectionism separates us. Feeling the need to prove ourselves as worthy, let alone superior, is isolating. We may strive to feel worthy enough to belong, yet the striving adds to the sense of separation.

When I was growing up, I didn't receive or hear expectations to perform perfectly, but I felt unworthy, without much to offer. If I didn't feel I could perform something well, let alone perfectly, I didn't even try. To avoid feeling vulnerable, I'd opt for being invisible as much as possible. In some school subjects, I did excel, and some of them came easily to me. Even with good recognition for this, I was haunted by what I couldn't do, or wouldn't try to do. And even with my clear achievements, there were always other people who did better. In their success, I saw a negation of my own abilities.

So, even though we might agree that perfectionism is hard on us, it seems always to hang around our necks. Every time I've given a sermon about perfectionism over the years, I have gotten a response that it is a real burden for us. But our nods or laughs of self-recognition haven't brought lasting serenity. Perfectionism seems to be steeped in our culture. And in the United States, this means the cultural dominance of whiteness.

In 1999 Kenneth Jones and Tema Okun wrote an essay about the characteristics of the culture of white supremacy, and how they show up in organizations, communities, and human relationships in this country. In 2021 Okun revised and expanded the essay into a website. She

explains that a culture of white supremacy shows up in many ways, and one of them is perfectionism.

In our culture, Okun writes, perfectionism plays out in organizations and families when “little or no appreciation is expressed among people for the work that others are doing.” It’s more common “to point out how the person or the work is inadequate,” or to talk about the “inadequacies of . . . a person’s work without ever talking directly to them.” In a culture of perfectionism, mistakes are seen as reflections of a person’s worth instead of “what they are – just mistakes.” We are cursed with confusion between *making* a mistake and *being* a mistake.<sup>i</sup>

Okun writes that such a culture “trains *all of us* to internalize attitudes and behaviors that do not serve any of us.” This includes the belief that we can be perfect, or should try to be. But this “raises the questions: Who decides what perfect is? [Who defines perfection? And of course,] Why would we want to be perfect?” In this culture, “we have been hoodwinked . . . about what is really important.”

She wants to be clear, she says: “I am not saying anything about anyone’s abilities. I am also not saying anything about what we have to do to excel in our work (or any other area of our lives) if that is important to us.” In contrast to our intentions and efforts to be our best selves, whoever we are, perfectionism is a burden and a barrier to growth and progress.

An atmosphere of perfectionism keeps us from considering and reflecting on “lessons learned from efforts made [and] mistakes made.”

Perfectionism keeps us from examining our attitudes about “what is considered a mistake, and why.” By internalizing perfectionism, a person neglects “to appreciate their own good work and more often points out their faults” instead of learning from” each experience. Our inner critic accepts the standards of the dominant culture, so we don’t appreciate our own work or our own worth.

Given the persistence of this part of our culture, I have been thinking of two practices we might use in order to shrink the power of perfectionism. One is the practice of just being present. When we are haunted by the shadow of perfectionism, we may not be mindful or aware of what we are doing, or of how we are experiencing the activity. The reading today quoted the Buddha speaking about his community’s practice: “When we sit, we know we are sitting. When we walk, we know we are walking. When we eat, we know we are eating.”

Extending this concept, the Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh wrote about washing the dishes mindfully. The practice is not for coming up with a spotless dish, but merely to experience that you are washing a dish. One could say the same about cooking a meal. I don’t cook regularly, but it’s my impression that the people who enjoy doing it enjoy being present and aware of the process of cooking more than they are driven to get to the end result.

I think this must have been how Thich Nhat Hanh thought about his nonviolent activism for peace in Vietnam, his native country. He paid attention to every part of every action of civil disobedience, every speech at every demonstration, every action of hospitality to refugees and military veterans alike. As you heard, Thich Nhat Hanh passed away recently at age 95. In his long life, he made the practice of mindfulness accessible to people of various faiths, and no faith, in the United States, France, and other countries. Any ordinary activity can be a way to focus your awareness and attention. Through attention to the present moment, he said, we can cultivate peace. The simplicity of this is deceptive. For Thich Nhat Hanh, living by it has not been easy.

Born in 1926, he became a monk at age 16. In the 1960s he appealed to the international community to stop supporting the war in Vietnam. He established relief organizations to rebuild villages. He started the School of Youth for Social Service. However, because he spoke out against all kinds of violence and refused to take a side in the war, he was banned from Vietnam by both the non-Communist and Communist governments. He moved to France, which had been the colonial ruler of his native land for much of his life. He led international efforts to help refugees from Vietnam.

[According to the website *Spirituality & Practice*,] around the world he conducted retreats for American veterans of the war, psychotherapists, artists, environmental activists, and children. In 1982 he founded the International Plum Village Community. A retreat center and monastery in southwestern France, Plum Village has trained a new generation of teachers in the practice of engaged Buddhism, which begins with mindful awareness.<sup>ii</sup>

The practice of being present and mindful of our actions can be available to us in ambitious public projects and in the most ordinary of private activities. But the lack of mindfulness can lead us to the pain of perfectionism.

Writing in *The Sun* magazine, Valerie A. Reimers recalled that her mother had loved sewing, having taught herself how to do it herself starting at age four. Reimers's mother had made her own outfits, costumes, and wedding dress. Then she made quilts and clothing for her own children. As a mother, she shared her passion with her daughter, Valerie. In doing so, however, she brought too much pressure. Many years later, Reimers said: "My mother surprised me with a confession. She said she was sorry for having insisted upon perfection when she tried to teach me to sew. She had come to realize that her demands had discouraged me. [They] deprived me of the joy sewing had brought her. If she could do it over, she said, she would be less insistent on perfection and let me simply enjoy making something."<sup>iii</sup> As Thich Nhat Hanh said, the key to joy and peace is not perfection, but presence. Awareness of the present moment can be a source of beauty, joy, and peace.

This brings me to another practice for unlearning perfectionism. And that is to cultivate im-perfectionism. This is a new term, so far as I know: im-perfectionism. What it means is the intentional recognition of our flawed nature as human beings. It is an owning of the "oops" inherent in our behaviors, nearly every day of life. It is an affirmation of our mistake-making inclinations and the ability to learn from our mistakes. Tema Okun says: "Learning from our mistakes is how we grow."

To be sure, honesty call for us to recognize the harms that we cause, the wrongs that we commit, the acts or words we wish we could undo. Integrity calls for making apologies and for setting things right when that is possible. As Okun writes, we grow strong "when we are allowed to be vulnerable with ourselves and each other." The practice of im-perfection involves owning that we are imperfect, that we can't do everything, and that even when we do what we can, it won't always come out to our liking or to the liking of others.

Yet as we recognize these realities, imperfection-ism includes affirmation of the gifts we do possess, the celebration of the efforts we do make, and appreciation of the presence we bring to whatever we do.

In contrast to a focus on what's wrong or incomplete, we can practice appreciating what's useful and helpful. We can replace a culture of demands and complaints with words of gratitude and a show of appreciation. This is the practice of im-perfectionism.

The Reverend Pamela Phillips is a UU minister in Virginia. She asks: "What if we were to intentionally take the risk of making mistakes?" What if we intentionally were to "abandon striving for perfection and not only accept imperfection in ourselves and others," but celebrate imperfection?<sup>iv</sup>

In the quest of living with intention, instead of striving for perfection, we can practice awareness of where we are and what we are doing. We can appreciate and celebrate imperfection. It is counter-cultural to do this. It is anti-racist to do this. And it is liberating.

With its threats of judgment from outside us and the toxins of the critic inside us, perfectionism isolates us. It separates us from one another. But we cannot thrive in isolation.

Im-perfectionism is a blessing because it means that we need one another. No matter how good we may be at this or that activity, no matter how much we own or how much we earn, we are not sufficient to ourselves. We rely on others, and they rely on us. We do this, not to fix each other, but to help each other. We rely on others, and they rely on us, to appreciate one another and embrace one another. Together, we embrace our humanity and celebrate our humanity. So may it be. Amen.

Reading from *The Long Road Turns to Joy*, by Thich Nhat Hanh (1926-2022)

The Buddha was asked, "What do you and your disciples practice?" and he replied, "We sit, we walk, and we eat." The questioner continued, "But, sir, everyone sits, walks, and eats." The Buddha told him, "When we sit, we know we are sitting. When we walk, we know we are walking. When we eat, we know we are eating."

Most of the time, we are lost in the past or carried away by the future. When we are mindful, [and] in touch with the present moment, our understanding deepens, and we begin to feel acceptance, joy, peace, and love.

In Buddhism, there is a word [which] means wish-lessness or aimlessness. The idea is that we do not put anything ahead of ourselves and run after it. When we practice walking meditation, we just enjoy the walking, with no particular aim or destination. Our walking is not a means to an end. We walk for the sake of walking.

A. J. Muste [the minister and labor activist] said, "There is no way to peace; peace *is* the way." Walking in mindfulness brings us peace and joy, and makes our lives real. Why rush? Our final destination is only the graveyard. Why not walk in the direction of life, enjoying peace in each moment, with every step? There is no need to hurry. Enjoy each step. We have already arrived.

The war in Vietnam caused countless injuries to the minds and bodies of people on both sides. Many soldiers and civilians lost arms or legs, and now cannot join their palms together to pay respects to the Buddha or practice walking meditation. Last year, two such people came to our retreat center, and we had to find alternate ways for them to practice walking meditation. I asked each of them to sit in a chair, choose someone who was practicing walking meditation, and become one with that person, following his or her steps in mindfulness. In this way, they made peaceful and

serene steps together with their partners, even though they themselves could not walk. I saw tears of joy in their eyes.

We who have two legs can easily practice walking meditation. We must not forget to be grateful. We walk for ourselves, and we walk for those who cannot walk. We walk for all living beings — past, present, and future.

Every path can be a path for walking meditation, from tree-lined roadsides and fragrant rice paddies to the back alleys of Mostar and the mine-filled dirt roads of Cambodia. When you are awake, you will not hesitate to enter any path.

... When you open yourself in this way, you will find companions on the path of awakening who share your insight. They will [be] with you, side by side, to alleviate the world's suffering.

Imagine that you and I are astronauts. We have landed on the moon, and we find that we cannot return to earth because our ship's engine is broken beyond repair. We will run out of oxygen before Mission Control can send another ship to rescue us. We have only two days to live. At that moment, what would make us happier than to return to our beautiful planet and walk on it? When confronted with death, we realize the preciousness of [every moment] on the green earth.

Imagine now that we astronauts have somehow/ miraculously/ survived and been transported back to earth. Let us celebrate our joy by [moving] on our beautiful planet together, with deep peace and concentration. <sup>v</sup>

#### Personal Reflection by Ginny Johnson

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<sup>ii</sup> "White Supremacy Culture: Coming Home to Who We Really Are," website by Dr. Tema Okun, accessed January 31, 2022. <https://www.whitesupremacyculture.info/>

<sup>ii</sup> Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat, "Thich Nhat Hanh," *Spirituality & Practice* website:

<https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/explorations/teachers/view/100/thich-nhat-hanh>

You can also read an appreciation of him in Yes! magazine at this link: <https://www.yesmagazine.org/health-happiness/2022/01/24/thich-nhat-hanh-mindfulness-in-life-and-death>.

<sup>iii</sup> "Readers Write: Perfection," *The Sun*, March 2003. <https://www.thesunmagazine.org/issues/327/perfection>

<sup>iv</sup> Rev. Pamela Phillips, "Intentionally Imperfect," Unitarian Universalist Church of Blacksburg, Virginia, January 30, 2022. <https://uucnr.org/services/intentionally-imperfect/>

<sup>v</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Long Road Turns to Joy: A Guide to Walking Meditation* (Berkeley, 1996: Parallax Press), accessed January 28, 2022, at *The Sun*: <https://www.thesunmagazine.org/issues/255/the-long-road-turns-to-joy>