Holding Yourself to High Standards, and Doing it Well

Everyone has their own way of doing things well. Where do you get motivation from and how do you approach mistakes? Achieving high standards tends to be approached from two directions: those who have to fix their mistakes and people whose goal is to be perfect.

As a product, there is nothing better than perfect. It's why it is so tantalizing: everyone is wanting to be the best. Unfortunately, perfection is nearly always subjective. Everyone is under the impression that perfection is the end goal, because it's impossible to be better than perfect. Holding yourself to the ultimate high standards is quite honorable. On the flip side, it's unachievable(because it isn't human) and leads to self-criticism and burnout.

The catch about being perfect is really cliché.We can't consistently achieve perfection, like godliness-to-the-max-there-is-not-one-thing-even-a-little-bit-wrong-about-this perfection. But that's what it is, and instilling perfection as your ultimate goal is harmful. Mistakes happen, and problem solving is an incredibly useful skill. The genre of people who refer to themselves as 'perfectionists' don't know what to do with flaws. Ironically, perfectionism isn't even productive. Our human bodies and minds are not and never will be accustomed to it. Humans are human. A novelist, Naomi Alderman, put it really nicely in an NPR interview I heard recently, "Go outside your house and pick up a piece of litter. Start where you are, and do something. And if we all do that, things will be immeasurably better. And some final state of perfection is not the point. If anything - evolution or God or whatever - thought that perfection was important, we wouldn't have ended up so imperfect. So it's all fine. Don't let the best be the enemy of the good, all right?"

Perfection is limiting. Goals that a perfectionist sets are often lofty and unachievable. As people, we sometimes fall short, especially when plans are too broad. Consistently falling short of plans or goals or having an unrealistic view that perfection is within reach, these are *taxing* and stressful to experience. Perfectionism often comes hand and hand with not being able to properly manage stress caused by too high standards and too many tasks. At some point down the road, it can lead to burnout.

If you've ever had a moment where you wished to be perfect, why? It's hard to find motivation for being perfect except for being perfect itself, or some other external pressures. There are 3 main types of perfectionists: self-oriented, who are overly critical of their own work; other oriented, who have exceedingly high standards of others; and socially-prescribed, who believe that other people expect perfection from them. Perfectionism supports itself. It's a weak structure; how can something be the foundation and the building?

This is how you change the narrative: you acknowledge your mistakes and move on from them, because your end goal doesn't have to be perfect. And there is another word to describe it: excellence (somewhat like perfection's cooler laid back older sibling). Now your humanity is worked into the grain of your goals. The biggest difference between excellence and perfection is the ability to come back from mistakes. Excellence cultivates problem solving skills. When someone is willing to make mistakes in the first place, then they are agreeing to additionally go ahead and solve the problems stemming from those mistakes when they come up. Being a problem solver is an incredibly desired skill, it promotes creativity and flexibility, which contrary to common belief can be developed at all times in your life (even when you are old!!)

There's a fancy word I learned in 7th grade which nicely ties flexibility in problem solving into one word: neuroplasticity. It's having a brain as flexible and malleable as plastic(metaphorically, of course). Neuroplasticity contributes to the idea of excellence and finding alternative solutions when needed. In the brain, there are synapses which are like footpaths between neurons. When you do hard and

rewarding things, like solve problems or exercise, you create more and more pathways. And the more you perform challenging and rewarding tasks the ‘stronger’ these pathways become. Like a footpath through a forest, slowly being made as more feet traverse it. Not only does focusing on excellence improve your ability to persevere, it also helps your brain!

This is a quick faure into the way I have been trying to change my own brain’s standards from perfectionism over to excellence(ism?). It all has to do with intentions. I play the flute. And for the longest time I was so incredibly frustrated by the gap between my own playing and the recordings I’d hear all the time. They are a whole lot better than me, and it is sort of unreasonable to compare my playing to theirs. I played to sound good, like the recordings I’d hear. And I would be endlessly frustrated by the shortcomings my playing had, with too-slow vibrato and technical flubs here and there. It really beat me down. There is also a fancy term for this: the performance gap. In my own life, I experience it as I listen to better flutists and better musicians. However there are greats in every subject, and the internet has allowed the stats, the words, and the performances of these folks to be easily accessible to all. Being great isn’t the goal for me anymore, just like playing the flute to sound good isn’t a good reason to be playing. That opens the door for self criticism and comparisons to others.

When anyone listens to a really good song, they feel emotions. So now I play (not without fault) to give people emotions. As a student, I don’t often have an audience too often, which complicates how I am able to achieve this goal. But now my longing for technical accuracy and intonation have purpose beyond the sake of being good. I want other people to feel things. It’s a pretty noble cause.