

The Pursuit of Failure *Susan Landry*

Pursuing failure is one way of defining perfectionism. Perhaps that seems oxymoronic, but consider that when one's goal is to achieve perfection at all times and in all things, that person is doomed to fail. Nobody is perfect, and absolute perfection is impossible. Winston Churchill said, "The maxim that nothing matters but perfection is spelled p-a-r-a-l-y-s-i-s."

Many of my clients are afflicted with perfectionism, and yes, it is an affliction, and one that ultimately paralyzes! These people are constantly berating themselves for the slightest mistake, and they never feel good enough. Their identity is based on performance, and when that performance is flawed, self-esteem plummets.

I make the distinction between perfectionism and the healthy pursuit of excellence. In pursuing excellence, we are doing our best, but we can accept our limitations. The difference lies in the motivation. The perfectionist is motivated by fear: fear of failure, fear of rejection, fear of not measuring up to some internal or external expectation. One whose goal is excellence is motivated by a desire to achieve in order to learn, to grow, to improve. In sports or at work or in extracurricular activities, he or she is motivated by a love of that particular endeavor. There is peace in knowing one is doing what he or she is called to do.

In Philippians 3:12, the Apostle Paul tells us: "Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me." Only Christ was perfect. As we grow in becoming more Christ-like, we have a goal for which we are aiming, but we know that we will not be perfected until we see Him face to face.

Often we make messes out of our lives, or we somehow find ourselves in the midst of a messy situation. There are times when it's best to embrace the mess, for God can bring order out of chaos. Thankfully, He does not wait for us to "clean up our act" before we come to Him. We are admonished to imitate Christ and to grow in spiritual maturity, but it is only through the power of the Holy Spirit working in us that this happens. Because of Christ's sacrifice, we are made perfect (righteous) in God's sight, but the process of becoming holy is a daily one. Psalm 138:8 declares, "The Lord will fulfill his purpose for me; your love, O Lord, endures forever—do not abandon the works of your hands." We are works in progress.

So as we pursue excellence, let us not fall into the perfectionism trap which paralyzes us with fear. Former Archbishop of Canterbury Geoffrey F. Fisher wisely observed: "When you aim for perfection, you discover it's a moving target."