

# “The Price of Perfection”

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26 March 2023

It was question 3A on the admissions application for university—the essay question that asked the standard:

*“Are there any significant experiences you have had, or accomplishments you have realized, that have helped define you as a person?”<sup>1</sup>*

In his response, one aspiring high school senior did not hold back.

I am a dynamic figure, [he wrote]  
often seen scaling walls and crushing ice.

I have been known to remodel train stations on my lunch breaks,  
to mak[e] them more efficient. . .

. . . I write award-winning operas. I manage time efficiently.

Occasionally, I tread water for three days in a row.

I woo women with my. . . godlike trombone playing,  
I can pilot bicycles up severe inclines with unflagging speed,  
and I cook Thirty-minute Brownies in twenty minutes.

I am an expert in stucco,  
a veteran in love,  
and an outlaw in Peru.

Using only a hoe and a large glass of water,  
I once single-handedly defended a small village in the Amazon Basin  
from a horde of ferocious army ants.

I play bluegrass cello, [and] I was scouted by the Mets.

I am the subject of numerous documentaries.

When bored, I build large suspension bridges in my yard.

I enjoy urban hang gliding. . . .

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<sup>1</sup> Hugh Gallagher, “The Wonder Years,” *Literary Cavalcade*, May 1990.

am an abstract artist, a concrete analyst, and a ruthless bookie.

Critics worldwide swoon over my original line of corduroy evening wear.

I don't perspire. . . . I bat .400. . . . Children trust me.

I can hurl tennis rackets at small moving objects with deadly accuracy.

I once read *Paradise Lost*, *Moby Dick*, and *David Copperfield* in one day and still had time to refurbish an entire dining room that evening. . . .

I sleep once a week; [and] when I do sleep, I sleep in a chair. . . .

The laws of physics do not apply to me.

I balance, I weave, I dodge,  
I frolic, and my bills are paid.

On weekends, to let off steam, I participate in full-contact origami.

Years ago I discovered the Meaning of Life but forgot to write it down.

I have made extraordinary four-course meals  
using only a [grater] and a toaster oven.

I breed prize-winning clams.

I have won bullfights in San Juan,  
cliff-diving competitions in Sri Lanka,  
and spelling bees at the Kremlin.

I have played Hamlet,  
I have performed open-heart surgery,  
and I have spoken with Elvis.

But I have not yet gone to [university].

I've known a few people like Hugh Gallagher,  
the young man who crafted this essay  
that landed him a place at New York University.

If I had been on the admissions committee, though,  
I would have wondered beyond the breadth of his life, to its depth.

For all his pluck and humour,

I would wonder what lessons he had really learned along the way.

I'd want to know if he had come to know  
that wit is not the same thing as wisdom,  
that passion is much more satisfying than perfection,  
and that the list of one's accomplishments—  
no matter how inspiring or vast—  
can never get at the true depth of one's experience in this life.

Or be a wholly accurate measure of one's worth.

In her poem, "The Invitation," Oriah Mountain Dreamer says:

It doesn't interest me what you do for a living. . . .  
[or] how old you are.  
I want to know if you will risk looking like a fool for love,  
for your dream, for the adventure of being alive.

It doesn't interest me what planets are squaring your moon.  
I want to know if you have touched the centre of your own sorrow,  
if you have been opened by life's betrayals  
or have become shriveled and closed from fear of further pain!

I want to know if you can sit with pain, mine or your own,  
without moving to hide it or fade it, or fix it.

I want to know if you can be with joy, mine or your own,  
if you can dance with wildness  
and let the ecstasy fill you to the tips of your fingers and toes  
without cautioning us to be careful, to be realistic,  
to remember the limitations of being human.

I want to know if you can see beauty even when it's not pretty . . .,  
and if you can source your own life from its presence.

I want to know if you can live with failure, yours and mine,  
and still stand on the edge of the lake  
and shout to the silver of the full moon, "Yes!"

If I were on the admissions committee,  
these are the questions I'd most want to ask Mr. Gallagher.

I would want so desperately to ask because, as I mentioned earlier,  
I've known so many people like him—and some so very well.

In the decade I was a student at Harvard,  
I met enough overachievers to last me a lifetime.

People who were scary smart—  
folks who had already written books,  
invented things, and won all sorts of medals—  
many of them long before even entering kindergarten.

Yet, for every student,  
no matter how bright, and witty, and accomplished they'd been  
before first walking through the hallowed halls of Harvard,  
there would come a moment of reckoning—  
a moment when it became clear that they weren't necessarily  
the smartest person in the room on any and every subject,  
a moment when they recognized that others  
were more talented or more gifted or had just plain worked harder than they.

How students handled that moment of truth revealed a great deal  
about what motivated them toward achieving their goals.

Some were clearly driven towards excellence by the mere challenge,  
striving to accomplish the highest level of success in their field  
for the very thrill of it—climbing the proverbial mountain  
simply “because it is there” to be climbed.<sup>2</sup>

If they failed to reach a particular pinnacle, they shrugged it off,  
their sense of self still fully intact, leaving the rest of the climb  
for another day or, even, for another climber.

But, others, it seemed, could be so easily crushed  
when scaling the academic heights  
if they didn't receive the highest grade in a class  
or gain the undying love and admiration of every member of the faculty.

At times, it was embarrassing to watch,  
but mostly it was just painful to witness.

Much more than healthy competition was at stake.

For some students, their whole identity

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<sup>2</sup> Original response attributed to George Mallory when asked about why he wished to climb Mt. Everest.

was wrapped up in their achievements, as well as their failures.

More often than not, what would sometimes come off  
as obnoxious and insufferable arrogance,  
was really just an awkward attempt to mask deep insecurities.

The result was that these students were easily frozen  
by the paralysis of their own perfectionism—  
as they gave in to the seductive belief  
that not only can perfection actually be achieved,  
but that if and when it is, all will be well  
and that they will have somehow, finally, proven their own worth.

While I'm relieved to say I was not one of those students,  
I do know, from first-hand experience  
that perfectionism can very often masquerade as a quest for excellence.

And I know that paralyzing procrastination can point  
to a deep fear of failure—the fear of failing not to do something,  
or even, everything, perfectly.

I know this from my own life,  
and I've come to know it from many of yours,  
as you've shared with me your own struggles.

It is a double-edged sword, this quest for perfection.

Without it, the world might not have Bach's *B Minor Mass*,  
the *Mona Lisa*, or the Theory of Relativity.

And, without it, truth be told,  
many of us might not be where we are today.

But perfectionism and the striving for excellence are not the same thing.

Where excellence involves spontaneity and taking risks  
in the pursuit of the best outcome possible,  
perfection often involves rigidity and fear  
in the pursuit of what is so often an impossible standard.

Where excellence is about making the most of the journey,  
perfection is more concerned with reaching the final destination,  
checking a box, and getting the t-shirt.

Excellence is what is within our reach;  
perfection is that which is usually not.

These are points I struggle to remember most days,  
especially when my inbox is overflowing with messages I can't return  
and the hours needed to write a wonderful sermon just aren't there.

That's why I didn't find it all that helpful, as a recovering perfectionist,  
to rediscover the description of a "The Perfect Minister."

Apparently, the results of a computerized survey indicated  
that the perfect minister preaches precisely fifteen minutes,  
condemns sin from the pulpit but is careful never to embarrass anyone,  
works from 8 a.m. to midnight, and also serves as the custodian.

The perfect minister makes \$50 a week, wears great clothes,  
drives a new car, and gives \$50 a week to the poor.

While a mere 28 years old, this minister has been preaching for 25 years,  
is wonderfully gentle, loves to work with teen-agers,  
and spends countless hours with senior citizens.

Each day, she or he makes 15 pastoral calls on families, shut-ins,  
and hospital patients, and is, yet, somehow  
always sure to be in the office when needed.

This little study has a note, at the end,  
that says that if your minister doesn't happen to measure up,  
you can simply forward a copy of this description on  
to six other congregations who are tired of their minister's imperfections.

Then bundle up your minister  
and send them along to the congregation at the top of the list.

Within a week, it promises, you should receive 1.643 ministers,  
at least one of which is sure to be perfect.

Now, with my time here at First winding down,  
it feels pertinent for me to say that I am, indeed, imperfect.  
Sometimes astoundingly so.

I have been neither a perfect person, nor a perfect minister.

And, if I'm honest, I haven't really tried to be.

For none of us is perfect.  
Not you, and certainly not me.

While we may strive for the best we can be  
and reach for the loftiest and most noble of goals,  
we need not aspire to the hollow glories of perfection,  
and especially the false promises of perfectionism.

Rather, let us grow to embrace the whole of who we are:  
imperfections and all, that we might make of our life experience—  
of our hard-won wisdom—a gift for others,  
something that even with its flaws can be of service to the world.

Some two decades ago, when I was on a retreat for people just setting out  
on the path to become ministers, I was given a magic wand.

David Blanchard, the minister and retreat leader  
who had hand-crafted them for us,  
explained that these wands should be used for good and not ill.

That they should be used for things that really mattered,  
and not wasted trying to resurrect a jammed photocopier on a Sunday morning.

(Remember, this was at the height of Harry Potter mania.)

And, then, David slowly made his way around the circle  
to activate each of our wands.

He took mine first, lifted it high in the air with both of his arms,  
and then brought it down with all his might, breaking it in half over his knee.

With a little smile, he handed the two sad and jagged twigs back to me.

I was a little annoyed.

After all, I had only owned the thing for a couple of minutes,  
and I hadn't even yet had a chance to take it for a test drive.

But, as I fretted away, he continued, making his way around the circle,  
seemingly destroying everyone's wand—  
wands that he himself had spent hours cutting and sanding and painting.

For a while I thought it was an interesting object lesson in Buddhism,

even though I was finding it hard to overcome my attachment to my new, and now broken, wand.

And, then, with everyone's new toys broken, David informed us that while ministry is magical, it is not magic.

In the middle of the circle, on a small table, he then placed a roll of silver duct tape.

He invited us to look at our broken sticks and then promised us that the real magic of our work in the world would come from learning to minister from the broken places in our own lives—through sharing how we managed to put the pieces back together.

I keep this, my damaged wand with duct tape, on my bookshelf.

For those, in the years at 175 St. Clair, who spotted it in my office, you may have thought it a tacky little knick-knack, but it has been a reminder to me that it is often through life's imperfections—through its struggles, and sorrows, and sadness—that we work out our best answers to the question of what it means to be human.

This insight into the magic of ministry is not limited to those of us who are ordained into this work as professionals.

This insight is true for us all.

Accepting and even embracing our imperfections—and the imperfections of those around us—can bring about tremendous healing in our world.

And our superpowers sometimes stem from the most unlikely of places within us—those imperfect places that help us to recognize our hard-won wisdom, our shared humanity, and our common vulnerability.

So, if ever you find yourself writing an application essay and are asked "*Are there any significant experiences you have had, or accomplishments you have realized, that have helped define you as a person?*" may you celebrate your failures as much as your triumphs.

May you honour your imperfections as a source of your strength.



And, may you remember these words of Eleanor Roosevelt, who said that: “Beautiful young people are accidents of nature, but beautiful old people are works of art.”

Let us paint boldly, then, on the great canvas of our lives, with each day we are given.

Amen.