

Copyrighted Material

Contents

Prologue xi

PART ONE

What is Perfectionism?

- | | |
|----------------------|----|
| 1 Our Favourite Flaw | 3 |
| 2 Tell Me I'm Enough | 18 |

PART TWO

What Does Perfectionism Do to Us?

- | | |
|---|----|
| 3 What Doesn't Kill You | 45 |
| 4 I Started Something I Couldn't Finish | 61 |
| 5 The Hidden Epidemic | 80 |

PART THREE

Where Does Perfectionism Come From?

- | | |
|--|-----|
| 6 Some Perfectionists Are Bigger Than Others | 93 |
| 7 What I Don't Have | 111 |
| 8 What She Posted | 130 |
| 9 You Just Haven't Earned It Yet | 148 |
| 10 Perfectionism Begins at Home | 172 |
| 11 Hustle Is a Six-Letter Word | 186 |

Copyrighted Material

PART FOUR

How Can We Embrace Imperfection
in the Republic of Good Enough?

12	Accept Yourself	207
13	Postscript for a Post-Perfectionism Society	223
	<i>Acknowledgements</i>	251
	<i>Notes</i>	255
	<i>Index</i>	283

Prologue

Every last one of us in the West lives inside a culture knitted by perfectionistic fantasies. Like a holographic simulation of exaggerated reality, it's a place where images and moving pictures of perfect lives and lifestyles beam from billboards, movie screens, television sets, commercials and social media feeds. Within the hologram, particles of unreality fire indiscriminately. Each one teaching us that we'd lead a happy and successful life if only we were perfect, and that everything will come crashing down if we stray too far from that ideal. This understanding is real, and alive, and all-consuming, and it's penetrated us so deeply that perfectionism lives in our interiors via a lingering and unshakable insecurity. Insecurity about what we don't have, how we don't look, and what we haven't achieved.

And yet, despite those immobilising thoughts of deficit, we're seemingly gluttons for punishment. Interviewees call perfectionism their greatest weakness. Leaders in business, politics, sports and the arts credit their success to it. Celebrities and life coaches educate us in the many ways we can maximise it for personal gain. In fact, so much of what we understand to be virtuous about work, money, status and 'the good life' in modern society constitutes perfectionism's most powerful driving force: an obsession with boundless growth and unrelenting *moreness* at any cost.

That cost has mounted exponentially. We're drowning in our discontentment, submerged in the thicket of never

enough, shooting for perfection because everyone else seems so effortlessly perfect. Deep down, we know this isn't a normal or natural way to exist. We understand, by virtue of being human, that no one is perfect or could ever be made perfect. And we recognise, in our hearts if not our heads, that perfectionism's heavy armour is weighing us down.

But we wear it anyway. Because taking off the armour, and accepting the beautiful but imperfect person we are, is so unfathomably hard if it also means confronting our most basic assumptions about what's 'great' and 'good' in modern society and undergoing a complete apostasy of understanding about how we *should* exist in the world. When was the last time you caught a person, never mind an entire country, doing that level of introspection?

Yet that level of introspection is exactly what we must do if together we're going to escape the perfection trap. This so-titled book, *The Perfection Trap*, traces my journey to that conclusion. It started as a kind of meditation, a scratching of a persistent itch, but soon developed a dramatic narrative arc with one single thread coursing through it: perfectionism is the defining psychology of an economic system that's hell-bent on overshooting human thresholds. The thrust of this argument is woven into thirteen chapters explaining what perfectionism really is, what it does to us, how fast it's currently rising, why it's rising, and the things we can do to escape it.

To make my case, I've used a mix of formal and informal data sources – for example, the results of psychological studies, clinical case notes, economic data, and psychoanalytic and sociological theories. I've also relied on anecdotal evidence from life going on around me in rather more heavy measure than one might expect from a social psychologist. For that, I make no apology. I'm unambiguously a numbers guy. I love

statistics. I spend a great deal of my waking existence drilling them into students. But an idea cannot simply bear the weight of data to find validity in the real world. It must also bear the weight of lived experience or else it becomes a mere abstraction – a number, a trend line, an estimate around a band of many other possible estimates.

So from the get-go, let me point out a couple of things about this book. First, the reader will find many psychological, economic and sociological ideas not so much spelled out but interspersed with, applied to and tested by concrete experiences in my own life and the lives of others. Second, and perhaps more importantly, the reader should know that I've disguised identities and circumstances to tell the stories of those experiences. This has meant changing names and sometimes genders, altering places and times, making up locations, and occasionally combining several different voices into one, or one voice into many. I realise that these hidden identities and various disguises put tremendous demand on your trust, but not more demand, I hope, than a screenwriter would seek to earn through a well-crafted plotline. My intention is to portray the sense and meaning of what I've seen, heard and experienced, if not precisely the circumstances in which those experiences occurred.

Because yes, I'm a perfectionist. And if there's one thing I want this book to be, it's a souvenir of solace from one perfectionist to another. The more time I've spent learning about my own perfectionism, the perfectionism of those around me, and the results of research studies looking into perfectionism's effects on health and happiness, the more I've come to realise that our stories are born of essentially the same root. Sure, we suffer perfectionism in our own special ways. But our journeys begin with the same core belief that we're not

PROLOGUE

enough to matter to other people, or be loved by them, which is the same thing. You can learn that belief in many places, but most generally and most globally it's learned right here, in the flawless hologram that consumes and surrounds us.

I hope reading this book gives you comfort. I hope it helps you to gain perspective over what perfectionism does to you, and where it really comes from. I hope it gives you peace of mind knowing that none of this is your fault – that you are enough, no matter how much your culture tries to convince you otherwise. I hope it gives you the tools to move towards self-acceptance. I hope it injects you with a resolve to pursue social and political causes that will establish a more psychologically attuned way of living, one that accepts human limits.

In other words, I hope this book helps you to learn a little more about yourself and the world you live in. And with that knowledge, I hope it helps you to experience more and more of the unparalleled joy that comes from accepting all of yourself and all of your imperfections for the astonishing little explosions of humanity that they are.

*September 2022
London, England*

PART ONE

What is Perfectionism?

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

1. Our Favourite Flaw

Or Modern Society's Obsession with Perfection

'I'm a perfectionist, so I can drive myself mad – and other people, too. At the same time, I think that's one of the reasons I'm successful. Because I really care about what I do.'

Michelle Pfeiffer

In Nathaniel Hawthorne's 1843 tale, *The Birthmark*, an eminent scientist named Aylmer marries Georgiana, an impeccable young woman whose perfection is marred only by a small birthmark on her left cheek. The contrast of Georgiana's pristine face with this discoloured mark of birth bothers the perfectionist Aylmer, and he can see nothing but his wife's one and only imperfection. 'A crimson stain upon the snow.'

For Aylmer, Georgiana's birthmark is her 'fatal flaw'. Soon, his revulsion rubs off on her, causing Georgiana to hate the distorted self-image that he's created. She pleads with him to use his scientific talent to fix her imperfection, 'at whatever risk'.

They devise a plan. Aylmer, a talented chemist, will experiment with a cocktail of compounds until a cure is discovered. He toils day and night, but the perfect concoction eludes him. One day, while he's distracted by his test tubes, Georgiana

glimpses Aylmer's diary and discovers a catalogue of failures. 'Much as he had accomplished,' she observes, 'his most splendid successes were almost invariably failures if compared with the ideal at which he aimed.'

Then suddenly, 'Eureka!' Aylmer concocts an alchemic miracle. 'Water from a heavenly fountain', which Georgiana hurriedly drinks before collapsing in a heap of exhaustion, waking the next day to find no trace of her birthmark. Aylmer delights in his success: 'You are perfect!' he tells his now flawless wife.

But there's a sting in Hawthorne's tale. Because although Aylmer's potion corrected Georgiana's blemish, it did so at the expense of her life. The birthmark vanishes – and soon after, so does Georgiana.

Not long after Hawthorne penned *The Birthmark*, another Gothic writer, Edgar Allan Poe, wrote an equally chilling study of perfectionism's tragic psychology. In Poe's short story, *The Oval Portrait*, a wounded man seeks shelter in a derelict mansion on the Italian peninsula. His servant tries to stem his wounds but eventually has to give up. The wounded man assesses his situation as too grave, so holes himself up in one of the mansion's many bedrooms to die.

Lying there on the bed, shivering and delirious, he becomes enchanted by the many paintings hanging on the bedroom walls. Next to him, a small book is perched on the pillow, which claims to explain them. As he adjusts the candelabrum to illuminate the pages, his eye catches a portrait of a young woman in an oval frame tucked away in a nook behind the bedpost. The man is mesmerised. He thumbs open the book and finds the entry describing the painting's story.

The woman in the oval portrait was the young bride of

a gifted but troubled painter. She was ‘a maiden of rarest beauty’, but her husband was so obsessed with his artistry that he paid her little attention. One day, the painter asked his wife if he could paint her portrait. She accepted, thinking this was, at last, her chance to spend some precious time with her husband. She entered his studio and there she patiently sat, in a dark, high-turreted chamber, as the painter immortalised her earthly beauty.

But rather like Aylmer, the painter was a perfectionist. ‘He took glory in his work, which went on from hour to hour, and from day to day.’ Many weeks passed. The painter became so lost in his art that he didn’t notice his wife was ailing. ‘He would not see that the light which fell so ghastly in that lone turret withered the health and the spirits of his bride, who pined visibly to all but him.’

Even still, she submitted uncomplainingly to her husband’s perfectionism. And the painter became so fixated on capturing his wife’s likeness that he eventually gazed only at the portrait. ‘He would not see that the tints which he spread upon the canvas were drawn from the cheeks of her who sat beside him.’ More weeks passed. The painter’s wife grew weaker. Then, just like that, he applied the final brush stroke to his masterpiece and bellowed, ‘This is indeed life itself!’

He turned to his wife to find that she’d died.

It’s not easy to read Hawthorne and Poe through a 2023 lens. Their tales cut eerily close to home. Hawthorne’s Georgiana could quite easily be one of the many men and women who’ve died or been maimed by plastic surgery in the quest for bodily perfection. Poe’s painter, likewise, bears haunting hallmarks of stressed-out bankers or lawyers, working all hours of the

day and night to close a deal or write a contract at the expense of time with their family and friends.

Yet, despite the many parallels, what's perhaps more illuminating about these stories is the contrasts. Back in Jacksonian America, perfectionism was the stuff of popular Gothic horror, something to be ridiculed and most certainly avoided. These days, the focus of perfectionism's psychology is rather different. It's much more of a lionised quality now, something we might look for or admire, a trait that says we're working hard, that we're giving it everything we've possibly got.

Of course, unlike Hawthorne's Aylmer or Poe's painter, we're not entirely naïve. We're aware of perfectionism's collateral damage, counted in hours of relentless striving, untold personal sacrifices and heaps of self-imposed pressure. But that's sort of the point, isn't it? Perfectionism is the insignia of self-sacrificial success in modern culture, the badge of honour that conceals an altogether more different reality.

Which is why job interviews tend to be especially revealing of our willingness to embrace perfection. Inside all the jeopardy of these ordeals, we learn a great deal about how we want to be judged, and the masks we wear to convince our interviewers that we really are worth the investment.

The most revealing part of the cross-examination is always the answer to that killer question: 'What's your biggest weakness?' How we respond invariably reveals what we think are socially acceptable weaknesses – weaknesses that prove we're right for the job, weaknesses that we're so much better for having. 'My biggest weakness?' we respond, trying to give the impression we're searching the depths of our character to find it.

'I'd have to say that's my perfectionism.'

This answer is well-worn. Indeed, according to surveys, recruiters commonly cite the phrase, ‘I tend to be a bit of a perfectionist,’ as the most overused cliché in job interviews.¹ But get past the cliché, ask ourselves why we do this, and it makes perfect sense to signal our suitability in this way. After all, in a hyper-competitive, winner-takes-all economy, average is a decidedly dirty word. Admitting you’re happy to do just enough is an admission that you lack the ambition and personal resolve to better yourself. And we don’t think employers are looking for anything less than perfection.

We don’t think society looks for anything less than perfection either. Unlike in Hawthorne and Poe’s day, perfectionism in the modern world is a necessary evil, an honourable weakness, our favourite flaw. Living inside this culture, we’re so invested in its absurdities that we scarcely recognise them as absurdities at all. But look closer. Hawthorne’s Aylmer and Poe’s painter are chilling warnings of the true cost to lives spent scaling the dizzying heights of perfection. In this book, we’ll uncover what perfectionism really is, whether it actually helps us, why there might be more of it than ever, and what to do about all these things.

So let’s start, shall we, by getting rational. Because when we do, we see that lionising perfectionism is a completely irrational thing to do. By definition, perfection is an impossible goal. You can’t measure it, it’s often subjective, and it’s destined to be forever out of reach for mere mortals like us. ‘True perfection,’ joked correctional psychologist Asher Pacht, ‘exists only in obituaries and eulogies.’² It’s a red herring; a fool’s errand. And since perfection is always beyond the possible, since chasing it is such an utterly

hopeless quest, the cost for those who try must be very high indeed.

So why does it feel like striving for perfection is the only way to succeed? And are we right to feel that?

To begin answering these questions, I want to turn back to 17 January 2013. A shell-shocked Lance Armstrong sits in a leather wingback chair, looking outward into a grand, old-fashioned reading room. His legs are crossed, his breathing laboured, his hands moving skittishly back and forth from his lap to his face. It's almost as if he knows in his bones that this will turn out to be one of the most-watched interviews in American broadcasting history.

His interviewer, Oprah Winfrey, is a master of her craft. She doesn't face him straight on like most interviewers. Instead, she sits at a careful angle so that Armstrong must turn his head, deliberately, to face her. After several straightforward questions, Winfrey goes all-in for her headline confession. And as she does so, she pauses for a dramatic second, lifts her head from her notes, fixes her gaze on Armstrong and coolly invites him to admit that his seven Tour de France titles were won with the help of performance-enhancing drugs.

'Yes,' Armstrong confirms. He'd been a prolific dooper.

Winfrey then invites Armstrong to explain himself. And that's when something remarkable happens. His demeanour completely changes. His torso straightens, his chin lifts. He'd been waiting for this moment. Staring Winfrey right in the eye, he tells her firmly that he 'didn't do it to gain an advantage'. Doping, in his mind, was simply levelling the playing field. 'The culture was what it was,' he tells her defiantly, 'it was a competitive time; we were all grown men, we all made our choices.'

Armstrong chose to dope because everybody else was doping.

How we behave is influenced by how others behave. We like to think we're as free as birds, that we're completely unique individuals, and certainly very different from most people around us. But in actual fact, we're not unique in the slightest. Just like Armstrong described to Winfrey, our basic instinct is to act more like sheep. The very last thing we want to be is shunned, ostracised or excommunicated from the herd. So every day, knowingly or otherwise, we carefully measure our behaviour to stay within the bandwidth of what's socially acceptable or 'normal'.

Rather than some divine individuality, the social wind is what really moves the weathervane of how we tend to think, feel and behave. When we're working, parenting, studying or posting to social media, especially if we're filled with fear or doubt – and we're filled with those feelings a lot these days – we tend to go with the herd. And we do this even when herd behaviour is decidedly unhealthy, like in Armstrong's case. So when everyone else seems to be perfect, our own sense that perfection is the only way to succeed starts to seem decidedly rational.

It's hard to escape this kind of culture. Recent research shows that we all have a certain intolerance for imperfection, whether that be in our work, school grades, appearance, parenting, sports or lifestyle. The difference, to quote psychoanalyst Karen Horney, 'is merely quantitative'.³ Some of us have slightly more intolerance, some slightly less; most are in the middle. And that middle bit of the perfectionism spectrum – the average – is fast increasing over time. We'll look at how fast later. But for now, let's talk about what's underneath this

collective scramble for perfection and whether we should be at all concerned.

I'm a university professor and one of the few people worldwide who studies perfectionism. Over the years, I've been working on all sorts of problems, such as identifying perfectionism's distinguishing features, looking at what correlates with perfectionism, and figuring out why it seems to be the defining characteristic of our time. In the process, I've listened to many clinicians, teachers, managers, parents and young people coming of age in the modern world. The view from the coalface is that perfectionism is very much the new zeitgeist.

This fact was confirmed to me in 2018 when an invitation arrived in my inbox from a woman named Sheryl. She'd contacted me on behalf of TED, and wanted to know whether I'd like to speak at their upcoming conference in Palm Springs, California. Perfectionism, Sheryl told me, was a topic of enormous interest to TED's membership. 'Our people,' she said, 'see perfectionism in their own lives, their children's lives, and the lives of those they work alongside.' She wanted me to tell the conference what perfectionism was, what it does to us, and why it seems so widespread. 'I'd love to,' I told her. So that month I sat down with TED's speechwriters to pen a twelve-minute talk entitled, 'Our Dangerous Obsession with Perfection'.

I'm proud of myself for making it through that talk, but I've grown to dislike the title. It's far too personal. It places the onus on us, on *our* obsession with perfection. Writing this book – buried in that tricky art of collecting thoughts in neat little sentences, then tweaking and distilling them into something plain for others to read – has been clarifying. Through

it, I've found gaps in my thinking that I didn't know existed. And I've started to see things in the data and all around me, things I'd somehow missed or simply couldn't see.

Perfectionism is not a personal obsession – it's a decidedly cultural one. As soon as we're old enough to interpret the world around us, we begin noticing its ubiquity on our televisions and movie screens, billboards, computers and smartphones. It's right there in the language our parents use, the way our news is framed, the things our politicians say, how our economy works, and the make-up of our social and civic institutions. We radiate perfection because our world radiates perfection.

My flight to the TED conference in Palm Springs departed from the shiny new Terminal 2 at Heathrow Airport. Terminal 2 is the Queen's Terminal, named after Queen Elizabeth II. She opened the original Queen's Building at Heathrow in 1955, which was demolished in 2009 to make way for the new three-billion-pound global gateway.

The Queen's Terminal is a breathtaking piece of commercial architecture. According to *Guardian* journalist Rowan Moore, its central waiting area is the 'size of the covered market at Covent Garden'. And the vision for passenger experience is much the same. It's a 'great social gathering space', says architect Luis Vidal, 'like a piazza or a cathedral'. Walking through the Queen's Terminal one certainly gets a sense of this romanticism. From the top of the gallery that skirts the building's periphery lies a grand expanse, punctuated by sweeping curves, clean edges, bright-coloured billboards, and floor-to-ceiling glass.

In this superstructure, the lines between what's real and what's not are blurred. Advertising is the principal culprit.

Even by modern standards, Queen's Terminal ads are an especially curious form of corporate artistry. 'Outthink infection' is IBM's call to an enlightened passenger, who'll presumably read it on their way to board a plane in the middle of a pandemic. Microsoft tells us how its cloud can turn 'chaos into clockwork', while HSBC charitably reassures us that 'climate change doesn't do borders'.

But perhaps the most striking aspect of the marketing at the Queen's Terminal is the lifestyle branding. One billboard shows a besuited man, impeccably groomed, roaming courageously from one destination to another aided by an especially benevolent car-sharing app. Another shows a grinning businesswoman, expensive suitcase in hand, being cheerily greeted by the concierge of an oh-so-helpful airline. These are not isolated examples. From the billboards to high-end fashion outlets to the almost too deliciously on-brand Perfectionist's Café, the terminal is a microcosm of what we celebrate: exaggerated, impossible ideals of perfect lives and lifestyles.

Yet sitting right there in the Perfectionists' Café, I couldn't help but dwell on the fanciful nature of the idealism being trumpeted. Because when viewed in the harsh light of what's happening in the real world, this building conjures a hyper-functional, ambrosial land that's simply unrecognisable. The immaculately besuited man beaming down at me from the electronic billboard doesn't appear to have legged it to check-in because the car park is thirty minutes from the terminal. The grin on the businesswoman's face seems almost goading when you've had to slalom through security only to find the flight's delayed.

Is coffee at the Perfectionists' Café perfect? It's not even hot. Your gate is finally called and of course it's the one at

the other end of the terminal, down the escalator and a two-kilometre walk under the taxiway. You get there only to find no seats at the gate and a queue of disgruntled passengers snaking its way into the walkway. Tired and in need of a stiff drink, you find a space to sit and begin to ask yourself whether this meeting could just as well have been convened online.

Stop right there and really think about this. It's staggering, isn't it, just how different this building's idealism is from reality. The aspirational taglines, the picture-perfect imagery, the sparkle of transatlantic travel – all of it points to a chasm not just here but in culture at large. Houses, holidays, cars, fitness regimes, beauty products, diets, parenting tips, life coaches, productivity hacks – you name it, we're living inside a hologram of unattainable perfection, with the imperative to constantly update our lives and lifestyles in search of a flawless nirvana that simply doesn't exist.

We're just human. And deep down we know, better than we'd like to admit, that all humans are fallible, flawed and exhaustible creatures. The more this holographic culture scrambles all sense of reality, the more it insists we fight our most humanising fallibilities and the slow march of Mother Nature, the more our perfectionism will trap us in pursuit of a chimera – rendering us helpless as our health and happiness plummet. We'll talk about perfectionism's impact on these things later in the book. For now, though, let's return to the Queen's Terminal so I can tell you a little bit about my own struggle with our favourite flaw.

Back in the Perfectionists' Café, waiting patiently for my flight to be called, I tried to nurse threadbare nerves by flicking through the most popular TED talks on my laptop. I must have watched hundreds in the run-up to mine. I studied

each one, searching for the secret formula. The best speakers seemed to exude bulletproof confidence, as if storytelling were as second nature as eating or drinking. I'm far less sure of myself. What if I couldn't muster the courage to go on stage? What if I forgot my lines? What if I panicked in front of all those people?

Perfectionists like me tend to deal with anxiety by overthinking. We suppose that covering every possible base is the most failsafe method of holding things together, forgetting that overthinking is itself a handicapping form of anxiety. Sure, I've never absolutely bombed a presentation using the overthinking method – but I've never truly aced one either. At the age of just twenty-nine, and against all odds, here I was flying to California as one of TED's much-hyped 'thought leaders'. On that big red speaker's circle, I needed to look like I was worth the five-thousand-dollar entrance fee.

One of my great struggles is being unable to sit comfortably next to success. I'd rather pass it off as luck or happenstance than accept acclaim that, deep down, I don't believe I deserve. That deficit thinking – or insecurity – is perhaps the most pernicious aspect of perfectionism. Because when you're constantly striving for more success – not to mention petrified of failure – even a rather high level of achievement can feel decidedly empty. Worse than empty, in fact, since perfectionism exposes our dreams as nothing more than dead ends. For the perfectionist, success is a bottomless pit that depletes us in its pursuit, while the answer to that deeper question – 'am I enough?' – is always over the horizon.

And just like the horizon, it recedes as we approach.

Constantly feeling never enough is a punishing way to go through life. Despite my outward achievements, and despite what is on one level an earnest desire to lead an enlightened

and compassionate life, feeling never enough means I'm never contented; I move away from people, avoid tricky situations, and end up presenting as awkward, unreliable and generally commitment-phobic. I'm restless, panicked, oscillating between relative stability and medicated relapse, prone to self-doubt and self-criticism, torn about who I really am, caught inside a cycle of overachievement in pursuit of a credentialised success that, in my heart of hearts, I don't truly believe in.

As far as I can tell, to move towards perfection in our lives and accomplishments is to alienate ourselves from ourselves, or worse, to never find ourselves at all.

Nursing that lukewarm coffee in the Perfectionists' Café, watching the hectic criss-crossing of Queen's Terminal passengers, I reflected for a moment on whether I might have been better off working with my father, a construction worker, on his building sites. Drilling holes, sanding wood, laying bricks for a living, marrying a local girl, owning a modest house, perhaps even driving a decent car and raising a couple of kids. I *would* have missed out on the collection of fancy degrees, Russell Group professorship, TED talk, and this glittering book deal. But I wouldn't be working round the clock, and I wouldn't be restless with fear, either. And maybe, just maybe, I'd have glimpsed that elusive horizon.

Then again, maybe not. As British psychoanalyst Josh Cohen asks, is anyone in the modern world truly spared the perfectionistic fantasies that plague our consumerist lives?⁴

To one extent or another, I suspect I'm caught in a trap familiar to everyone living in the modern age – entangled in a thicket of never enough, unable to make sense of what all the relentless perfecting is for. Endless amounts of work, consumption and self-improvement summoned in pursuit of no