

# Grace in the Grit:

## Exorcising the Demon of Perfectionism

By Kent Ira Groff, APC

*Once in a while you can get shown the light  
in the strangest of places if you look at it right.*  
—Robert Hunter

While writing this, I found grace in the grit of working on an adobe-style house for Habitat for Humanity in Taos, New Mexico. Part of me knew I needed to spend this precious week writing, but another part knew that the break of engaging in kinesthetic service would be good for my soul and for the writing. The service project won out, and I found myself still “writing” while pounding nails.

Because as volunteer carpenters go and come, each leaving our less-than-perfect doorjambs and windowsills, it creates a funny sort of therapy. A perfectionist would walk off the job at 9a.m. I’ve come to realize that it’s worth several visits to a psychiatrist to cure my perfectionism. Constructing genuine community means building on each other’s less than perfect beginnings. My psyche gets healed a bit more when I surround myself with vulnerable human beings on behalf of a good cause.

**Never obligation, only invitation.** People in western cultures tend to operate out of an all-or-nothing mindset. Go on a diet. Start an exercise routine. Commit to spiritual practices. A year later: It didn’t work. I once complained to my orthopedic doctor that the back exercises he prescribed did more harm than good. “I do them for a week; then my back is sorer and I have to quit for two weeks.”

“Two things,” he said. “First, be gentle on yourself. Exercise till you stretch yourself, but not till you feel intense pain. Second, aim for four days out of seven. If you slip back to three days, just move your inner computer cursor in the right direction.” What he told me for my back I give as sound counsel for any physical, mental and spiritual disciplines. I use a phrase: *Never obligation, only invitation.*

**Not “Be perfect,” rather “Be complete.”** Religious language reinforces this do-it-right or don’t-do-it-at-all attitude. Most folks today mentally translate perfection as *perfectionism*, and perfect as *faultless*. As leaders, we can help people and ourselves with a reminder that both the original New Testament Greek *telios*, and the Latin *perfectum* (behind our English word), mean “complete, mature, or whole.” And the Greek noun *telos* means “goal or finish line.” One way I script my own psyche is to say, “That’s just ideal!—instead of perfect. Our self-talk affects our unconscious thinking and acting.

Jesus does not say, “Be perfect...” but rather, “Become

complete, therefore, as your Abba in heaven is complete” (Matthew 5:48, AT). Luke has already helped by translating the phrase, “Be compassionate\* as your Abba is compassionate” (6:36, AT)—and be compassionate to your self. \*Or merciful

Our culture inflicts this damning perfectionism on us. A family with a member in recovery from anorexia can witness to the subtle, crippling effects of a Barbie Doll perfection syndrome and exercise addiction. Gerald May, M.D., in *Addiction and Grace*, gives solid counsel for finding inner freedom from all sorts of perfectionist demons. The apostle Paul can say, “Not that I have already obtained this or have

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already reached the goal (*telos*); but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own... Let those of us then who are mature (*telioi*) be of the same mind” (Philippians 3:12, 15).

When I can’t take my normal walk in the mornings, I take a mini-walk to keep the pattern going. When I can’t take 20 minutes for centering prayer, I take two minutes.

**Sabbath.** Practicing Sabbath, or pausing for mini-sabbaths, can be an Rx for perfectionism. It’s a way of trusting the universe of divine Love to provide for what needs to be done on other days or by other ways or through other folks. To fast from our workaholic tendencies by celebrating with family or friends or self is to claim our humanity and free ourselves from the demon of “it’s all about me.”

**Praying your procrastinations.** I’m learning with Ignatius to turn to God in all things—even in my imperfections and procrastinations. I look at envelopes from charitable agencies piling up on my desk; I glance at daily to-do lists, persons to call, to write, to e-mail; I experience human feelings of frustration.

But with some releasing litany—often for me it’s a wordless inhaled breath (or a centering word or phrase) followed by a deeply exhaled breath—you can inwardly offer the procrastinations as they come to mind, one by one, while driving or lurching or going to sleep, when it’s too late to phone the board chair or make the pastoral visit. Each breath serves as a

positive arrow of compassion, instead of a negative downer of guilt.

Through many such yearnings you've prayed countless times for urgent tasks that demanded to be done along the way. Finally, when you do make the phone call, send the e-mail, or write the check, you've wrapped the action in a web of prayers. With a slight inner shift of the sail, you are "turning to God in all things"—praying your procrastinations.

**Traces of grace in the grit: Holy humus!** A woman on retreat was praying when she heard a construction worker say, "Holy shit!" Later she and I queried: Can this pop phrase mask our human yearning for life's "waste" to morph into wholeness and holiness?

We can take a cue from the visceral spirituality in *The Table Talk of Martin Luther*. Maybe some folks are "praying" without knowing it—that life's lowest places might be consecrated: "Holy humus!" The expression can mean more than venting your spleen. We can pray to see traces of grace in the grit of our own or others' defeats and discouragements.

### **Grit Seasoning**

While I do this grit  
work, season  
the irksome pieces  
with enough  
Ahas! to remind me  
of the reason.

The reason is your life mission (see Resource Three). It's your "why to live," your purpose for being on this earth, your passion. Such ahas! come unbidden, often just when we feel our own brokenness, even shame and unworthiness.

In a hospital CPE (Clinical Pastoral Education) training program, a new student chaplain was assigned to visit Marie

Smith, a patient with terminal cancer; she had called to request a visit. It was this seminarian's first real encounter with death. As he made his way down the hallway in the oncology unit, he was overwhelmed with the stench of necrotic flesh. Upon knocking and then entering the room, he felt overwhelmed by her ashen color. He thought he would throw up. But from somewhere in the back brain, he remembered that it can help at such times to sit down and put your head in your hands. So he sat that way for four or five minutes, and the sickness did lessen.

But when he looked at the woman, he felt so embarrassed by what had happened that he got up and left. Feeling he had failed, he went to the meditation room to sort things out. He decided he would tell his supervisor the next day that he was resigning from the program, and maybe even quitting seminary. Perhaps this ministry thing was not for him.

But the next morning, before he could find the supervisor, she found him. Marie had just called again: Was he the chaplain who visited her? He thought, *Oh no*. "Well, this time she just wanted to say thanks. After she called yesterday, she wished she hadn't; she was so sick she didn't feel like talking, and surely didn't want any minister preaching to her." "But somehow," the patient said, "the chaplain who came must have sensed that. Because he just came in, sat down, bowed his head and prayed for me for maybe five minutes. And then he gave me the most loving glance, and left. Of all my times at this hospital, this is the most meaningful visit I ever received."

Once when I told this story, someone asked, "But the chaplain wasn't really praying, was he?" His intense identity with her pain was his visceral praying, his yearning for her with "bowels and mercies" (*splagchna* in Greek; see Philippians 2:1, KJV).

***Felix culpa*: "a good mistake."** Sometimes you can reflect on a story like the chaplain's experience—or a failed

project in your congregation or a dumb little thing you did last week—in light of St. Augustine’s concept of *felix culpa*. Often it’s translated, “happy fault or fortunate fault,” referring to the fault/fall of Adam and Eve, which becomes the occasion for each of us to realize the “grace in the grit” as we leave the garden of our own less than perfect lives. I like to translate it: “a good mistake.”

Only retroactively do we see good coming out of a failed experiment. But even to frame failure as an “experiment” begins to redeem it. Thomas Edison could say he didn’t fail, but found 2,000 ways how not to make the light bulb. Proactively, what we can do is pray to notice flecks of grace in the gaff or the goof—that it can become a good mistake.

“Drops of experience” are never wasted, according to mathematician philosopher Alfred North Whitehead. When you lose computer data on new members, or you drive two hours to a hospital to visit a cancer patient who was just discharged, or you eke away hours learning new technology for a website, tell yourself: *All that time I spent I was praying for new members, or for folks with cancer, or for our congregation to connect with tech generations.*

Here’s a really good mistake. In September 1928 Alexander Fleming returned to the laboratory of St. Mary’s Hospital in London after being on holiday for a couple of weeks. He discovered Petri dishes that his students mistakenly left in an incubator had formed mold in the dank atmosphere. Fleming noticed—and *noticing* is the miracle of any genuine discovery—that the mold had killed a ring of bacteria. Fleming’s surprise discovery of penicillin is a real life story of how a good mistake created the gift of healing for generations. His vacation led to his vocation.

**Micromanaging.** The need to control people and situations is one of the demonic expressions of perfectionism. At the root of the demon of micromanaging lies a secret fear of shame: I don’t want another’s half-botched job to reflect poorly on my own self-competence. Another demon behind

micromanaging is failing to trust in God by not trusting people.

Humility in a strange way is actually spiritual self-confidence: confidence that you can celebrate the gifts of others, rather than belittle them, while at the same time claiming your own. It’s a God-confidence that there are enough gifts for both your neighbor and you to claim your potential for the good of the cosmos, without exploiting or belittling each other. And that’s a good definition of *telios*: mature.

### **Spiritual Practice 10. “Let It Be”**

Listen to the Beatles’ song “Let It Be” (on mp3 or the CD *Let It Be*). “Mother Mary” refers to Paul McCartney’s dream of his mother, who died when he was fourteen. The title also can be heard as a subtle take on Mary’s response when the angel Gabriel announced she would bear a child—seemingly impossible: “Here am I... Let it be to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38). As you hear “Let it be...” in your mind imagine letting go of an issue that you can’t control, or accepting a challenge that may want to “birth” itself in you.

(Capital Records, Inc., U.S.A.; Sound recording by EMI Records Ltd., England, 1970)

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