

THE PERFECT POISON

TO SUCCESS

My Parenting, Perfectionism and Procrastination

Mike passed the stack of test papers over his back to me. I lifted one off the top, sniffed the blue mimeograph ink, then passed the rest behind me to Laylah. The teacher instructed us to begin. It started out easy enough; all I had to do was select the proper word, from two or three choices, to complete a sentence. I quickly answered several when I hit a roadblock. Suddenly, I could not remember the difference between the words “want” and “went.”

My mind was going, “I know this; I studied this; why can’t I think of it.” Worst of all I thought, “I have to get this right.” I raised my hand and asked the teacher for help. She explained that she couldn’t help me because it was a test.

I looked at the two words again and again. The more I looked at them, the more I got confused. They began to look like the same word. Have you ever said a word over and over until it sounds like gibberish? That’s what was happening to me.

The teacher announced that we had just a few more minutes to finish the test, and I still hadn’t gotten past this one question. I realized that I wasn’t even going to be able to finish the test. I panicked, and began to cry. I was a six year old in First grade; and I was already a perfectionist.

That perfectionism spilled over into every aspect of my life. I recall getting plastic models of cars, planes, and ships as birthday gifts. They were fun to build, but I was frequently frustrated by the modeling glue. Too often I would accidentally smear the glue on the outer surface of the model ruining its finish. I would get so angry at the “imperfection” that I would throw the model in the trash rather than complete it.

The problem is that kids don’t become perfectionists on their own. It begins with a critical parent, who pushes their children to succeed, often for the sake of their own pride and glorification. My parents were constantly raising the bar. I may have cried over tests, but my sister’s perfectionism went even higher. She made straight A’s all the way through elementary school, high school, and college, but not without a price. She was hospitalized twice with stomach ulcers from the stress.

Perfectionism is a de-motivator. It can cause someone to sacrifice their goals too soon. I

remember giving up baseball and guitar playing because the skills were too difficult for me to acquire quickly. If I had stuck with either just a little bit longer, I may have obtained enough ability to enjoy them as ends in themselves.

Perfectionism also leads to procrastination. Surprising to many, procrastination has nothing to do with laziness. I recall many times as a young man having trouble beginning a project. I would gather all the materials I would need. I’d go over the instructions multiple times. But, I was reticent about taking the first step. Deep down inside of me was doubt - doubt that I could accomplish the task without flaws. Knowing that it wouldn’t be perfect prevented me from even starting.

As a writer that would manifest with me doing tons of research, taking copious notes, mapping out extensive outlines, but hesitating over writing the first paragraph. When I did actually write something, I would never show it to anyone. I feared the criticism. If it were not for the compliments from my teachers in high school on essays that I “had” to turn in, I may never have developed the confidence to become a professional writer.

I began both my writing and speaking careers as a perfectionist. Overtime, my perfectionism evolved into mere over-achieverism. But, the difference between the two is huge. You see, the solution is to focus on the journey and not the results. The journey is where and when you get to be creative, experiment, and take risks. As I became more confident in each skill I relaxed and learned to enjoy the process instead of the goal. Today I write as much for fun as for profit. I take risks with my writing, and can’t wait for people to read it.

As an older child, I began to relax enough to stop trashing my marred models. Oh, I still managed to smear way too much glue on them, but rather than freak out, I creatively included them into the model as battle damage. It even inspired me to take it further. One time I took one of my mother’s turkey trussing pins, heated it up over a candle, then melted tiny bullet-holes along the fuselage of a WWII plane model.

I know a number of people who have had great ideas for starting a business, but whose perfectionism never allowed them to begin. I understand that. The first company I owned

was a dealership in a multi-level marketing business. I would procrastinate in doing any selling until I had followed all the rules, read all the materials, listened to all the recorded seminars, etc. I kept thinking that at some point I would accumulate enough knowledge that I could do the work fearlessly. Instead, I spent tons of time in preparation, and little time in actually doing. As a result I failed.

My next company began without intention and grew organically a little at a time. I made a necklace for a girlfriend. Her friends loved it and wanted one too, so I made more. Then their friends wanted necklaces. I started making earrings too. I even got some stores to carry my products. Before I knew it, I had a thriving jewelry business. I believe it was this early success in business - where everything did not have to be perfect to get started - that enabled me to go on to found numerous companies. The idea is to start somewhere doing something, then you can build, adjust, grow, tweak, learn, and add-on as necessary.

In 1997, when I first became a professional public speaker I would practice a speech until it was perfectly memorized. I was terrified of making a mistake. It was the actual making of some mistakes that helped me get over my perfectionism. Somehow I didn’t die right there on the platform, and people still enjoyed my presentation. Go figure! Eventually, with each new experience I became more comfortable in front of an audience; I worried less about failure and kept calm. If I did make a mistake - I could laugh it off. I was enjoying the journey.

If you are a perfectionist, the trick is to allow some imperfection into your life a little at a time so that you can get comfortable with it. Like any other addiction, you must wean yourself.

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