



## A Splendid Imperfection

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**READING:** “The Perils of Perfection,” By EVGENY MOROZOV, **NY Times**, March 2, 2013.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/03/opinion/sunday/the-perils-of-perfection.html?pagewanted=all& r=0>

Each one of us is a splendid imperfection. The universe is unfolding as it should. We are this moment, just as we should be, and we are where we should be just at this moment.

It may seem strange to combine the words ‘splendid’ and ‘imperfect’; weird to suggest that you are just as you should be this moment. Yet Unitarian Universalist theologian Rebecca Ann Parker in **SAVING PARADISE** reminds us of that older, deeper meaning of paradise which claims that paradise is not free from suffering or conflict. Paradise “is a place in which Spirit is present and love is possible.” Are you there? Are we there? I believe we are!

Yet all too often that word ‘imperfect’ captures a sense of inadequacy. Oh, we’ve failed. We should have bought gas when it was cheaper. We should have taken the time to talk with our parents before they died. Oh, the list goes on. How could we not fail our parents, our spouses, our children?

We do not measure up. That heavy weight of feeling we are not making it falls upon us. We lack a feeling of self-acceptance. Some years ago a church held an old time hymn dance. At a hymn dance, you dress up in a costume of your

favorite hymn. There were a numerous Christian soldiers. A couple of the larger egos in the church dressed up as “How great thou art.” A young couple dressed in grass skirts, claiming they were dressed as “Coming through the rye.” Everyone was totally astonished when a young person showed up nude. What could they be dressed as? And the response was “Just as I am, Lord. Take me just as I am “

We want to be accepted just as we are. The Hasidic Jews tell us that one day Rabbi Zusya said, “In the coming world, they will not ask me ‘Why were you not Moses?’ they will ask me “Why were you not Zusya?”

The title of Thomas Harris’s old book is “I’m OK – You’re OK:” Just as you are, just as I am. And that’s pretty core Unitarian Universalist theology: if that’s not the inherent worth and dignity of every person, I just don’t know what is. You are a splendid imperfection. If paradise is here and now, how could it be otherwise?

In her book **SAVING PARADISE** Rebecca Ann Parker says that for the early Christian church, paradise was “this world, permeated and blessed by the spirit.” And that is what she advocates for us as well. She writes “As inheritors of Western Christianity, we believe we must stand again at the open doors of paradise and bless this world as sacred soil, as holy ground, and as a home that all must learn to inhabit together.” (28) The purpose of the love feast, of the Eucharist, of communion in the early church was, she says, to return “the senses to an open, joyous, experience of the world; it was an encounter with divine presence infusing physical life.”

Another way of putting it then was saying, “I’m’ okay - you’re okay” in the midst of feeling inadequate, overcoming that sense of not measuring up, a feeling of being, indeed, a splendid imperfection. Indeed, Parker’s paradise it seems to me is itself a splendid imperfection.

But who amongst us has not learned that paradise is not here and now but far away and on the other side? Is it not by such things that we are measured? If we do not measure up, is it not because we sense we are not perfect?

Are you perfect?

We have wandered in dangerous directions. Perfectionism has greater dangers than just procrastination.

In his **SPIRITUALITY OF IMPERFECTION**, Ernest Kurtz writes, “trying to be perfect is the *most* tragic human mistake.” (Page 5)

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Not just A tragic mistake, writes Kurtz, but the MOST tragic mistake. Maybe it's good being a splendid imperfection!

Consider a couple of examples of trying to be perfect. The Puritans who settled Massachusetts Bay Colony were trying to be perfect. The very word Puritan suggests perfection, purity. But they didn't allow any one different from them around. They chased out Roger Williams, Anne Hutchinson as well. I will not recite the crimes of the Puritans against those imperfect beings the Indians. Let it merely be said that because the Indians did not cultivate the land the way the English did, the English claimed indigenous nations had no right to that land, the land their forebears had been buried in for centuries. Neat, orderly gardens for our Puritan forebears.

Various efforts to make societies perfect come across one way or another, some human trait that is not perfect. It may be skin color, or body shape, but perfectionism is often the genesis of racism and sexism. So EVGENY MOROZOV wrote, “Learning to appreciate the many imperfections of our institutions and of our own selves, at a time when the means to fix them are so numerous and glitzy, is one of the toughest tasks facing us today. “

One of the tragic dangers of perfectionism is escapism. Perfectionists have a sense of being in touch with the ideal, with supreme good. From this point of view, special knowledge allows them to feel a unique connection beyond this world. The world was created by a lesser being, a fallen angel. How else can one explain the suffering of the world, concentration camps, AIDS? How could a good God create such an imperfect, fallen world?

For these Gnostics, the world was created by a God who is less than the true God. Their special connection, knowledge of hidden divinity allows them to disconnect from this imperfect world and ignore it. Given the problems of our world, the overwhelming issues that confront us, we cannot but at times have some sympathy with this point of view.

But escapism is a rejection of compassion as much as it is a rejection of suffering and imperfection. I believe that all true faith, all spirituality heightens our sense of identity with creation. We begin to practice the golden rule when

we imaginatively walk in another's shoes. Implicit in this is a sense of oneness, and also a sense of difference, a sense of splendid imperfection in our oneness with each other.

Why is the perfect, perfectionism so misleading.

What would you be like if you were perfect? Imagine yourself, perfect?

I would ask, if you were perfect, what happens the morning after?

What is perfect is finished, completed. Our sense of the perfect comes from our sense of when we are finished with something. When we say something is imperfect, are we saying much more that it is not finished? As the saying goes, "God is not finished with us yet." Should she be, we'd be dead and gone. In the world of Nature, in the world of the paradise Rebecca Parker reminds us of; the notion that something is finished is out of place. Emerson speaks:

These roses under my window make no reference to former roses or to better ones... There is no time to them; there is simply the rose; it is perfect in every moment of its existence. Before a leaf-bud has burst, its whole life acts, in the full-blown flower these is no more, in the leafless root there is no less.

So too, in our splendid imperfection are we perfect every moment. Can we see it, feel it? Accept ourselves as perfect in this moment?

Fanatics and dogmatists make us feel inadequate. We lack the surety they seem to have. But they are blinded by their own simple light. Behind every church dogma there is a long history, there are stories of human longing and struggle. The dogma of the trinity is but one example: how Servetus was burned because he rejected it. How the Emperor Constantine demanded people accept it as part of a loyalty oath to him. Dogmatists only lift up the dogma, and fear to tell the story. But the story beyond the dogma, the 'why' is what's really important. At some point a parent stops telling a child simply what to do because he is told to do so and tells him why. Dogmatists don't like that part.

The sitting around the campfire, around the kitchen table is really what it's all about. In the Roman Empire of Constantine, truth and national security were competing values. The great lie of perfectionism is there are no values conflicts. The perfectionist's deceit is that we can gain happiness by clinging to only one value, one path. But we have many paths and life is juggling many

ways. Today, the major value conflict is between the free market and democracy. Which shall you cling to? Or shall we try to balance them. Out of this clash shall the stories of our lives come. “Learning to appreciate the many imperfections of our institutions and of our own selves, at a time when the means to fix them are so numerous and glitzy, is one of the toughest tasks facing us today,” says EVGENY MOROZOV

And of these stories, which story do you need to know best?

You need to know your own story best. The story of your life. But as Eric Berne of GAMES PEOPLE PLAY and Harris of I’M’ OKAY AND YOU’RE OKAY and so many other psychologists tell us, we have so many voices in our heads that want us to tell their stories rather than our own stories

Perhaps your mother was treated as less than perfect by her mother. So she treated you as less than perfect. What else did she know? So many tapes in our minds going on and on. Rather than listening to the “I’m OKAY You’re okay” tape, the tape your spiritual community here asks you to start with each day, you start each day with the complaining voice of your boss, or some other person who has been nagging you.

Why give them more priority than your friends here?

Sure you are imperfect. You are a splendid imperfection. You’re OK. I’m okay.

Say to yourself: “I’m okay”

How does it feel? right?

This is how we open those doors that Rebecca Ann Parker speaks about, those doors to paradise. If you do not feel you are ok, your world won’t feel okay.

“Knowing that paradise is here and now,” writes Parker “is a gift that comes to those who practice the ethics of paradise.” And those who say “I’m ok, you’re okay.” “I’m a splendid imperfection and you’re a splendid imperfection,” these practice the ethics of paradise.