

wonder now why anyone would want to take such satisfaction in seeing what is missing, what is wrong, what is “broken.”

The pursuit of perfection has become a major addiction of our time. Fortunately, perfectionism is learned. No one is born a perfectionist, which is why it is possible to recover. I am a recovering perfectionist. Before I began recovering, I experienced that I and everyone else was always falling short, that who we were and what we did was never quite good enough. I sat in judgment on life itself. Perfectionism is the belief that life is broken.

... Life offers us many teachers and many teachings. One of mine was David, who was an artist and my first love. The living proof that opposites attract. While we were together, my driver’s license came up for renewal. And I needed to take a written test of the traffic laws.

The DMV had sent a little booklet. I studied it for days. All the while I was memorizing the meaning of the white curb and the yellow curb, David would try to persuade me to join him for a walk or go to a party our out to dinner... I told him I couldn’t take the time. Of course I got 100% on the test. Triumphant, I rushed into his studio shouting that I had gotten 100% on my driving test. David looked up from his painting with an expression of great tenderness. “My love,” he said, “why would you want to do that?”

It was not the response I had expected. Suddenly I understood that I had sacrificed a great deal to get 100 on a test that I had only needed to pass in order to drive. I had spent days studying for it that I could have spent in much wiser ways. I had learned many things that I did not even want to know.

... [This] was clearly not about driving. It was not even about grades. It was about needing to deserve [the love of my perfectionist father, who had judged my efforts at school as never quite good enough]. Fortunately, David did not play by these rules. He didn’t even know the game.

Second Reading

“For Yaedi”
David Ignatow

Looking out the window at the trees
and counting the leaves,
listening to a voice within
that tells me nothing is perfect
so why bother to try, I am thief
of my own time. When I die
I want it to be said that I wasted
hours in feeling absolutely useless
and enjoyed it, sensing my life
more strongly than when I worked at it.
Now I know myself from a stone
or a sledgehammer.

Sermon

The Enemy of the Good Rev. Judy Welles

Finger paint. Remember finger paint? Remember how fun it was to create a work of art with finger paint? Not only because of the result, but because of the process! It's one of the few childhood activities I can remember where we were actively encouraged to get messy — get both hands in and slop that stuff around, rub our forearms and elbows in it as well. It was the rare finger painter who didn't also end up with finger paint on her face, in her hair, and all over her clothes. But what fun it was!

There's not much in our oh-so responsible adult lives any more that encourages us to make messes. Of course, some of the things we do simply are messy, like bathing the dog or hanging wallpaper. But those messes, and most of the messes we make on the way to something else, are to be cleaned up as soon as possible. The state of messiness for its own sake is actively discouraged.

After all, if cleanliness is next to godliness, then what must messiness be next to?

Well, I'm here to tell you this morning that messiness is next to creativity, to serendipity, and to surprise. It's not the worst thing in the world. And there are some situations where a state of messiness provides just the right context and environment for some really good work to be done.

But there's more... I think there are solid reasons to discourage perfectionism and to make plenty of room for the kinds of compromise that get things accomplished even if those things aren't exactly what we would have wished. I'm here this morning to talk about what's pragmatic and what's sensible, as well as what's messy and fun and creative.

I speak to you as a recovering perfectionist — and you might want to talk with my husband and the rest of the church staff for a realistic assessment about how far I have come in my recovery (or not). All of us on the staff have high standards in bringing you meaningful experiences and opportunities to learn and grow; all of us struggle at times to find the balance between getting it just right or getting it done. Perhaps that's why we work together so well as a staff team — we really do understand each other's mode of operation.

I confess to you that when I was editing the UUCV newsletter for a year, I would spend hours and hours (usually on a Monday, my day off) checking and double-checking that all paragraphs were spaced three points apart, not two points or four points; and that the columns on each page lined up at the bottoms as well as at the tops. I spent a long time looking for graphics to illustrate the articles; and a lot of time fiddling with the sizing of a boxed announcement so that it fit just right. I was pretty sure that none of you was measuring the points between the paragraphs or criticizing my editorial abilities if photos weren't perfectly centered. I admit to finding considerable satisfaction in working at that level of perfectionism, but I can't help wondering if the time might have been better spent writing a letter to a friend or listening to music while cooking something.

As I age and become more seasoned in my profession, I have come to appreciate more and more Voltaire's wise observation that "The perfect is the enemy of the good." As my stamina diminishes and my energy takes longer to be restored, I have learned

that often “good enough” is exactly that — it’s good enough to say that it’s done and time to move on to something else. We don’t have all day, you know... I think one of the best arguments for being messy is that the time spent to straighten things up could probably be better spent doing something else.

One of my favorite stories about the value of not planning too much or being too tidy concerns the building of an entire university campus, the University of California at Davis. Recognizing the nuisance factor at most universities of people taking short cuts across the grass instead of walking on those orderly, straight, right-angled paths, the people who designed the Davis campus decided to hold off on building any paved paths. When the buildings were complete and the campus opened to offer classes, only grass lay between all of the buildings — no paths at all. After a year, it was very obvious from the tracks worn in the grass which routes between buildings the pedestrians preferred, and it was on those tracks that the University eventually built the paved paths. There’s little trouble with people walking on the grass now.

I guess it’s this built-in appreciation for creative untidiness that caused me to savor a book Jill turned me on to, titled *A Perfect Mess*¹, which makes many arguments in favor of messiness. Its subtitle is *The Hidden Benefits of Disorder — How Crammed Closets, Cluttered Offices, and On-the-Fly Planning Make the World a Better Place*. Don’t you love it already? The authors take on the professional organization of neatness consultants (The National Organization of Professional Organizers) and note how huge amounts of money are spent each year not only on the consultants themselves, but on all the supplies required in order to keep neat — the color-coded file folders, the storage containers, the leather binders to hold your yellow pads, the special pens in an array of colors and thicknesses.

The argument against spending a lot of money to get organized is a persuasive one, but even more persuasive to me is the argument against spending a lot of *time*. We can never get time back, and it’s feeling more and more precious to me as the months and years of my life go by.

For example, you could spend some time at the end of every day using that system you paid so much for and putting everything away, filing it using a system you took some time to devise and which you hope you can remember. Or at the end of the work day you can leave your stuff out all over your desk and go walk the dog. After all, you’re going to need it all again tomorrow. Why spend time putting it away and more time getting it out again the next time you have to use it?

A few years ago at a ministers’ meeting, a professional organizer came to speak to us. She described a relatively simple system we could use to keep our desk tops clear, so Duane and I dutifully went out and bought the supplies she suggested and set up the system, each of us tweaking it to suit our own quirks. I do use this system, and it’s helpful to find things that I only need now and then, such as the file folder for a committee whose monthly meeting I attend, or the stack of bills that need to be paid, or the paper files that I start when I commit to writing a sermon on a certain topic.

¹ Abrahamson, Eric and David H. Freedman, *A Perfect Mess: The Hidden Benefits of Disorder — How Crammed Closets, Cluttered Offices, and On-the-Fly Planning Make the World a Better Place*, Back Bay Books/Little Brown and Company, New York, 2007

But I still have a pile of stuff on my desk right in front of that tidy filing box, and that pile is where all the immediate works in progress can be found: the phone messages to be returned, the materials to be reviewed, the little scribbled chart I'm using to set up a meeting of seven people on any of four possible dates. Whatever is most timely is literally "on top," and therefore easy to find.

The photograph on the cover of your Bulletin is a picture I took last December on Christmas Eve afternoon, right after I finished preparing the Christmas Eve service. There are books all over the place, on the floor and taking up all possible space on my desk. There's a coffee cup, of course, and papers spilling over from desk and countertop to the floor. Notebooks and the hymnal are open here and there, drawers are open, and the printer is churning out the manuscript I will use in a few hours. When I look at this photograph, I feel great satisfaction at the way it shows my creative process, which is essentially to try to do everything at once using all possible resources. I'll never have a tidy desk, and you know what? I don't want one! I like my office space to attest to the fact that someone is actually working here!

When you don't put things away and the clutter accumulates on your desk (or on the dining room table or wherever you do your work), that pile of stuff can actually be something of a gold mine. Many is the time I've been sorting through the pile in front of my tidy filing box, looking for something specific, and I've come across something I wasn't looking for which I forgot I had. It's likely to be something I'll use eventually, and I'm always delighted to be reminded that I have it. If those workshop notes or that book list or those meeting minutes had been filed where they are "supposed to go," I'd probably never see them again, and never be able to make use of them.

There is something insidious in our culture that makes value judgments based on appearances. We see this kind of thing everywhere, and to some degree I think that all of us are susceptible to engaging in this practice. We notice whether someone's shoes are scuffed or down at the heels, what the inside of their car looks like, or the inside of their purse. And then we make judgments about the person based on these observations: he's probably a bad driver if his car is that messy; she's probably late filing her taxes if all her financial records are strewn across the dining room table.

There's another side to this, though, which is equally valid. Walking into a messy environment allows us to relax a little. We have good friends here in town who have three young children, ages 6, 5, and 2. The mother is artistic and creative, which means that the dining room table is more likely to have clay or drawing materials on it than food. I'm more likely to take notice when I arrive there and the house is *neat* than when it's messy (and it is sometimes neat, I hasten to add). My internal reaction to their messy house is something like "Oh good, it doesn't matter that I have a spot on my shirt."

Someone else's messiness allows us to relax about our own imperfections. Isn't it a relief to know that you don't *always* have to hold in your stomach?

I know from my own experience as a parent, and from earnest conversations with friends, that the issue of children keeping their rooms picked up (or not) is often a hot-button trigger for fights within the family. My daughter Katy is a prime example of the kid who just refused to keep her room tidy — perhaps she was actually incapable of it. I did draw the line at anything that would grow mold or smell bad or was a serious health hazard, but otherwise I let her keep her bedroom to her own abysmally low

standards — clothes and shoes all over the floor, bed never made, books and toys everywhere. When I got tired of looking at it, my solution was simply to close her bedroom door.

I had a surprisingly vehement conversation with my brother about this issue. He has two daughters just a bit older than mine, and their rule as parents went like this: we own this house, you just live here. And as long as you are living in our property, you must meet our standards of cleanliness. You will make your beds every day, hang up your clothes, put your things away, and keep a tidy room at all times. My position was: a child's bedroom is the only place that is completely her own territory, and she should be allowed to determine how she wants to live in it. It's a good way to give her some autonomy that isn't dangerous, to give her some freedom to figure out what's important to her by her own standards.

Now all of these kids are in their thirties with their own homes. Katy makes her bed every day and keeps things as picked up as one can with a baby in the house. So do her cousins. What was all the fuss about?

Some people believe that cleanliness at home is a health and hygiene issue. Others have conducted research which shows that:

children exposed to fumes from home-cleaning products, among other chemicals, were up to four times more likely to develop asthma. {In fact}, one considerable risk factor [for asthma] is an unusually *low* level of allergens in the home. According to research reported in the British medical journal *Thorax*, children who aren't sufficiently exposed to allergens when they're very young are more likely to develop reactions when later exposed to normal levels. Kids who confront allergens all along, on the other hand, are more likely to become sensitized to them, [and thus immune].²

And this is the place to mention a particular concern of mine: the overuse of anti-bacterial products. Of course it makes sense to use hand sanitizers when you've been exposed or potentially exposed to dangerous bacteria. But overuse of these products seems to be producing ever-more resistant strains of bacteria rather than protecting *us* any better, and most of the time plain old soap works fine.

After all, isn't this what the human immune system is for? We have to be exposed to germs and dirt to some degree so that the natural mechanisms designed to keep us healthy can work the way they are supposed to. However, I regret to report that the five-second rule has been proven to be invalid; the number of bacteria found on a piece of food dropped on a floor was not significantly different if it was tested after 2 seconds or 6 seconds of exposure.

And if you want to hear a true success story for the human immune system, ask Duane some time about the winter when he had a part time job as a sewer-sniffer in Seattle. It was the healthiest winter of his life.

Now before everyone gets totally carried away with this idea, I do want to put in a word for balance. Creative untidiness is one thing, but a health hazard or pathological hoarding are something else entirely. Messiness and disorder are not always good

² Abrahamson and Freedman, *A Perfect Mess*, Back Bay Books, 2007, p. 136.

things, and there are situations where messiness gets completely out of control. All I'm trying to do this morning is address the imbalanced preference for neatness and perfectionism that seems to be innate in our culture, and get everyone to relax a little. My mother used to say "You eat a peck of dirt before you die" — but please, not all at one time.

I adapted a quiz from the back of the book Jill and I used to prepare this service, and put copies of it on the Sign Ups table in the Social Hall. If you're wondering where you fall on the spectrum of tidiness between the pathological mess-maker and the order sadist, I encourage you to pick up a copy and learn something about yourself.

Needs an ending... Doesn't have an ending. Oh well...

Silence for Reflection

Minister's Prayer

Spirit of life and love, persistent accompanist who is always within us, among us and beyond us, help us to remember what's important. Help us to use our time well — we have so little time, really. Guide us toward good decisions so that our energies go to making the world a less broken but more livable place.

Help us to love one another despite our imperfections — the obvious ones and the hidden ones. Help us to be fully present to one another with love and curiosity, so that we can more easily see that little spark of life-spirit that inhabits every one.

Open our hearts to one another in our celebrations and in our struggles, lest we forget that each of us is vulnerable, each of us needs one another. We especially hold in our hearts this day *[ad lib from book...]*

We are grateful for this beautiful day, for this gathering of good-hearted people, and for the opportunity to do our work in the world.

Amen.

Closing Words

Make a Mess!

from Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life, by Anne Lamott

Perfectionism is the voice of the oppressor, the enemy of the people. It will keep you cramped and insane your whole life, and it is the main obstacle between you and a [terrible] first draft. I think perfectionism is based on the obsessive belief that if you run carefully enough, hitting each stepping-stone just right, you won't have to die. The truth is that you will die anyway and that a lot of people who aren't even looking at their feet are going to do a whole lot better than you, and have a lot more fun while they're doing it.