When I was in college I took a class on Biblical Hermeneutics; that’s the study of what all goes into interpreting various biblical texts. It was a very tedious and sometimes boring class where the reading was long and difficult. My rule for classes like this was to find something personally interesting and pursue it as far as possible. For the final paper we had to pick a word or passage from the Bible and interpret it using the tools we had learned. I choose to do a word-study using a word that was common to both the Old and New Testaments. The word was “Spirit.” The first thing I discovered was how prolific the word was throughout the Bible. It had different meanings depending on whether Hebrew or Greek was used. Obviously, it also had different meanings depending on the context it was used in. Then there were the cultural variables that contributed to understanding the application of the word. There were also interpretive texts that were written in other languages, like Aramaic and Latin, that scholars used over the centuries to interpret the use of the word in certain passages. I quickly found that my topic was way too big to be explored effectively and efficiently. That’s when the anxiety set in, as it usually did. The biggest problem I had in college is what I called “explaining the universe down into a sentence.” I always struggled to stay with the essential information that was related to the topic and not include everything I thought was “important.” Most papers had a page limit and the instructors said they simply stopped reading at the limit-page. This paper was to be from 12 to 20 pages in length, not counting the reference section. As I began to
narrow down the information, I decided to ignore the page limit and just do
the work. It was more fun that way and I figured I could always narrow it
down later. As the research unfolded I decided to use the original Hebrew
and Greek words in my text. It made the paper more interesting and the
interpretive tools more accurate, and it was fun to write actual Greek and
Hebrew words. In those days we had typewriters and no word processing,
so I had to leave spaces in the final typed copy where I added the Greek
and Hebrew by hand. This was the only time in my college career that I
pulled an “all-nighter.” I was working as a janitor in the evening and took
my typewriter to work so I could use one of the offices to type the paper
and not be disturbed by the noise in the dorms back on campus. I finished
the typing paper at around 4:00 AM. All I had to do was write in the Greek
and Hebrew words, which took a couple of more hours, and I was done. I
finished the paper a full week before it was due and had spent about six
weeks doing all the research and writing. It was actually exciting and I was
proud of it. I learned a lot and had a good time writing it. Unfortunately, the
paper was 42 pages long including the reference section. I figured the
professor would accept it if I explained all the work that went into it and how
passionate I became about the topic. To make sure this was considered, I
attached a note to the paper saying something to the effect that I knew it
was too long but please read it anyway because I really valued his opinion
and I want to know if I applied the interpretation tools properly. I got the
paper back in the campus mail after the semester was finished. I turned to
the back page and it said “Paper is perhaps too long—- A.” There were no
other comments in the paper! I think he found one or two misspelled
words, but that was it. I immediately felt a little depressed. I got an A and
he accepted the length of the paper, but he didn’t give me any feedback.
He didn’t say how great the paper was or how many scholarly points I
made or how accurate my interpretations were. I had to do some mental
gymnastics to assure myself that I could relax in knowing that I had
covered the topic thoroughly, intelligently and completely and that I had fun
doing it. I learned way more that that “A” grade could ever indicate. I did it
perfectly.

I approached just about everything in my academic career in this
way. I was passionate about what I was learning and strived to learn as
much as I could regardless of the grade I might get. Of course I wanted an
“A”, but producing perfect papers or performing well on the exams were in
and of themselves more important to me. My perfectionism served me well
in academic life. It also provoked tons of anxiety. From the beginning the
topics always felt too big. It was easy to do the research and collect references and write up sections on note cards, but sometimes almost impossible to actually start writing the papers. I would sit for hours with notes taped up all over the place sipping tea and trying to “explain the universe down to a sentence.” What helped me most was having an outline. I could write down all the main areas I wanted to cover and use note cards for the references. Then all I had to do was sort the cards according to the outline, make some notes on what I wanted to say and start writing. Whether it took one hour or several hours, I eventually got the introductory paragraph finished, which usually freed me up to start writing the body of the paper according to the outline. Once in rough draft form, I wrote and re-wrote sections until I felt they were as perfect as they could be. After a final read-through I would start typing. Typing was the most fun because I did not have to think. My rule was that once I began typing, the paper was done. No changes were allowed. After the typing was done I read it through a few times over the next couple of days to proof it for spelling and grammar errors. I sometimes ended up re-typing a page because it looked messy from using white-out (thank God for Word Processing now), but I would never re-write something for content (unless it struck me as utterly terrible, which was rarely). I always remember breathing a sigh of relief when I was done typing. It put real closure to the whole process and allowed me to finally relax. It was done and it was done as perfectly as I could do it.

Perfectionism serves us best when it works this way. I took joy in the activity itself, regardless of what grade I received. Yes I would be disappointed if I got a B and yes I really wanted an A, but the sense of self-satisfaction I experienced after completing a project was the real reward. I liked all the researching, reading, writing, anxiety, starting over, putting things together, tearing them up and starting over, and finishing something I could be proud of. If this is not your experience or you have never really experienced it, you may want to question how your tendencies toward perfection are serving your best interests.

No one has to tell you that it is “OK” to be imperfect. How often have you heard clever sayings that remind us of our innate ability to do things imperfectly? Conversely, we hear even more about the unfortunate tendency to want to do
things *perfectly*. Counselors and Psychologists have especially given perfectionism a bad rap over the years. All the research seems to point to the evils of trying to be perfect. It focuses on all the pain and suffering it causes the individual and the world in general. As a result, we pathologize perfectionism and label it as a discrete psychological entity that is a disease in and of itself. It is something to be gotten over or worked through. It is not a state you want to live in for very long. *And there is some truth in this assertion!*

However, research has consistently shown that perfectionism in talented and gifted people is not only normal, but a necessary part of psychological development (Silvermann, 1999). The drive to meet self-imposed high standards of performance or self-awareness can move you to be “the best you can be.” It is not that this drive to be perfect in different parts of life is without pain, it’s just that the pain is handled differently and is viewed as one of the many variables in reaching higher levels of emotional and intellectual development. At this point it should be obvious that perfectionism has many different dimensions. It can both free people to grow and develop or imprison them in a never ending cycle of trying to reach the unreachable.

**Perfectionism**: [definition] = a drive that manifests as dissatisfaction with “what is,” and a yearning to become what one “ought to be” (Daniels and Piechowski, 2009). It is a “potent force that is capable of bringing incredible satisfaction and creative contribution, or intense pain, frustration and paralysis depending upon how it is channeled” (Silvermann, 1999). The key to dealing with personal perfectionism is looking at how it is channeled. And this is where some tension can arise. *Do perfectionistic people have to ability to channel their perfectionism in meaningful verses dysfunctional ways?* Do we have a
choice over how this drive manifests itself? Again, most of us have seen someone use their perfectionism to excel in a certain aspect of their lives, while watching someone else become paralyzed by feeling like they can never do “it” good enough. According to Silverman (1999) and Schuler (1997, 2000) there is a difference between “healthy” and “dysfunctional” perfectionists.

Healthy perfectionists have a strong need for order and organization, accept mistakes, enjoy the fact that their parents hold high expectations for them, have positive ways of coping with their perfectionism, have adults who modeled doing their best, and view effort as an important part of their perfectionism. Dysfunctional perfectionists are continuously anxious about making mistakes, hold extremely high standards for themselves, perceive that others hold excessive expectations for them, internalize negative remarks from others, question their own judgments, lack effective coping strategies, and exhibit a constant need for approval (in Daniels and Piechowski, 2009).

“Healthy” perfectionists seem to channel their tendencies in different ways from “dysfunctional” perfectionists. But if we could choose to channel the tendencies, why would anyone choose the dysfunctional way?

**Why are talented and gifted kids perfectionistics in the first place?** (Silvermann, 1998)

- Perfectionism is an abstract concept. Children who function at higher intellectual levels can grasp the meaning of things that may not necessarily exist in the concrete world. They can see the “what ifs” easier than other children, and can see the possibilities for themselves in trying to master specific tasks. Striving to be more perfect is really abstract thinking; a skill they develop earlier in life.

- Gifted kids experience uneven development; like having the mind of a 9 year old in the body of a 5 year old. They set internal standards for themselves according to their mental age, even if their 5 year old body may not be able to master the skill.
As a result of higher mental age, gifted kids have older playmates and form relationships with adults easier. They start to set standards that are similar to what their older friends are doing.

Gifted kids are often successful at “first attempts” in mastering new skills. They develop “forethought” which helps them predict the consequences of their actions, avoid failure, and learn things quicker. They come to expect that they will be successful with most tasks in the future, no matter how difficult the challenge. Prior to coming to IMSA, many of our students are unfamiliar with failure.

Intelligent kids crave stimulation. If things are too easy, especially in school, complicating a task can make it more interesting and challenging. Doing things perfectly simply provides them with a more challenging situation. Because these kids become bored with school material faster, they may become overly focused on getting perfect grades as the only way to affirm their intellectual abilities.

So, from a very early age gifted kids experience the desire to be “all that they can be” and are often successful at mastering higher-level intellectual skills at an earlier age. They may not choose to be perfect, but they are constantly pulled in that direction by their own internal drives. The key is how they channel these drives. Do they maintain their desire for learning, find ways to get through the tough times, learn to accept limitations, or do they fall into feeling bad about themselves when things don’t come easy and projects don’t turn out as well as they would like them to?

“When perfectionism is experienced as perpetual misery and failure, it may need an antidote such as the “striving for excellence” perspective to refocus the energy and bring balance to the personality” (Silverman, 1999).
One way to channel perfectionism in the right direction is to use the “striving for excellence” way of thinking about it. If all your satisfaction is tied up in the “product” you may never enjoy the “process.” “Anything worth doing is worth doing well”, but most of the pleasure has to come out of the “doing” even if the end result is not always what you wished or worked for. Here is a comparison between the pursuit of excellence and the pursuit of perfection.

**The Pursuit of Perfection**
- Rigid: anything but perfect performance is unacceptable
- Poor self-esteem: become defined by what they do, so what they do must be done perfectly.
- Overwork and seldom feel confident: “I must always do more.” Anything less than 100% is not enough.
- Avoid new experiences because of fear of making mistakes.
- Making mistakes is seen as personal failure.
- Have to do it themselves, won’t ask for help or trust others.

**The Pursuit of Excellence**
- Derives personal satisfaction and pride from a “good-enough” performance.
- Self-esteem involves strong desires to do well, master a task, challenge oneself to do the best they can.
- Work hard, are confident, feel good with a score of 91.
- Willing to try new things and take risks.
- Learn from experiences as well as mistakes.
- See the value in collaboration; see others as resources.
How to be a healthy perfectionist

“What perfectionism applied to oneself may lead to higher accomplishment, whereas perfectionism applied to others leads to unfair expectations, disappointment, and resentfulness. Perfectionism that translates into trying again and again leads to success, whereas perfectionism that results in paralysis, avoidance, anxiety attacks, and withdrawal guarantees failure” (Silverman p.145 in Daniels and Piechowski, 2009).

- Appreciate the “trait” of perfectionism: it serves a useful purpose and will do you well in life. Having high ideals and standards are good things, even if it hurts when you cannot always reach or fulfill them. “Missing the mark” does not mean you have stopped striving for excellence. It just means you have missed the mark and can learn to do something differently or simply learn to accept it “as is.”

- Believe that most mistakes are actually learning experiences: the sooner you believe this the better! Some mistakes are just that, mistakes. We can’t control them or change the outcome. We can, however, always look back and learn from them. Sometimes the hardest thing to learn is that we have failed.
and have to accept that and get back on track. Successful people know how to fail; it is always part of their future success.

**Prioritize your perfectionism:** In other words, “choose your battles.” Apply the perfectionism in areas that really matter to you rather than trying to do everything perfectly. We all have to make healthy choices about what to strive for and when and where to settle for less than our best.

**Fight procrastination---- always start something:** Starting a task is often harder than completing it. Perfectionism works best once a task has begun. Once started, creative juices have an opportunity to flow, there is something to relate to, something to build on. Procrastinating as a way of dealing with the anxiety over a project usually leads to paralysis and panic because there is nothing for the mind to respond to. Beginning a project, even poorly, will suggest ideas for continuing or suggest a path for starting over. The other key is starting sooner rather than later. Relying on last minute adrenaline rushes to start a project can be self-defeating. It causes mental exhaustion and can lead to feelings of depression. Move the start date as far away from the due date as possible. The reward is the feeling you get when the task is finished ahead of time.

**Maintain high standards for yourself but don’t impose them on other people:** It’s hard enough to live up to your own internal set of expectations without making others live up to them as
well. We set ourselves up for disappointment when we fail to convince others to live up to our personal expectations.

**Don’t give up:** even if first, second and third attempts are unsuccessful, keep striving. That is called *persistence*. Successful people have learned how to handle internal frustration when not succeeding and persistence helps them hang in there to eventually overcome an obstacle.

“Success is not final, failure is not fatal: it is the courage to continue that counts”
Winston Churchill

**Don’t punish yourself for failing:** learn self-acceptance. Take it easy. Talk nice to yourself. It is OK to appear foolish and admit to being wrong. Accept it and learn what you can do differently next time. Getting down on yourself, calling yourself names, predicting nothing but failure because of the mistake you made creates tunnel vision and leads to fear and depression where all the little failures seem to get lumped together. Take it one mistake at a time. They are all different and say nothing about you as a person.

**Hold on to your ideals, and believe in your ability to reach them:** they may just be dreams now, but dreaming of what might be moves us forward, if ever so slowly at times.

**Recognize the good and bad aspects of your personal perfectionism:** There is a choice in how you view it and use it. You can let it paralyze you with fear of failure or you can
choose to work through those feelings, regroup, and approach the thing from another perspective. This would be called striving for excellence rather than having to be perfect.

- **Accept that there is pain in perfectionism:** healthy perfectionism creates anxiety about one’s own performance. When trying to do things perfectly there are just too many variables that cannot be controlled. This makes us feel powerless; like we can never be good enough. This feeling is normal. If anyone tells you differently, they are wrong. Successful people struggle with their perfectionism and learn to recognize when it is paralyzing them. They are able to surmount the pain rather than avoid it. They choose to work with the anxiety and sometimes dig their way out one step at a time. Success or striving for any kind of excellence is never without doubt and pain. However, things are seldom as bad as they first seem. Take the time to step back and evaluate the situation objectively. Some things cannot be changed and will never turn out the way you expected them to. Those things will ultimately have to be accepted rather than avoided. “Acceptance” acknowledges the pain and leads to freedom. Ignoring or avoiding the pain through procrastination or denial only serves to keep us stuck and unhappy (Silverman p.162 in Daniels and Piechowski, 2009).
Other tips for dealing with perfectionism

When someone says, “I’ve tried everything”, it usually means they didn’t like the suggestion they were given, didn’t think it would work anyway, or tried it once and found it too difficult or ineffective. It takes time for change to occur. Finding something to channel perfectionism takes some time and a certain amount of trial and error effort. Once found, trying the strategy over and over again is the only way for it to prove itself effective or ineffective. If you try it once and it doesn’t work, keep doing it until it is clear that the strategy is not for you. Trying a new behavior for two weeks is enough time for it to become a habit, suggest something else, or find it isn’t the best way to go.

There is no magic. When perfectionistic people try to start large projects, they can quickly become overwhelmed with trying to organize it. Sometimes the best way they have found to deal with this anxiety is to avoid starting the project in the first place. The longer they delay the longer and harder it becomes to get started. First rule: do something, anything, to break the cycle and do it early. It may require a “blind leap of faith.” Someone says “break up the project into smaller parts and just work on it for an hour tonight.” You think that is impossible, but you take a “blind leap of faith” and do it anyway for the next two weeks. It isn’t that much fun and a little awkward, but you end up having more than half the project finished. That is how you gradually overcome perfectionism that paralyzes you. Try something and stick with it; even if it feels uncomfortable and hopeless. It always feels better once you have started.
Give yourself frequent breaks while still thinking about the project. Getting a cup of tea, going for a short walk outside are good ways to do it. Avoid taking a break that involves engaging with something that will completely interfere with the direction your mind is trying to go in. Video games and social networking are prime examples. Most people lose themselves in these endeavors and forget where they were with the project they were thinking about. Now, they have to start all over and this only creates more anxiety.

Give yourself a break. Striving for excellence means “perfect” will happen sometimes. That’s what you are striving for. When it doesn’t happen resist the urge to beat yourself up. You’re not going to feel good about it, but that’s normal! You’re not supposed to feel good about not living up to your own expectations. That’s how we grow and change, by improving on mistakes or shortcomings. Beating yourself up only increases the fear that things will “never turn out” or “it’s always going to be this way” or “this is the worst thing that could happen right now.” Admit that it is hard and you are really mad or disappointed. They accept it and move through it. Take a break or get started on something else.

Sometimes talking to someone is the best way to get objective advice on how to handle perfectionism. Someone who gets to know you well will offer some honest feedback. Smart people struggle with this all the time!!! Give yourself a break and let someone you care about know where you are at!
References


