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perfectionism: the crucible of giftedness

Abstract

Perfectionism is the most misunderstood aspect of the personality of the gifted. The psychological field characterizes it in extremely negative ways, which may be counterproductive to the development of the gifted individual. There are positive as well as negative aspects of perfectionism, depending on how it is channeled. As one gains higher consciousness, perfectionism becomes a catalyst for self-actualization and humanitarian ideals. Dabrowski's theory allows us to see how perfectionism changes in form at different levels of development.

The pursuit of excellence is a personal journey into higher realms of existence, a journey that enriches the self and the world through its bounty. It is the crucible that purifies the spirit—the manifestation of life's longing for evolution. A cherished goal for only a small portion of the population, excellence is the hard-won prize of those whose zeal and dedication are fueled by the drive to attain perfection, as they envision it. The passion for perfection is selective, only visiting those who have the potential to achieve excellence. Chiefly an affliction of the gifted, perfectionism (like its sisters, intensity and sensitivity) tends to be mistreated by those who counsel the gifted. But perfectionism is not a malady; it is a tool of self-development. The drive for self-perfection manifests as dissatisfaction with "what is," and a yearning to become what one "ought to be" (Dabrowski & Piechowski, 1977, p. 42). It is accompanied by an inner knowing that there is more to life than the mundane. The beauty and richness of the human experience comes from the process of actualizing one's full potential. "It is by being fully involved with every detail of our lives, whether good or bad, that we find happiness" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 2).

Perfectionists set high standards for themselves, and experience great pain if they fail to meet those standards. They are besieged with guilt and shame that few people seem to understand. Their unrelenting self-criticism appears maladjusted. Even when others applaud them, they often feel miserable, aware of how much higher they aimed. They may feel they have cheated themselves and others by not fully utilizing their abilities. Those who perpetually remain in this self-castigating state live unhappily ever after, and give perfectionism its bad name. But this is only

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part of the story, albeit the one that receives the most attention. The extent of joy it is possible to experience is directly related to the intensity of the struggle in which one engaged to reach his or her goal.

Perfectionists are capable of ecstatic heights, of being totally in Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) flow, unfettered by time constraints or the judgments of others, when the activity itself becomes the reward rather than a means to an end.

> The best moments usually occur when a person's body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile. Optimal experience is thus something that we can make happen....
>
> Such experiences are not necessarily pleasant at the time they occur. The swimmer's muscles might have ached during his most memorable race, his lungs might have felt like exploding, and he might have been dizzy with fatigue—yet these could have been the best moments of his life. (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, pp. 5-6)

Perfectionism is an energy that can be used either positively or negatively depending on one's level of awareness. It can cause paralysis and underachievement, if the person feels incapable of meeting standards set by the self or by others. It also can be the passion that leads to extraordinary creative achievement—an ecstatic struggle to move beyond the previous limits of one's capabilities ("flow").

The twofold Janus of giftedness, perfectionism has one face with the potential for propelling an individual toward unparalleled greatness and the other with the power to immobilize. Guardian of the past and the future, of beginnings and endings, of war and peace, the Roman god, Janus, also represents the transition between primitive life and civilization, and the growing-up of young people. The youthful aspect of Janus has no assurance that he is capable of realizing his dreams. In order to move forward, he must take a blind leap of faith. If he hesitates, he may be frozen, forever, in a state of thwarted potential. The mature aspect of Janus has emerged from the struggle for selfhood with wisdom. Unfortunately, age alone does not guarantee wisdom. Higher consciousness only evolves by striving to grow beyond the immature, self-absorbed facets of oneself. The younger face of Janus represents the beginning of the journey toward self-actualization and higher consciousness and the older face its completion. Its countenance conveys that there is, indeed, Perfection in the universe and that we are all part of that Perfection.

Excellence vs. Perfectionism

It is popular today to separate the pursuit of excellence from perfectionism. Hendlin (1992) defines a perfectionist as "someone who thinks anything short of perfection in performance is unacceptable" (p. 9), whereas the person who strives for excellence is "able to derive personal satisfaction and pride from a good-enough performance" (p. 13). Greenspon (1999) suggests that striving for excellence reflects good self-esteem and involves "strong desires to do well, to master a task, to challenge oneself, to know as much as possible, or to be the best" (p. 1). By way of contrast, perfectionists are characterized as needing to excel in anxious attempts to bolster their flagging self-esteem. Perfectionism, says Greenspon, represents a psychic wound, which is never healthy. In her book, Perfectionism, Adderholdt-Elliott (1987) also distinguishes between these two states. Those who pursue excellence work

hard, are confident, feel good with a score of 96, are willing to try new things, take risks, and learn from their experiences as well as their mistakes. She depicts perfectionists as those who overwork, never feel confident, procrastinate, feel like failures when they don't get 100, work alone because they do not trust that anyone will do as good a job, are resentful if their work is improved, and avoid new experiences because they are afraid of making mistakes. The pursuit of excellence is defined as good and perfectionism, bad.

The adage "no one is perfect" supports the common belief that perfection is an unattainable goal. It is considered hubris to seek perfection; that is the realm of the Almighty. Artists from Eastern traditions have been known to purposely imbed a slight flaw in their work as a reminder of the perfection of imperfection. It seems to me that the antonym of perfection is neither excellence nor imperfection. For all intents and purposes, its opposite is "good enough for government work." Excellence takes longer. In our fast-paced world, we believe that there is insufficient time to do one's best. Productivity (the quantity of one's work) has replaced quality (the crafting of one's work) as the measure of one's value to society. The ethos of "good enough" is based on comparison with the work of others; excellence is the full expression of one's capabilities. While "good enough" may yield a multitude of external rewards, it fails to provide the depth of satisfaction that feeds the soul. If we eschew perfectionism, we sacrifice the pursuit of excellence in the bargain. Olympic champions, scientific breakthroughs, great works of art are all products of the perfectionistic personality gone right.

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. The seedling does not know that it is a mighty oak in the making. If it obsesses over what it is not, it may not survive and grow to what it can become. As higher consciousness develops, the struggle for selfhood is gradually replaced with awareness of the unity of life and one's unique role in promoting the good of the whole. Then perfectionism is in the service of joy, the service of truth, the service of beauty, the service of love, and it becomes a blessing instead of a curse.

The Many Dimensions of Perfectionism

The term perfectionism is used to describe a variety of issues, and most of the mental health profession perceives it as psychologically unhealthy. Burns (1980), for example, defined it as a compulsive pursuit of impossible goals. Pacht (1984) maintained that this destructive pursuit of the unattainable is symptomatic of psychological maladjustment. As a unitary construct, perfectionism indiscriminately mingles idealism, introversion, preoccupation with one's flaws, fear of not being able to live up to others' expectations, and making unfair demands of others. This strange amalgam has been implicated in stress-related ailments, anxiety, depression, anorexia, bulimia, workaholism, sexual compulsions and dysfunctions, chemical abuse, Type A coronary-prone behavior, migraines, excessive cosmetic surgeries, suicide, psychosomatic disorders, obsessive-compulsive personality disorder, and a host of other disorders. It is often associated with all-or-nothing thinking: "Either I am perfect or I am worthless." Dysfunctional family systems are usually held suspect for creating the condition.

In actuality, perfectionism must be seen as a potent force capable of bringing intense pain, frustration and paralysis, or incredible satisfaction and creative contribution, depending upon how it is channeled. It has the potential to lead to professional fulfillment and spiritual development, but if the energy is diverted by self-doubt and lack of faith, it can be agonizing and debilitating, plummeting one into despair. If the energy is a response to external pressure, or if it is projected from within and assumed to come from outside the self, it becomes a prescription for depression and despair. One can never be good enough to fill a vacuum within one's sense of self. And if the energy fuses with entitlement, it takes on its most destructive form, molding its possessor into a tyrant.

Considerable research has been conducted on the negative aspects. Hewitt and Flett (1991a) identified three components of perfectionism: self-oriented, other-oriented, and socially prescribed—all considered forms of maladjustment:

Self-oriented perfectionism is an intrapersonal dimension characterized by a strong motivation to be perfect, setting and striving for unrealistic self-standards, focusing on flaws, and generalization of self-standards.... Other-oriented perfectionism involves similar behaviors, but these behaviors are directed toward others instead of toward the self. Finally, socially prescribed perfectionism entails the belief that others have perfectionistic expectations and motives for oneself. (p. 98) [italics added]

Research with their Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (Hewitt & Flett, 1989) showed a significant correlation between clinical depression and self-oriented but not other-oriented perfectionism. In further studies, other-oriented perfectionism correlated with antisocial and narcissistic personality disorders (Hewitt & Flett, 1991b).

Ironically, a second Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale was developed at approximately the same time by Frost, Marten, Lahart and Rosenblate (1990). This scale is based on Hamachek's (1978) construct of perfectionism, which allows for a healthy form of perfectionism. According to Hamacheck, "normal" perfectionists derive pleasure from accomplishing difficult tasks, whereas "neurotic" perfectionists never feel that what they have done is good enough. The dimensions of this instrument include concern over making mistakes, high personal standards, perception of high parental criticism, doubting the quality of one's actions, and high preference for order and organization. Investigations using Frost, Marten, Lahart and Rosenblate's scale with gifted teens confirm that perfectionism is alive and well in the gifted population. These studies contest Greenspon's (1999) assertion that there is no research to support a positive form of perfectionism.

Perfectionism and Giftedness in Children

Perfectionism is the most noteworthy personality characteristic associated with giftedness. The bond between giftedness and perfectionism has been noted again and again in the literature (Buescher, 1985; Clark, 1983; Delisle, 1986; Hollingworth, 1926; Karnes & Oehler-Stinnet, 1986; Kerr, 1991; Kramer, 1988; Lovecky, 1992; Manaster & Powell, 1983; Robinson, 1996; Robinson & Noble, 1991; Roedell, 1984; Roeper, 1991; Webb, Meckstroth, & Tolan, 1982; Whitmore, 1980). While most of these authors report observational and clinical data, there are also several recent empirical studies of

perfectionism in gifted youth. Roberts and Lovett (1994) reported much higher levels of perfectionism among gifted junior high school students than among nongifted academic achievers and nongifted students. Kramer (1988) found greater degrees of perfectionism in gifted than in nongifted teens, and more perfectionistic tendencies in females than males. Baker (1996) also found higher levels of perfectionism in exceptionally gifted ninth grade girls than in girls of average ability. Kline and Short (1991) reported increasing perfectionism in gifted girls as they went from elementary to high school. This was confirmed in Schuler's study. Schuler's (1997) study of 112 gifted adolescents in a rural setting indicated that 87.5% had perfectionistic tendencies; no gender differences were found. In analyzing data on Frost, et al.'s instrument with gifted sixth, seventh and eighth graders, Siegle and Schuler (in press) found perfectionistic tendencies across all socioeconomic, racial and ethnic groups.

Two studies bear closer attention. Parker (1997) conducted an investigation of 400 gifted sixth graders with Frost, et al.'s scale, along with several other measures. Three groups emerged from his study: 32.8% were nonperfectionistic, 41.7% were healthy perfectionists, and 25.5% were "dysfunctional" perfectionists. Parents' and children's perceptions closely matched. His research supported the existence of both normal and neurotic perfectionism. He concluded that "the overriding characteristic of perfectionism in these talented children is conscientiousness, not neurosis" (p. 556.).

Schuler (1994) developed a modification of the Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale by Frost and his associates—the Goal and Work Habits Survey. She normed the instrument with 336 gifted adolescents nationwide representing a broad spectrum of racial, social and economic levels and then used it in her study of gifted adolescents in a rural setting (Schuler, 1997; in press). Both "healthy" and "dysfunctional" perfectionists were revealed. The healthy perfectionists had a strong need for order and organization; accepted mistakes; enjoyed the fact that their parents held high expectations for them; had positive ways of coping with their perfectionism; had adults who modeled doing their "best"; and viewed effort as an important part of their perfectionism. The dysfunctional perfectionists were continuously anxious about making mistakes; held extremely high standards for themselves; perceived that others held excessive expectations for them and internalized negative remarks from others; questioned their own judgments; lacked effective coping strategies; and exhibited a constant need for approval. These studies suggest that there is a high correlation between perfectionism and giftedness, and that perfectionism is multifaceted, with both healthy and unhealthy forms.

In a previous article (Silverman, 1998a), I enumerated six reasons why gifted children are perfectionistic. First, perfection is an abstract concept. It takes an abstract mind to grasp its meaning and to cherish a vision that does not exist in the concrete world. Facility with abstraction is the sine qua non of giftedness; this quality differentiates the gifted from others throughout the lifespan. Second, perfectionism is a function of asynchrony or uneven development. Gifted children set standards according to their mental age rather than their chronological age. For example, a six year old with a nine-year-old mind expects to be able to draw and write like a nine year old (or even like an adult), in spite of the fact that her motor coordination is age appropriate. Less able children have simpler goals. Third, many

gifted children have older playmates, so they tend to set standards appropriate for their more mature friends.

Fourth, young gifted children have enough forethought to enable them to be successful in their first attempts at mastering any skill. "As a rule, it will take the gifted longer to decide to dive into the pool, but they will be less likely to hit their heads on the bottom" (Roeper, 1991, p. 97). The gifted have greater ability than their agemates to predict the consequences of their actions. From their earliest years, they have been able to avoid failure and act in a manner that will assure success in their endeavors. They have succeeded in the past, so they expect to be successful in the future, no matter how difficult the challenge. Since they are accustomed to success, and relatively unfamiliar with failure, some gifted children become quite failure-avoidant. Greater cautiousness is also a personality variable in introverts, which represents well over half the gifted population (Silverman, 1998b).

Fifth, the gifted crave challenge and stimulation, and if schoolwork is too easy they will do whatever they can to complicate the task, including trying to accomplish it perfectly (e.g., striving for 100% instead of mastery). This was revealed in Schuler's (1997) study. The majority of the students found the work they were expected to do unchallenging—requiring a minimal amount of intellectual effort—yet they poured their enormous energies into achieving the highest grades possible. There is no joy in demonstrating mastery of a skill or concept one learned long ago; therefore, artificial rewards, such as grades, become the only satisfaction possible. Unchallenging schoolwork, combined with the high premium placed on competitive grades, fosters "dysfunctional" perfectionism in gifted youth.

Last of all, perfectionism occurs as a distortion of the drive for self-perfection, which is a positive evolutionary drive. It takes spiritual maturity, the older visage of Janus, for perfectionism to merge with higher consciousness. The young Janus is likely to want the fruits of his labors to be perfect and put his perfectionistic energy into self-validating projects.

Robinson (1996) also regards perfectionism in the gifted as a potentially healthy trait, and exhorts counselors to support what she calls "positive perfectionism":

> Some therapists would label as neurotic those characteristics that are quite typical of bright youngsters. Indeed, therapists are trained to look for psychopathy rather than health in people who are "different." ...Counselors tend, in particular, to see perfectionism as a neurotic trait. Although, in general, high degrees of perfectionism may be associated with lower degrees of self-confidence (Flett, Hewitt, & Davidson, 1990), supportive adults can enable students to practice "positive perfectionism" (i.e., setting high standards for oneself, working to meet those standards, and taking joy in their attainment). Passionate pursuit of one's own interests, even esoteric ones, to the exclusion of a well-rounded life may be seen by counselors as "peculiar" and socially isolating. (pp. 133-134)

Perfectionism and Development

Several personality theorists have viewed perfectionism in a positive light. Murray (1938) maintained that a healthy person has a strong need for achievement—a need to overcome obstacles and accomplish difficult tasks. For Murray, the drive to excel and attain high standards was not only

appropriate, but essential to the full development of the personality. Adler (1973) regarded perfectionism as an indispensable part of life, a striving to rise above feelings of dependency and helplessness. Understanding one's personal power, for Adler, involved maximizing one's abilities and using them for the good of society. Maslow (1971) equated the full realization of one's potential with the absence of neurosis. Self-actualization necessarily involved the struggle for perfection of one's talents and capabilities. Maslow's description of the process of self-actualization sounds remarkably like Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) flow:

> Self-actualization means experiencing fully, vividly, selflessly, with full concentration and total absorption. It means experiencing without the self-consciousness of the adolescent. At this moment of experiencing, the person is wholly and fully human. This is a self-actualizing moment. This is a moment when the self is actualizing itself. As individuals, we all experience such moments occasionally. As counselors, we can help clients to experience them more often. We can encourage them to become totally absorbed in something and to forget their poses and their defenses and their shyness—to go at it "whole-hog." (p. 45)

In Maslow's prescription for self-actualization, he invites counselors to encourage what others might discourage: perfectionistic zeal.

Within the context of Dabrowski's Theory of Positive Disintegration (TPD) (Dabrowski, 1964, 1972), perfectionism takes on a deeper, more profound meaning. The drive to perfect the self emerges as the individual progresses from lower to higher—multilevel—development. The impetus for this development is provided by inner forces Dabrowski termed "dynamisms": positive maladjustment, feelings of guilt, feelings of shame, inferiority toward oneself, disquietude with oneself, and dissatisfaction with oneself (Piechowski, 1975). These dynamisms are all facets of the drive for self-perfection. They erode an individual's comfort with life as it is known and seed the desire to become something more. Counselors recognize that a person must experience discomfort with the current state of his or her life before real change can happen. Therefore, the dynamisms of growth are the therapist's allies. Most mental health professionals see themselves as change agents. They wouldn't be satisfied simply putting a band-aid on the symptoms so that the client can live exactly the same life with greater comfort. Change is, by its very nature, uncomfortable. Dabrowski's theory provides a roadmap of where the changes can lead in personal, moral and spiritual development, and in the unleashing of one's creativity.

From a Dabrowskian perspective, the polarity between inner conflict and mental health is a function of a unilevel [lower level] conception of reality. At the lower levels in Dabrowski's hierarchy, life goals involve adjustment to what is. At the higher levels, the goal is to create of one's life what ought to be. Inner conflict and the drive toward self-perfection are requisites of the evolutionary process toward the higher levels of development. Nelson (1992) describes how Dabrowski's theory applies to the gifted:

> TPD accounts for the development of affective characteristics associated with the gifted: emotional intensity; unusual sensitivity to the feelings of others; heightened self-awareness; feelings of being different; idealism and sense of justice; early development of inner locus

> of control; high expectations; perfectionism; strong need for consistency between abstract values and personal actions; advanced levels of moral judgment; early concern about death; high energy; aesthetic sensitivity. (p. 362)

Since the term "perfectionism" has many different meanings, I would like to explore the aspects of perfectionism that appear at different levels—the distortions of the drive for self-perfection at the lower levels, and the transformational potential of this personality trait at the higher levels.

Level I

At Level I, perfectionism as means of self-development is absent, but some manifestations of Level I narcissism would be considered other-oriented perfectionism (Hewitt and Flett, 1991a). A type of "drivenness" may appear at Level I that is self-serving, such as a drive for power, for wealth, for prestige. More is better, and there is no vision of "what ought to be," only a desire for greater self-aggrandizement. There is an absence of inner conflict, and the end always justifies the means. Perfection at this level is having everything one wants; it does not mean striving toward becoming a better human being.

The "imperfections" of others are grounds for attack, and they consist mainly of failing to serve the narcissistic individual in some way. Some examples would be (1) not being totally controllable; (2) not being available whenever needed; (3) not doing things exactly the way the narcissist would do them; (4) failing to meet the narcissist's fantasized standard of bodily perfection. In therapy, a woman may say, "He's very perfectionistic. He's always pointing out my flaws. He wants me to look like a movie star. He even buys me clothes two sizes too small for me."

Narcissistic individuals feel no guilt or shame about ridiculing those less fortunate or making fun of others' physical attributes. There is no inner conflict, no remorse, no reflection, and no real impetus to change. The most destructive distortion of perfectionism is when the person's agenda is to make everyone else perfect, with no concern for self-perfection. Behavior modification aimed at controlling sociopathic tendencies is an appropriate counseling strategy at Level I.

Level II

Some rudimentary forms of perfectionism can manifest at Level II, in which the individual truly wants to improve the self. But since a hierarchy of values has not yet developed, there is no clear sense of the direction that improvement should take, and behavior can be circular. It is at Level II that most of the negative manifestations of perfectionism occur. Perfectionism may appear as perseverations, obsessions, compulsive behavior, phobias, rigid control of self or others, and excessive anxiety about other people's opinions of oneself. Perfect at Level II means homeostasis: freedom from inner conflict and living in accordance with societal expectations.

Many people at Level II experience insecurity and feelings of inferiority toward others, and engage in self-deprecating behavior. Their conceptions of what they ought to be are introjected from others: family, friends, community, church, government, television or movie stereotypes, etc. They suffer a great deal if they feel that they do not live up to the expectations of others, and fear that others

will find them inadequate. The focus of their attention is their own imperfections: they magnify their flaws and overlook their strengths, thereby providing a distorted mirror of their own existence. The foundation of their self-concept is weak and easily shaken by external events. They have a great need for self-affirmation and validation from others. Their conception of the ideal self is one that is self-assured and not vulnerable to attack. This is why they are often willing followers of Level I leaders, who appear to have the qualities they feel lacking in themselves.

Individuals at Level II may appear at times to have multilevel values. However, higher level values and lower level ambitions are comingled indiscriminately. Some higher level values may occur in a more stereotyped form, as rules to live by, or cliches (e.g., "All mankind are brothers.") Yet, contradictory attitudes and behaviors are quite common, with little awareness of the discrepancies (e.g., "We ought to bomb those guys.") It is difficult for these people to determine which value is more important to them than any other, or to set priorities.

Much of the therapeutic focus may be devoted to sorting through the myriad of life experiences to determine the most important issues. Clients may rehash events with little insight into their own part of the dynamics involved. Perfectionism has not yet fused with hierarchization, so attempts at self-improvement at this level may be short-lived and easily sabotaged. Cognitive-behavioral therapies (e.g., positive self-talk) are helpful at this level. Here is where the distinction between crippling perfectionism and striving for excellence can redirect and transform the negative aspects of perfectionism.

Level III

It is at Level III that perfectionism in the service of self-development evolves. There is a glimpse of the personality ideal, in which the person experiences or comprehends the possibility of living a life deeply imbued with higher level values. This is usually followed by a period of torment because that reality cannot be maintained on a daily basis. It is possible for individuals at Level II to experience momentary euphoria during religious experiences (e.g., "I've been touched by God."), or in mass therapy (e.g., EST), but the quality of the experience is often syntonic, followed by their adopting a set program, and stereotypical rules for living, established by an external source. This is not the pattern for individuals at Level III.

Awareness of the ideal triggers an independent search involving scrutiny of the self according to specific criteria. The first step of the journey is often quite painful as the individual falls far short of his or her own standards. Basic existential questions of "Who am I?" and "What is my purpose here?" begin to be the focus of attention, often accompanied by a sense of disorientation to the current reality. The desire for self-perfection becomes a burning force in the lives of individuals at Level III, over-riding other people's expectations. Many defenses, patterns, relationships, and life-styles break down during the initial phases of Level III. There may be no clear sense of what is coming to replace them. Only a recognition of the inevitability of the changes and a profound sense of loss.

Perfectionism may seem to consume the person at Level III. At first, it may manifest in external pursuits, such as workaholism, construction of new projects, going back to school, or pouring oneself into a cause. There

is a desire to do the very best one can possibly do in whatever area the person invests his or her time and energy. The motive, however, is not to please others or to mend flagging self-esteem, but to achieve a vision or an ideal that makes full use of one's capabilities. The nature of "imperfections" shifts as well. Fears of being seen as inadequate by others are replaced by fears of failure to achieve one's potential, and shame at the discrepancies between one's ideals and one's actual behavior. As development proceeds, the focus of the perfectionism changes from manifesting some perfect something in the world to becoming one's own higher self. Existential therapy, psychosynthesis, Jungian analysis, spiritual practices and other teleological therapies that deal with the purpose of existence are helpful at this level of development.

Level IV

Perfectionism at Level IV is coupled with commitment and strength of will to make one's vision a reality. Self-flagellation is replaced with compassion for one's own shortcomings, and a firm conviction that development is proceeding on a true course. Compassion for self and compassion for others emerge together, increasing the availability of psychic energy for doing constructive work in the world.

Perfectionism in the service of the personality ideal fuels the process of self-actualization. There is an emerging sense of mission or purpose of one's existence, an awareness of one's potential, and a dedication to bringing one's life more and more in tune with the personality ideal. Perfectionism—the desire for self-perfection—provides the power behind one's dedication: "What ought to be will be." Dabrowski felt that individuals at this level engage in autopsychotherapy and education-of-oneself as dynamisms for development (Dabrowski & Piechowski, 1977). They are their own best counsel.

Level V

At the highest level of development, the term "perfectionism" does not seem to apply. The individual is no longer striving, no longer plagued by doubt or fear, and there is no inner conflict. This is the level at which the personality ideal is attained: one consistently acts in accordance with one's highest principles, in harmony with universal good. There is no polarity here. The most evolved beings on the planet recognize the Perfection that exists in all things, and appreciate every human being as a part of that Perfection [e.g, Peace Pilgrim (1982)]. These individuals are here as teachers to show us what is possible in our own development. They give us hope that humanity will someday evolve to this perfected state.

Therapeutic Perspectives

Most of my clients, and the parents of gifted children that I address at workshops and seminars, reveal that they are perfectionists. My first task is to help them see their perfectionism as a strength instead of as a weakness. I share with them the strong linkage between perfectionism and giftedness, and explain that it comes with the territory of giftedness. It is not created by bad parenting, nor is it "cured" by self-help techniques. It is a permanent part of the personality that has a positive function.

At this point, I introduce Dabrowski's theory, and explain how the problematic elements of perfectionism are simply

distortions of the developmental drive for self-perfection. This information may be the most healing part of my work. When the positive aspects of perfectionism are appreciated, this frees up energy to synthesize their perfectionism with the personality ideal.

As a therapist, I find that sharing Dabrowski's theory with my clients releases them from the bondage of their secret terror that their perfectionism marks them as psychologically disturbed. Once they recognize the positive value of their drive for perfection, they are able to deal more effectively with the negative aspects, changing attitudes and behaviors that are self-defeating and retaining those aspects that further their development. We discuss the aspects of perfectionism which yield great benefits to self and society, and the aspects which lead to repeated suffering. I try to help my clients sort out those elements they wish to retain and those they would like to dissolve. For example, perfectionism applied to oneself may lead to higher accomplishment, whereas perfectionism applied to others may lead 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. The client now has a choice as to which of the faces of Janus to model: the one facing forward or the one facing backward. Perfectionism facing forward leads to striving to create a better life, while perfectionism facing backward leads to self-flagellation, overconcern with one's mistakes, and wallowing in self-pity. And where there is choice, there is freedom to become self-determining.

We do a great deal of priority setting, facing the painful realization that one cannot be perfect in everything. We have to make choices about what to strive for, and where we can settle for less than our best. I encourage my clients to channel their perfectionism into what they care about the most, rather than dissipating it in areas that are unimportant to them. I acknowledge that there is pain in perfectionism. I try to teach my clients not to be afraid of the pain. It is good pain—growing pain. And I assure them that they have the inner strength to cope with it.

Conclusion

There appear to be many forms of perfectionism, some more constructive than others. "Narcissistic" perfectionism fits within Level 1 of Dabrowski's theory. "Neurotic" or "unhealthy" perfectionism fits within Level 2. However, it is important for a therapist to realize that perfectionism is not all bad. Willingness to pursue one's goals in the face of obstacles, setbacks and failures is commendable. And living each moment as if it were important can change the consciousness of the planet.

Multilevel development, according to Dabrowski's theory, begins with an intense awareness of the gap between where one is now and where it is possible to be. It takes great personal courage to live in that gap and try to close it. The desire for self-perfection is painful and not everyone is willing to experience that pain. This is what separates the person who is invested in making this a better world from the apathetic person who is comfortable with the way things are now.

The therapist's role is not to protect clients from their pain, but to reassure them that they have enough inner strength to use that pain in the service of their development. The young Janus is not yet aware of his own Perfection; therefore, he is unable to channel

this powerful energy for the greater good. The therapist holds the mirror of his divinity and encourages him to mobilize his inner resources to become his most noble self.

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