

Chapter 1: The Killer Called Perfection

Have no fear of perfection. You'll never reach it.

—Salvador Dalí

The need for perfection comes in many different flavors, each with its own set of problems. I am going to analyze three key areas of life where perfection kills—self-worth, relationships, and body image. Perfection will paralyze your potential, ruin your relationships, and break your body.

I am happy to say that I survived my pursuit of perfection. It was a hard-fought battle, and I nearly lost; however, in the end I snatched victory from the jaws of defeat. I am living the message of this book and now feel the need to share a bit of insight to give others a greater perspective. For thirteen years I believed a lie that my body was stronger than it really was. I was diagnosed with Crohn's disease as a young teenager. This rare digestive disorder declared war on my life and slowly but surely wore me down. Eventually my digestive tract became so weak that I needed surgery to remove my large intestine. This meant I would be getting an ileostomy. I would live the rest of my days as a freak with a poop bag that was visible for all to see. This was not a life-threatening situation, but I would have rather died than have the surgery. So I resisted surgery, even though I knew it would drastically improve the quality of my life. My days were filled with pain beyond imagination, but in my own sick mind, life was perfectly predictable. I was hanging on for dear life, yet I maintained control. Between the ages of thirteen and twenty-five, I had surgery recommended to me on three separate occasions. I made surgery my enemy and ultimately lost the battle.

On March 30, 2006, I was faced with a decision I thought I would never have to make. The night was cold and wet as I slipped in and out of consciousness. An ambulance had arrived at the hotel where I was staying to rush me to the emergency room. For the past six hours I had been fighting a losing battle. My colon had ruptured, and I was becoming more and more septic by the minute. My abdomen was so distended that I could have easily been mistaken as a pregnant father ready to give birth! The bacteria in my bloodstream were causing my skin to become discolored, and the pain was more than I could bear. I remember wishing that I would pass out and slip into a coma—anything to deliver me from what was happening. I was shivering and running a fever, and I just knew that I was going to die. The paramedics tried to keep me conscious, but their efforts were largely wasted. The drive from the hotel to the hospital could not have been more than ten miles; however, we were in Nowheresville, Canada, and the roads were dark and narrow.

The ambulance came to a sudden stop, and before I knew it, I was being wheeled furiously through the entrance and down the dimly lit hall to the emergency room. I was lying on the stretcher flat on my back, paralyzed with pain. I could literally see my abdomen protruding from my core. I noticed a man in a white coat standing next to my makeshift bed. As the doctor examined my traumatized body, I felt more and more like death was within reach. The surgeon spoke, but I heard nothing. He tried desperately to get my attention, as he needed my consent for the miracle he was about to perform! All I could hear was a faint murmur, and then I suddenly felt a sharp pain on my left arm. A needle penetrated my skin and made its way to my bloodstream. Wow, that pain medicine was incredible!

The morphine that was now freely flowing inside of me provided a temporary but welcome relief. The doctor explained that my colon had ruptured and that he would need to operate immediately. He did not actually tell me that I would die, but I knew my life was coming to an end. For a split second I allowed my mind to wander toward death. I remember thinking that I had lived a good life with no regrets. I have to admit that I did entertain the thought of death, if for no other reason than to escape the pain. My mind was racing. Death was for old people, certainly not me. I could not speak. I simply nodded my head. I was then presented with a telephone, and before I knew it, I could hear my parents on the other end. I'm not sure if I even heard what my parents were trying to tell me, but I became convinced that life must go on. My life had been too short to die now. I had many more things to do, people to meet, and places to see. I wanted to have a family one day. It is incredible what a near-death experience will do for a mind in terms of perspective. I wasn't supposed to be here. I was young with many years ahead of me. There was just one slight problem at this particular moment. My colon had been torn open from the years of scarring created by inflammation. I was leaking bacteria and was becoming septic.

My mind quickly snapped back to reality, and I realized the doctor was staring at me, waiting for an answer. I raised a thumb, and a crew of hospital staff rolled me quickly into the operating room. He appeared minutes later, and thank goodness I would not be conscious for what he was about to do with my broken body. He had a job to do. Because I was so sick, I was completely self-absorbed. Before I got to this point, all I had to do was surrender to the surgery and realize my imperfection. I was given three chances to do so, but no, I was bound and determined to suffer if it allowed me to hold on to my perfection. If left to my own selfish design, I would not be alive to share this story.

From the depths of my heart, I hope that you have not had a similar experience. I do not feel such an experience is necessary to benefit from this message. Perfection will wreck your life. Trust me. I experienced it. At the same time I believe there is incredible irony in this notion. Consider the world in which we live and then your own view of perfection. Progress and accomplishment at any cost are handsomely rewarded. Not only does society promote perfection, but it also encourages us with messages like "anything is possible." What we often fail to realize or ignore is the cost that comes along with these. Relationships, your health, your mental clarity—these are the things that are compromised on the path to perfect. Sadly these costs are too often tolerated and labeled as side effects. The costs can even be ignored altogether or rationalized as acceptable. As you pursue your perfect life, you will neglect the truly important things in life. You are not alone, and your decisions impact those who are close to you. A life bent toward perfection is a life destined for heartache, not only for you but also for those around you. After all, what's the point of perfection if you have no one to share it with?

If you could paint the picture of perfection for your life, what would it look like? Most likely you would envision a result of some effort sustained for a period of time. Maybe it's money, and you imagine no longer having to worry about it. Maybe it's fame, and you are celebrated everywhere you go. Maybe it's power and accomplishment, and you control the financial well-being of thousands of people. Let me ask you one more thing: Would your perfect picture have anyone other than you at the center? If you are anything like me, the answer to that question is no. Your quest for perfection demands all your time, energy, and emotion. You are tenacious beyond reason, and anyone who interferes is a threat. Now consider this same scenario, but this time think about if I asked your loved ones—your spouse, your children, or even a close friend to draw the picture of your perfect life. Would they say the same thing? Perfection lies in the eye of the beholder. It is impossible for perfection to reach consistency in relationships

because of its self-centered focus. Your pursuit of perfection will clash with the desires of those whom you love.

According to an article by Dr. Shauna Springer in *Psychology Today*, the strong traits of perfectionist personalities usually prevent the formation of healthy relationships. Dr. Springer explains that perfectionists do not experience a full range of emotions but rather vacillate between dread and relief. Perfectionists spend most of their time dreading the next potential failure, and temporary success is met with short-term relief. In addition, perfectionists feel as if they must be strong and constantly in control. Spouses of perfectionists often comment on their partners' emotional unavailability because of the avoidance of talking about personal fears, inadequacies, and insecurities. When caught up in the bondage that accompanies the pursuit of perfection, a person is much less likely to care about cultivating an intimate relationship. If you are going to chase perfection, you must be willing to sacrifice your relationships.¹

Let's consider another area of life that is hurt by the pursuit of perfection—body image. Your body is a gift, and you only get one. Your body is unique and unlike any other and requires your care and attention. This particular area is the one that I struggle with to this day. Body image over body well-being is the focal point in society today. We see beauty everywhere we look, and we are very quick to compare ourselves to what we see. The images we see are perfect, and the world promotes that perfection, so we pursue it. What we don't see is the cost; we never do. We look beyond the process and focus on the result. We see it as possible because it has already been done. The idea that we can reshape our bodies in order to live better lives is devastating.

I'm not talking about nutrition and exercise. These are necessities in life. What I am referring to is the battle within. Pain with this pursuit is a wonderful thing, as it hints of oncoming danger. Pain is a natural response our bodies give us when something is wrong. When we heed the warning and explore the potential causes, we are acting consistently with the ongoing care that our bodies require for longevity. When pain is ignored or tolerated beyond reasonable measure, things become dangerous. When we compromise our health and bodies to pursue a certain body image, perfection is rearing its ugly head. To this day I struggle with my body image. The thing that I dreaded most in life is now a reality: I live with a permanent ileostomy, and the world can see. I have an everlasting reminder of my catastrophic failure and defeat. I have a medical device that sits on the surface of my abdomen that collects bodily waste. I also have a nine-inch scar from the night my surgeon opened me up for my emergency procedure. The surgery beat me, and I cannot hide the physical effect. What I fail to realize far too often is that these bodily alterations are my signs of life. I am extremely vulnerable in this area and have tremendous compassion for body-image battles.

The world is our enemy because it tricks us into believing that we can have perfect bodies. The pursuit starts with an idea, which gives birth to action. Action leads to habit, which paves the way for addiction. Addiction leads to isolation, which ultimately creates disappointment, frustration, and permanent damage. Body image is an epidemic of catastrophic proportions. For some reason we convince ourselves that if we can manage to look a certain way, we will feel that much better. The picture of perfection exists in our minds, and as a result, we set ridiculous expectations. We take good things in nutrition and exercise and turn them into obsessions. According to a recent article featured in *Healthline*, Heaven Stubblefield defines exercise addiction as “an unhealthy obsession with physical fitness and exercise. It is often a

¹<http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-joint-adventures-well-educated-couples/201209/how-perfectionism-hurts-relationships>

result of body image disorders and eating disorders. Exercise addicts display traits similar to those of other addicts. These include obsession with the behavior, engaging in the behavior even though it is causing physical harm, engaging in the behavior despite wanting to stop, and engaging in the behavior in secret.”² This is a problem, but the only one who cannot see it for what it really is ... is you. And for that matter, the only one who really cares is you. You are putting your body in serious jeopardy and damaging your longevity. Exercise addiction is often accompanied by eating disorders. Once again the pursuit of that perfect body image is the primary driver. Statistics taken from the National Eating Disorder Association (NEDA) reveal that in the United States twenty million women and ten million men suffer from a clinically significant eating disorder at some time in their lives. Whether it’s by eating or exercise, the pursuit of your perfect body image can destroy you.³

Relationships and body image are obvious areas where perfectionists can struggle. Not so apparent (at least to the outside world) is the personal battle with progress. As human beings, we were created for adventure with daring imaginations. I mean, how many skeptical kids do you run into every day? We have much to learn from children. Think about your own early childhood and your perception of the world. We dreamed of becoming superheroes and professional athletes and presidents of countries. We were expert storytellers full of creativity. We lived with confidence and carried aspirations of grandeur. Nothing was impossible, and we were limited only by the scope of our imaginations. All of sudden we grow up. It is an utter catastrophe yet undeniable fact of life that our imaginations shrink as our bodies grow. As we mature both physically and emotionally, we begin to develop an awareness of the world around us. We start to think about the future, and our dreams become smaller. We begin to hear things like “don’t be silly” or “grow up” or even “get real.” Our hope and childlike faith are replaced by practicality and rationale. Our perception of reality grows beyond the present day, and we learn how to worry about things over which we have no control. We compare our day-to-day lives with the highlight reels of celebrity. Our social circles expand, and we begin to meet people who have been pushed down by the world. We learn about what it means to grow old. We feel pressure and responsibility and develop new beliefs about who we really are. Our minds, which were once filled with imagination and bright ideas, become clouded with daily tasks and to-do lists. We learn about failure and disappointment and discover unrealistic expectations that others place upon us. We give birth to a tiny voice inside our heads that nags, scolds, and taunts. All of a sudden we are older, and our creativity has evaded us.

As we continue to grow into adulthood, the child within us diminishes. We develop habits that lead to routines that ultimately leave us empty. We begin to long for something more, and oftentimes we cannot figure it out. We develop new vocabularies and learn to say things like *why* and *can’t* and *won’t*. We assign ourselves limits and develop comfort zones that we dare not stray from. We lose our senses of adventure in favor of what is normal. We accept rather than challenge. We suppress rather than vocalize. We blend in rather than stand out, and slowly but surely we allow life to push us down. We get by and simply endure rather than thrive. We do as little as possible or the bare minimum of what is required. We lose conviction and motivation to excel. Over the years we grow cold, suspicious, and pessimistic. As we encounter troubles in life, we recognize them as proof of heartache and demise. We begin to see others as threats and defend ourselves relentlessly. We develop an instinct that we feel is necessary to protect ourselves from ever getting hurt again. We trade our vulnerability for cold harsh reality. We

²<http://www.healthline.com/health/exercise-addiction#Overview1>

³<https://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/get-facts-eating-disorders>

spend the majority of our lives trading our time for money and in most cases despise the substance of what we call work. We grind through every day. We hold on, looking forward only to the weekend, which presents a momentary break from our realities. At some point along the way we begin to calculate our time until we no longer have to work anymore. I guess most would call this day retirement, but then it's really just more of the same, isn't it? As human beings, we were created to thrive, yet anything short of perfection elicits failure. We trade our childlike faith and determination for mediocrity and obscurity because it involves less effort. We justify our resignation by assuring ourselves that we tried and that life just isn't fair.

We were all created with the desire to make an impact and to leave the world better than when we came. This impact does not have to be profound nor does it have to be a brilliant innovation. Perfection is not the goal, but then again it never should have been. Perfection paves the way for failure before you ever get started. Perfection taunts and belittles. Hey, I have been trying to write this book now for six years! Why isn't it finished yet? I wish I could answer that question. I'm sad to say it's taken me this long to come to the realization that my perfection does you no good. For six years my thoughts have remained my own and thus were not shared. I believe in my heart of hearts that I was born to write this book. I believe my life was spared to share this message. Why in the world would I feel that it needed to be perfect? This is the struggle that I face, and I bet you've experienced it too.

Perfectionism is procrastination, and it can be devastating to your potential. Undeveloped potential is wasted talent. What good is an idea in your head if it never becomes a reality? An idea without action is as useful as a teacher with no voice. You could be carrying the cure to cancer, and the world would never know because you never shared. It's not that you don't want to help but that you are afraid of what might happen if your idea doesn't work. You are more concerned about perfecting your idea than sharing your idea. Along the way, you could unknowingly be depriving the world of exactly what it needs (whatever that might be.)

I can think of three pioneers that revolutionized the world in which we live. None of these men were perfect, and all experienced failure and criticism along the way. Can you image a world without electricity? Neither could Thomas Edison, and his determination paved the way for modern-day technology. In December of 1879 after a year and half of work, Edison successfully revealed the incandescent electric light. Thomas Edison's teachers said he was "too stupid to learn anything." He was fired from his first two jobs for being unproductive. Edison made a thousand unsuccessful attempts at inventing the lightbulb. When a reporter asked, "How did it feel to fail a thousand times?" Edison replied, "I didn't fail a thousand times. The lightbulb was an invention with a thousand steps." What about a world devoid of cinematic entertainment? Walt Disney created more than eighty-one feature films and hundreds of shorts. He earned more than 950 honors, including forty-eight Academy Awards. He founded the California Institute of the Arts. And he built Disneyland. And through Walt Disney Productions, the Disney name became one of the most famous and trusted brands in the world, but his path was far from perfect.⁴ Disney had great potential, and like Edison, he was determined to share his conviction with the world even in the face of opposition. According to Hollywoodstories.com, Disney formed his first animation company in Kansas City in 1921. He made a deal with a distribution company in New York, in which he would ship them his cartoons and get paid six months down the road. He was forced to dissolve his company, and at one point he could not pay his rent and was surviving by eating dog food. Far from perfect. Lastly, consider the legacy of Steve Jobs. In August of 2012, Apple Computer overtook Microsoft as the largest company in

⁴http://www.mouseplanet.com/9365/Of_Failure_and_Success_The_Journey_of_Walt_Disney

the world. Apple hit the new milestone—Disney lion—at a time when its influence on the economy, on the stock market, and on popular culture rivals that of some of the most powerful companies in US history.⁵ Not bad for a guy who was fired from the very same company twenty-seven years before. There was nothing perfect about the early pursuits of these three men. Each came to grips with their imperfection and persevered in the face of adversity. I don't know about you, but I'm sure glad the ideas of Edison, Disney, and Jobs made it out of their minds and into the world!

If the lives of these three men do not provide adequate evidence that perfection is not necessary for success and significance, I don't know how else to further communicate my message. The world is our greatest enemy, but we have a powerful choice. The trajectory of our future lives is dependent not on perfection but on purpose. Perfection is impossible. I hope that much is clear by now. The impacts of Edison, Disney, and Jobs were nothing short of spectacular, and the world will forever be grateful; however, they were not perfect. What made these men heroic was their discovery of purpose.^e

I love what Kenneth Carlson wrote in his November 2011 blogpost at Authentic Development.

We are impressed with perfection. We are impressed with relentlessness. We are especially impressed when the odds are against the hero and they go for it anyway. We want to know people like that. We want to be like that. So we do it. We go after perfection in our lives. We are going to be perfect parents. We are going to be the most amazing employee. We are going to be a great son or daughter. We are going to be there until the world ends for our significant other. One problem though ... we aren't perfect. The expression "only human" exists for good reason. We fail. We make mistakes. We screw up as parents, employees, kids, and especially with our closest relationships. Here's a new thought ... or at least new for me. How about surrendering to imperfection? Owning it. Investigating it. Exploring our own fullness. What if we lived out of that place? Doing our best in the midst of knowing that we may fail.⁶

Up to this point we have examined the problems associated with perfection. Now that you are well aware of the problem, the remainder of this story will deal with the solution. Remember, you were not created for perfection, and no one expects it. You were, however, created for a purpose, and the sooner you find it, the better off the world will be. Think of your purpose as an integral piece of a puzzle. As human beings who are social in nature, we were created for fellowship. There are no two people in the world today whose purpose is identical. Much like our physical bodies, we function better as a whole with complementary actions. Not only will your discovery of purpose in life benefit you, but those around you will be better off as well. Purpose is a selfless pursuit that leads to meaning and significance in life. What I have learned in the years since my life-saving surgery is what I intend to reveal in this book. The best part about my dance with death is that I am now living a life I never thought was possible. If there is any gap between the life you live now and the one you want to live, my hope is that you

⁵<http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10000872396390443855804577601773524745182>

⁶http://www.authenticdevelopment.com/_blog/Authentic_Development/post/Surrendering_to_Imperfection/

stick with me and walk the path of the purpose process. Wherever you are, it's never too late. Your purpose is out there and desires desperately to be found. You need to get started, and you may have to start over (and over and over again); however, you will find your passion, and the purpose of the rest of this book is to take you there.

