



## Perils of Perfection

BY **TERI SCHWARTZ**, SENIOR CO-MINISTER,  
FIRST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF CHICAGO

An overachiever’s high-stress lifestyle was causing a whole complex of stress-related issues: migraines, backaches, heart palpitations, and climbing blood pressure. Alarmed, her doctor told her she needed to slow down and learn to relax.

The overachiever asked, “Like do yoga, meditate, take long walks, vacations, that kind of thing?” Her doctor nodded.

“Fine,” answered the woman impatiently, “Just give me a schedule of all the things I need to do, and I’ll start right away.”

This person seemed to suffer from what the late psychoanalyst Karen Horney called, “the tyranny of the *shoulds*.” People who are perfectionists feel a tremendous compulsion to fulfill the many *shoulds* on their endless lists of tasks to be done.

They may think there are right and wrong ways to do things. For instance, when Joe, a retired Marine Corps drill sergeant, takes his boys fishing they have routines for getting ready, for fishing and for cleanup. It is all time-efficient, neat, and very, very organized. The boys think the “fishing ritual” is overdone and they resent having to comply. As the daughter of a former drill sergeant, I get it.

Or, take Jean, a 29 year-old woman terrified of doing something (anything) wrong. She thought people would think less of her if she ever made a mistake. One time when her boyfriend invited her to meet his rather intellectual family, she quickly became worried about saying something dumb among them. She felt tense and defensive all week beforehand. Ironically, she then found it hard to concentrate at work, resulting in silly slip-ups like she’d feared making. Her anxiety then led her to stammer and stutter her way through the gathering at her boyfriend’s house. Again, I sympathize. My father-in-law is an x-ray astrophysicist.

Now, we all may feel natural anxiety in certain social and family situations. But for perfectionists this burden is more than a heavy workload; they believe their entire worth is wrapped up in not only what they do, but how well they do it. I know this personally; I’ve been one for most of my life.

We perfectionists, like the ones in the stories above (borrowed from the online pages of *Psychology Today*) have great fear of failure, of making mistakes, of disapproval. (So you better love this sermon!) Perfectionists typically have all-or-nothing thinking, believing they are worthless if their accomplishments are not perfect. And, since being perfect is impossible, deep down, perfectionists feel worthless.

Perfectionists tend to have anxiety and low self-esteem. Perfectionism is a risk factor for obsessive-compulsive behavior, eating disorders, and clinical depression. Perfectionists usually learn early in life that people value them because of how much they accomplish. Love, in some way, is conditional.

We perfectionists tend to procrastinate, because we want to know the “right” way to do something. Some perfectionists may never have what looks in the world’s eyes like high accomplishments, because they may be too paralyzed even to begin. In fact, I couldn’t possibly have started this sermon until what I deemed was the *perfect* book arrived from amazon.com: *Perfecting Ourselves to Death*. I waited for it. I kept waiting for it. Finally, I checked the website, to find I had merely *looked* at the book, but failed to put it in my check-out cart before placing an order. So much for being perfect!

Creativity is  
allowing yourself  
to make mistakes. Art  
is knowing which  
ones to keep.

—Scott Adams

A monthly for religious liberals

### THINKING ABOUT MISTAKES

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Perfectionists are driven by both a desire to do well and a fear of the consequences of not doing well. Some psychologists believe there is a healthy, adaptive side to perfectionism—think of a brain surgeon or Michelangelo’s art. I want my brain surgeon to be as perfect as possible.

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## The peril of perfectionism is idolatry. It is the belief that our lives, our world, and our very selves are ultimately in our control.

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But there’s an illusion that drives the pursuit of perfection. It’s a secret fantasy that *if only* this next thing goes right—this report, this job promotion, this wallpaper, this sermon—then everything will be okay. People will like me. I’ll be at peace with myself. I’ll never know financial insecurity. Etc. Things will be OK *if only*... *If only* I file my taxes perfectly, remember to feed the parking meter, scour the kitchen until it’s spotless, *then* I could stop worrying and relax.

The dark side of this fantasy is the corollary: if I *don’t* do this job well enough, if the kitchen isn’t clean, if my taxes are audited, if I don’t get the promotion, I will be a failure. No one will love me. I’d be worthless.

Given this tremendous pressure, perfectionists may avoid letting others see their mistakes, and then other people never perceive them as human. Anne Lamott says in her book on writing, *Bird by Bird*:

*Now, a person’s faults are largely what make him or her likable. I like for narrators to be like the people I choose for friends, which is to say that they have a lot of the same flaws as I. Preoccupation with self is good, as is a tendency toward procrastination, self-delusion, dark-*

*ness, jealousy, groveling, greediness, addictiveness. They shouldn’t be too perfect; perfect means shallow and unreal and fatally uninteresting. I like for them to have a nice sick sense of humor and to be concerned with important things, by which I mean that they are interested in political and psychological and spiritual matters. I want them to want to know who we are and what life is all about. I like them to be mentally ill in the same sorts of ways that I am; for instance, I have a friend who said one day, “I could resent the ocean if I tried,” and I realized that I love that in a guy.*

Me too. And I am not alone. I know you perfectionists are reading this. And the good news is that we’re in excellent company. Martin Luther was a perfectionist. He wrote:

*I tried to live according to the rule with all diligence, and I used to be contrite, to confess and number off my sins, and often repeated my confession, and sedulously performed my allotted penance. And yet my conscience could never give me certainty, but always doubted and said, “You did not perform that correctly. You were not contrite enough. You left that out of your confession.”*

Perhaps some of you think Luther was nuts, and now you have proof. His drive certainly is seen in his high quality writing. But it was his faith that offered him a transforming experience. Later he wrote,

*Sometimes it is necessary to drink a little more, play, joke, or even commit some sin in defiance and contempt of the devil in order not to give him an opportunity to make us scrupulous about small things. We will be overcome if we worry too much about falling into some sin.... What do you think is my reason for drinking wine undiluted, talking freely, and eating more often if it is not to torment and vex the devil who*

*has made up his mind to torment and vex me?*

The peril of perfectionism is idolatry. It is the belief that our lives, our world, and our very selves are ultimately in our control. It’s the worship of an illusion, with our hopes hanging on the tyranny of the “should.” In a life that is largely insecure, we may cling to what little control we have. We may try to control things that are out of our control, but ultimately, a power greater than ourselves is at the helm.

Perfectionism is a religious issue. But our faith tradition gives us mixed messages. As Unitarian Universalists, we’ve long stood on the side of works rather than faith in our own salvation, supported by the American mythology that we must pull ourselves up by our bootstraps in an indefatigable feat of self-reliance. The Bible tells us that we are earthen vessels, but it also tells us to “Be perfect as your heavenly father is perfect.”

When we look more closely, however, the Hebrew word translated as perfection is *tamim*, which means to “bring to completeness.” This implies a process, living in right relationship with God and with others. So perhaps it should read, “Bring yourself to completion as God is bringing God’s self to completion.”

Ultimately, our faith is the antidote to perfectionism. We believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person. *But do we believe that of ourselves?* Are we people of just as much worth if we lose our jobs, if our mortgage is foreclosed, if we never finish school? I’m here to tell you a counter-cultural message: *we are*. Love isn’t contingent upon accomplishment. Accepting—and even loving—our very flaws is how we reach out to one another and have a satisfying life, a life worth living.

May we have the courage to be real—bare seams, imperfections, tears, warts and all. May this be the place where we love one another into all of our realness, all of our humanity. ■

## Imperfection: The Perfect Spirituality

BY GAIL SEAVEY,  
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UNIVERSALIST CHURCH OF  
NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE



My youngest sister Beth was very talented physically. When she was seven she could roller skate across the basement, up the stairs, down the steep driveway and the steeper hill of the road with perfect balance and grace. But she was very shy. Her teachers at school would comment on her quietness at every parent-teacher conference, and my well-intentioned mother would encourage her to be more outgoing. Beth found this impossible to do without a great deal of anxiety and thought there was something very wrong with her.

When Beth was fifteen, she and our 12-year-old brother found a cure for shyness. They started playing a fun and dangerous game with some other neighborhood kids. They would each steal alcohol from their parents' liquor cabinets, bring it to the playground and pass it around. My brother says that it only took one drink for him to physically crave another one. Beth was delighted to discover that her anxiety went away. One drink and she became outgoing. Two drinks and she was the

life of the party. It felt great. It was worth any downsides to be able to overcome her imperfection.

It was even worth the time she passed out drinking at the playground and her frightened friends left her there to die. One of them had the presence of mind to call our home and (anonymously) report where she was lying unconscious so that we could rescue her.

When Beth was 28 she became ill with cancer. Beth never admitted she was an alcoholic, but she did have a fleeting notion while recovering from her first operation that drinking a six-pack of beer every day might be a mistake.

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**We can imagine  
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Her sisters had frequently encouraged her to do numerous things to help her stop drinking. So Beth went to one A.A. meeting. People stood up and told terrible stories of abuse, family dysfunction and tragedies that led them to drink. She sat there thinking, "I had a nice childhood, good parents, caring brothers and sisters, and now I have a loving husband and a beautiful baby. I can't be an alcoholic."

As soon as Beth was well enough to socialize, she returned to her six-pack-a-day habit. Drinking did not kill her four and half years later; the cancer did. But I grieved more than her death. I grieved Beth's life. She had never found peace with herself just as she was. In my grief I learned an important lesson, however. I loved my sister unconditionally. I loved her with all her human limits and imperfections. I could not get her to live a life I thought would be healthier—I could not influence her, control her, help her or even guide her. I tried. She was never interested.

My brother's story was very different. He figured out his life was not working very well while he was still in college. He went to A.A. and was able to take the first step, admitting that he could not control his addiction to alcohol. He had no idea that acting on the next ten steps over the years ahead would change him. But it did.

He said that Step 12, which sounds like an end to the process, is really the beginning: "Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps...I now live these principles in all that I do." He has been in recovery now for over 20 years. I asked him about this sermon and he said, "It's all about understanding that we are not in control of our lives—how to live knowing that we can affect some things, but not others. It's all in the serenity prayer."

*God grant me the serenity  
to accept the things  
I cannot change,  
The courage to change  
the things I can,  
And the wisdom  
to know the difference.*

Living with and loving this brother and sister, I have learned that they are no different than I am. I have never had an alcohol or drug addiction (though some would say that I do have an addiction to over-work and would kill for chocolate). But I too have had to learn that I am not perfect and not in control. Or as Bill Wilson, one of the founders of A.A. said, "It seems absolutely necessary for most of us to get over the idea that man is God."

I think Bill Wilson had a particular image of God when he said that. His God was all-seeing, all-knowing, all-powerful, perfect and in control. I thought I didn't believe in that God anymore, but I was still trying to live as if I were created in that God's image. It was a set up.

Human beings have great imaginations. We can imagine ideals higher than we can live up to. That's good, because it gives us something to reach for and

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room to grow. But it's bad if we think we can live those stratospheric ideals and never fail or fall short. We can imagine having no boundaries, but we are all bounded with perfectly natural human limits. We might imagine being in complete control, but we soon discover that our world is so much bigger than the circumference of our power to control. A life committed to loving relationships and spiritual study has taught me to accept my full humanity, imperfections included.

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### The question in the end is this: can we love humanity—ourselves and others—just as we are?

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In *The Spirituality of Imperfection*, Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham gather classic spiritual stories that offer alternate visions to “playing God.” Some are very ancient, suggesting that this is a primal human temptation. For instance, they tell about the mid-2<sup>nd</sup> century Desert Father Hermas who described a conflict between good and bad angels within each person. “We must take care,” he warned, “not to put our trust in *the wrong angel*.” Hermas offers no hope that we can entirely rid ourselves of the *bad angel* within us; he suggests not a plan for perfection but a program of survival—surviving our mistakes. We all sin; we all fall short, from time to time. The important question is whether we survive those errors.

The same experience that Hermas calls sin—the all too human feeling that we are inadequate, helpless, out of control, twisted, off-balance or uncertain—Buddha describes with the first of his Four Noble Truths: “Life is suffering.” The word translated as suffering is “*dukkha*, which means (literally) a bone or axle out of its socket, broken and torn apart from itself.”

Buddhist and Christian traditions both teach that to survive being out of joint,

sinful or imperfect, we must first acknowledge our imperfections. For the addict, this means admitting that one cannot control one's addiction or compulsion. For the one who wants to help the addict, it means admitting that one cannot control another person. The first spiritual task for all of us is to name the suffering.

I have worked with many people in spiritual direction: addicts, those who love addicts, adult children of addicts and just plain old everyday people who are trying to be perfect. They are often very disappointed that naming the imperfection does not magically make everything all right. The imperfections, the suffering, the sins, the sicknesses, the human limits are still there. The spiritual task remains after naming it: deciding how to *survive* it. That's when you have to decide what you can change and what you cannot.

People start drinking or drugging for different reasons—it's fun; their friends do it; it's part of a family or cultural pattern. People become addicted for different reasons—the substance makes them feel better emotionally or physically; it allows them to compensate for an imperfection, hide from a fear, fill an emptiness, inflate a joy, scratch an itch. Addiction can even save lives. Some people have had such unbearably traumatic childhoods that the anesthesia of addiction helped them stay alive until they were grown-ups and had the strength to face the trauma—if the addiction didn't kill them first, that is.

People love addicts for different reasons—they grew up with them or they work with them or they go to church with them. They might not even be aware of the addiction. They may feel guilty when they figure it out. If they are aware of their beloved's addiction they might judge it, do an intervention, try to fix it or enable it because it meets their own needs.

Each of these people, within different situations and relationships, will have

to make different decisions about how to survive the addictions. But they can all seek wisdom by praying or meditating, studying or reflecting, going to meetings or conversing with the experienced about what to change and what to accept.

This is sometimes very difficult. I will offer a worst-case scenario from a church I once served. An active member, beloved by all, was drunk most of the time. He was also charming, generous and a very talented carpenter. He spent hours fixing things at church. For a few years this had only positive results for everyone. The things he fixed looked great, the relationships he formed seemed sound. He went to A.A. and was in and out of residential treatment. We could fix him. He could fix himself.

But people started to notice that the things he fixed were not really fixed—the furnace did not pass inspection; the kitchen sink was leaking in a different place. He started to demand things of friends and family that they could not do—come find him up in another state where he had blacked out; come stop him from shooting himself. One person after another felt unsafe with him. The board voted that he could not work in the church when he was drunk.

He named it, his family named it, his friends named it, his church named it. He was an alcoholic. No treatment, program or meeting helped him. We all had to accept it. We had to accept the things we could not change.

He accepted it, telling his minister that he planned to drink himself to death, which would be kinder to his family than blowing his brains out with a gun, as his father and brother had done. His friends accepted it and stopped rescuing him. His wife accepted it and left him. When the furnace had to be disconnected in a panic so it would not blow up, the church finally accepted it and enforced their previous vote. These were all painful decisions. Everyone loved him.

And they loved him even unto death—for he did die of liver failure, as he planned. Some people felt guilty that they could not save him. A few others felt angry at other people for not saving him. But most people knew that when their relationship with him became dangerous and destructive, they had to accept that they could not save him, even when we would not stop loving him.

We loved him because he was more than his addiction. He was a loving father, a heartbroken son, a talented craftsman, a teller of tall tales. He was a brilliant and funny companion, a generous soul. He disappointed those who loved him even as he suffered. We loved him because of, or in spite of, the fact that he was fully, completely, imperfectly human. But love does not fix everything.

The question in the end is this: can we love humanity—ourselves and others—just as we are? Can we love one another in the midst of our poor choices, our mistakes, our sins? We were born not to be perfect but to grow in wisdom, not to be in control but to reach out to one another unattached to outcome, not to live forever but to love while we live. ■

## Always Evolving

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## The Healing Moment

BY REV. ELIZABETH TARBOX

Each day I am newly reminded of my unworthiness: a dozen thoughts misspoken; another day when the good I do falls so far short of the good that I could do; myriad small interchanges, moments of sharing that strain to the breaking point my desire to be generous, helpful, and kind; months of careful work lost by a moment's impatience, a careless word.

But when I am here at the edge of creation, breaking with the small tide over the sand, the need to do good rolls away; the question of what is right diminishes to insignificance and is easily borne away by the tiny waves. Here, where no words are spoken, none are misspoken.

I am with the broken stubble of the marsh grass that holds on through the wrecking wind and the burning flood. I am with the grains that mold themselves around everything, accepting even so unworthy a foot as mine, holding and shaping it until it feels that it belongs. I stand somewhere between truth and vision, and what I don't know ceases to embarrass me, because what I do know is that the water feels gentle like a lover's touch, and the sand welcomes it.

What I have done or failed to do has left no noticeable mark on creation. What I do or don't do is of no moment now. Now I am here and grateful to be touched, calmed, and healed by the immense pattern of the universe. And when I die, it will be an honor for my blood to return to the sea and my bones to become the sand.

Reassured, I am called back to my life, to another day. ■

*From her book Life Tides, published by Skinner House Books in 1993.*

## The Imperfectionist

BY REV. FORREST CHURCH

The reason I've been able to produce so much is that I'm not a perfectionist—I'm an imperfectionist.

I'm confident that everything I say can be improved upon by others, and that's my great strength, because I know that it won't be improved upon by others unless I take the first step.

When we only do things which please us, or don't frighten us, after a while fewer and fewer things please us.

Over time, our circle of options diminishes until we are prisoners in gardens of our own making.

The more decisions you make in your life, the more times you act, the more certain it is that you will be wrong.

To be fulfilled we need to recognize, all of us, that the world doesn't owe us a living—rather we owe the world a living.

And in the brief time that is given us, we must somehow learn to give ourselves away. ■



## From Your Minister

BY MEG RILEY  
SENIOR MINISTER,  
CHURCH OF THE  
LARGER FELLOWSHIP

Mistakes. The longer I live, the more clearly I know that I'll never quit making them. So, one skill that I have honed to a fine point is that of apologizing.

I certainly didn't learn it growing up. As a kid, to apologize was to lose that most prized possession of my nuclear family: Being Right. My father used to say, and he was only half joking, that if he ever did something wrong, he would be sure to apologize. Honestly, in my life I only remember him apologizing to me once—and I treasure that moment of humanity and humility.

Not apologizing and not being apologized to was very much connected to never admitting mistakes, and that was the environment where I grew up. Lies, obfuscation, blaming other people, remaining stonily silent—all were viable options in a household where to be vulnerable was to be in danger; to admit fault was to be heaped with blame. Safety meant *just don't admit you did it*. We were all good candidates for political office.

I remember the first time I made a real, heartfelt apology. At my junior high youth group at church, we played "Sardines"—a kind of reverse hide-and-go-seek where, when you found the person who was "it," you hid with them, until everyone was piled into a closet, bathroom stall, etc. During one game, I accidentally broke a door. When our youth group advisors asked who did it, I kept the kind of silence that was customary at home.

This time, however, a different scenario unfolded. The young couple who were our advisors looked very sad when we all said we didn't do it; the young woman began to cry. As she and her husband went off into a nearby

classroom and spoke to each other in low voices, the other kids began to glare at me. One of them looked me in the eye and demanded, "Why don't you tell them you did it?" I was stunned. At home, we hung out in a cloud of denial which both condemned and protected all of us. No one ever suggested direct communication. Looking around at the group, I saw many heads nodding. *Go talk to them.*

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Incredulously, I walked slowly towards our advisors. I still remember the cold tile floor on which I crouched before this young couple, hanging my head and owning that I was the one who broke the door. We had a meaningful conversation full of contrition and care. For the first time, I saw how a genuine apology, met with love and forgiveness, could be a doorway to freedom.

Over time I realized that the people who interested me most took full responsibility for their behavior. At some point, I joined Adult Children of Alcoholics. Though my parents weren't alcoholics, they were themselves children of alcoholics, and some of the patterns I grew up with were patterns of alcoholic families.

The Twelve Step program for recovery has one step where people review their days and "when wrong, promptly admit it." This is vital to spiritual and emotional health, and therefore to staying out of addictions or other bad patterns. I found the daily practice of making amends for things I'd done wrong to be a healing practice, rather than letting many tiny molehills build up into mountains.

Professionally, I had a great mentor in apology—Kay Montgomery, then executive director of the Unitarian Universalist Association. She was my boss

for years. One remarkable thing about Kay was how safe I felt calling her when I'd made a mistake, even a serious one. "Don't you hate that!?" she'd exclaim. Other times she would moan with me. And then we'd talk about how to fix things the best we could.

Kay also taught me the finer points of apology. "It takes nothing off me to apologize," she said. I do agree, it takes nothing good off me—only guilt and disconnection.

I've had many, many opportunities to apologize, and I am confident I will have many more, so long as I am drawing breath. Here's what I have found as key: I stay centered on how genuinely sorry I am that the person I'm apologizing to is hurt. Whether I made a mistake because I was distracted, whether my intentions were good and I "didn't mean it," whether I didn't know or didn't do something I should have—none of that matters. Something I did, or didn't do, hurt someone I care about, and I am genuinely sorry.

Apology, of course, means nothing without "making amends," as the Twelve Steps say. Making mistakes is absolutely human—and some mistakes aren't fixable. But doing the best I can to clean up after myself is guaranteed to make me feel better.

I used to envy my Catholic friends—they could go confess their mistakes anonymously each week through a curtain and be forgiven. Now I think that opening the curtain, looking squarely at the person I hurt, and apologizing is a much deeper form of healing for me. There are times, of course, when I can't. Even in those times, I try to make amends in the present, finding ways to come back to myself and to right relationship with the others around me.

There is simply no way to live in the world without making mistakes, but there is a way back into connection. Our calling is not to be perfect. Our calling is to be in caring, honest relationship. ■

May 2015

## REsources for Living

BY LYNN UNGAR, MINISTER FOR LIFESPAN LEARNING, CHURCH OF THE LARGER FELLOWSHIP



Contrary to popular belief, there is something to be said for failings and foibles. After all, mistakes are the basis of our whole diverse, ever-changing, interdependent web of life. Evolution only happens because of accidents and failures. Our genetic diversity starts with the fact that every now and again—pretty regularly, actually—something goes a bit wrong, and what we call a mutation takes place. A genetic mistake.

But sometimes those mistakes work out better than the “right” way, better than the perfect genetic copy. Those mistakes survive to be passed on in generations that are then labeled “successful.” Teachers tell us that evolution is about the survival of the fittest, but they can forget to mention that new versions of “the fittest” only happen through biological boo-boos.

Evolution aside, the world of science is littered with examples of mistakes that became monumental discoveries. Penicillin, for example, was discovered because a petri dish where bacteria was being cultured got contaminated with ugly, fuzzy green bread mold—a mistake a careful scientist should have been able to avoid. But instead, the Scottish scientist Alexander Fleming was able to remain creative and open-minded even in his accidents, and he realized that the area surrounding the mold was free of bacteria. Mold there, bacteria gone...something clicked.

Lots of painstaking and detailed research later, we have antibiotics—a major medical breakthrough of our scientific era, based on something that happened to go awry.

Mistakes are places where the unpredictable breaks through, where something utterly new and creative can spring up. Perhaps, in more theological language, mistakes and

imperfections are the cracks in our solid selves where the divine can seep in. If, as I believe, God is a force of creativity at

work in the world, then there would be no place for God if we were perfect, since perfection leaves no room for growth and change.

But our mistakes are only a blessing if we face them with an open mind and heart, with neither arrogance nor shame. And that, perhaps, is the real blessing of our imperfections: an opportunity for humility. Humility doesn't play a very big role in our society. Generally what we see modeled today is either an arrogance that shirks responsibility and weasels out of admitting our failings, or the kind of arrogance that goes with self-abasement and self-flagellation, pretending that our own feelings of embarrassment and disappointment are more important than the effects our failings have on others.

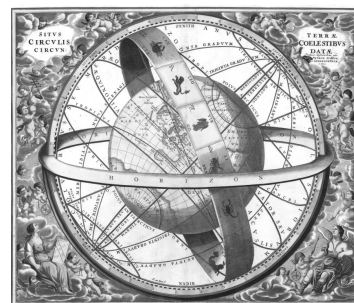
Humility, being humble, is something different. To be humble is, quite literally, to take a step down, to move toward the earth. Indeed, the word “humble” has the same origin as the word “humus”—dirt. To greet our imperfections with humility is to get grounded, to get real with our limitations, so that we can deal with ourselves and the rest of the world as we really are, not as we would like to present ourselves.

That's the thing about humility. It makes possible forgiveness. It's terrifying to face people with your faults in full view, never knowing what they will see or how they will react. But it's only when we stand before one another simply as who we are—warts, scabs, ugly bumps and all—that we create the possibility of being truly known. And it's only when we create the possibility of being truly known that we create the possibility of being genuinely accepted.

When all that people can see of us is a glossy surface, then that is the only thing that can find a welcome in the world. But when we're humble enough to let our imperfections show, we risk

the possibility of finding what we most long for: the knowledge that we ourselves—in all our authenticity—are both acceptable and accepted by those who see us. From a place of humility we learn to take things as they are, rather than as they are “supposed” to be, and to move forward from there.

Perhaps it was a lack of humility that stumped early astronomers as they tried to chart the orbits of the planets. You see, in those days astronomy was very closely related to theology, since God was supposed to dwell out in the cosmos, reflected in the perfection of creation. The astronomers “logically” assumed, then, that since God was perfect, the planets must travel in perfect circles as they journeyed through space.



The problem, of course, is that planets don't move in perfect circles. They move in ellipses—uneven, egg-shaped patterns that have to do with the laws of gravity rather than geometry. Clearly the theory was wrong. Just where the astronomers went wrong, however, is anybody's guess. Perhaps they were arrogant in linking their science to the attributes of God. Perhaps there is no creator, or at least not one that actively choreographs the dance of planets through space.

Or perhaps the problem was as much one of bad theology as bad astronomy, and the Divine isn't particularly interested in perfection, or in smooth, symmetrical, tidy spheres. Maybe the Holy rests not so much in the elegant dance of planets through space as it does in something much humbler, much closer to the earth, something imperfect and messy and real. ■



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From her book, *Instructions in Joy*, published by Skinner House Books in 2002, and available through the UUA Bookstore ([www.uuabookstore.org](http://www.uuabookstore.org)).

## Afterward

by **Rev. Nancy Shaffer**

Afterward, we want to say,  
*But can't we do that over?*  
Say, *But it was a mistake!*

Ask, wanting some other  
answer: *It's forever?*

And sometimes, though all  
light is slanted—as in autumn,  
though it isn't autumn—  
and all the earth lies tilted,  
we cannot say the light is so,  
the earth askew—for how  
are we to live, how find hope,  
if light itself is altered,  
the earth not on its axis?

Grief is lonely in these ways,  
begins in just such tearing; we were  
nested in this earth; and now  
are not. Knew this life by cherished  
habits and have lost them. ■