



Katherine Morgan Schafler

The night before our wedding, my husband and I decided to sleep separately, so that each of us could spend the evening in the most relaxing way possible before our big day. I returned home from the rehearsal dinner at around 10:30 p.m., walked my dogs while responding to emails, and then worked out.

After working out, I took an amazing shower, rewrapped the gifts I was giving to my bridesmaids the following day (the gift wrap from the store graffitied the paper with so much tape, and it was all too kitschy in the first place), filed some clinical notes, edited my vows in bed for about twenty minutes, checked my emails again, and then drifted off to sleep a touch after 2:00 a.m. It was, by all accounts, the perfect night.

Perfectionists are not balanced people, and that's okay. Subscribing to prepackaged notions of balance and generic wellness when they don't fit who you are isn't being healthy, it's being obedient. I've written a book for the women* (*Women here and throughout the book refers to all those who identify some or all of the time as women and all those who others perceive to be women.) who are done being "good." I wrote it for the women who are ready to set themselves free.

If you were sitting across from me on my therapist couch right now, we could share confidential eye rolls over how you've been told ad nau seam that perfectionists set themselves free by getting rid of their perfectionism. I'm telling you right now that that will never work.

Writing “I will not be a perfectionist” one thousand times on the proverbial chalkboard is a complete waste of your time. So how do you set yourself free, or even begin to understand what freedom looks like for you? You start by being honest with yourself about who you are.

You admit that you’d never be satisfied with an average life—you long to excel, and you know it. You acknowledge just how much you thrive by being pushed—you need a challenge or your boredom risks tipping over into a depressive episode. And you stop playing small and denying your gifts—you were born to shine, and you can feel it.

Until now, you’ve resisted your perfectionistic tendencies in response to our collective portrayal of perfectionism, which is deeply skewed and highly selective. It leads with the negative (which is true but not holistic) to demonstrate how perfectionism is bad, abruptly concluding that perfectionists are unhealthy and need to be fixed.

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Interestingly (read: predictably), the push to curb perfectionism and be “perfectly imperfect” is directed towards women. Have you ever heard a man refer to himself as a “recovering perfectionist”? When Steve Jobs or Gordon Ramsay or James Cameron demand perfection, they’re exalted as geniuses in their respective fields. Where are the celebrated female perfectionists?

You could argue that Martha Stewart built an empire on her perfectionism and is perhaps the most celebrated female perfectionist of our time, but notice what her company, Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia, centers itself on: brunch recipes in a pinch, all things holiday entertaining, paint palettes that pop, weddings. These are archetypal homemaker interests. Martha Stewart wears her perfectionism on her sleeve to roaring acclamation instead of being told to “be more balanced” (i.e., temper her powerful drive) because her interests stay within the realm of what is acceptable for women to be publicly ambitious about. None of this is a coincidence.

Part of the urging to stamp out perfectionism in women arises because perfectionism is a powerful energy. Like every kind of power (the power of wealth, words, beauty, love, etc.), perfectionism—if you don’t understand how to harness it correctly—will corrupt your life. Perfectionism makes an excellent servant and a terrible master; let’s also be honest about that.

Can we just say it?

We both know that in the past, your perfectionism has tortured you in every arena of life: professionally, romantically, artistically, physically, spiritually.

That's because you didn't understand it as a power and a gift, you didn't respect it, you tried to deny it, and you reduced it to a proclivity for tidiness and punctuality, though real perfectionism has little to do with either. The more you pushed your perfectionism away, the harder it pushed back. You couldn't get rid of your perfectionism if you tried (and try you did) because it's a fundamental component of who you are.

Lucky for you, the deepest, most powerful parts of who you are never abandon you. Whatever you did to numb out or downplay or otherwise mute the powerful energy inside you that you didn't know what to do with, I did it, too. It's okay; none of it worked. Thankfully, your perfectionism is still intact, and now you have a real solution to your problem.

Your problem is not that you're a perfectionist. Some of the most joyful, extraordinary, fulfilled people in the world are perfectionists. Your problem is that you're not being your full self.

Women receive an eternal fountain of directives every day about how to be less. How to weigh less, how to want less, how to be less emotional, how to say yes less, certainly how to be less of a perfectionist. I wrote a book about more. About how to get more of what you want by being more of who you are.

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Here's one question I've been asking myself for a long time: What do people mean when they say, "I'm a perfectionist"? The colloquial definition of what it means to be a perfectionist is reduced to the following: a perfectionist is someone who wants everything to be perfect all the time and who gets upset when things aren't perfect.

It's not that simple.

When people say, "I'm a perfectionist," they're not saying that they expect themselves to be perfect, others to be perfect, the weather to be perfect, all events that unfold in life to be perfect.

Perfectionists are intelligent people who understand that everything can't work out perfectly all the time. What they sometimes have trouble with is understanding why they still feel so disappointed by imperfection in the face of that intellectual concession. What they sometimes wonder about is why they feel so compelled to endlessly strive. What they're sometimes confused by is what they're striving for in the first place. What they often question is why they can't just enjoy relaxing "like a normal person." What they want to know is who they are outside of what they accomplish.

Every human being encounters versions of these existential curiosities at some point. Perfectionists think about them all the time.

I've identified five types of perfectionists; by identifying which type you are, you'll unlock your gifts. You'll also gain a deeper understanding of your intense drive to excel, you'll stop squandering your willpower trying to force yourself to not be a perfectionist, and then you'll exploit all that freshly liberated energy in service of your most authentic self.

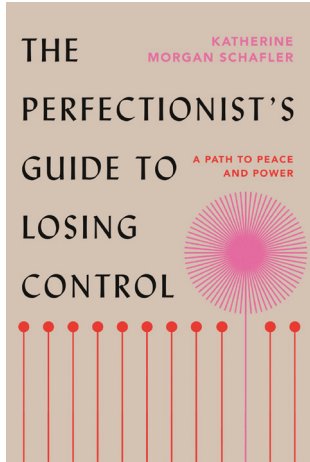
Investing in a pathologized version of who you are is a profoundly unnecessary use of your energy. It's also an excuse for you to avoid healing. I'm not here for either. I'm here to shift the focus of the conversation from weakness to strength. From correction to connection. From pathology to phenomenology. From fear to curiosity. From reactivity to proactivity. From eradication to integration. From treatment to healing.

Perfectionism does not have to be a struggle. You do not have to stop being a perfectionist to be healthy.

Here's another question I've spent years exploring: *What if your perfectionism exists to help you?* 📖



Info



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Katherine Morgan Schafler is a psychotherapist, writer and speaker, and former on-site therapist at Google. She earned degrees and trained at UC Berkeley and Columbia University, with post-graduate certification from the Association for Spirituality and Psychotherapy in NYC.

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