

## CHAPTER 1



# I Was Perfect Once, but I Didn't Like It Much

*It is a wonderful thing to be alive!*

Ecclesiastes 11:7, TLB

"I'm going now," said my administrative assistant. "Thank you for everything."

"All the best to you in your new career," I said. As she walked out the door, she handed me an envelope. When back in my office, I opened it. Inside her bon voyage card she had handwritten this message: "Joan, I hope someday you can stop and smell the roses."

I glanced around to make certain no one was leaning over my shoulder reading the note. Her message embarrassed me, because it reminded me that my zealous attempts to hide my perfectionism-induced exhaustion were unsuccessful. Still, I couldn't help chuckling. Bonnie correctly assessed my unrealistic mindset and suggested that I slow down, stop trying so hard to make it all just right and start enjoying life. The writer of Ecclesiastes would have made the same recommendation: "Better one handful with tranquility than two handfuls with toil and chasing after the wind" (4:6).

Several years have passed since the day I read that stop-and-sniff-the-roses message, and I've made some positive intentional

adjustments in my attitudes, beliefs, lifework and personal roles. I've learned to relax and celebrate life—imperfect though it may be (at least much of the time). Yet recently I've noticed that I'm being sucked back into the trying-too-hard-to-make-it-just-right syndrome. I'm bombarded with messages that imply I'm still not doing life quite right.

### Over-the-Top Expectations

*A tremendous amount of the information out there comes down to two statements: One of these is "You're deficient." And the other is "If you buy this, it will fix that."*

MIKE DASH, HIGH-TECH INDUSTRY CONSULTANT <sup>1</sup>

Books, magazine and newspaper articles, reality and news shows, commercials, Internet pop-ups, websites, stores, doctors, schools, fitness centers and even churches present methods and habits we can and should adopt to look younger and trimmer; be healthier and more energetic; work faster and better at home or in the office; be more successful; make extra money; maintain consistently satisfying relationships; obtain more education; improve our cooking, time management, home décor, parenting and grand-parenting skills; build a bigger, better and more organized house; be a more loving mate; enjoy increased fun and additional exciting vacations; and enhance social interaction with neighbors and colleagues—all while keeping up with technology, avoiding overload, reducing anxiety and stress, developing personally and spiritually, giving generously to the hungry and hurting, and doing all with greater love, patience, joy, self-control, peace, persistence, passion and care. (I don't know about you, but just rereading that sentence makes me want to lie down and take a long nap—perhaps for several days!)

Jerry White, author of *Making Peace with Reality*, says it this way: “We live in a different world—one that is accelerating with change and fraught with uncertainty. We cannot alter its march. It is our reality.”<sup>2</sup> We live in an unreasonably demanding age of over-choice, over-knowledge, over-tech, overexposure, over-responsibility and overachievement. Too many tasks to complete, roles to perform, challenges to accept, activities and events to plan and attend, hurting people to help, bills to pay, options to consider, books to read; too much information to assimilate, new technology to learn, tragedy and heartache on the screen, news and media bombarding the airwaves, blurring of reasonable boundaries and—*sigh!*—too little respite and renewal.

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“Overburdened, overworked, and overwhelmed. What started as a joy became drudgery, and I felt like giving up. Nothing is harder to bear than a burden we’re not called to carry . . . And while there are many needs, God has not asked us to meet every one.”

Joanna Weaver, *Having a Mary Heart in a Martha World*<sup>3</sup>

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From my own experience and from working with coaching clients, business and ministry associates, as well as talking with women in the audiences of our Intentional Woman seminars and workshops, I’ve noticed something: This saturated and accomplishment-oriented lifestyle often leads to an exaggerated sense of power and entitlement.

Sometimes it’s blatant (as in the ostentatious lifestyles and work ethics of those recently convicted with cheating and manipulating their way to influence and control), but more often this inflated sense of power comes on subtly. If you’re reading this book, you likely long to serve God *and* grow to be

the woman He created you to be. In addition, you probably want to accomplish this in the manner the Bible teaches: with excellence, joy, love, peace, self-control, goodness and patience (see Gal. 5:22).

Like many other women with a heart for God, you're probably not purposefully or aggressively seeking dominance or control. However, as Donald McCullough states in *The Consolations of Imperfection*, "No one except God can carry the weight of everyone's safety and health and happiness and fulfillment in life. To guarantee this for even one person will soon have anxiety tearing you apart like a lion enjoying a fine meal."<sup>4</sup>

### The Subtle Allure of Power

*Great is the Lord and most worthy of praise; his greatness no one can fathom . . . his understanding has no limit.*

PSALMS 145:3; 147:5

"Judy has boundless energy and limitless creativity. I can always count on her to be available when needed," said my friend Judy's boss during an awards meeting. "She's our company's greatest asset. We simply couldn't function without her."

These comments are high praise coming from an employer. Or are they? Take a second look at the descriptions used to commend Judy: boundless energy, powerless without her, limitless creativity, always available. These phrases describe only one: God.

Some of us slide into a position that breeds this exaggerated sense of power, as Judy did. Talented, high-achieving, goal-oriented people like my friend are usually conscientious, dedicated, reliable and loyal. Sometimes they cross over the line of reason and try too hard to make it just right. Others, like Judy's boss, notice and often nudge the unrealistic process along by

requesting or expecting more than is humanly possible. Consider the following story from Becky Lee, a personal life coach and former corporate executive:

Feeling rushed, exhausted, agitated and overwhelmed, I boarded a plane headed for London just as they closed the door and started to taxi down the runway. I located my seat next to the window and climbed clumsily over a woman with extremely long legs. Once buckled in, I sighed with relief that there was an empty seat between us.

I pulled out the hard copy of the presentation I was to give as soon as we landed at Gatwick International. I reviewed my talk and munched on the granola bar I found at the bottom of my purse. After rechecking my papers and eating my breakfast or lunch (it could have been either—I couldn't remember the last time I ate), I headed to the lavatory to express enough milk to send home to Ohio so that my husband could feed our baby daughter. I planned to send it by overnight air before I went into the meeting.

Once inside the tiny toilet, I shook my head as if to wake up from this nightmare. "What are you doing, Becky?" I whispered. "This is ridiculous. Who do you think you are? God?" Talk about an exaggerated sense of power! Pushed beyond reasonable limits, I saw the truth: I was sliding down the slippery slope to burnout. I decided right there to stop the madness. When I arrived home after that whirlwind trip, I told my husband I would never do that again. For way too long, I had tried too hard to make it all work. I knew the solution for me was to resign my lucrative position. I did, and I never looked back.

## Perfection's Quandary

As you read Becky's and Judy's stories, perhaps you thought or even said, "That's not me. I would never allow myself to be in a position like that." Or maybe you thought these two women were reading your personal journal! Certainly not every woman exhibits her unrealistic expectations with the same approach. Perhaps this entire concept seems a little fuzzy to you right now. If so, I encourage you to keep reading. Within these pages, many other women will share their trying-too-hard-to-make-it-just-right stories. Awareness, discovery, connection *and* relief are on the way!

After facilitating a workshop on *The Relief of Imperfection* one morning, I went to a nearby restaurant with several participants. Halfway through my chicken salad, the woman sitting beside me said, "But I always thought perfection was *good*—and that perfectionism was even better!" I've since discovered others are equally confused. Although there are some who avoid the *P*-word like a plague, some wear it proudly like a Girl Scout sash across their chests. After all, what's wrong with perfection?

The dictionary defines the word "perfection" as "the state of being complete in every way; without defect; flawless; completely accurate; pure, most excellent or faultless."<sup>5</sup> Obviously, nothing is wrong with perfection; it defines the nature and character of God. He is perfect in every possible way in each circumstance on any day of any century. The quandary with perfection surfaces when we as God's created human beings attempt to make our own situations, family members, jobs, homes and emotions flawless, sinless or perfect. It isn't possible.

Have you experienced the following? You try, teach, plan, think, research, study, organize, affirm, strive, maneuver, deny, avoid, control and still come up (for air) empty-hearted? I'm not proud of it, but I admit I have. Here's a sample of a former

silent yet fervent prayer: “Dear Lord, I pray that all limitations, weaknesses, defects, pain, hurt, mistakes, embarrassment and imperfection in my personal and public life, relationships and circumstances be eliminated.” A little exaggerated? Maybe, but not much. The results of this petition? Ongoing disappointment that I believed I had to hide in order to appear godly. As Dr. Larry Crabb writes in his book *Inside Out*, “The simple fact we must face is this: Something is wrong with everything. No matter how closely we walk with the Lord, we cannot escape the impact of a disappointing . . . world.”<sup>6</sup>



## Entitled to What?

*That your faith might not rest on men’s wisdom, but on God’s power.*

1 CORINTHIANS 2:5

Striving for what remains impossible is a sure path to frustration. It can lead to disillusionment, anxiety, dissatisfying relationships, pretending, isolation and loss of the intimacy and love we seek. *Perfectionism*, the dictionary indicates, is “the theory that moral, religious, or social perfection can be attained by mortals.”<sup>7</sup> Some of us live as if we believe this theory. This underlying premise can give us an inflated sensation of control and privilege that edges out God, faith and even reality.

Although human beings can share in God’s energy and creativity, helpfulness and power, we do not possess these qualities in infinite measure. To believe we do is a recipe for physical, mental and spiritual exhaustion. To think we’re *entitled*—as intentional women with hearts for God—to the most superb devotional lives, Bible studies, families, husbands, children, relationships, churches, work lives and residences is a set-up for disappointment and frustration.

This concept recently hit home (literally) for Lynnette, a caring young professional woman who now stays home to raise her three little girls:

For years I worked diligently to free myself from the tyranny of unrealistic expectations. Yet recently I became upset and confused like I'd been before. Having two more children made our existing home cramped for a family of five, so we decided to build a new house. We researched, prayed and genuinely believed we made the right move.

I started planning how I'd decorate, and excitedly chose beautiful upgrades. But shortly after signing our contract, I began to doubt. I liked the house, but felt dissatisfied with the lot. I thought I'd miss the park across the street from our current home. I worried about the power lines one-quarter of a mile away and the smaller backyard. *Will the girls' toys fit in the yard? Will the power lines obscure my early morning view?*

If we opted out, we'd lose our earnest money. Still, I schemed to fix the problem. I researched other lots as they opened up. Reviewing the development plans, I saw four lots with larger backyards. I fixated on the one with the biggest backyard located directly on a park. *That will make me happy. I'll have my dream house and never move again.*

Preoccupied with disappointment, I studied the backyard view of every house I passed. When jealousy welled up, I wanted it to go away. I memorized Hebrews 13:5: "Let your conduct be free from covetousness. But be content with such things as you have. For He Himself has said, 'Never will I leave you nor forsake you.'" *Father, this is coming between us. I don't want that. Please help me.*

My internal scheming (I even researched dropping the contract and going with another builder in a different community) affected our marriage, too. Adam tried to understand, but it was difficult for him because he felt excited and happy that he could provide this new home for us. After praying, struggling and journaling for days, I finally saw how I had begun to feel *entitled* to one of the neighborhood's few premium lots. I let my concerns turn to worry until they became completely overblown.

I can't even see the power lines from the backyard, and we'll live right across the street from a greenbelt. Our backyard is big enough for the swing set my husband built and the floor plan fits our entertaining and ministry values.

Although not an easy process, I realize that I had allowed the trying-too-hard-to-make-it-just-right mindset to consume me again. I experienced the frown of perfectionism and did *not* like it. It felt heavy, preoccupying, energy-draining and divisive. It pushed me away from my true desire to glorify God and enjoy His presence.

My real home is being prepared in heaven. That home will be perfect. For now I'm satisfied and happy to live here with my family and the liberating smile of imperfection.

### Perfectionism? Not Me!

*Now we see things imperfectly as in a poor mirror,  
but then we will see everything with perfect clarity.  
All that I know now is partial and incomplete, but then I will know  
everything completely, just as God knows me now.*

1 CORINTHIANS 13:12, *NLT*

“Your daughter Joan will most certainly have a nervous breakdown before her eighteenth birthday if she keeps this up,” said my third-grade teacher.

“I don't think so,” replied my mother during the annual parent-teacher conference. “She's just eight years old, after all.” They completed their time together without Mother showing her displeasure with Mrs. Harris's (not her real name) assertion. Yet when Mom shared the story with me later, I could tell that she felt annoyed at my teacher and convinced that I—her first-born child—would *never* allow the prediction to come true.

Even in those early elementary years, I did not enjoy acknowledging limitations. I wanted to read every book available to me and be the student with the most book reports. I could not fathom seeing a red mark on my worksheets. I can remember wanting to be more than a top student—I also wanted to love and serve God with all my heart. I longed to do everything possible to make certain God was pleased with me. During the years when many little girls are thinking about hopscotch and popsicles, I was serious about my intellectual and spiritual growth. If they'd had Day Planners back then, I probably would have added a red one to my Christmas list!

In case you're wondering, my teacher was wrong, and Mother was right. I did not have a nervous breakdown at 18 years of age. I waited until I was almost 40! (Technically speaking, it was “severe burnout.” More about this later.)

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“Personal integrity, it seems to me, calls for owning the whole of one's experience—the painful as well as the joyous, the shameful as well as the praiseworthy, the shadows as well as the light, the limitations as well as the possibilities.”

Donald McDullough, *The Consolations of Imperfection*<sup>8</sup>

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I've always attempted to plan well, cover all the bases and operate in every one of my roles by working hard and avoiding mistakes. I really don't enjoy seeing my flaws—or anyone else's. It's embarrassing to admit that I worked too hard to make it all just right, but I guess that's my truth. If I'm not careful, I push my desire to be Christlike into God's solo territory of perfection. And each time I acknowledge that it's happening again, I don't like it much.

### Trying and Working Too Hard

In her book, *Working Ourselves to Death*, Diane Fassel contends that although workaholics often work a great deal, they aren't *always* working. Some avoid work, some work in compulsive spurts, and others procrastinate. All have a latent perfectionist streak. Fassel defines workaholics this way:

“Work addict” is a broad term that covers rushaholics, careaholics, busyaholics—any person who is driven to do too much, whether that person works sixty hours a week or runs around like a chicken with its head cut off. In its narrowest sense, workaholism is an addiction to action; but the action takes many forms. . . . Some work addicts appear motionless, but their minds are racing. The type of action may vary, but the process is the same: You leave yourself.<sup>9</sup>

Of course, the most noticeable workaholic in our culture is the “obsessive worker.” She works long hours, taking on project after project, often feeling misunderstood and underappreciated for the significant contributions she makes. Yet she feels compelled to keep doing; it is a matter of identity for her. If she stopped to rest, it would prove she is inferior, lazy or both—and that would be unthinkable.

A “binger” works in spurts, but with great intensity. Work, projects, tasks and accomplishments become the medication of choice so that she doesn't have to feel her emotions, deal with her disappointments or ask deep questions.

Then there is the “work anorexic.” She's afraid she'll do it wrong, so she procrastinates, and the resulting guilt immobilizes her.

Each workaholic is disturbed by her humanness, because human beings need consistent sleep, nutritious food, interaction with others, respite and relaxation. In addition, as a human being she makes mistakes and has needs, emotions and disappointments—and that exasperates her. To stave off the unpleasantness that's inherent in these human experiences, she keeps working and trying hard to make it all better.

In the zealous pursuit of excellence, schools and universities produce children and young people obsessed with flawless performance in athletics, academics and extracurricular activities. Pressured by church and family, homemakers may become overly focused on trying too hard to make it all just right in the interest of being picture-perfect wives, mothers, daughters and neighbors. As Robin Lindberg, a caregiver, wife and mother of two boys, writes:

*Over-care!* When I heard that characteristic of perfectionism and overload, I knew it described my life.

Several months ago, my husband, Doug, and I moved into a new house. Of course, our two sons (8 and 10 years old) moved in, too. Doug's 97-year-old grandmother, Gammie, also lives with us. I have been her full-time caregiver for over a year now, and we hope she stays with us for the rest of her life. We all love our new place—it has four bedrooms and a large room and laundry area in the basement.

In addition to Doug, our sons, Gammie and me, my sister-in-law Lauren is living here too, while maneuvering through a traumatic divorce. Her 20-year-old daughter, Margo, moved in also, and her 17-year-old daughter, Nickee, spends several nights a week as well.

When our good friends Walter and Eve divorced and sold their house, we offered Eve a place to live for a while until she gets back on her feet. At the beginning of the year, my friend Julie went back to work, so I became the full-time babysitter for her precious 3-year-old son, Morgan. This week, we have another family with two young sons coming to visit.

We have a house full! Most of the time, it feels great—I'm grateful for a husband who enjoys helping people just as I do and thankful to be a stay-at-home mom in a new house with more space. I pray that my service gives witness and honor to Jesus so that the members of my family and my guests might come to know God in a personal way.

But my *over*-caring shows up when I try to fix everything for everyone. I want to take away everyone's pain. It is as if I want to be their savior. Recently I realized that when I try too hard to make it all just right, I'm really attempting to play God. It wears me out and sends me into overload. At the same time, it robs those I love from learning the lessons God wants to teach them. I might even stand in the way of them coming to know Him personally. That thought makes me sad.

I understand what perfectionistic-overload means for me: It's when I try to go beyond my human limitations and do what only God and the other person can do together. It is then that I experience exhaustion and self-doubt. Changing the way I relate to the people

around me puts me squarely into unfamiliar and uncomfortable territory. For now, I'm content to be in the process of adjusting my unrealistic expectations, trusting God for what I can't do and experiencing surprising spurts of joy in the midst of my sometimes overwhelming circumstances.

## Coexisting with Imperfection

*Perfectionism is the belief that it's possible for everything to be exactly as we think it should, and that this would make us totally, blissfully happy.*

VERONICA RAY, *I'M GOOD ENOUGH*<sup>10</sup>

Over-care, overwork and the trying-too-hard-to-make-it-just-right syndrome often surface when we confuse who we are as God's unique and valuable creation with what we can or cannot *do*. Yet if you and I had everything just the way we wanted, it would not be perfect. Our dreams, thoughts, desires and goals are laced with flaws.

*Perfection on this earth is not possible.* At first glance, this statement may seem discouragingly negative. Yet I remember how this truth gradually seeped into my mind and eventually saturated my heart. My shoulders started to relax and I gained permission to breathe more deeply. Even now as I write this, I can't help smiling. I feel relieved. Imagine relief, joy and peace coexisting with imperfection.

One day, everything and everyone who trusts in God will be flawless. Although it may not be how we envision a perfect eternity, it will be the way God wants it. And we'll delight in it. We'll worship the triune God with perfect pitch, complete adoration and unimpaired service. It will happen. Letting go of our

need to do and make it all just right *now* releases us to hope in the glorious future God has planned for us later. As Paul writes:

All creation anticipates the day when it will join God's children in glorious freedom from death and decay . . . And even we Christians, although we have the Holy Spirit within us as a foretaste of future glory, also groan to be released from pain and suffering. We, too, wait anxiously for that day when God will give us our full rights as his children, including the new bodies he has promised us (Rom. 8:21-23, *NLT*).

God offers you and me an ongoing *yes* to life—not a one-time solution to the trying-too-hard dilemma, but a continuing process of spiritual enrichment. He encourages us to live in the midst of our less-than-perfect reality with Jesus as our companion, teacher, soul mate, savior and friend. In every life role, Jesus invites us to live *freely* and *lightly*, even though we dwell in a relentless age of over-the-top expectations:

Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly (Matt. 11:28-29, *THE MESSAGE*).

I invite you to join me on this adventure, a journey to freedom. It will take commitment, because this new way of thinking and behaving is not familiar to us who have long practiced this trying-too-hard-to-make-it-just-right philosophy. However, the truth is that only God is absolutely perfect, and He promises

to help, guide, teach and give us courage. We can change. We can grow. We can heal.

Isn't that a relief?

*Lord, I know sometimes I try too hard to make it all just right and this contributes to my anxiety and disillusionment levels.*

*I know I can't be perfect, but sometimes I think I should be.*

*Then I try even harder. I'm really tired of living this way.*

*So I'm coming to You just as You asked me to do.*

*I want to live "freely and lightly" with You as my coach.*

*Teach me the "unforced rhythms of Your grace."*

*I'm listening.*

