

Prisoners of Excellence

April 19, 2009

There is something vaguely sinister about the word "Excellence" that thrills me and terrifies me all at the same time. Excellence means perfection and it might shock those of you who know me, and may have suspected all along that I have never performed perfectly at anything, ever! Well, just once! In school my only real early academic achievement came about many years ago as a contestant in my district High School science quiz panel. My team was tied for first place and had entered the last round. The final question was asked, "What is the correct name of the organic silt which lies at the bottom of the Marinas Trench?" Without hesitation my hand shot to the bell... OOZE" ...was my immediate answer, which was correct and won for us our championship match against a neighboring High School.

Of all that I did manage to learn in those 12 years of schooling, I never dreamed that a slimy, pitiful, insignificant, icky word like OOZE would represent to date, my one single moment of publicly recorded excellence in life, but it did.

Somehow I hoped that my eternal legacy passed on from generation to generation would not remain in our family history as one the un-married, childless Aunt who hit the buzzer first and shouted "OOZE" before the competition ever had the chance!

Our images, experiences and practices of excellence are vastly different however there is one perception of excellence in this culture which we do all understand and that is the idea that if we do not do something extremely well, than we should not do it at all, at least in public!

Linda Weltner, a columnist for the Boston Globe and a Unitarian Universalist, who is an active member of the Marblehead, MA. U.U. Church, wrote a wonderful article called, "Some things in Life are Worth Doing Badly," which I would like to share with you in part this morning. She wrote:

“My husband plays the tuba badly.

No, wretchedly. With unforgettable in expertise.

After my husband played "When Irish Eyes are Smiling" at my older daughter's wedding, as a way of welcoming our son-in-law's Irish family, his father created an award for Jack that read, in part, "for a spontaneous public performance which demonstrated an originality so stark that it stunned the audience, rendering them incapable of meaningful response."

This did not hurt my husband's feelings. He knows the impact his music has. This is a man for whom practice means playing all the notes, right or wrong, at least twice. His tuba, purchased at a yard sale for \$100, looks as if it's been run over by a truck. His entire repertory consists of five songs which run the gamut from "Happy Birthday" to "So Long, It's Been Good to Know You."

Still, the phone rings and people, ask him to do a gig at some special event, an occurrence which happens more frequently than I might hope. He doesn't get nervous or decide to polish up his technique a bit. He glows. He basks. He's unabashedly delighted. And delightful.

At his first note, audiences burst into hysterical laughter, and the more earnestly my husband attempts to render a recognizable melody, the harder they laugh, until they leap to their feet, choking and cheering. I understand why he's in demand. What has been harder for me to accept is how my husband can be perfectly capable of enjoying his tuba solos without ever aiming at competence.

This is not the way I was brought up. Whether it was swimming, tennis or ballroom dancing, my mother made sure I began with lessons. The pleasure in doing a thing, I was taught, was in doing it well, and so my whole life has been about mastery, whether I was skiing, sewing or cooking. I never enjoyed trial and error. I wanted to do things as they should be done. I disliked looking awkward or amateurish, and to my way of thinking mistakes took the pleasure out of things.

If I felt I'd end up doing something badly, I politely declined the opportunity to begin."

Achieving an element of excellence in what we do in life, privately and publicly certainly has a number of connotations. For example, a tone deaf, enthusiastic musician who loves playing anyway, has a very different implication toward the health and welfare of others, than that of a dabbling untrained want-to-be physician who tries to practice medicine without the skills required ... or a friend who offers to help with your taxes, who just likes to play with numbers, but has no clue as to which forms to use. I would really hate to find myself sailing on the high seas in a 65 foot sloop with someone in command who has only piloted a sunfish on a lake! I would also not wish to be the newborn child of a 12 year old mother who is barely out of elementary school. There are times when we cannot afford to be victimized by inexperience or incompetence. The implications of anything less, when we depend upon others for their expertise can be critical to our very survival. However, those images of what it takes to live lives of excellence, come to us so strongly, as necessary in every aspect of our living, that we may well 'politely deny the opportunity to begin' doing anything other than what we confidently do well, even if it is simply done for our own enjoyment.

Years ago I taught a woodworking class to children whose 5 year old egos could have cared less about being perfect. They created some of the funniest and most ingenious inventions out of wood.

They made marionettes with the silliest faces, arms and legs of unequal length, imperfect in every way, but so unique and created with such pride and devotion to their projects that I had to appreciate the fact that they were freely learning to experiment easily with a new way to express themselves. A way which did not require them to duplicate someone else's idea, a way which was without a perfect model to copy, dangling in front of them.

In the years that have passed I wonder what happened to these kids. I wonder who was the first person who pointed out their lack of skill in creating their marionettes, who commented on the crooked expressions on the faces of their puppets and criticized their mis-cut limbs as imperfect. In this class, excellence of form was not important, a chance to explore their creative freedom, was.

Creativity, enjoyment and personal expression was all we had set out to do. The children responded with great enthusiasm. Many of the adults who picked the kids up at the end of the class, expected to see theater ready marionettes identically made from a standard pattern, all looking alike and perfect in every way. Unfortunately, those parents were disappointed in what their children had created. Likewise, so were their children.

Many have been brought up to compare themselves to the skills of others as the only criteria for pursuing anything. One only needs to attend a rehearsal of The Nutcracker in Boston or one Little League game or Pee-Wee Football practice to spot those kids who will grow up in the competitive shadow of universal excellence, never able to distinguish between that which we do for fun, and pure personal satisfaction, from those tasks in life which absolutely require technical excellence because they do directly affect the health and welfare of others.

Interestingly enough our approach to religion is no different. For many faith communities there is a pattern to follow, a prescribed way of approaching the divine, the unknown and the mysterious. There are words that must be said correctly in a specified order, ideas explained in a certain way, even methods of prayer which have a prescribed time frame of continuity and repetition.

I am curious as to who is considered religiously excellent and perfect in every way?

The one who can recite the most prayers verbatim or the one who can give an accurate rendition of the proceedings of the First Council of Nicea or the one who can look to their fellow human beings and welcome the untapped and uniquely personal expressions of the divine within; that make us laugh and cry that make us wonder, and unconditionally accept the releasing freedom our own harmless imperfections.

Linda Weltner ends her article with this statement.

" ... my husband and I are proof of how rewarding it can be to sing to dance, to play a musical instrument or a sport, to study a foreign language, or calculus or anything that doesn't come easily. All you have to do is free yourself from the prison of excellence. "

So be it

Amen

Rev Holly Baylies© 2009

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