Conclusion

Latter-day Saints and Perfectionism

W. Justin Dyer

This special issue on members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and toxic perfectionism seems long overdue. Although there has been some research in the past, many misleading narratives about Latter-day Saints and perfectionism—narratives promoted by professionals and nonprofessionals alike—were pulled into that research vacuum. Prior to the research presented in this issue, there were no studies that revealed how Latter-day Saints compare in perfectionism to those of other religions and those of no religion, and there was no longitudinal research that provided evidence for the sources and consequences of perfectionism over time for Latter-day Saints. Without this comparison and longitudinal data, our ability to reasonably tackle this important problem for Latter-day Saints has been hampered. The authors of the articles in this issue provide much-needed data and perspectives that help us understand, prevent, and heal from toxic perfectionism in our culture.

Several of these perspectives are found in the first article, "Understanding Perfectionism," by Kawika Allen, Jace Clayton, Emma Moore, and Debra Theobald McClendon. Today, it seems there are conflicting views about setting high goals, with some people unsure whether these goals may reflect an unhealthy perfectionism. Many wonder whether the high expectations of the restored gospel are a good thing. However, as Allen and colleagues remind us, setting high goals and expectations is wonderful. Phrases like "Dream big," "Reach for the stars," and "The sky's the limit" are stereotypical precisely because they can be motivating and help us accomplish ambitious goals.

However, to avoid toxic perfectionism, we must separate our individual worth from our successes and failures. As quoted in their article, a nonperfectionist "may well be disappointed and hurt by failure [but] perfectionistic people are potentially devastated by it. . . . Striving for excellence is vitalizing and energizing, and it opens the possibility of continued growth. Perfectionism, by contrast, is deadening, bringing with it feelings of hopelessness and personal failure."[1] As we fall short, we can learn to embrace an invigorating pursuit of excellence without succumbing to the self-loathing and judgment that failure often brings.

Toxic perfectionism can manifest itself in a person who obsessively strives for flawlessness and then crashes into despair with the inevitable imperfections. It may also manifest in a person who is so afraid of failure that they rarely try, or if they do try, they give very little effort. Not trying gives the person a reason for their failure other than that they were not good enough. As one perfectionist admitted in that article, "It's better to say I didn't try than to say I failed" (see p. 17). These feelings of shame and low self-worth undermine our relationships with ourselves, family, friends, and God and can negatively influence the expectations we have of other people.

Mark Ogletree's article "Perfectionism's Influence on Adolescent Mental Health" finds that toxic perfectionism is not something to be taken lightly. Results from his article suggest that toxic perfectionism has a snowball effect with anxiety, depression, and low self-worth. Evidence suggests that each of these reinforce and are reinforced by toxic perfectionism across adolescence. What's more, 51% of youth who were high in toxic perfectionism had seriously considered suicide at some point (see fig. 4, p. 85).

But where does this toxic perfectionism come from? As summarized in my article, "Perfectionism Across Adolescence," it likely emerges from a society where (1) there are an anxiety-provoking number of choices to make, (2) polarized and cancel culture gives choices incredibly high stakes, and (3) the sense of community has been lost to radical individualism, turning us obsessively inward rather than encouraging us to be outwardly aware. Further, evidence in the article "Parental Influence on Adolescent Perfectionism" by Jenet Erickson, Olivia Forsberg, and McKenna Schmidt suggests parents likely have a large influence on

1. Thomas S. Greenspon, "Is There an Antidote to Perfectionism?," *Psychology in the Schools* 51, no. 9 (2014): 988, https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.21797.

perfectionism in their family. An astounding 46% of girls whose parents use love withdrawal and shame (also called psychological control) are highly perfectionistic, compared to just 10% of girls whose parents do not use these tactics (see fig. 1, p. 64). Toxic perfectionism also appears to flourish in families that are either highly rigid or highly chaotic. A loving, flexible family structure that supports rather than suffocates seems most effective in preventing perfectionism.

What about religion? Does its structure suffocate its adherents? Are Latter-day Saints a "notoriously perfectionistic population" as some have claimed?[2] Michael Goodman's "Religion and Perfectionism" article provides the first-ever study known to examine these questions. Although the answers may surprise the social media world, the research community should be unsurprised. Decades of research have found that religion is related to better mental health. Thus, it is no surprise that Latter-day Saints, known for their strong religiosity,[3] and those of other religions exhibited lower levels of perfectionism compared to atheists and agnostics who had never been part of a religion (see pp. 100–101, 118). It is not unlikely that the decline of religion in society is another reason for the rise in perfectionism.

At the same time, it is also likely that the increase in toxic perfectionism over the past few years may be partially the reason for the decrease in religion. As found in the article "Religion and Perfectionism," of those who were highly perfectionistic, more than one in five (22%) left their religion within a four-year time period (this includes those of all religions in the sample, not just Latter-day Saints; see fig. 2, p. 101). Because they feel that failure within an organization is tied to their self-worth, it may be difficult for the toxic perfectionist to stay connected to *any* institution. And indeed, we see a steep decline in people who participate in religion and also many other civic organizations.[4] Although it is speculative to say the rise in toxic perfectionism may be part of what's driving disengagement from organizations, it could be easily said that

2. Donna Bevan-Lee, "Mormonism and the Pursuit of Perfection," *Medium,* November 16, 2019, https://medium.com/@donna.bevanlee/mormonism-and-the-pursuit-of-perfection-54646372c949.

3. Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford University Press, 2005), 35.

4. See Robert D. Putnam with Shaylyn Romney Garrett, *The Upswing: How America Came Together a Century Ago and How We Can Do It Again* (Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2021).

institutions that value people for their inherent worth rather than an "earned" worth are much more likely to retain their members—this is true even as an institution may encourage its members to greater heights.

In working on this issue, one of the most important takeaways for me was the reality that perfectionism does not belong to a single group but is widespread across religious and nonreligious populations. The tendency to tie our value to the ever-shifting quality of our performance seems to be part of the human condition, and few people are immune to this. But Christ's gospel teaches that our value is tied to the unchangeable love of God.

On the one hand, the fact that fewer Latter-day Saint youth struggle with high perfectionism is a good thing. This means Christ's message is likely having its intended effect on many families. On the other hand, the reality that more than one in ten of the Latter-day Saint youth surveyed (15%) are high perfectionists and 7% are mid-high to high perfectionists (see fig. 3, p. 38) means nearly every ward will have several youth struggling with toxic perfectionism. What can be done? The more we learn and apply the lessons from the articles in this issue, the better we will help our youth (and adults) flourish.

These new statistics on perfectionism provide the foundation upon which other remedies can be built. In her article "Healing from Toxic Perfectionism," Debra Theobald McClendon expertly outlines cognitive distortions we often don't realize we have. These include selective attention, double standards, overgeneralizing, and catastrophizing. Toxic perfectionists may believe they are thinking rationally yet may fall into unrealistic thought patterns. The perfectionist may believe that if something goes wrong, it must be entirely their fault, even if that is not the case. Helping individuals recognize faulty thinking and gain a more balanced perspective can assist them in seeing the world as it really is. McClendon's excellent exercise (see fig. 3, page 139) can help an individual slow their thinking enough to recognize distorted beliefs and reflect realistically on their situation. For some perfectionists, a trained therapist may be an important guide in helping them recognize how some of their thought processes can be adjusted to see situations more clearly.

McClendon's article also points us to a gospel perspective on perfectionism. She quotes President Russell M. Nelson: "Be patient with yourself. Perfection comes not in this life but in the next life. Don't demand things that are unreasonable but demand of yourself improvement. As

you let the Lord help you through that, He will make the difference."[5] This teaching encapsulates the wonderful journey to strive for improvement every day and provides the perspective that we can trust in a God who, no matter our mistakes, loves us infinitely and is there to help and enable us.

Further, one of the greatest antidotes to perfectionism is to know that our infinite worth does not depend on our good behavior, intelligence, talents, or appearance. Adam Miller's essay "Love Is a Law, Not a Reward" reminds us to look through the right end of the telescope—to avoid thinking of God's love as a reward for perfection or a love that can be earned (see p. 157). Instead, God's love is ever present, even in our imperfections. God loved us first (1 Jn. 4:19) and will love us through eternity.

Sometimes we may think that tying our worth to our success will help us succeed. We may think that feelings of self-hate and loathing will keep us from making the same mistakes again. At one time or another, most of us have called ourselves all the meanest names ever invented after we've made a mistake. Yet, even as a short-term strategy, this is ineffective (not to mention unproductive and wrong). In the long run, when we devalue ourselves for any reason, we strip away our motivation and a foundation upon which to progress.

And progression *is* essential. Recognizing our mistakes is key to mental health. We become lost when we cannot identify our right and wrong choices. It is the Lord's covenants that provide the essential map to our heavenly home. Yet trying to achieve progress by beating ourselves down only makes us feel stuck. By sensing the Savior's constant and unearned love calling us from ahead and supporting us from behind, we can believe in our progress and feel lifted when we fall.

In the end, we hope readers of this special issue have found insights that can help them more joyfully walk the covenant path. Often, we most clearly see the *Lord's* perfections as he loves us in our weakness. When we see the way the Lord loves us, we can more easily forgive the imperfections in ourselves and others. Our imperfections may be thought of as "a thorn in the flesh" (2 Cor. 12:7). Paul, struggling with his imperfection, asked for his thorn to be removed. But the Lord told him that (1) "my grace is sufficient" and (2) "my strength is made perfect in weakness."

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5. Russell M. Nelson, "Men's Hearts Shall Fail Them," The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, posted November 18, 2011, YouTube, 2:22–49, youtube.com/watch?v=EMwKxmTLaCs.

Recognizing the way the Lord loved him, Paul didn't just put up with his weakness. Rather, he wrote, "Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me" (2 Cor. 12:9). For Paul, whatever limitations he had were a source of glory because they gave him a chance to connect with the power and love of Christ.

Although our thorns in the flesh may cause us to walk the covenant path in a halting and stumbling way, as we continue toward our eternal home, we can say with Paul, "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing" (2 Tim. 4:7–8).