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Perfecting Ourselves to Death: The Pursuit of Excellence and the Perils of Perfectionism (Book Review)

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Book Reviews

Perfecting ourselves to death: The pursuit of excellence and the perils of perfectionism, by Richard Winter, Downer's Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2005. 203 pages. Reviewed by Sherri B. Lantinga, Interim Dean of the Social Sciences and Associate Professor of Psychology at Dordt College.

I will never forget a senior student who came for routine academic advising in mid-November a few years ago. She was clearly stressed, and when questioned, she cried out, "I have to know by December 1 what I am going to do for the rest of my life!" With that sort of felt pressure, it was no surprise that she was anxious. When I read Richard Winter's book *Perfecting Ourselves to Death*, I thought of that student and other people like her who struggle to live in a culture that promotes flawlessness in our decisions, behavior, relationships, and appearance. As a psychiatrist and professor of practical theology at Covenant Theological Seminary, Winter is concerned with how cultural pressures impact mental health. His last book focused on how our media-saturated culture has actually increased American boredom (*Still Bored in a Culture of Entertainment*), and his observations of how culture fosters unhealthy perfectionism in his clients and students led him to write this book.

Winter groups the book's 15 chapters into four main sections: definitions, psychological correlates of unhealthy perfectionism, contributors to perfectionism, and practical solutions and theological insights. Winter's writing style is nearly conversational, and the discussion questions following each chapter suggest an intended audience of study groups of concerned parents, teachers, and pastors. Throughout the book, Winter supports his points with examples from his clinical cases, his own struggles with perfectionism, and with some sociological and psychological research. Readers wanting to study particular points in more depth will appreciate the end notes, three indices (subject, name, and scripture references), and a ten-page narrative appendix that describes perfection as understood by ancient Greeks, early Christians, Hindus, and Buddhists.

Winter describes perfectionism as a "desire to be unblemished and faultless in some or all areas of life" (24) combined with a cluster of thought patterns such as all-or-none thinking, fear of making mistakes, and need for predictability. As a social psychologist, I appreciated Winter's recognition that under some circumstances perfectionistic thinking is quite helpful (e.g., when doing brain surgery) but that in many other situations these patterns are counterproductive and unhealthy. Winter is also careful to emphasize the multi-causal nature of perfectionism as something that is at least partly inborn and partly learned from parents, the media, and other influences. In the early chapters, Winter reviews various definitions of perfectionism and considers

whether perfectionism is best viewed along a continuum (healthy to unhealthy) or is itself a disordered manifestation of conscientiousness. He also outlines different classification systems for perfectionism, such as a tendency to focus on appearance versus relationships or on one's own standards versus those of others. After perhaps too much time on these foundational issues, Winter describes correlates of and causal influences on perfectionist thinking, including procrastination, depression, anger, eating disorders, and a sense of personal shame. Unhappily, many of these chapters are very brief and seem based more on opinion and anecdotes than on the research relied upon in the initial chapters.

In the final section, Winter discusses practical strategies for reducing unhealthy, perfectionistic thought patterns. The self-help strategies he proposes are consistent with cognitive-behavioral therapy approaches, but they assume significant motivation to change on the part of the perfectionistic reader. Given his earlier descriptions of perfectionistic thinking, I wondered whether such a person would be able to sustain such a long, slow change process without the structured relationship found in counseling. Winter does not offer research or scripture to support his proposed strategies, but he recognizes that a theological understanding is foundational for real change to happen. In the next two chapters he explicates such a foundation from a biblical perspective, based on the perspective that people are fallen image-bearers who live in a particular, identity-shaping social context. He emphasizes that in contrast to our culture's emphasis on perfect appearance and perfect performance, "true perfection is found in developing a Christ-like character" (169). It is a shame that this discussion is relegated to the end of the book in an attempt to appease non-Christians, who are warned in the Introduction about a Christian perspective. When hints of this perspective do come up in other chapters, they are typically paired with a plea to non-believers to keep reading (e.g., "I hope that you will, at least, stay with me to see where we can agree" 89). In his attempt to please both audiences, the book may fail to satisfy either.

In the end, I did not find Winter's argument satisfying. He overplays perfectionism as the source of too much that is wrong in the world; it is hard to think of any psychological problem that Winter would see as unrelated to perfectionism. He spreads the concept thinly across too many related topics, often with little more than an appar-

ent veneer of clinical stories to support his argument. I wanted more evidence (from research or Scripture) to boost the reader's confidence in the general applicability of Winter's points. Because of Winter's desire to make the book useful for study groups, topics are addressed rather superficially. For example, I wished that a biblically-based analysis of perfectionism were considered in far more depth. I wanted to know more about Winter's view of how sin is related to perfectionism, but sin is not mentioned until two-thirds of the way through the book and is not even listed in the subject index (and neither is the Fall, though "depravity" gets a single listing). Further, how is pride related to perfectionism? Is perfectionism the result of basic human fears about relationships and rejection and about one's identity and purpose in the world? Beyond the lack of theological depth, I wanted to know more about the relationships between perfectionism and depression, anger, and anxiety: does one of these cause the others? How effective are anti-anxiety drugs or anti-depressants in reducing unhealthy perfectionist thinking?

Review: *Democracy at Risk: how political choices undermine citizen participation and what we can do about it*, by Stephen Macedo, et al, Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2005. 228pp. Cloth \$44.95. Paper \$17.95. Reviewed by Jack R. Van Der Slik, Professor of Political Studies *emeritus*, University of Illinois at Springfield.

Macedo and his co-authors open with urgency, saying, "America is at risk. The risk comes not from some external threat but from disturbing internal trends: an erosion of the activities and capacities of citizenship" (1). Regrettably, this work fails to remedy the risk while offering some wrong directions.

The authorship of this work deserves particular attention. The study originated in the American Political Science Association's Committee on Civic Education and Engagement. The title page names Stephen Macedo as first author and then lists 18 co-authors alphabetically. This collective effort aims to test the proposition "that modern social science has useful insights into the state of democratic life and what might be done to improve it" (vii). The intention is unusual because the science-oriented ideology of the discipline typically eschews "improving" anything.

The authors have usefully catalogued hazard points in American life regarding the civic engagement they mean to promote. What is included in civic engagement? "[A]ny activity, individual or collective, devoted to influencing the collective life of the polity" (6). The litany of activities is long: voting, campaigning, attending rallies, demonstrating, face-to-face talking, volunteering, and learning about public policies and processes just to name a few. To give this study scope and limits, the authors address three expansive areas: national elections, government at the local level, and association life.

About national elections the authors note a decline in

Because of the relative shallowness with which each topic is addressed, Winter's book may raise more questions than what it answers.

Despite its significant shortcomings, the book is not without some value. In identifying and labeling a cluster of emotional, behavioral, and cognitive patterns, Winter provides a new way of understanding the people around us. The book's most useful chapters provide insights into our own thinking and that of family, friends, and co-workers, and a study group discussion may foster additional self-insights. For example, maybe my meticulous separation of used office paper into several bins and categories of re-use is done less out of respect for God's creation than a biochemically-driven scrupulosity that was reinforced in childhood. Perfectionism is not always maladaptive, but cultural pressures for perfection can surely create psychological and social problems that we should be prepared to combat. Unfortunately, Winter's book may not give us enough to do so.

participation by citizens, not only in voting but also in the conventional foot soldier work of campaigning. Citizens have little contact with campaign organizations, and face-to-face engagement has declined. Young people are grievously uninformed, and much less than a majority of them are voters. The authors lament a decline in the media environment, especially the print media. The polarity of political competition also bothers the authors, as does the predictability of gerrymandered congressional elections.

Regarding the American metropolis, the authors decry the absence of ordinary citizen faces, often replaced by specialized spokesman with parochial interests. Instead of diverse integrating structures at the local level, there is spatial separation of rich and poor, whites and nonwhites, more educated and less educated. The authors condemn the Progressive reforms of the early 20th century, such as nonpartisan elections, council-manager governments, and off-year elections for engaging fewer voters than partisan elections do.

A rich mosaic of groups and organizations constitutes America's associational life. Charitable, religious, and labor unions receive particular attention. Workplace organizations, voluntary associations, and churches "are frequently schoolhouses for civic and political information and skill development" (120), or what has become known as "social capital." The good news is that volunteering and service in nonprofit organizations has grown during the last generation. The authors assert that the U.S. "possesses one