

The Perfect is the Enemy of the Good

By Lex Latkovski

As a student at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee, I decided early on I wanted to graduate with a 3.0 GPA. I knew that a perfect 4.0 GPA was probably impossible for me, not because I'm not an intelligent guy, but because I knew I simply didn't want to work that hard. A 3.0 was going to be good enough for me, and I wasn't going to kill myself along the way. Give me a respectable 3.0 from Vandy and leave the near-perfect 4.0 honors for the countless brainiacs surrounding me.

I was pursuing a double major in Math and Spanish. I was hoping to do well in most of those classes to offset the lower grades I expected to get in harder classes like organic chemistry, or in the boring classes when I was either asleep or absent. Sure enough, I graduated with a 2.992 GPA, eight-thousandths of a point below my target 3.0. Close enough, I say. That's a rounding error as far as I'm concerned. Mission accomplished.

As with most everything in life, there were tradeoffs to my 3.0 approach. I believe I could have pulled off a 3.5 at Vandy if I really would have applied myself and studied more. But I also knew that I wanted to have a social life (going out with my buddies and striking out repeatedly with women). I was also working 20 hours a week as a valet parking attendant and in the business school library to pay my tuition and earn extra spending money. I was trying to strike a balance between getting good grades and enjoying my college years.

Looking back, I realize I was simply following the classic adage, "The perfect is the enemy of the good." Mark, one of my neighbors on my freshman hall, ended up getting a perfect 4.0 at Vandy, graduating at the top of the class. But he never did anything remotely fun (in my opinion), was always in the library studying, and was chronically worried about some deadline or project down the road. He was a total stress puppy. I don't think Mark really had any fun in those four years. Yes, he attained his quest for perfection, but I argue that it came at a considerable cost to him with friendships, social activities, and general happiness. I'm happy that he achieved his goal, and I'm VERY happy that I was not in his shoes. No thank you.

My guess is that Mark would have been accepted into his choice of medical school and gone on to become a successful doctor if he had achieved a 3.7 undergrad GPA from Vandy. There was probably no need to be perfect, other than to hit his self-imposed perfect target. The extra time and energy he spent to move from a very attainable and commendable 3.7 GPA to the

difficult and perfect 4.0 was immense. Those extra 0.3 points came with a hefty price tag, if you ask me. He had his perfect program, and I had my perfectly adequate one.

One of my all-time favorite books is *The 80/20 Principle*, by Richard Koch. It beautifully digs into the 80/20 rule attributed to the Italian economist, Vilfredo Pareto. The 80/20 rule essentially states that, for many events and situations in life, roughly 80 percent of the effects come from 20 percent of the causes. For example, 80 percent of real estate is sold by 20 percent of the realtors, people wear 80 percent of their wardrobe only 20 percent of the time, 80 percent of auto accidents are caused by 20 percent of the drivers, and 80 percent of your productivity comes from 20 percent of your activity.

As I mentioned in *Passport Forward*, I completely renovated my childhood home in Louisville, KY, spending hundreds of hours along the way. It was a labor of love, but also a massive project. I can honestly say I probably spent 80 percent of my time on the last 20 percent of the project. I got bogged down and frustrated on the details and finishing touches of the final 20 percent. To go back to my earlier example, if I was shooting for a grade on my finished renovation project, I wanted to get a 3.6 GPA. I wanted a work of art that I could be proud of and that the new owners and neighbors would appreciate, but I wasn't going to kill myself or go crazy (or broke) trying to get a perfect 4.0.

I didn't cut any corners, and I was extremely pleased with the final product. Sure, I could walk through the house and obsessively point out where I saw a flaw or a less than perfect detail, but I was the only one who knew about it. Prospective buyers and the neighbors didn't see it or notice it, nor did they care. My perfect ideal was only in my eyes and head. The extra work to move it from a beautiful and functional house (a 3.6) to a perfect one (a 4.0) would have been immense, if not impossible. The perfect would definitely have been the enemy of the good, and I probably would have never finished it.

A few years ago, I finally realized my procrastinating tendencies were rooted primarily in my need for control and my desire to do things perfectly. I put off starting something or doing something if I wasn't exactly sure of how it was going to turn out, or if I didn't know how to do it perfectly. Fear of failure and imperfection kept me stuck in a rut of inaction, doubt, and insecurity. Sure, I wasn't making any mistakes, but nothing was getting done.

"Nothing would be done at all if one waited until one could do it so well that no one could find fault with it."

- Cardinal Newman

The 80/20 Principle helped me see how much more efficient it can be to do a good job quickly rather than a perfect job through a laborious process. I saw how difficult and elusive absolute perfection actually is, and that my increasing efforts beyond an acceptable point often provide diminishing returns. I realized I was wasting valuable time on the last 20 percent, time that could be spent on another project or relaxing, or better yet, traveling around the world. So, I started to get more done by doing a very good job on many things instead of striving for perfection on a few things. I was able to get so much more done this way. It lifted the burden off where I had previously been getting bogged down and stuck.

“The greatest mistake you can make in life is to be continually fearing that you will make one.”

- Elbert Hubbard

I’m still pretty lazy, so I have learned to pick my battles and to focus on the projects and activities that will yield the most pleasure and advantageous outcomes. When it’s time to get something done (such as writing and publishing this book), I just take the first step, putting one foot in front of the other, knowing that I will figure out a way to arrive at a perfectly adequate finishing point soon enough.

I would much rather get a bunch of stuff done well than to get only one thing done perfectly. The perfect is truly the enemy of the good.