

Chapter Six

CONTROL/PERFECTIONISM/SELF-APPRECIATION II

You do not have to be perfect in order to be loved. Love yourself as you are, and others will come to love you for yourself as well.

LU



DS “How the Light Gets In”

I recently viewed Leonard Cohen's DVD, *I'm Your Man*. Loved it. To my ears, that guy's heartsong is one of the great ones. Sonia and I loved him and the DVD so much that we even took it over to some friends' house and watched it a second time. I took note of some of the words in one of his songs, and may quote him inside the cover of my new solo piano CD (should I manage to summon up the wherewithal to return to the studio). His words are helping me get to that point:

Ring the bells that still can ring.
Forget your perfect offering.
Everything has a crack in it.
That is how the light gets in.

The notion of "perfection" can cripple initiative, of course. It helps to *know* that fact, to be aware of it. And to have such incisive wisdom as Leonard's verse helps even more. Indeed, "ring the bells that still can ring." Celebrate each moment's joy. Give it all you got, no matter how rickety you might feel, and embrace *all of it* —

the cracks, the light, and the sharing of whatever love, grace and beauty one can generate.

TC Navigating Through the Day

I think you're on the right track when you say, you are starting to take things and people more at face-value, that getting hung up on the details of "why" gets old, and simply looking at things as they are, in and of themselves, and then making your moves according to where you want to go with yourself and the music is the best way. Ultimately, what else can one do?

Seems to me the only way to navigate through one day and make it to the next is to give up notions of controlling others, or environmental things, or politics and politicians, or any of the other broad social domains. External control can't be done, at least not without the numbers. One can grow old and die waiting for enough people to pile up and share your view so that positive changes can be made.

TC The Need for Control

The need for control can be self-destructive. Self-denigration (i.e. perfectionist thinking) can diminish energy and creativity. Getting pissed at the insanity of this disintegrating world is futile, toxically egoistic, and can drive you crazy. The only way through it all seems to be self-acceptance, self-appreciation, honest, heartfelt creativity, patience, more patience, and then still more patience, not only with others, but especially with one's self.

In a sense, all of this is easy. I mean, what, finally, is the point? Seriousness can be good, but so is the recognition that it's really about finding a way to enjoy one's self, a way that is based, not on domination or oblivion, but on the simpler things in life: loving one's self, loving one's friends and partners, loving music in general and one's own music in particular, and loving even the difficult and often trying process of searching and finding a way to work, earn a living, and succeed in getting one's message out there, either in a small way (a local bar) or in greater ways (which depend on one's own actions, yes, but also on a lot of things having to do with luck, circumstances, chance meetings, etc.)

MH

Free at Last!

Personally, I was never able to adapt to the so-called “real world,” a world that is as insane as it is generally mediocre. As something of a perfectionist, I always gave too much. They wanted less, not more. And as something of an idealist, I had (and still have) high principles and high ethical standards. Once again, they wanted less, not more. Lower, not higher. More superficiality, less depth. Make more money, have fewer scruples.

In short, I did not fit in the ladder-climbing, ambition-driven domain of me-mine-more, and do-it-to-them-before-they-do-it-to-you/me/us. At the time, I wondered if I were less of a person for being constitutionally unable to get with the program.

However, when I finally did manage to escape, I gave a huge sigh of relief: free at last!

SL

You Do Not Have to be Perfect

So sorry about that god-awful experience with the cops. They should not have pulled you over for no reason, then grilled you for an hour because you argued with them. It's completely understandable that thenceforth, "fear of making mistakes made my driving go to pot, my confidence disappear, and in the end, I couldn't even contemplate getting behind the wheel of a car without breaking into a cold sweat."

That fear of making mistakes has been with you since your earliest years. The cops just tapped into it. In order to evade harsh, painful criticisms as a child, you HAD to be perfect. You grew up feeling that defensive perfection-need, and deeply so. How can a baseball batter step up to the plate if he or she has to hit a home run every time? And yet, that's what you were forced into thinking you had to do.

The flip side of the fear of making mistakes is a terribly demanding inner sense that you have to be perfect. Well, lovely one, remember this again and again and again: You do not have to be perfect! Perfectionism is a kind of disease. It is an illness. It causes nothing but pain, lack of confidence, low self-esteem, and ultimately total inertia. Beginning right now, with driving, with painting, writing, conversation, cooking, manners, every aspect of your daily conduct, remember:

You do not have to be perfect. Love yourself. Appreciate yourself exactly as you are. You do NOT have to be perfect. Perfectionism is a socially sanctified form of sickness. Self-acceptance, self-appreciation, and self-assertion are high virtues. You do not have to comply and be perfect in order to be loved. Love yourself as you are, and others will come to love you for yourself as well.

TC **Acceptance on All Levels**

It is not easy being out there in the world. Good for you that you maintain a fairly good sense of equilibrium, even when things are not going exactly the way you want them to.

Acceptance on all levels has a way of making everything that happens perfect-just-the-way-it-is, if only because at any given moment it can't be anything *other* than what it is. Acceptance of one's self in whatever situation is at hand has a way of bringing light and delight to the context.

Me, I've (finally) moved to the point where I don't feel that I have anything to prove (which helps me relax), and there's nothing I want to brag about (which helps me accept myself and others). As a result, I can sit back, observe nonjudgmentally, and simply enjoy whatever dance others are into. It's not a mind-state anybody told me about. It's just a place that feels better than previous places did.

I've become something of a watcher in the hills; life flows by; I watch, accept, appreciate, and (usually, but not always) don't let myself get hung up in the madness characteristic of today's greater social context. It has to do with the old idea about controlling things one can control, and not trying to control the things that can't be controlled (and hoping for the wisdom to know the difference :-))

SL Jack Kerouac: Self-Invention, Perseverance, and Breakthrough

I've been thinking about you this morning in relation to a *New York Times* review about Jack Kerouac's journals, *Windblown World* (which I've not yet read). Whether or not we like Kerouac or his novels is irrelevant, but some of the things said in the review pertain, not only to him, but to you and to me and to many other writers we have known directly or indirectly.

The Kerouac reviewer, Walter Kirn, said, "Most important, the entries [in the journal] tell a story of self-invention, perseverance and breakthrough that should help rescue Kerouac from the cultists and secure his admission to the mainstream hall of fame, where he deserves to rest."

A little later, Kirn said, "Despite the reputation for self-indulgence that continues to cling to him, Kerouac was a reflective, vigilant artist who constantly, and consciously, strove to overcome his limitations — the chief one being, as he saw it, his own self-critical temperament."

I like these passages because they pin-point one of the severe problems Kerouac suffered — terribly low self-esteem, partly because of his Catholic upbringing, and largely, I suspect, because of a profound lack of understanding and love from his parents. At the same time, Kirn points out how Kerouac worked hard, re-invented himself in his own eyes, and managed to overcome enslavement to his own self-criticisms. That does not mean he eliminated those criticisms. But he learned how to set them aside long enough to believe in himself and his talent, and long enough to work assiduously to develop his ability to merge transcendental mental perceptions with his deep emotional empathy for the particular — as Tennyson, one of your British poets said, "to see the world in a grain of sand."

Because Kerouac believed he was worthless, perhaps his most formidable enemy became the fears he felt that were generated by unremitting perfectionism — *aesthetic* perfectionism, in which nothing he wrote attained the heights of the Masters he so admired (e.g. Dostoyevsky, Shakespeare, Henry Miller, others), and *personal* perfectionism, in which he felt so worthless it ultimately drove him to give up writing and fall into serious substance abuse (he died of alcoholism at age 47).

Nevertheless, in his writing years, he confronted this demon of perfectionism and did not let it crush his yearning to write. (If he had taken psychotherapy seriously — this was the 50s — he may well have liberated his psyche from this terribly debilitating illness — and that's what perfectionism is, an illness in which a person

Bureaucracies and endless documentation can in themselves drive one batty. And of course revealing aspects of one's inner life that are perhaps less than omnipotent or "perky or full of ideas" requires enormous strength, trust, daring.

A person as bright and complex as yourself naturally wants to be perceived only as totally collected, competent, confident, and capable. In a word: perfect. When confusion appears within, one's self-image suffers terribly and often makes it almost impossible to speak to others of those dark and perhaps extremely demanding demons. After all, if one is perfect, one is not supposed to have demons, is he? And if he does, isn't he supposed to be brilliant and powerful enough to overcome them without disturbing the lake with even a single ripple? As a result, one can find that his "artist's anxiety/doubt/instability" is excruciating, and yet he is unwilling and unable "to write it." The inner urge to create cannot be fulfilled, precisely because one's need to be perfect and all-controlling stifles it.

I understand completely. I guess there is something in all people that wants to be the one who does the helping, not the one who needs helping. We want to be the teacher, the knower, the savior. It hurts the ego (and frightens the wounded psyche) to have to reach out to a therapist or a friend and reveal one's uncertainties, confusions, imperfections, conflicts, doubts, needs, whatever. It's one thing to know these things, entirely another matter to suddenly find one's self on the couch talking, so to speak, instead of sitting in the chair listening. So my heart goes out to you for the painful turns your life is taking at the moment.

As well, your willingness to share your life with a therapist and to share a few particulars with me has escalated my respect for your intelligence and strength of character still another notch.

I think you are accurate indeed when you wonder how much ballast your knowledge and philosophy can provide. Knowledge is a terrific helper, as is a keen intellect, but neither can do the trick by itself. I suspect you have indicated as much to certain others, but to find one's self suddenly confronted with that particular

reality has to be a bit of a shock. What? My vast knowledge and exceptional brilliance are not enough? — yikes! In these domains one's greatest strengths are very often only secondary troops, marvelous clarifiers and interpreters, but only *after* insight. And where or how does one get that insight? And what insight are we talking about?

Good questions to explore, yes?

TC Liberation Into Freedom

In an interview I once had with bassist Stanley Clarke, I asked him what it was that he and Chic Corea and John McLaughlin and other musicians liked about playing at lightning speeds.

He said it was a joy to overcome inertia. In society at large, he said, everything moves incredibly slowly, whether you're standing in line at the supermarket or trying to get a new idea across to people whose conditioned minds can handle only familiar thoughts, things they could recognize from past experience. When he played super-fast, it felt like he was liberated from that density, that incredibly thick-minded inertia that surrounds us everyday. It felt like he was flying.

That always stuck with me. In fact, I may have already mentioned that idea during our correspondence. In any case, it resonated with me. As I considered what he said, it occurred to me that one of the main implications of his insight was self-acceptance and serene independence.

In order to fly, one must acknowledge the general inertia and its manifestations in so many of the individuals we meet; one must see it and *accept it* without rancor (reacting against reality only binds us to it and *determines* our thinking). One has to

spend time in the workshop honing one's skills, developing one's ideas, perfecting one's art; and then get out into the marketplace and present one's work with as much intensity and grace as one can muster.

Perfection is not the goal. Liberation into freedom is.