

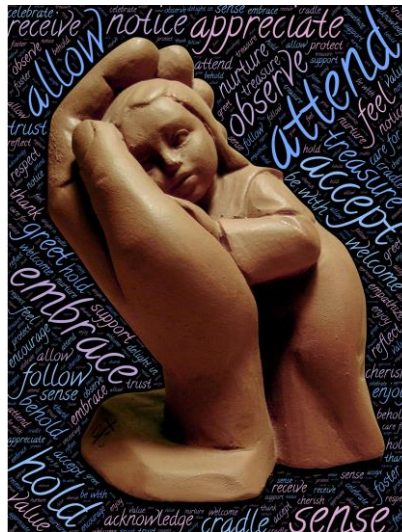


SIEBENQUELL

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# Perfection will kill you!

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SOURCE: JOHN HAIN, CCO PUBLIC DOMAIN

The biblical storytellers continually remind us that God has placed a mighty challenge before us. We are called to be authentically human. Unfortunately, we have often been denied the chance to unfold and develop our authentic humanity, because we were too busy trying to pursue a clean and antiseptic perfection.

To be authentically human means to allow the fears and passions, the hopes and failures of life to be at home in your life and in your heart. It means that you need to be comfortable with limitations, finitude and fallibility as well as achievement, exploration and success. To be perfect as the Father is perfect is to be able to master one aspect of life, namely, to allow no imperfection to prevent us from loving and living. That is the perfection of God's love. No imperfection in his people has ever hindered him from loving us or living with us.

A long time ago I heard a story from John Shea that I have surely retold a hundred times over the course of the years. I remember it when my own obsession with perfection gets in the way of living authentically. I retell it for people whose perfectionism is getting in the way of being authentically human.

William Sloan Coffin, a renowned Protestant pastor and peace activist, had just gotten a divorce and returned from California to New York. His friend, the famous Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, came to pick him up at the airport. The rabbi said to William Sloan Coffin, »You should have called me!« And Sloan Coffin said, »I had many friends in California. I didn't need to call you. Many people were supporting me and consoling me during this

divorce.« Heschel said, »You should have called me!« Sloan Coffin responded, »You don't understand. I had many people around me. So what would you have done if I had called you?«

Heschel replied, »I would have told you about my father, the greatest rabbi in Eastern Europe. He, too, got a divorce.« And Heschel began to cry. Then he said, »Ah, you Christians. Perfection will kill you!«

Then he went on. »By the way, someone has given me the gift of a bottle of cognac. And right now it is unopened in my room.«

The sign of the authentically human is not the perfect. I have met and been berated by the zealots of perfection throughout my life. You can, indeed, know them by their fruits, for the hallmark of them all is the fact that they have no stories to tell, no stories to share. What they always carry with them are commandments and thinly veiled condemnations. They have no stories, because stories do not contain, carry or convey perfection. Stories carry authentic life, with all its messiness and joy, with all its potential and all its pitfalls. I have never met a single one of these soulless zealots to whom I would entrust my soul or the soul of any other person. But I sure would have loved to sip cognac with Abraham Joschua Heschel in the hours of wound and suffering.

**Erik Riechers SAC**

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