HOW TO BE ENOUGH

SELF-ACCEPTANCE for SELF-CRITICS and PERFECTIONISTS

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ST. MARTIN'S
ESSENTIALS
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For Adrien and Davin, with all my love

Author's Note

All HIPAA identifiers and other potentially identifying details have been changed to honor therapy's confidentiality pledge and to render clients unrecognizable, even to themselves, while retaining the essence of their stories. In many cases, to further disguise identity, I have created composite characters from several clients. In the case of the Tice, Bratslavsky, and Baumeister study, the story comes directly from their methods section, but I invented the details of journals from 1975, *Tetris*, *People*, as well as the color of the aromatherapy candle.

Prologue

A Tale of Two Titans

IT WAS HARD to tell what shone most brightly that December evening in 1937. Powerful beams of light from the hand-operated spotlights searched the sky above the Carthay Circle Theatre in Los Angeles. Pure star power emanated from the red carpet. Flashbulbs popped as tuxedoed and bejeweled celebrities like Clark Gable, Marlene Dietrich, Cary Grant, and Shirley Temple made their way into the theater, past the thousands of fans who spilled into the street, craning their necks for a glimpse. But brightest of all, perhaps, were the hopes of thirty-six-year-old Walt Disney, the creator of the first full-length animated feature to be unveiled that night, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*.

Entering the theater, Walt was both elated and profoundly anxious. Charlie Chaplin had wired him a telegram that morning: AM CONVINCED ALL OUR FONDEST HOPES WILL BE REALIZED TONIGHT. And over the course of the next eighty-eight minutes, they were. The audience even applauded the backgrounds, without a single animated character on the screen. When Snow White was poisoned by the apple and laid out on her funeral bier, audible sniffling and nose-blowing could be heard throughout the theater. Walt had been fretting for months over whether viewers would be emotionally moved

by animated characters, but at the end of the film, when the audience leaped to its feet in a standing ovation, he felt a knot release within him. It was all right. People liked it. He hadn't failed.

Snow White might have been a historic success, but the road to that success was excruciating. Walt hired a small army of six hundred artists and drove them into the ground—three eight-hour shifts every day, around the clock—drawing, inking, and painting over a quarter million stills. The work hours totaled two hundred years' worth of labor. Furthermore, the film, first budgeted at $250,000, had exceeded its budget more than sixfold. His studio owed the bank a million dollars, a mind-bending sum during the heart of the Great Depression.

But to Walt, the time didn't matter. Money was no object. The only thing that mattered was that he had pushed and scraped and, through sheer force of will, achieved that elusive "just right" feeling. If the movie didn't feel right in his bones, not only would it fall short, so would he. He *was* his movies.

Chasing that feeling was intense and agonizing, not only for Walt but also for everyone around him. Since Walt couldn't draw each cel himself, he had to let go of absolute control, but he couldn't bring himself to trust the world-class staff he had so carefully handpicked. Even after animation began, Walt screen-tested more than 150 young women for the role of Snow White, a marathon time suck of exhausting comparison. When it came time to paint, Walt had the studio grind its own pigments, then painstakingly measured each with a spectrometer—one of only twenty in the world at the time—creating an expansive library of 1,200 different colors that pointlessly exceeded Technicolor's existing technology. Undaunted, Walt had the staff create a seven-foot-tall chart displaying exactly how each pigment would translate to the screen.

Even in the final, combustible days leading up to the movie's release, Walt couldn't stop micromanaging. "Have the hummingbird make four pick-ups instead of six," he corrected. Regarding one of the dwarfs: his "fanny in the last half of the scene is too high." The Queen's eyebrows were too extreme. One of Grumpy's fingers was too big. In an irony visible only to his

exasperated staff, Walt worried aloud that the constant revisions would suck the spontaneity from the film. Far from Walt's office, on the studio floor, the supervising director threw drawing boards across the room, screaming, "We gotta get the picture out!"

When the film was finalized, Walt could only see the flaws. To a reporter, he admitted, "I've seen so much of Snow White that I am conscious only of the places where it could be improved. You see, we've learned such a lot since we started this thing! I wish I could yank it back and do it all over again."

Ultimately, the colossal success of *Snow White* publicly cemented Walt's place in cinematic history. For a time, it was the highest-grossing American film ever, making nearly $92 million in today's dollars during its initial release. Away from the spotlight, however, it solidified Walt's perpetual dissatisfaction. His triumph only set the bar higher for Disney magic. Despite Walt's carefully crafted public image of the sheepish, aw-shucks "Uncle Walt," a journalist visiting the studios noted that Walt "appeared to be under the lash of some private demon."

After the war, faced with the realities of budgets and bank loans, the studio went through a round of layoffs and budget cuts. Walt, demoralized, began to lose his drive. His future films, he fretted, would never be the jewel box masterpieces—painstaking, gorgeous, almost spiritual experiences—that the earlier ones had been. Rather than making the most of what he had or looking at the new constraints as a challenge to be mastered, he grew despondent: If the films couldn't be perfect, what was the point in making them?

Walt tried immersing himself in an old interest: model trains. "Just a hobby to get my mind off my problems," he said, but he felt trapped and rule bound even in leisure. Tellingly, Walt wrote to a fellow railroad buff who had constructed a model railroad big enough to straddle and ride in his yard, "I envy you for having the courage to do what you want."

Caught between the false choice of perfection or failure, paralyzed by both his self-imposed standards and bank-imposed budget, Walt withdrew

into himself. The Disney brand might have centered on happiness and community, but Walt increasingly found himself lonely and isolated, mostly through his own making. When presented with a formal dinner invitation, he would RSVP "NO!" in red crayon, underlined for emphasis. Amid the frenetic activity at the studio, Walt would slouch in his chair and complain, "It gets lonely around here. I just want to talk to somebody." When lent a listening ear, however, he would ruminate aloud about his childhood hardships, and when it was his conversation partner's turn to talk, he would leave them hanging: "Gotta get goin'!"

The world Walt Disney had created—one of fantasy, innocence, and wish-upon-a-star fulfillment of dreams—stood in stark contrast to the world he lived in, where it was too precarious to loosen his grip, enjoy a genuine interest, or be a friend instead of a taskmaster. A *New York Times* reporter who visited the studios noted, "I came away feeling sad" to find that the brilliant man who had delighted the world's imagination was now deflated, intransigent, craving approval but desperately lonely, and avoiding his problems by procrastinating with toy trains.

★ ★ ★

The popcorn machine was filled with too many kernels. As the cameras rolled on the television show *The Children's Corner*, the lid bounced open and the newly popped popcorn exploded over the sides. After filming wrapped, the show's cocreator, thirty-three-year-old Fred Rogers, said, "Now we have to do that again."

The show's star, a bubbly young woman named Josie Carey, was mystified. "Why? That was fun! The kids will love it." But Rogers was concerned that for younger children, the runaway popping and the ensuing mess could be disturbing. Carey threw up her hands. He was so particular, so exacting. To Carey, the popcorn spilling everywhere was exciting—it was exactly what made TV entertaining.

But Fred Rogers hadn't gotten into TV to be entertaining. According to biographer Maxwell King, Rogers's mission on TV was "to make it better, to make it more appropriate and educational for young children. The slapstick, pie-in-the-face quality of early television was just what he wanted to change." Rogers had high standards, deep commitment, yet also a clear-eyed vision. He paid attention to the details—he saw things and thought of nuances nobody else did.

In 1961, the head of children's television at the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation thought these traits made Fred Rogers the right person to lead a quiet revolution in children's education. "I've seen you talk with kids," said the executive. "I want you to look into the lens, and just pretend that's a child."

And so began the show that would come to be called *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. Over thirty-one seasons and 895 episodes, the world would witness Rogers trade a blazer and dress shoes for his cardigan and sneakers at the start of every show, a comforting, reliable signature.

Each episode underwent intense care and deliberation. Excellence was the only acceptable standard. Every script went through multiple levels of review—Rogers himself, the show's producers, and Rogers's mentor and consultant, Dr. Margaret McFarland, a child psychologist at the University of Pittsburgh.

Once, in the middle of shooting an episode, Rogers felt the script was not quite right, even after all the usual layers of input. So he did the unthinkable. He stopped production, left a highly paid, mostly unionized crew twiddling their thumbs on set, and walked down to the university campus to consult with Dr. McFarland. After about an hour, he came back, and the show rolled. But the incident was pure Rogers. If it was for the kids, it had to be right.

With such exacting standards, one might think that Rogers would be difficult, an unreasonable autocrat, or at least deadly boring. But Fred Rogers wasn't any of those things. Instead, he magically merged high standards with flexibility, responsibility with creativity. An ordained

Presbyterian minister, he devoted himself to service, seamlessly combining rectitude with approachability and humility.

Rogers's mentor at the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, the chain-smoking Dr. William Orr, taught Rogers the principle of "guided drift": staying the course of one's principles while embracing the flow of life. Uphold your integrity but take chances. Be open to change and serendipity rather than being confined by a rigid set of rules.

This philosophy showed up in the show and in life. During one taping, for instance, Rogers began as usual by swapping his blazer for a cardigan and buttoning it up, only to realize that he was one button off—the Monday button was in the Tuesday hole. Familiar with Rogers's standards, the crew expected him to call, "Cut!" and start over, but instead he ad-libbed a line and re-buttoned the sweater, noting that mistakes happen and, moreover, they can be corrected.

Another time, the script called for a shot of the fish in the set's tank eating their food. A production assistant fed the fish during rehearsal in order to calibrate the camera and avoid glare on the tank, so when actual taping came around, the fish were full. They just stared at the food as it sank unceremoniously to the bottom of the tank. Everyone settled in for a long day, assuming they'd have to wait for the fish to get hungry again so the scene could be shot as scripted. But, recalled longtime producer Elizabeth Seamans, "Fred just looked at it. And he looked at the camera and said, 'I guess the fish aren't hungry right now; you know sometimes we're not hungry.'" It was a perfectly reasonable explanation, and he trusted his young viewers to be accepting of the circumstances. The moment became a mantra for the crew: "Do the fish really need to eat?" It reminded them that rolling with the punches made for a better TV show than shoehorning fish—and by extension, life—into a preconceived script.

Despite his flexibility with others, Rogers could be hard on himself. In 1979, after more than a decade on the air, Rogers rolled a piece of paper into his typewriter and tapped out his thoughts in a clickety-clack stream of consciousness: "Am I kidding myself that I'm able to write a script again?...

Why don't I trust myself?... AFTER ALL THESE YEARS, IT'S JUST AS BAD AS EVER. I wonder if every creative artist goes through the tortures of the damned trying to create? GET TO IT, FRED!"

But what truly pushed Fred Rogers was something much deeper than self-castigation. The reporter Tom Junod profiled Rogers for a 1998 cover story in *Esquire*. In the process, he watched Rogers in action on set and commented, "Fred, of course, was an amazing perfectionist who didn't—I wouldn't say he drove those people, that's the wrong word—but absolutely knew what he wanted when he wanted [it] and would not leave that day until he saw it." His staff could sense the intensity, too. "There wasn't a spontaneous bone in that man's body," observed Seamans. "He hated to go into anything unprepared."

But both Junod and the *Neighborhood* staff also understood innately that Rogers's intensity was in service of something greater than a good show. He was driven by his high but flexible standards, commitment to guided drift, his unshakable service to children, but most of all, his energy was funneled into one thing: human connection.

He forged connections quickly and deeply, with everyone. Ten-year-old Jeff Erlanger came on the show to explain how his electric wheelchair worked and why he used it. Nearly twenty years later, Jeff rolled onstage in a tuxedo at the Television Hall of Fame induction ceremony to introduce Rogers. Rogers, who had kept in touch but not seen his old friend since the original taping, leaped to his feet and clambered straight onstage, a huge smile on his face.

Rogers connected with François Clemmons, the Black, gay actor who for twenty-five years played Officer Clemmons on the show; together, they quietly broke the color barrier by cooling their feet in a shared plastic wading pool—a revolutionary act in 1969. In his memoir, Clemmons remembers, "There was something serious yet comforting and disarming about him. His eyes hugged me without touching me."

Rogers once connected with an empty-eyed boy fiercely wielding a toy sword in Penn Station, who was forced into saying hello by his starstruck

mother. Rogers leaned in and whispered, “Do you know you’re strong on the inside, too?” The boy, caught off guard at being given something he did not know he needed, nodded nearly imperceptibly.

Rogers even connected with Koko, the gorilla who had been taught American Sign Language. It turned out she was a fan of the show. Upon meeting, she hugged him and wouldn’t let go. Then, in tribute to the opening sequence of the show she adored, she lovingly removed his shoes.

In *Esquire*, Tom Junod wrote about Rogers, “There was an energy to him … a fearlessness, an unashamed insistence on intimacy,” and, tellingly:

> Once upon a time, a man named Fred Rogers decided that he wanted to live in heaven. Heaven is the place where good people go when they die, but this man, Fred Rogers, didn’t want to go to heaven; he wanted to live in heaven, here, now, in this world, and so one day, when he was talking about all the people he had loved in this life, he looked at me and said, “The connections we make in the course of a life—maybe that’s what heaven is, Tom. We make so many connections here on earth. Look at us—I’ve just met you, but I’m investing in who you are and who you will be, and I can’t help it.”

★ ★ ★

Disney and Rogers are both titans of childhood; their creations are both beloved and immortal. As personalities, they are both studies in high standards, intensity, work ethic, and focusing on the details, from the size of Grumpy’s finger to the velocity of popcorn.

But despite being cut from the same cloth, they each created very different garments over the course of their lives. One man was rigid; the other was flexible. One had something to prove; the other had something to share. One avoided any possibility of error; the other made room for inevitable mistakes and hardship through a belief in service and a mission greater than himself. One disengaged from those around him; one engaged fully and with authenticity. One craved approval yet was desperately

isolated; the other craved intimacy and created a life based not on control but connection.

Despite such different lives, Disney and Rogers shared a core worldview, *perfectionism,* or the tendency to demand from ourselves a level of performance higher than what is required for the situation. Perfectionism can be healthy, with high yet reasonable and flexible standards, but it quickly becomes unhealthy when standards become unrealistic and rigid. Most importantly, unhealthy perfectionism demands we perform superbly simply to be sufficient as a person. It's not a diagno"PGID9"sis, though it can range from mildly inconvenient to downright paralyzing. Perfectionism comes both from within as a personality style and from all around us as a reaction to a demanding environment.

If you've been nodding in quiet recognition, this book is for you, whether or not the term *perfectionism* snaps into place like that final, satisfying puzzle piece. In fact, most of us with unhelpful, Disneyesque perfectionism don't see it as the overlapping center of the Venn diagram of our struggles. I, for one, didn't resonate with the concept until I started researching it for my last book, *How to Be Yourself: Quiet Your Inner Critic and Rise Above Social Anxiety*, and I'm a clinical psychologist who supposedly has a certain degree of self-awareness about things like this.

But it turns out you and I are in a very big boat. And the boat is getting bigger. Perfectionism is on the rise. In a bold 2019 study, Dr. Thomas Curran, author of *The Perfection Trap: Embracing the Power of Good Enough*, and Dr. Andrew Hill examined perfectionism in over forty thousand college students over a generation, from 1989 to 2016, and discovered that perfectionism was on a steady upward march. Over the twenty-seven years of data, young people became more demanding of themselves, more demanding of others, and perceived that others were more demanding of them.

Demanding a lot of yourself has probably gotten you a long way. I know it's bought me a lot. Since you're reading this book, I'll bet it's the same for you. But demanding a lot can also cost us. Perfectionism can take us down

the road of Walt Disney—isolation, burnout, chronic dissatisfaction. Luckily, it can also go the way of Fred Rogers—excellence, flexibility, magnanimity. And guess what? We can forge the path we take. We can learn to be good to ourselves even when we're wired to be hard on ourselves. Ready? Let's take a look.

PART I

Introducing Perfectionism

1

How We See Ourselves

SINCE YOU PICKED up this book, I'll bet you a jelly donut you identify with some part of Walt Disney's or Fred Rogers's high standards, intensity, work ethic, and commitment to doing things well. To outside observers, our lives make a lovely, framed photo of functionality, productivity, or having stuff figured out. The descriptions are flattering: overachiever, on top of everything, accomplished, successful.

But I'll bet you probably also identify with the hidden clutter just outside the frame of that lovely photo. I'm right there with you. We are our own toughest critics. Meeting our expectations for ourselves feels good temporarily but, like a burp, dissipates quickly. We have an internal cattle prod that drives us forward relentlessly, but we also get stuck in our own versions of reworking the size of Grumpy's finger or typing anxious stream-of-consciousness notes when we're supposed to be writing an episode script. Privately, we may feel like we're falling behind, inadequate, left out, or not like everyone else. Despite our eagle-eyed inner quality control inspector ensuring we do things correctly, we worry about letting others down, being judged, or getting criticized. We get called some dubious labels: type A, intense, task-oriented, driven, workaholic, neat freak. Too often, we feel like

Walt Disney—lonelier and more isolated than we'd like, a feeling of disconnection that goals and tasks never seem to fill. We yearn for the heaven of Fred Rogers—compassion, purpose, community, belonging.

Don't get me wrong. Perfectionism confers some magical superpowers like high standards, strong work ethic, reliability, and deep care of others. But gone awry, it can subject us to a powerful riptide of *I should do more, do better, be more, be better*. We might look like we're hitting it out of the park, but we feel like we're striking out. For those of us who struggle with it, *perfectionism* is a misnomer: it's not about striving to be perfect. Instead, it's about never feeling good enough.

★ ★ ★

Interestingly, at the heart of perfectionism is something downright magical: conscientiousness. Conscientiousness is the least sexy superpower. Detail-oriented super vision! Single-handedly crush the marshmallow test! Clear the highest standards in a single bound! But it is the most potent trait for a good life. Dr. Angela Duckworth, author of the book *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance*, and three colleagues examined almost ten thousand American adults and identified conscientiousness as the most consistent predictor of both objective and subjective success—it plays a role in everything from income to happiness to life satisfaction.

Conscientiousness is deeply rooted; the word dates from the 1600s and distills down to *conscience*, our inner sense of right and wrong. It means caring deeply—caring about doing things right, caring about doing a good job, caring about being a good person. We care deeply about, and for, those around us. But at some point, conscientiousness can tip over into unhelpful perfectionism.

Trailblazing Oxford University colleagues Drs. Roz Shafran, Zafra Cooper, and Christopher Fairburn* posit that clinical levels of unhelpful perfectionism emerge when we keep pushing despite adverse consequences;

we keep hammering away at the nail long after we've smashed our thumb. Two core elements lie at the heart of clinical perfectionism, both of which made my eyebrows shoot up in recognition.

First is *a hypercritical relationship with oneself*. We are our own worst critics. We focus on flaws rather than what's going well, what is lacking rather than what's good. When we don't fulfill those high expectations for ourselves, we are hard on ourselves, but when we do, we decide the expectations were insufficiently demanding in the first place.

Second is *an overidentification with meeting personally demanding standards*, which Shafran and colleagues call *overevalution*. Our evaluation of ourselves as a person is contingent upon our performance. In other words, we conflate meeting all our expectations for ourselves (or failing to do so) with our sense of self. If we define "failure" as not reaching our standards, a mistake or shortcoming means *we've* failed, even if our standards were unrealistic. Classic examples include striver students defining themselves by their grades, people struggling with body image measuring their self-worth by their weight or body shape, social media users who confuse their worth with their number of followers, athletes who only feel as good as their last game, or anyone struggling with social anxiety who feels like every interaction is a referendum on their character. We can overevaluate almost anything: how healthy we ate today, how adeptly we handled that weird thing Jim said at work, the tidiness of our house, or how much we managed to get done today.

We're not perfectionistic about everything all the time; we're only perfectionistic about what matters to us, because meeting those demanding standards (or not) says something about us personally. I may be perfectionistic about my work and my social behavior, but I'm definitely not when it comes to the state of my home office (piles are a method of organization, right?).

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