

The Perfection Paradox

Accept Your Addiction, Overcome Your
Obsession, and Escape to Excellence

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For Sharon

My wife, my best friend, and the greatest
partner a person could ever hope for.

Thank you for supporting and encouraging me,
and for putting up with years of perfectionism
at its worst. Perfection may not be attainable,
but I got as close as God allows with you!

And for Kary Oberbrunner

My coach, mentor, publisher, and friend.
Thank you for believing in me long before I did.

I am careful not to confuse excellence with perfection. Excellence

I can reach for; perfection is God's business.

— Michael J. Fox

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Foreword

At its very best, life can be difficult. But worse still, life can be even more challenging if one's ultimate goal is perfection. Mounting pressures in the endless pursuit of perfection can be unimaginable, unrelenting, and unbearable.

Let's face it; current societal issues don't make dealing with lack of perfection any easier. Instagram models displaying enviable physiques, luxuriating in exotic locales, cause us to yearn for that perfect lifestyle. Former classmates and colleagues posting celebration pictures of their new perfect dream jobs cause us to question our own work-a-day existence. Even friends and family members contribute to the problem by sharing photos of perfect babies, perfect parties, perfect hairstyles, even perfect meals. It can all be too much.

Life isn't perfect. It never has been, and it never will be. Despite the temptation to measure up to someone else's image of perfection, in one way or another, we are bound to fall short. Worse still, the desperate—and futile—pursuit of perfection ends up costing us more than we should ever be willing to pay. For too many intelligent, highly educated, hardworking, talented individuals, the mirage of perfection creates distractions, disorientation and disillusionment. That's why this book, Jeffrey A. Kramer's, *The Perfection Paradox*, is so critical.

I met Jeff more than 20 years ago. Our work and careers brought us together numerous times over the years in various conference and training settings. Without fail, Jeff was always well prepared, busy attending to details and working hard to deliver more than was promised or expected. I saw what others saw—a consummate professional at work. But I was blind to Jeff's staggering, even debilitating, obsession with perfection—an obsession courageously revealed and now, thankfully, rejected.

By way of Jeff's unusual vulnerability and real-life stories of struggle, we learn from his trials and tribulations. We come to realize how easy it can be to fall prey to the seductive embrace of perfection and the psychological deception that follows. But Jeff goes further still. He reveals the damaging effects of perfection on ourselves and others, and shows us simple, yet powerful steps available to overcome perfection's stranglehold.

One of the things I've come to know and appreciate about Jeff is his desire to serve and help others is unwavering. *The Perfection Paradox* does just that. This book serves to help others who might also suffer from an addiction to perfection, a means of escape.

As Jeff writes in the book, "imperfect action beats perfect inaction every day." Imperfect or not, I hope you take action, read on and benefit from the journey contained in these pages.

—Philip Van Hooser, MBA, CSP, CPAE

Award-Winning Keynote Speaker; Leadership Trainer;

author of *Leaders Ought to Know: 11 Ground Rules for Common Sense Leadership*

Introduction

Perfection. It sounds appealing; after all, what's better than perfect? That's what I always believed, and it served me well for many years. At least I thought it had. What I didn't know at the time was I had fallen prey to an addiction I never knew existed, an addiction to The Ideal.

This addiction starts as a seemingly innocent desire to do great things. A perfectionist believes they are doing amazing work, are continuously approaching excellence in everything they do, and are helping others do the same. The problem is others don't see it through the same lens. When someone else looks at a perfectionist, they may see a procrastinator, a pessimist, someone who is inflexible and intolerant, or maybe a quitter. At least that's what has happened in my life.

I was the consummate overachiever but was always disappointed in what I viewed as my underachieving results. Everything I did needed to be the best, most complete, most efficient, most thorough, and on and on and on. You know the type. I needed to win to show how great I was. In each instance, I thought I was chasing excellence, but others saw me as a bad sport, a pessimist, anal-retentive, or just a jerk. I was in pursuit of perfection and getting down on myself for being that underachieving failure, oblivious to the way others viewed me.

When I started something new, I had to get the best equipment or resources. The problem was that eliminated my excuses, then when I wasn't getting my desired results, I couldn't blame the equipment. I'd have to find something or someone else to blame, or move on so I didn't have to be a failure any longer.

You may have noticed a trend here. First, I was unable to differentiate between failing at something I did and being a failure as a person. Second, I struggled with separating the idea of setting high standards and seeking excellence from setting unrealistic standards and seeking something unachievable. This isn't uncommon among perfectionists as most of us don't know the

difference between those two sets of standards. Or more accurately, we know, but aren't able to separate them.

We perfectionists struggle with the simplest of things. A family vacation means a checklist and agenda to see everything in order, on time, and as planned. In my case, with a separate folder for each stop with every reservation, confirmation, site seeing info sheet, etc., all printed out and organized in the most logical sequence. This pattern repeated itself endlessly in my life. Arranging the clothes in the closet, loading the dishwasher, or running errands around town. I was being prepared, planning ahead, getting organized. My family saw an overcontrolling agenda, no flexibility, and a lot less fun.

At some point in my journey, once I admitted my struggle with perfectionism was real, I knew I had to learn more about my addiction. For starters, what exactly is it? Merriam-Webster's dictionary defines perfectionism as a disposition to regard anything short of perfection as unacceptable. Drilling down a little more, perfection is defined as freedom from fault or defect, or an unsurpassable degree of accuracy or excellence. I don't know about you, but when I read that I see error-free excellence jump off the page.

Defining my addiction was only a start. Knowing I needed to get a deeper understanding of what it meant, I did what any good perfectionist would do—research! From the sources available, I relied most heavily on two, *Psychology Today* magazine, and the American Psychological Association website, both of which provided a wealth of original and curated material. So, what do these and other sources they directed me to have to say on the subject?

There are multiple instances where the experts identify two primary types of perfectionism, those being adaptive, and maladaptive. The *Harvard Business Review* refers to these as excellence-seeking perfectionism and failure-avoiding perfectionism, respectively.¹

Adaptive, or excellence-seeking perfectionism is where the high achievers live. An adaptive perfectionist is someone who sets exceedingly high standards and goals and works very hard to achieve them but recognizes that things may not go perfectly. Generally, an adaptive perfectionist is satisfied with their accomplishments, primarily because they understand the difference between perfection and excellence. Superstar athletes, performers and artists are examples of the types of people grouped into this category.

Take pop superstar Adele as an example. During the 2017 Grammy Awards, Adele performed a tribute to then-recently deceased superstar George Michael. Partway through the song Adele stopped, apologized to the audience, and asked if she could start over because she didn't think her performance was good enough to honor Michael.² This wasn't a case of being a failure or not being good enough; it was a case of performance satisfaction for a purpose, perfection required to honor perfection. Another excellence-seeking perfectionist is actress Michelle Pfeiffer, who was once quoted as saying "I'm a perfectionist, so I can drive myself, and other people, mad. At the same time, I think that's one of the reasons I'm successful. Because I really care about what I do. I really want it to be right, and I don't quit until I have to."³

Conversely, the maladaptive perfectionist can't differentiate between excellence and perfection. They set high standards and goals, but then beat themselves up with self-criticism and feelings of inadequacy when they don't achieve them. Or, if they do meet their standard, they are mad they didn't perform better or achieve more than they did. Maladaptive perfectionists are never satisfied, usually stressed out, overly critical of themselves and others, and don't hesitate to share the blame for failure. Some research has even indicated that maladaptive perfectionists tend toward depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder, social anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and even suicidal tendencies.⁴

While there isn't a complete consensus on these two classifications, there is general agreement that perfectionism can be broken down into three basic forms identified by Thomas Curran and Andrew Hill in their 2019 paper published in the American Psychological Association Bulletin. These three forms, which they call the multidimensional perfectionism scale, are self-oriented perfectionism, other-oriented perfectionism, and socially-prescribed perfectionism.⁵

Self-oriented perfectionism, like it sounds, is focused on the individual perfectionist and our desire to be perfect. This is the form where we perfectionists set unrealistically high standards for ourselves, think we can't fail because everything depends on us, and believe that being perfect will earn us the credibility and respect we don't think we've earned. Unfortunately, this form of perfectionism is linked to higher levels of depression and anxiety and can contribute to a variety of eating disorders.

Other-oriented perfectionism is when the perfectionist imposes their standards on others, expecting them to achieve the same unreasonable standards the perfectionist sets for themselves. While it may seem the others would be the ones feeling anxious, the perfectionist experiences anxiety as well, worrying about how the others will perform, and if that performance will meet expectations. Perfectionists may also find it challenging to form meaningful relationships and friendships with other people due to imposing unreasonable standards.

Socially-prescribed perfectionism is somewhat of a blend, in that it is essentially other-oriented perfectionism in reverse. In this case, the perfectionist believes others expect them to be perfect, and will only like and respect them if they are. Often, we perfectionists don't think we can live up to the standard set because our feelings of inadequacy tell us we aren't good enough.

These experts and resources have provided me with invaluable insights into myself and my behaviors. Interestingly I find all three forms of perfectionism in myself, at different degrees of

affliction, but in all three nonetheless. On a more revealing note, at least to me, I laid out the basic chapters of this book and their intent before I finished all my research. Only as I began writing in earnest did I realize I had organized the first three chapters about the making of the addict in exact alignment with the three forms of perfectionism they described.

While an understanding of the clinical, scientific, or expert information about perfectionism has value, this book is based on my personal experience and observations (and of course research as any good perfectionist would mandate), and delivered from a non-clinical perspective. I'm not a therapist, a counselor, a psychologist, or an addiction specialist. I'm just a regular guy trying to understand himself so he can make his way in the world, perhaps like you.

***Perfectionism is a powerful drug,
and once it gets a grip on you, it
can be difficult to break free.***

Along the way I've come to understand no matter who or what drives us to perfectionism, the earlier we begin the pursuit and the harder we pursue it, the

stronger our addiction becomes. Perfectionism is a powerful drug, and once it gets a grip on you, it can be difficult to break free. We strive for perfection until reality sets in, the paradox is revealed, and we expose the damage the pursuit of perfection delivers into our lives. Only then can we break the grip, or at least loosen it so we can move on and reclaim the lives we deserve.

I am grateful you decided to join me on this journey through three stages of perfectionism; ways we develop our addiction to perfection, reflecting on how perfectionism affects our lives, and finally, understanding a path to "recovery" from perfectionism. It's my hope that if you see some of yourself in me, you will overcome your addiction before it breaks you. It took writing this book for me to do it.

Part 1: Perfection—The Making of the Addict

Chapter 1: I Know I Can Do Better

I always feel that whatever I do, I could do better. I suppose it is perfectionism.

— Rowan Atkinson

Self-imposed perfectionistic tendencies come from a burning internal desire to excel at what we do. The experts call this self-oriented perfection, but I saw it as wanting to do my best. I had one problem, though—it never was. No matter how well I did, I always thought I could have done better. I was never good enough for me.

The earliest memories I have of this feeling of inadequacy go back to little league baseball. I don't remember the exact year, but it was the first season I played in the *majors*, which meant moving up from the small field to the full-size baseball diamond. I made some all-star teams in the *minors* because of my consistently good results, so many in the league had fairly high expectations for my move up.

I set the stage with my first at-bat in the first game of the season. Yep, jacked that pellet out of the park over the right-center field fence. I took my victory trot around the bases, racked up a slew of high fives as I crossed home plate, and, along with my teammates, visualized the huge year I was going to have. Looking back, I have no idea if I had a huge year or not.

I can't remember if I even made the all-star team. In fact, the entire season is lost to me except for two things: that first at-bat home run, and the fact that it was the only one I hit during the entire season. Nothing else mattered at that point because my failure to hit any more home runs defined the whole season as a failure, which of course meant I was a failure. Sure, I played ball for several more years—little league, winter league, high school JV—but it ended there. My childhood dream of playing in the big leagues was dead, mostly because I didn't believe I was good enough anymore after that *horrible* season.

I didn't realize it at the time, but this would be the start of a lifetime struggle with feelings of inadequacy. My experience in scouting is another example. I was active in scouting throughout my youth and worked hard to earn the highest rank at each level: Bear Cub in Cub Scouts; Arrow of Light in Webelos (our den was the first one in the history of the Catalina Council to have every boy in the den earn the Arrow of Light); and finally, Eagle Scout in Boy Scouts. Perfection achieved, right?

I thought so then, but as time progressed, I viewed my accomplishment differently. Scouts were earning their Eagle rank more quickly than I had. I persevered long after many of my friends had given up, receiving my Eagle at nearly seventeen years old, but I read in the quarterly newsletter from the National Eagle Scout Association about scouts as young as 13 achieving Eagle.

My collection of merit badges was a source of pride; I earned 23 of them, more than the 21 required for the rank. That is until reading about a younger scout who had earned all 135 merit badges in existence at that time. Suddenly, my 23 was woefully inadequate. Making matters worse, I never earned a Palm, which is recognition for staying active and earning merit badges after earning Eagle Scout. My failure to earn any Palms became another source of disappointment, especially when considering the young scout who earned all the merit badges also qualified for the maximum number of Palms possible.

Here's the scoop on the negative situation I had manifested. The average age scouts reached Eagle over the last decade was steady at 17 years and three to four months old. As of early 2019, 420 scouts in history have earned every merit badge available. That's less than 0.0004% of all scouts. Finally, less than 1% of Scouts ever earn a Palm.⁶ Eagle Scout is an amazing accomplishment, but I came to believe I wasn't a good enough Eagle Scout. Only in my mind could the need to be perfect tarnish such a wonderful accomplishment.

Remember my baseball experience? I didn't mention the reason it ended with the JV team in high school. I got cut from the varsity team at tryouts my junior year. I had a pretty mediocre tryout, so I probably deserved to be cut. I recall hitting two home runs, both off the coach, then him telling me the reason he was cutting me was that I couldn't hit. Kind of ironic, but true. I went out for the track team after that. To clarify, I was 5'-10" tall, a solid 225 lbs., and not so fast. But I was strong, and they had events where all you had to do was throw stuff far. Best of all, track was a no-cut sport!

I picked up the shot put and discus quickly, with discus becoming my favorite. With hard work, I improved and won a few meets. My senior year the chase was on for the school record, and by the end of the season, I threw my personal lifetime best, broke the school record, and qualified for the state championship meet. This may sound exciting, but I'm guessing you know where it's going. I threw the best I could at the state meet but fell short of qualifying for the finals. It didn't matter that I had broken the school record and qualified for the state championships after two seasons in the sport. What did matter was that it was one more thing at which I wasn't good enough.

For perfectionists, our thinking fuels our need for perfection, and we intentionally place ourselves into the *perfect* spiral. When we fail, we become depressed, angry, and embarrassed. Because we must not fail, we strive harder for perfection, making us more depressed, angry, and embarrassed when we *do* fail. So, what do we do? We ratchet up the effort level even more, and well, you get the picture. Surely this can't be our fault, can it? We tried so hard and did so well; there must be

For perfectionists, our thinking fuels our need for perfection, and we intentionally place ourselves into the 'perfect' spiral.

someone or something else to blame. Nope.

The perfectionist just sees themselves as inadequate. Julia Cameron, an artist and author of *The Artists Way*, *The Prosperous Heart: Creating a Life of "Enough"*, and over 30 other books, captured it this way: "Perfectionism is not a quest for the best. It is a pursuit of the worst in ourselves, the part that tells us that nothing we do will ever be good enough—that we should try again."

That's a big problem. We've spiraled ourselves into a point of not being able to tell the difference between failing and being a failure. To make up for our shortcomings, we often have to prove our worth in other ways. Brené Brown is a University of Houston professor, TEDx speaker, and author of *The Gifts of Imperfection*, as well as several other books on perfection, shame, and vulnerability. She contends perfection is not about healthy achievement, growth, or self-improvement, but is about it being a shield, and a tool for gaining the approval and acceptance of others.

I can vouch for Brené's thoughts from my personal experience. My feelings of inadequacy didn't end with scouting and high school sports; they followed me into adulthood and my career. I won't bore you with every step of my career, but there are highlights demonstrating my continuing spiral into inadequacy and failure.

In nearly 35 years of experience, I'm on my 11th employer. A few stops lasted six to seven years each so you can do the math on the rest. Some people might call that job-hopping, but I called it climbing the career ladder. After leaving my first employer, I worked for four different consulting engineering firms in seven years. Along the way, I had a five-month stop at one, but believed my departure from that job was not my fault, and I worked hard to prove that.

Two other firms went out of business shortly after my 15- to 18-month tenures with them ended. When offered the job at the fourth consulting firm, I asked if they were sure they wanted to hire me because I had put two of the previous firms out of business. It was offered as humor, but you and I both know there was some serious thought behind it of *did I really have anything to do with those firms going out of business?*

At age 40, I became Director of Transportation for the 38th largest city in the country at the time, earning a comfortable six figures. It was a job I earned and loved, but after a few years, I made the move to a similar opportunity in a neighboring city, where I happened to live. I decided the new position would be more challenging and prestigious because an airport was added to my responsibilities, and it allowed me to serve my community.

My tenure there lasted just over four months, with my dismissal coming the week between Christmas and New Year's. It was unexpected, and I was furious because I felt it was completely unwarranted. Fortunately, I landed in a great place with a successful consulting firm, but that contract came to an end nearly seven years later, launching another cycle through a revolving door of three different employers in five years. The first two of those ended when conditions or superiors changed, so those really couldn't be my fault either. Do you see the pattern? I couldn't stay in a stable situation too long for fear of eventually being found out, so I regularly moved into positions that didn't work out. Of course, when they didn't work out, it wasn't my fault, right?

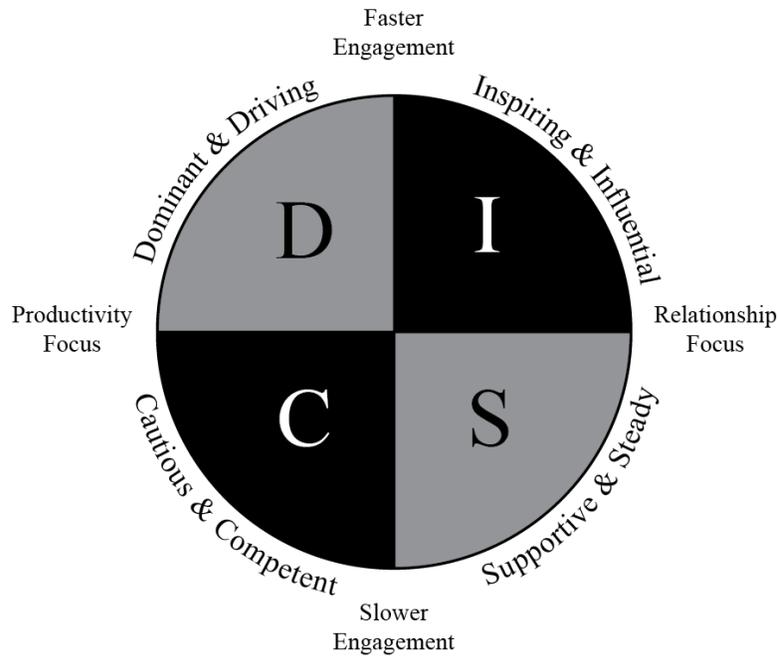
I thought I wasn't a good enough employee, an imposter in their midst, so I made up for it by collecting credentials and recognition. I became a registered professional engineer in three states, won several project and personal awards, and was elected national president of a professional association full of high-caliber people. My favorite accomplishment was my collection of numerous professional certifications and designations. I was proud of what I had

become—Jeffrey A. Kramer, PE, PWLF, CPM, CCM, TCS, CJP, CHBC. Maybe now I was finally good enough.

In reviewing that signature line, my name has 14 letters in it, but my credentials have 22 letters in them—more letters in my credentials than in my name. There were so many I had to drop some to get down to 12 credential letters so they fit on my business card. I was proud of the collection and thought if I had all those certifications from credential-issuing organizations, people would respect me, and I would appear good enough. But it had little impact. I merely felt more inadequate because now I had all these credentials to live up to, yet knew I probably wouldn't.

What does my ancient history have to do with anything? It's the foundation of my addiction. Throughout my life, I chased perfection because I never thought I was good enough. I knew I could do better and was addicted to achieving the ideal. For many perfectionists, this is the way we're built. This internal wiring, or behavioral tendency if you will, often draws perfectionist-oriented people into career fields where mistakes are costly, so being perfect is seen as an asset. Think engineers, architects, accountants, surgeons, and so on. If you are familiar with the DISC model of human behavior, we are the Cs.

DISC is a behavior model developed in the 1920s by Dr William Moulton Marston, who later went on to contribute to the invention of the lie detector, and also to create the character Wonder Woman. The DISC model predicts a person's normal behavior tendencies based on two traits; the speed at which they engage with others, and whether they tend to focus on productivity or relationships. Depending on the blend of traits, Marston described the styles as Dominant and Driving (D), Inspiring and Interactive (I), Supportive and Steady (S), or Cautious and Competent (C).



Since many perfectionists fall into the C behavioral style, let's focus on that briefly. Approximately 25% of the population falls into the type C personality category. This personality type is generally slower to engage with others and tends to think instead of feel. We like consistency, quality and excellence, doing things properly, and we value logic, credibility, intellect, stability, and understanding why. We also tend to be pessimistic (although we see it as being realistic), overly organized, and overly analytical.⁷ If you've ever heard the phrase *analysis paralysis*, that's a C type personality.

Being a C isn't a bad place to be. Famous people who share this perfectionist tendency include Bill Gates, Albert Einstein, and Steve Jobs (during his first stint at Apple). Michael Jackson, the musical genius behind *Thriller*, *Billie Jean*, *Beat It*, and dozens of other chart-topping hits, is another good example of a C type personality. During a 1993 interview with Oprah Winfrey, Jackson said, "I'm never pleased with anything, I'm a perfectionist, it's part of who I am."

He even admitted to crying after doing the moonwalk for the first time on the Motown 25th anniversary special, not because he was happy with performing a move no one had ever done

before, but because he was unhappy with how it had gone.⁸ Imagine, the person many consider the greatest entertainer of his time pulls off a new, now-iconic dance move, and he wasn't satisfied. Music producer Akon later noted that if he hadn't pushed Jackson to release his music, he might never have put out a song.⁹ Numerous experts suspect Jackson's ultra-perfectionism contributed to the sleep deprivation and depression issues that ultimately led to his 2009 death from heart failure caused by a medication overdose.

Winston Churchill nailed it for this personality type when he stated, "The maxim 'nothing but perfection' may be spelled 'paralysis.'"¹⁰ Paralysis is the perfect description, pun intended. Churchill probably should have said we are paralyzed by fear. The fear of failing and therefore, being viewed less favorably in some way, and the fear of being embarrassed or being found out to be an imposter are common.

My biggest fear is whatever I do or create will not be good enough, meaning I am not good enough, thus making me a complete failure, again. I can't count the number of things that sit unfinished or never got started, because of this paralysis. Someone only needs to look around my yard, garage, house, office, or even on my hard drive for proof. Dozens of ideas and plans were laid to rest by fear of failure over not being good enough. Writing this book may be one of the biggest. Actually, it didn't start out as this book.

In late September 2013, I was attending the 25th American Academy of Certified Public Managers[®] conference in Boise, Idaho. While there, my wife, Sharon, and I went out to dinner with my boss. Joining us were my friend, Phillip, and his wife, Susan. Phil, who was keynoting the conference, is an accomplished executive, a highly sought-after speaker, and an author with several books to his credit.

During conversation, I announced I was writing a book and asked Phil if he would read it and consider writing the foreword or an endorsement. At the time, I was planning a personal growth book, roughly titled *The Keys to Unlocking Your Peak Performance*. I created a directory folder and document file for it on my computer, but that's as far as it got. I never started writing because I was afraid no one would want to read it. After all, what had I ever done?

Eventually, the idea morphed into a leadership book, which included the same beginning and ending as the other concept. I had been presenting on the topic for that book, and had ideas for a coaching program as well. I even recorded 14 videos and created handouts for the program. But I was afraid it wouldn't be good enough, so neither the book nor the program has seen the light of day. The leadership book was important to me, though, so I needed to conquer my fear.

This is around the time my perfection addiction was exposed, and I began working toward overcoming it. Facing my perfectionism head-on was the only way I could move forward with everything I wanted to accomplish, including the leadership book and program. That's when I realized I had to write this book before I could be free to do anything else. I committed to contributing the finances, and to a completion deadline, but, even then, the introduction and this first chapter took me five months to write and submit to editorial review. I was so afraid it would suck that I was paralyzed and couldn't get started.

For me, it's been a lifetime of paralysis from the fear I wouldn't be good enough. Can you relate? Thinking you can do better no matter what it is or how well you've done is debilitating. You've had a glimpse of how much life I've lost by standing still because I was afraid to step forward. How much life have you lost to thinking you weren't good enough and could do better?

Before you move on to the next chapter, stop and think seriously about that question. Grab a piece of paper and jot down all the times you didn't do something because you were afraid you

weren't good enough. Then list everything you did to hide those imperfections. How does your list look? Reflect on how the items you listed have held you back. It's a bit of an *ouch* moment, isn't it?

If only we had gotten some help or encouragement along the way from parents, teachers, a coach, or a boss.