

a beautiful
mess

a perfectionist's journey through self-care

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Conversant Media Group



Chapter 3 Culture's Con

Every six months a group of my girlfriends and I gather to laugh, gawk, scream, and make complete fools of ourselves. Each Monday night for eight weeks they come over with appetizers and desserts so we can yell at the television. What brings about this mayhem? *The Bachelor*. The most dramatic season ever. For 14 seasons, I have watched almost every couple “fall in love” and then a short matter of months later, break up on the cover of *People* magazine. My friends and I make judgments about the Bachelor or Bachelorette and the candidates vying for their love. Then we experience the emotional highs and lows when they don’t couple up as we hope they would. We’re excited when our favorite

reject is invited to be back on the show for another season. It's absurd. It's ridiculous. And yet I keep watching.

I do not watch this circus because I believe that two people will fall in love this time. I tune in to watch this social experiment gone wrong because the "chosen one" always thinks they are the exception to the rule and the opiate masses on the show are more caught up in getting the rose than the actual Bachelor/ette themselves.

Without fail, manipulative editing casts characters, warps words, and leads us down the Prince Charming path whether the bachelor shows up as a doctor, professional athlete, or single dad. We're all waiting for "it" to happen. What is "it"? From an early age this generation of women have been duped by a group of pretty princesses. I grew up before I could buy the sweatshirt with all of the princesses on it, but needless to say, I was on the edge of my seat in second grade watching Ariel trade in her tail for legs in order to get her prince. I wanted Cinderella to have her shot at trying on the glass slipper and I didn't want Jasmine to find out that Aladdin really wasn't a prince.

My mother toiled away every Halloween so I could have the most beautiful costumes, and each year I was transformed into another princess. I grew up loving everything Disney, and still do. When I moved to Southern California, one of the first things I did was go to Disneyland—every month. I am a huge fan of Walt Disney's creativity and passion. Fast forward to the present day and the princesses have joined together in an exclusive girls-only club waiting for their castles and princes, trying to escape their dysfunctional families and dreaming of happily ever after...eternally stuck in the same cycles.

It is nearly impossible to grow up in American culture without Disney's influence. Movies, television, vacations, and clothing all scream for our attention and our wallets. There

is one school system that has spoken out about it—The Waldorf Schools (which are private schools all over the world) limit children's exposure to media and ban advertisements and slogans on clothing. They even limit language about Disney at school. I heard about this at an eating disorder conference where the speaker was talking about sending her daughters there. She said that she was a little weirded out and asked them, "What do you have against Disney?" The answer was that Disney wasn't the problem, but rather their focus was letting kids' imaginations develop without the Disney-approved wish list: frilly dresses, princess mentality, white horses, rescuing, etc. And that's just the list for the girls. The "fairest of them all" idea is carried through into adulthood where shows like the Bachelor/ette still breed these stereotypes. Only now it is tuxes, fancy cars and dates (and roses) that feed our individualism, escapism, entitlement, and perfectionist tendencies. Maybe the Waldorf Schools are on to something.

Even if you didn't buy the princess bit, the other alternative was the tomboy. From the womb, there are boxes for all of us to fit into and corresponding performance reviews to measure how successful we are at filling them. The tomboys still have certain clothing, stereotypes and batting averages to live up to. There is an "it" to chase no matter who you are. Our culture chases after perfection and sadly always has. The lines have blurred between fantasy and reality when we think the perfectionist life is even possible.

Even if you do not dream of helicopter rides and private serenades by the latest top 40 artist, the American dream is still there: The wild 20s and college years, followed by meeting the man of your dreams. Then after a few years of "us time," and chasing the career, it's time to buy the house. Nothing absurd, but it has to have enough space for the clothes, shoes, and stainless steel appliances. The kids, 2.3 to

be exact, come next and then the dog, retirement and college savings, vacations, and when the kids go back to school, you can volunteer at church and in the classroom. All with manicured nails, highlighted hair, well-behaved kids and a clean house. It's perfect. It might sound like a lot of people you know, or even yourself.

My point is not that these things are wrong, but the commas between each life event hold a lot more importance than we realize. What happens in between are the things that we don't want anyone to see. The commas are what don't sell magazines unless they turn into success stories. They are the debt acquired in college that we're still trying to pay off; the boyfriend who you thought was "the one," but then left you for your best friend; the soul mate who hasn't shown up yet, making the dream scenario entirely unattainable; the miscarriage that definitely was not part of the plan; it's the messy closets, the sick kids, the foreclosed house. It's the weight gained, the failed diet, the addictions behind closed curtains. The broken marriages and families, the cancer... it's the things we're never told will happen to us because we never planned for our lives to be like this. We expect perfection because that is what our culture sells, all wrapped up with a pretty bow.

The perfectionist movement started as soon as the Mayflower spied land. Our country was founded on the idea that we could do it better. America held God's blessing and the Puritan values that England forced out. In her book, *Be Happy Without Being Perfect*, Dr. Anita Domar gives a fantastic historical rundown from the Mayflower to the first housewives book of the 1800s, followed by the suffrage movement that divided women into camps of "the kitchen or the world." In World War II women were forced to work, but the 50s sent them back to the kitchen to wear high heels and perform for their veteran husbands. I have my grandmother's

cookbooks from this time period and they are full of advice on housekeeping, what to serve at dinner parties and appropriate etiquette.

The 60s and 70s birthed the women's liberation movement and vocal protests. Shortly after followed the shoulder pad—tie wearing working women of the 80s trying to do it all well: Be the housewife from the 50s cooking and cleaning and caring for the kids, while also being independent and working like her 70s sisters. All the while, still maintaining herself, her sanity and her family. The latchkey kids of the 70s became the helicopter parents of the 90s and early 2000s and while still doing everything their mothers did in the 80s, they now had to put their kids on a pedestal. These privileged kids were placed in gymnastics, French class, piano lessons, swimming lessons, soccer camp, and church youth group, and they couldn't even walk yet! The result is today's generation of young women and men who think they *can* and *have* to perform perfectly to gain acceptance and love, but they're tired. I'm exhausted just writing about it.

The illusion of controlling one's destiny is overwhelming. The guilt and repercussions of failure due to not being able to control one's life are huge for someone, like me, who grew up in this type of culture. It's no wonder eating disorders are in the millions and depression is one of the most common diagnoses. Control is the only way out of this insanity, so the Western culture chooses food or drugs, legal or not, to find stability and *okayness*. But a foundation built from such addictive behaviors will never bring satisfaction for very long.

The problem is that from an early age we are taught two things: consumerism and that we're not okay just as we are. As infants when we cry our parents seek to give us what we want, whether it is food, a nap, or a clean behind. As we grow, the world of advertising—which now spans every medium

from T.V. and Internet to radio and cell phones—promises new toys, gadgets, and food that will make our lives better. This never changes. The toys just get bigger and more expensive. Whenever we get one it isn't long before we want the next “thing” that promises to bring ease and glamour to our already full closets and countertops. It is estimated that the average American living in a city sees 4,000 advertisements a day.¹ Being told we need something else to complete us all day long, every day, consciously or not, keeps perfectionists in a constant state of feeling overwhelmed and like they have failed even before they have gotten out of bed.

These ads can also turn into ideals based on unrealistic people. People like Martha Stewart and Angelina Jolie don't make our lives easier either. Celebrity culture—the national obsession—teaches us how to (and that we need to) throw the perfect party, adopt kids from all over the world, get a little dog and serve an organic meal by 5:30pm—and do it all in an environmentally-friendly manner. What we do not see are the armies of people helping these two women and all the other celebrities on magazine covers pulling off their perfect lives. Martha has an empire of employees at her beck and call and Angelina has a nanny for each kid. But the illusion remains—and so we try, and we're still not okay.

The tension of trying to *buy* our need to feel okay is insane. The same five-dollar magazine that offers the cabbage soup diet (lose 10lbs in 2 weeks) also outlines how to bake the perfect chocolate cupcakes. No matter who you are, there is a solution, but it won't last long. Magazines like *Real Simple* demonstrate an organized and sane way of life that looks really simple only until you look at the cost. Gadgets and furniture offer the latest and greatest colors, functions and comfort to make your life that much easier. It's all built on the presumption that what we have and who we are is not good enough.

Perfectionism knows no bounds. It spills from the pages of consumerism and infiltrates our education. In high schools across America, 4.0 GPAs aren't good enough, so teens graduate with 4.6s. You can keep acquiring "friends" on Facebook because 336 aren't enough to manage. And the worst part is that the church has completely bought into all of it. One night of volunteering isn't enough, so women sign up for more. Church nursery, choir, women's bible study, mentor a junior higher, bake cookies for the fundraiser, and donate goods to the yard sale all in the same week. Don't forget your daily checklist of scripture reading and journaling. Gleaming faces shine up at onlookers from glossy covers of books promising the life you've always wanted and God's purposes for you. Then you can also buy the matching t-shirt, mug, and calendar at the church bookstore. So the question becomes how are we supposed to live our lives differently and with purpose if everything modeled to us looks exactly the same?

We have to take a long, hard look at how we grew up and the culture we live in now, even within our churches. Life doesn't happen in a vacuum. All sorts of things influence our families, our communities, and us. We live in an amazing country with freedoms many people only dream about. The fact that as a woman I can vote and write a book are privileges I do not take lightly. The U.S. government and its citizens give out more aid than any other country, and we can express our opinions, positive or negative, as much as we want. But it is naïve to think our culture is "the best" or that we don't have anything to examine. The perfectionist roots that our foremothers and fathers have left us are in serious need of examination. This perfectionist cycle of life is leaving a lot of women (and men) tired, burnt out, and overwhelmed. People are trying so hard that they

then feel guilty, so they try harder. It's craziness. The lack of satisfaction and *okayness* is alarming.

During the period of history when Jesus entered the scene, He became a cultural change agent. He didn't harp on the people in the crowds or the guys who cut through the roof to save their friend. He talked to (and yelled at) the religious leaders of the day. The Pharisees were so hell bent on the legalism of the law that they had stopped tasting life and were manipulating others into following their black and white thinking too. Jesus ate, rested, prayed, talked to the poor, healed, and partied; for Pete's sake, His first miracle was turning water into wine so the party could go on!

Jesus' main concern was not what's law and what's not, but rather, whether or not people were loving their neighbors as themselves. But what happens when we do not know how to love ourselves? How can we love our neighbors? Perfectionists feel guilty a lot; always trying to measure up and help their neighbors, but it's not help if we're doing it out of guilt. That's called penance. It's overcompensation for a guilt that Jesus has already taken care of and He desperately wants us to realize that.

We will always have needs, but the "not good enough" feeling perfectionists struggle with on a daily basis is overwhelming and our culture is constantly feeding the insecurities. I meet with women regularly and at some point in the conversation, they will start talking about how good God is and ultimately how they are not. They do not say this outright, but it's almost this masochistic thing of leaving the "self" out of it. I'm sometimes left wondering who is living their life then? To God be the glory? Not really.

God sent the Holy Spirit in Acts so that we could be the Lord's hands and feet. In I Corinthians 12, Paul talks about the body being many parts, but we're all trying to be the foot in these scenarios of perfection. We're all chasing

the same mold. We are not taught to discover our own passions and gifts because the church and popular culture have told us what those should be. Time and time again Jesus is empowering women in the Bible to be present in their bodies in order to discover their God-given passions. He heals a bleeding woman's body and calls her daughter, which also heals her soul. He tells a woman who is about to be stoned to go and sin no more, giving her the opportunity to choose not to sin, a freedom she'd never known. Their lives were spent doing what their culture told them to do. Jesus wanted women to live their lives in their good bodies. He did not ignore them or abuse them. And He wants that for you and I as well.

Part of the problem is the word "flesh." I cringe even writing it. It's not a nice word; it might as well be flab. But it doesn't mean our bodies are bad. Jesus came to us in a body. He redeemed the human error that started in the Garden of Eden and redeemed the "flesh" by rising from the dead in *a human body*. That doesn't mean there will be no sickness or pain in life, but it does mean that we can find Jesus in the mess of it all and seek peace. Until we make peace with our flesh and our flab, healing cannot happen.

Cissy Brady Rogers speaks on disembodiment—the idea that we are so disconnected from ourselves that when we look at our bodies and our lives we see them as something to fix; an object outside of ourselves in need of constant judgment. If our bodies can't get on board, then how will the rest of our selves fall in line? We're so consumed with looking good and being good that our doing good stems from our disembodiment. It is done for affirmation and attention and not because our souls told us that we were good at something and we should go do it.

I work in an office that supervises undergraduate students working with the local community. We are on the front

lines of a plethora of social justice issues and conversations on campus. The students who come to work with us are some of the brightest I have ever met; however, working with these students, I noticed a phenomenon of which Cori's story is a perfect example:

Cori was an energetic go-getter who had a passion to influence and educate people about inner-city life. She loved downtown and couldn't wait to engage in upbeat dialogue about her views. She had a vivacious spirit and an overwhelming sense that the world is not as it should be. This drive led her to want to change the world. After graduation, she quickly got a job helping at-risk youth. She planned trips across the world to educate herself and learn more about the issues that were affecting the people she was supposed to care about most. She was by all means poised for success. But the job quickly unraveled and the trip was a financial disaster.

Cori came running into my office declaring her life was over and demanded that I tell her what to do because she was out of ideas and out of money. After asking a lot of questions, I told her to take a look at the 12-steps and that it would be hard, but worth it. Throughout the journey of the following nine months, Cori learned that it was her perfectionism and guilt that drove her to want to help in the inner-city. What she thought was selfless love for others was, in reality, a turning away from her roots. This turning was born out of a deep hatred of the privilege she was born into. She was disconnected from her passion, her roots, and her body. She started to project this disconnection onto the people she loved the most and it turned into unhealthy anger.

She didn't want to pursue her hobbies of dancing and art because she felt guilty taking time for herself, especially after receiving such an expensive college education. But there she was, falling apart, smoking and sleeping around to feel her body, going from job to job because she didn't feel good

enough. Her anger at the world and at God gave her a great drive and occupied so much of her mind that she didn't want to allow herself time and space to heal. Cori wanted people to see her "doing good" so that she felt accepted and worthy. Her competitive nature would rear its head in jealousy at other women who were a few steps ahead of her due to her intense feelings of unworthiness. She needed to learn that social justice isn't justice if we are treating ourselves unjustly. That defeats the purpose. She needed recovery before this false self completely overtook her.

Generation Y (aka Millennials) is a group of young people who care deeply and feel an overwhelming sense of responsibility for the injustices they see around them. They want to save the world that they, more than any other generation, are connected to through technology and travel. Social justice used to be a word reserved for card-carrying members of Greenpeace, but now it is very fashionable—literally. There was a switch on college campuses as the Gen Xers graduated and colleges became more and more aware of this burden so many of the students carry.

As I talked to administrators, one common characteristic was this sense of perfectionism and the desire to play a "savior" role. Like Cori, so many of them wanted to sacrifice their own selves for the sake of the cause. Unfortunately though, they would end up defeated because they couldn't do it by themselves. In working at a college, I see this time and time again. It is also the story of a segment of women of all ages in Western culture, not just the Millennials. The invitation has become "go save the world" or at least change it. Through our culture's technology, media and celebrity, people are more connected to the world than ever before; and as a result, more disconnected than ever from their true selves.

Cori is now one of the most impassioned and bold women I know. She never stopped loving social justice work,

but now it is connected to her inner person and her healthy anger. She found that her own liberation is bound up with those around her. And as she is free to be herself, she subconsciously liberates those around her into freedom as well. It's a symbiotic relationship. She is working on a Master's Degree in Anthropology to continue on her journey of knowledge not only for others, but also for herself. She learned to sit at the feet of Jesus even when that seemed like the most illogical thing to do.

In the original story of sitting at the feet of Jesus, the story of Mary and Martha, they are actually running a mission of hospitality. Commentaries point out that Martha was probably a widow and the responsibility of maintaining income and livelihood fell to her. This story is about so much more than dinner. Martha wants to keep up the holy mission that she feels she is called to. But Jesus says that Mary is right to be taking a break: "She is sitting with me." If we don't sit with Jesus, what good is the ministry? However, churches can't measure sitting. Discipleship is a lifelong pursuit, not a six-month life group. Even that word—disciple—gets a bad rap. It comes from the same root word as discipline.

We might hate that word, but perfectionists are so good at it. They run marathons (plural), they have blogs, they have the appearance of an orderly home or room, and a great job. All of this and, as a Duke study recently pointed out, they make it look *effortless*.² Yes, I did all of this and it took no effort at all; it's expected of me. Don't think so? Try complimenting a perfectionist. She will say, "Oh this old shirt? I got it on clearance at Target years ago." Or, "This recipe is so easy. I will just go write it down for you." I know because I do it, and it takes a lot of discipline for me not to. For me, sometimes I have to force myself to shut up and simply say, "Thank you." It's hard, but the other way is torture because

by not accepting the compliment or the love, the hunger for love is never met. And the Martha Stewart fantasies flourish.

Perfectionists never celebrate the accomplishment of their goals because when they do, they think, “Well, of course, I was supposed to do that.” And without an ounce of self-recognition (it was nothing; it was all God; it was all Jane’s doing), it’s off to the next thing. Children see this, our friends and families see it, and the false expectations are passed on. The comparison and competition get kicked into high gear—if she can do it, so can I. Or the thought of, “Wow, she did that so well, I can never try that because I don’t want to be compared to her; what if I don’t measure up?”

To make matters worse, we only communicate through single sentences now, preventing anyone from seeing the full picture. Updates on Facebook and Twitter or short blog posts become the portals into our friends’ lives. While these little blurbs can be informative and interesting, it’s never the whole picture or person and it’s very one-sided.

So often I try calling people only to get voicemails. One of my friends called our mutual friend Kelsey when she spotted her, just across the street. My friend watched as Kelsey picked up the phone looked at it and put it back in her purse, effectively watching her call be rejected in real time. We can now pick and choose who we want to talk to, when, and how we want to communicate. Somehow this way of life is supposed to be more convenient, but with all of these different avenues of communication, I believe it’s just another thing to perfect. “Texting is just easier,” I hear all the time, but it is absent of intimate relationship and keeps us trapped in our cycles. There is a lack of awareness when our lives are limited to 140 characters. It allows us to control how good our lives look and “if everything looks good, it must be good.”³

Stress, guilt, and failure are all very familiar territories to a perfectionist. This is what makes self-care so hard—if I’m

not doing everything I'm "supposed" to do I feel stressed, guilty and like I've failed, but those are the same feelings I have, even when I'm doing everything right.

When I hold workshops and retreats, women always say, "Oh I wish I could do this more often." The thing is they can, but they are choosing not to. The culture has made it very easy to choose the "it." The "it" is the predictable life and we know how to manage the burnout and stress while waiting for Prince Charming, a new refrigerator, or for the weekend to come. It's controllable to an extent and keeps us in a pattern of perfecting everything. But to choose to let that control go—to enjoy a walk or a bath or art journaling instead of our 10-minute mile or our quick shower or the devotional checklist—and the guilt kicks in. That is the black and white life that Jesus railed against. Jesus was so aware of who He was that He knew when He needed to run and when to walk. He knew when to yell and He knew when to gently call someone daughter. He knew when He needed to be with His close followers of women and men and when to be in a large crowd. He knew how to be present and did not wait for what was next. He knew Himself.

We are invited into that same self awareness, but it does take discipline. Yes, that ugly word. If we take the word and redeem it though, it becomes a whole new perspective on life. Living with diets, workouts, the media, being in style, technology, school, kids, families is hard—it all takes discipline—and in all of it we are invited to sit at the feet of Jesus. We are asked to check our expectations at the door. Goals are great, but not if we put ourselves on a cross in the process. Jesus already did that. Our culture has some amazing resources but we need to choose them, not have them choose us. We have voices and opinions, but with everyone scrambling to share their voice, opinion and blog, we can't even hear ourselves.

We need to realize our own *okayness*. I don't mean this in the sense of someone asking, "How are you doing?" And a pat response, "Oh I'm okay (*but ask me how I'm really doing because I'm really not*)." I mean this in the sense of "I'm *really* okay. I accept and love who God created me to be." We're not given permission as perfectionists to be in that space—there is always something to be "not okay" with, something to be working on. The permission to allow yourself to be okay comes with awareness.

The faking and pretending are halted; they do not magically disappear. *Okay* does not mean that we're super-fantastic-I'm-always-happy and have a clean house or I need Prozac because I spent a week in sweatpants. I am not trying to undermine the much-needed doctor prescribed drugs that have helped many people in this country. But when commercials lead us to believe that we need them like we need a new refrigerator, something has gone terribly wrong. Commercials should not be what diagnose us, the doctors and communities that come alongside us should be helping us name our struggles, understanding that life is never pain free. There is a sense in Western society that we should live lives with assurance that pain is abnormal, but that concept is what is wrong. Acquiring all of the latest gadgets from Williams-Sonoma nor any prescription medication can take away the disappointment, mistakes, and failures we experience in the kitchen and as human beings. We need to learn to be okay in the mess.

For starters, we need to get mad at being duped. We're not princesses, we're women. We are smart, intuitive, and wise. We have a voice. We will fail, but it's okay because we gave ourselves permission to do so. We're choosing to be okay. We don't need the night cream or the latest bra with angel wings because we're okay. We need to practice self-care, to be able to sit at the feet of Jesus because that is where

He wants us. It is only there that we can find out how to love God, our families, our neighbors, and ourselves.

Exploration

Letter to younger self

Find a picture of yourself in elementary school. You know the one with a big bow on the side of your head. What would you say to her knowing what you know now? Draft a letter in your journal or even seal it and reopen it in a few months. This is a good practice to heal past hurts and get in touch with the little girl in all of us. The phrase *we are every age we ever were* stands out and sometimes we need to go back to being age five or nine or thirteen and communicate to that little girl... healing can happen anywhere.

Questions to ponder

- Do you consciously or unconsciously place unrealistic expectations on yourself because of societal pressures?
- As you think about the culture you grew up in and live in now, what are you at odds with? What have you accepted?
- What are the messages that inundate you on a daily basis?
- Does your community buy into the culture's messages? Do they make space to process what is going on around you without condemning it or you?
- Do you give yourself permission to feel okay? If not, how can you begin to do so?