

Montoliu: The flip side of perfection

Contributed by Raphael Montoliu
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I heard it said, a long time ago, that life in America was more stressful than in any other industrialized nation … Being a newly arrived immigrant at the time (I know immigrant is a very dirty word today, but I cannot avoid using it), I did not understand what that meant, as life here seemed rather easy, with many opportunities for success, and many rewards.

Thirty years later, and having lived for a significant amount of time in a total of three very different nations, I think I may have come to know the meaning of such stress.

Stress is a mental experience, that affects the body and the emotions, but that does not necessarily have to do with actual outer circumstances or events, rather it is often rooted in specific beliefs and perceptions. It is how we handle life that causes us to be stressed, rather than life itself, most of the time.

Life here seems to be handled with high expectations, standards of perfections that are not seen in too many other cultures, that are often deemed to be “substandard” by Americans. Even Europeans are looked upon with some disdain for having supposedly lower standards in some aspects of their lives. Some environmental causes are met with the comment: ”So you want us to live like Europeans?” as if Europeans still lived in the dark ages.

The flip side of this pursuit of materialistic happiness, which goes with the pursuit of superficial perfection, is stress, as nothing is ever good enough, and no one can ever be satisfied with what they have, they consistently want more, bigger, louder, brighter, faster. Even food has to be large, and as it gets bigger, shinier and more perfect, like plastic, it loses its content, with almost no nutrition.

So this plastic culture focuses almost entirely on appearances. Damn the content, worship the superficial. People eat perfect-looking empty or chemical food, they elect individuals who “look presidential” and are clueless or have no integrity or character, they watch mind-numbing movies and flashy news and entertainment, they live in huge houses made of cardboard, and they attempt to look and act as if they were still 20 in their 40s, with fake body parts whenever they can afford them.

Indeed the struggle to appear perfect also targets physical appearances and personal lives. People don’t just want perfect trappings; they want perfect lives, some according to Hallmark ideals in the domain of relationships. They also want perfect bodies, women still being generally pressured to strive to look like the 16-year-old anorexic models who fill the pages of popular magazines.

Happiness must also be perfect, and anyone who feels sadness or grief, or anything even slightly negative, better get over it quickly and according to some predetermined and orderly steps defined by the experts, or else it is concluded that there is something wrong with them and that they need psychotropic medications, which are given to the public by doctors like candy these days.

Normal anger is not tolerated, but violence is, and pervades society precisely because people are taught to bottle up their everyday anger and frustrations, to control their behaviors and suppress their feelings, until they go postal or psycho, or implode in depression. So while no one should ever express normal, rational anger or pain, everyone better have a gun and some medication, as fear and paranoia become rampant.

Children are not immune from a pressure to perform, to excel, and to compete madly, the latest being that toddlers can be taught to read. Perhaps they will be made to have read Shakespeare and Homer and do calculus by the age of two … after all, you can never induce a person to aim for the best too early, or so it is believed.

What is lost in this process of striving for superficial perfection and performance? Some American tourists made a comment, while visiting Venice, reputed to be one of the most romantic cities in the world … they said it wasn’t bad, but it needed a coat of paint. They were apparently oblivious to the soul of the place, and wanted it to look like Las Vegas.

Soul, heart, poetry, charm, substance, meaning, authenticity, these things are lost, in people as well as the outer environment, when outer perfection is sought with such neurotic determination. There is definitely a huge yet unconscious hunger for these attributes in America today, as can be seen in the current trend of

“distressed” furniture which people with so called disposable income and some sophistication like to acquire, looking for some traces of soul in their decor. Because this hunger is unconscious, the attempt to restore “soul” in everyday life is indeed feeble and superficial, and as everything else commercially exploited.

The poetic dimension of life, so crucial to the soul, that without it withers and dies, is severely lacking in this speedy plastic and concrete “perfect” American culture, so seemingly practical and materialistic yet without respect for actual matter, without much respect or love for land, water and air, and so fundamentally alien to nature, as can be witnessed when, traveling by air, perfectly straight lines and square angles are seen to define cities and impose their very odd, unnatural order on curvy, naturally wiggly hills and valleys.

What is also lost here, and the source of the most intense stress in the final analysis, is self-acceptance. High standards mean relentless self-criticism, each one of us being trained to be our very own “coach,” beating and whipping ourselves into guilt and ever greater demands to become better in all areas of our lives, not from natural growth and inner inspiration, as should happen given some care, trust, and natural time, but by trying to lift ourselves by our own bootstraps.

Mistakes are frowned upon and learning time and performances are condensed to the speed of light. Those who fail or appear to give up are pariahs, akin to lepers … they are “losers.” It is ironically believed that there is something seriously wrong with those individuals who do not have the drive to relentlessly struggle to better their lives

according to other people's standards, and almost everyone is conditioned to want it and want it yesterday … from the hurried business executive to the spiritual seeker demanding instant enlightenment.

For these very reasons, because growth does not happen naturally and on its own terms, from the inside out (there is no time to live, only time to race through life, to get and perform rather than be), people who forcefully achieve the goals society teaches them to seek frequently end up feeling fake, and have an occasional “identity crisis,” as their outer life does not match their inner life.

Yet most do not experience such necessary redemption, they simply navigate unaware on the edge of meaninglessness and despair, attempting to function while quickly pursuing what is called happiness with ever more and better stuff, ever more effective medications, greater and madder sources of entertainments and escapes, and a belief that if they could only reach the epitome of what they think is perfection in one aspect of their lives or another, they would be satisfied at last, they would feel worthy and could rest on their achievements for an instant … until artificial standards are raised again, and a new race begins, and the gerbil is back running in the wheel inside his/her mental cage, going absolutely nowhere with great speed and impressive determination.

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