

Mastery vs perfection

Christopher J Meyer

'There is nothing noble in being superior to your fellow man; true nobility is being superior to your former self.'

W.L. Sheldon

In Japan, there is the term wabi-sabi. Wabi-sabi posits that the beauty of an object is found in its imperfection. In direct contrast to the Western perspective, which tends to conflate perfection with beauty, wabi-sabi celebrates transience, individuality, and the flawed nature of a thing. Embracing our imperfection puts our attention toward that which supports our growth and development: continual improvement.

Isn't self-improvement or personal development striving for perfection? It depends on the goal you set. Rather than aiming for perfection or striving to be better than others, we can find opportunities to continually improve ourselves. To fully appreciate wabi-sabi as a model for personal growth, it helps to look a little closer at the culture in which it originated. The Japanese have a long history of elevating craftsmanship to mystifying levels, be it carpentry, metal-smithing, even product packaging. Great emphasis was placed on mastery rather than on perfection. Mastery, unlike perfection, embraces both transience and imperfection, because it is a process, a state of being, not an end goal. It is the continued result of improvement and learning.

Author Malcolm Gladwell, citing Daniel Levitin, famously described the 10,000-hour rule, which states that 10,000 hours of deliberate practice is required to become world-class at anything. Japanese apprenticeships could span a lifetime.

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Mastery replaces the notion of perfection with aspiring to better ourselves through dedication and practice. When it comes to skill, there can be no fixed point. Even the greatest masters remain avid students. Their skill, like our own, develops over time.

'The big misconception is that the alternative to perfection is failure. Mercifully, life isn't binary; it exists on a spectrum. On one side, we have the unattainable: perfection. On the opposite side, we find the unavoidable: chaos. All of the beauty that exists in the world hangs in the balance (between these two).'
Ryder Carroll: *The Bullet Journal Method*. pp. 224-7.

Dr Gonstead and BJ Palmer, much like you who are reading this, were drawn to the challenge of attaining mastery. In the case of BJ we can see how he may have been influenced by the wabi-sabi concept that infuses Japanese culture and art, one only need visit the Palmer mansion to see its influence. Dr Gonstead shared a similar quest for mastery and continual learning, and not only from his patients or in his clinic. There is a story I recently overheard about when he went fishing with Dr Thatcher at his cabin up north. He was sitting at the shoreline contemplating the water waves and its interaction with a tree branch, and he was heard to exclaim: *'See, look, when this end of the branch moves, so does that other end. It is the same with the bones of the body'*. He was continually learning even when he was not in the clinic with patients. There are also the stories of how he had read Guyton's Physiology and Gray's Anatomy to the point that the books were dog eared, and he could critique newer editions with prior ones and say *'I think they described it better in the earlier edition'* when it came to applying the information in day to day clinical practice.

We too work within the imperfect arenas that are our practices, our patients, and our community, and yet can strive toward a continual improvement in all these areas and to learn from each. I recall as a student at a DE conference being told that if you are serious about self-improvement to do these three things:

'Start a practice, get married and have children. Because you will be presented with all the areas in your life that need improvement at one time'.

Perfection, like a permanent state of balance is impossible, but mastery as an ongoing quest for balancing all the various forces in our complex world toward a beautiful harmony, even if ephemeral, is itself a thing of beauty. Our patients and their imperfections are the 'living clay' or 'canvas' where we perform our art of healing. The closest thing to perfection that I strive to continually get better at is: How quickly, elegantly and fully can I restore my patient's spine, body and mind function back to their optimal state, i.e. to return them to themselves? Nothing lasts forever, but our actions have will have ripple effects that spread outward in space and time, and who knows what ultimate influence each of us in our quest for mastery will have?

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Also by this author

Meyer CJ. Disc focused Bio-Psycho-Social model per Gonstead clinical practice. Asia-Pac Chiropr J. 2025;5.4.
www.apcj.net/papers-issue-5-4/#MeyersBSMDisc

About

Dr Meyer has practiced for 26 years in Green Bay, Wisconsin. He is a summa cum laude graduate of UW-Green Bay, A former Troxell Intern Program member and head intern (1996-98), a 1998 graduate of Palmer College, Iowa, Member of the Gonstead Clinical Studies Society (GCSS) (1999), Gonstead Diplomate (2017), Member of the Advanced Gonstead Research Society (AGRS) (2020), Gonstead Fellow (2024). He has presented at Gonstead Meeting of the Minds (MOM) several times.

He attained his master's degree in Integrative Health Sciences from Thomas Jefferson University, Philadelphia PA in May of 2024. He holds Advance Practice Certificates in: Mind Body Medicine (2021), Integrative Health Education and Leadership (2022) and Integrative Nutrition (2023) and was the 3rd graduate of the program.

Has been a Licensed Nutritional Counsellor (WI) since 2008 and has much clinical experience with Standard Process Supplements. Held a Level 3 certification in Neuro-Emotional Technique (NET) since 2013, as well as advanced training in NET from Thomas Jefferson University.

Husband to Abby and proud father to son James (4) and Annie (20 months). Dr Meyer is continually working to put what he has learned into clinical practice in a way that advances the work of Dr Gonstead and he welcomes your constructive feedback.

