Combating Toxic Perfectionism

A few weeks after the semester started, my stress levels started to mount until all of the pressure gauges in my brain were ready to pop. Just sitting in class became torture, and every second of the day I felt one small step away from bursting into tears. I was teetering on the brink, unable to focus on school or work. Even simple tasks seemed daunting, and I was terrified of making mistakes--any mistakes. I had always held myself to a high standard, but somehow my high standard had become an impossible standard.

Anything less than a perfect score sent me into a vicious spiral of feeling depressed and inadequate. Checking my grades made me sick and nauseous, and throwing up from stress became a daily occurrence for me. I couldn't stop working and I couldn't slow down because I knew that if I slowed down, I would fail, and if I failed--at anything--my whole life would crumble. So, I kept doing everything I was supposed to be doing and tried to keep my head above water. Part of me knew I couldn't live like this forever, but the thought of cutting things out of my schedule or settling for anything less than perfection made me feel like a coward.

One night, all this stress and overwork finally bubbled over. I was overwhelmed with homework, I had to take an online exam that wasn't working, and I discovered I had submitted an assignment incorrectly. After finally slogging my way through everything, I decided to go to bed early. Just as I was lying down to go to sleep, I checked a notification on my phone and saw that I received a low score on an essay I thought I had done well on. This was the final straw, and I broke down in tears.

My whole life I had worked hard and done my best, but it was starting to seem like my best wasn't good enough. No matter what I did, no matter how hard I tried, *I* would never be good enough. I had always defined myself by my achievements. If I did well, I could be proud of myself. If I didn't do well, that meant I should've tried harder. Logically, somewhere deep in the back of my brain, I knew that getting a poor grade on one assignment wasn't a big deal, but in that moment, it seemed like the end of the world. The end of *my* world. I was supposed to be smart. I was supposed to be funny. I was supposed to write well. What would be left of me if I stopped being these things?

Overwhelmed by the weight of my inadequacy, I cried for a long time. Finally, after the tears were done, I prayed. It wasn't a very long prayer, and I don't remember what I prayed for, but I remember the feeling of peace and comfort I received. There have been very few times in my life where I've felt the Spirit as a burning in my heart, but this was one of them. Despite all the panic and confusion, I knew God loved me, and I knew everything would be okay.

The next day, I sat down and took a long look at my expectations, and I recognized that I had been asking too much of myself. I needed to feel the compassion and love for myself that I knew Heavenly Father had for all of his children. With this in mind, I started making changes to my thoughts and lifestyle. I cut unnecessary stresses out of my schedule, and I started focusing more on my mental health. After time and effort, I've begun to understand that my value isn't defined by any personal or academic achievements: my value comes from my identity as a child of God.

As Susan H. Porter says: "When you know and understand how completely you are loved as a child of God, it changes everything. It changes the way you feel about yourself when you make mistakes. It changes how you feel when difficult things happen." ("God's Love: Most Joyous to the Soul," *Liahona,* November 2021). No matter what failures or discouragements I face, I know my Heavenly Father loves me. I'll never be perfect in this life, but I don't have to be. I will always have Heavenly Father's love and support, and I will always be enough for Him.