



## Perfection may be the Enemy. It all depends on whose side you're on.

WHENEVER SOMEONE argues that the pursuit of perfection is akin to paralysis by analysis or increasing effort resulting in diminishing returns, at some point he or she invariably spews, “Perfection is the enemy of the good.”

It certainly sounds valid, like an aphorism that conveys some kind of universal truth. But what is that truth? What’s the real meaning behind those seven, oft-quoted words?

Ironically a Google search attributes the exact phrase—unsurprisingly without a source—to the 19th century French novelist Gustave Flaubert, a perfectionist known for agonizing over the fine-grain of his writing (he took five years to write *Madame Bovary*).

The quote is more likely taken from the French “Le mieux est l’ennemi du bien.” literally translated as “The better is the enemy of good.” written almost a century earlier by Voltaire in his poem, *La Bégueule* (*The Prudes*). Here’s the phrase in context:

In his writings, a wise Italian  
Said that the best is the enemy of the good;  
No one can grow in prudence,  
In goodness of heart, talent, science;  
Look for the best of these chapters there;  
Elsewhere avoid the chimera.  
As it stands, happy that can be pleasing,  
Living in his place, and keep what he has!

It appears that all the talk about leaving well enough alone, accepting “good enough,” and not obsessing about perfection not only misses the

author’s point, but actually inverts it. Voltaire’s “good” is prudence, the status quo. His “best” is a pursuit of excellence that threatens that good. They are enemies intent on snuffing the other out.

People, and by extension society, can not grow by being cautious and judicious, by being overly concerned with preserving their standing. Instead, they must remain hostile to the social order and strive for greatness in their hearts and in their work.

In fact, our world is advanced by those who dare to struggle for perfection, the rebels and provocateurs who, like our Founding Fathers, help change our lives from what it is to what they believe it should be.

Flaubert did write, “Be regular in your life, so that you may be violent and original in your work.” Yes, when it comes to “living in your place” avoid the hollow belief that the grass is greener on the other side of the fence. Take note of Shakespeare’s words from *King Lear* and be happy with your life:

How far your eyes may pierce I cannot tell;  
Striving to better, oft we mar what’s well.

But when it comes to your work and your community, ignore the merely good. They want you to be one with them, in line and passive. Instead, be an enemy of the ordinary. And when times get tough, which they invariably will for passionate souls driven to change things, take a deep breathe, close your eyes, smile and recite this childhood mantra:

Good, better, best, never let it rest, ‘till your good is better, and your better’s best.