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In Defense of the “Pursuit of Perfection”

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We’ve had many discussions about perfection here. We’ve heard every quote in the book, quotes like “A perfectionist is someone who doesn’t get anything done!” to “Getting to a 9.5 is relatively easy, it’s that last .5 that gets expensive!” Yet I constantly find myself pushing for perfection. Could we have done something more efficiently? Could it have turned out a little better? That spot we had to redo, how could we have gotten it “perfect” the first time? Can we even make something perfect? I have no idea, but the high probability that I will never get something perfect does not keep me from trying to do it. Our collective goal, in the end, is to have our customers feel that their boat is indeed perfect. Some may say perfection is unrealistic, but to us that pursuit, however challenging, is part of why we strive to build the world’s finest wooden boats.

In thinking about what “perfect” really is, it dawns on me that maybe perfection can be in the eye of the beholder. We have built a number of boats that were not perfect, in fact all of them are not perfect, but yet it is only we, that were involved with the build, that can tell. If I had a nickel for every time someone said “wow it’s perfect!” Clearly our involvement in the build process allows us to see the “imperfections”, and we take this opportunity to grow and learn. If we weren’t there nitpicking our “mistakes”, though, would the boat, in essence, be perfect? If a tree falls in the woods, does it make a sound?!?

As I glance down at my 1 month old daughter, sitting in her “newborn lounger”, I am struck that even our emotions can change what “perfect” is. This tiny person that screams at me, spits up on me and pees on me should, by all definitions, not be considered perfect. Yet to me and to my wife, she is. She is absolutely perfect.
One of the things that can be difficult for young, optimistic, energetic guys coming to serve an apprenticeship here is our company’s constant pursuit of perfection, the mentality of Kaizen that permeates our souls. It’s a tough environment to get used to; where completion of a task comes with an explanation of all the ways that it could have been done better. Where we rarely celebrate how beautiful something turned out because we are focused on the next opportunity to chase perfection, once again thrilled at the chance to make something perfect! That insatiable pursuit of perfection drives us to work harder, faster and smarter, but it doesn’t always drive us to remind people that are on-boarding that one of our most important goals is to learn from our experiences in order to make improvements for next time.

I heard several quotes the other day that resonated with me: “Cynicism is the refuge of cowards” and “Just because you can’t do everything doesn’t mean you shouldn’t do something”. Some people struggle with being paralyzed by the thought of not hitting the mark, of putting themselves out there and failing. Some can’t put their ego aside, also fearing the thought of failure. Those of us who choose to chase perfection understand that in our lifetimes, we may never reach it, but it won’t keep us from being optimistic that maybe, if we keep pushing, we may get so close that it doesn’t matter. We look at failure as an opportunity to improve ourselves and our team. It doesn’t break us when we don’t reach perfection, even though we gave our all. The knowledge that we tried our best, the passion that we put into our work and the comradery of working with a talented, driven, united team is satisfying enough.

Some claim that people like us aren’t able to have balance in our lives, constantly chasing perfection in one, singular avenue of our lives, never satisfied. I find that puzzling, is it really balance that I am looking for? Balance, which implies that in order for one thing to gain, the other has to lose? I think harmony is what we are after. Harmony with all the other extremely important aspects of our lives; our families, our friends, our hobbies. I am focusing on the pursuit of perfection in my professional life, but I apply the same passion and pursuit in my home life, and I find harmony in that combined pursuit.

So why chase that “impossible dream”? Think how much further we will get just by aiming at it!