



## Exposing perfectionism: Part one of a co-research story conversation by Victoria, Chloe, Lona & David Epston

### Chapter 1: Why task ourselves with such an undertaking

*Our story begins in the middle, where questions of a co-research project concerning anti-perfection lifestyles are put forward*

VICTORIA: I am struggling with a whole lot of negative feelings when I think about this upcoming project. I am unsure if it is to do with feeling like I have nothing to contribute, or questioning my right to say anything, due to my lack of contributions of late, or due to something else all together. I am wondering if you could please clarify a few things for me. For starters, what is it that you wish to achieve out of this 'co-research' project?

DAVID: Why task ourselves with such an undertaking? To see what it can do of course! The project is in hopes of making available to a much larger audience via the anti-anorexic co-research project. And since it has never been done before, everything is pretty speculative. As always, Victoria, we are like steam engines that lay track just ahead of themselves as they go. When you are inventing things, this is our fate. But in some ways, it is so much more adventurous than knowing where you are going and what is to become of that – anti-anorexia has been such an adventure from beginning to end.

VICTORIA: What areas do you suggest we focus on as "co-researchers" in regard to perfectionism?

DAVID: I think it is probably best to respond to something that demands attention rather than making up a project. The perfection and university studies seemed relevant to you and Chloe some months ago, but may have gone off the 'boil'. However, such a correspondence I hope will allow for anything of anti-anorexic concern to be entered into it and taken up to see where we can go with it.

VICTORIA: Why and how have you selected the co-researchers, including myself?

DAVID: Yourself, Lona, and Chloe are all people I know who are committed to such an endeavor as anti-Perfectionism, and I suspect the three of you will be about as many as I can manage in terms of keeping each of your voices separate and distinctive. This project will be new for me too.

VICTORIA: Would it be helpful to have a stated definition of 'perfectionism' before we start





- DAVID: this?  
Why don't we work it out as we go along?
- VICTORIA: How will we be able to collate comments or even converse with five participants, including yourself?
- DAVID: That will be a test! I am hoping I can figure it out as we go along, I might need you all to be patient with me and I expect there will be, as always, some trial and errors. But then again, how else does one learn the 'new'?
- VICTORIA: I hope that it is ok that I have just gone ahead and asked these questions David. I do not mean to be disrespectful in asking them, they are just areas I would like to have clarified if I could.
- DAVID: Of course not Victoria.
- VICTORIA: Thank you.

### Chapter 2: On the boil

*The three co-researchers relate insider stories, support, and theorizing around perfection's practices*

- VICTORIA: David, thank you so much for responding to these queries. I felt really hesitant about asking, but I am glad that I have done so. If I can be completely honest with you David, since I have asked these questions, I began to feel a whole lot better about this project. Maybe I was feeling that I did not have enough information about it to proceed – being afraid that I might stuff it up. I have a funny feeling that it had to do with something about feeling like I had no control over the process. My stupid insecurities surfacing again. David, I am afraid now that you may feel like I was second-guessing you or something. Please know that this was definitely not the case. I just needed some more information. I am the kind of person who does quite a bit of research and gains all the information I can before I make any decision. Perhaps it was partly this too.

I would really like to be part of this project as best as I can be. For me, perfectionism is present in every part of my life – even to the point of being abused if I do not breathe properly. I was having difficulty trying then to talk about this in general because it is almost like it is part of who I am and how do you discuss this in conversation with another person?

In further response to my questions, you mention that maybe perfectionism is





not having such an impact on my studies as it was before you went away. Before today, I would have said yes this seems to be the case, but, typically, I have discovered that I am not so lucky. In my first paper in the course I am studying, I had to write an essay on my reflections on a particular narrative article. I spent a great deal of time stressing over this essay, and re-wrote it a couple of times. I was dreading handing it in because it contained some personal information that was kind of scary for me to write in an 'academic' essay.

Anyway, I received my marks for the paper the other day and received full marks for this essay. The point of this story was to illustrate the power of perfectionism. With this essay, I received another grade – one from a group work assignment – 2 marks less than full marks. But the thing is that I won't even mention this group mark to anyone because I feel ashamed that I did not get 100% for this one too. Today I have learnt that many groups did not even pass this assessment, so I know I should be ok with my grade, I just am not. To me this is a very clear example of how perfectionism is trying to take over my studies once again. I'd thought I'd share that with you anyway, to illustrate that this issue is still very much 'on the boil'.

LONA: Hi all, I am not sure if this is the way the response is to be done, however, I am not about to allow perfectionism to silence my attempt at responding so here goes: I find it so interesting that Victoria asked what we should focus on as a topic in perfectionism. In reading Victoria's introduction to the letter, I noticed how loud the voice of perfectionism was speaking.

VICTORIA: Thanks for pointing this out Lona. To be honest, I got really defensive when I heard your comment about perfectionism's influence on my words. But thinking back on how I was feeling when I said that, I think that you are absolutely right. Perfectionism had taken my voice and was masquerading as "Victoria". Also to be even more honest, I am feeling a little bit apprehensive about entering into conversation with you as perfectionism has convinced me that I will have nothing worthy to say, and might stuff it up and come across looking like an idiot, so I should not even bother. As you can see, I am challenging this command, but I have little doubt that this will come at a price.

However, tonight I have been inspired by your opening paragraph which includes; "I am not sure if this is the way the response is to be done, however, I am not about to allow perfectionism to silence my attempt at responding so here goes ..." So thank you, Lona, for your words that have given me the courage to give this a go too!





CHLOE: Hi all, I just wanted to add a few random thoughts to this conversation also. As always, I am struck by the fact that Lona and Victoria's words could have come straight from my own mouth. Indeed, lack of time due to university work aside, part of the reason for my delayed response to this e-mail is that I have felt (or perfection has insisted?) that I have absolutely nothing worth adding to this conversation.

VICTORIA: Chloe, for what it's worth, I disagree with this with every inch of my heart and my spirit.

CHLOE: ...However, as I sat here re-reading this e-mail tonight, I was both so morally outraged at perfection's attempts to silence the voices of two women – voices that I respect and cherish – and heartened by Lona and Victoria's courageous stance against perfection in daring to join in this discussion despite perfection's protests, that I have been emboldened to join in this conversation as well. I refuse to let perfection prevent me from speaking out in support and solidarity of you Lona and Victoria.

I was just wondering in light of how difficult I'm finding it to join in this particular 'co-research project' (and from the sounds of it, others are too) – do you ('you' as in any and all of you!) think that perfection might be putting up an especially big fight given what it has to lose from these conversations? After all, we will be putting it in the 'hot seat' won't we?!

VICTORIA: Chloe, it makes such a difference to me to have you here with me (us) in this conversation. You have so much wisdom to share that I would loathe if perfectionism managed to take away your voice here.

LONA: Perfectionism, I believe, has told me for so long that I have nothing to contribute and doubted my right to say anything. Perfectionism would tell me that if what I said wasn't perfect, best I said nothing at all. So for many years perfectionism silenced my voice and my ideas.

Perfectionism built up a hierarchy of good and bad, and split them. Perfectionism became my biggest critic, my judge. I hear the voice of perfectionism still, in the way perfectionism eyes me in the mirror, looks at my breasts, my nose, my body. The way perfectionism conducts the process of self-reflection as a therapist and the way perfectionism talks to her husband – “he is too fat as well”, it says to me.

VICTORIA: I can really relate to this. I hate looking in the mirror as I get the critical run-down





each time I do also. And don't even get me started on how I feel in a swimsuit! The more I think about it, the more I realise just how much of my life is ruled by perfectionism. I feel this need to be the best at everything I do, and if I am not then I feel like a complete failure – a waste of a human being. It also stops me from doing many of the things I wish to do, because perfectionism tells me I'll just screw it up anyway, so why bother.

I can also relate to your comment about self-reflection as a therapist. I am training to be a therapist and my classes involve a substantial amount of practical work with classmates. I can never accept the words of the person I am working with if they tell me I have helped them to see something in a more constructive way, and I always, always come away from a practical exercise thinking, "well I totally screwed that up".

CHLOE: I can relate so much to this. Perfectionism has prevented me from engaging in so much of life due to its dictate that it is better not to do something than to do it and risk not doing it perfectly. I am just beginning to realise now how long perfection has been a part of my life, much longer than its good friend and companion, anorexia. What struck me when reading Lona's description of her experiences with perfection and from my own experiences of perfection is the overwhelming sense in which perfectionism is stifling and paralysing. It gets you (I'm using 'you' in the generic sense of the word) pinned in a corner with absolutely no room to move.

Lona, I am wondering how it is that you have been able to evade perfection in becoming a therapist? I acknowledge that perfection probably still does its best to interrupt your work but it seems to me that you must have come a long way in out-doing or 'un-doing' perfection in order to be able to practice as a therapist.

LONA: Before I became a therapist, I was a hairdresser. Perfectionism dominated the work. I graduated top of my class and was the last to move from being an apprentice to being a fully-fledged hairdresser – why? – because perfectionism told me I wasn't yet good enough, and that I should continue learning to improve. So whilst my colleagues began to earn a living and open their own salons, perfectionism was hooked on self-indulgence. In fact, the haircuts began to take so long I started to irritate myself. Perfectionism told me that if I couldn't do the haircuts perfectly, it would rather I didn't do them at all, so I gave up. This is another trick of perfectionism: it tells me that I should hand over my work to someone better.





So perfectionism used to stop me from completing what I was doing. But I have had enough. Hence I am responding even if I am not sure that I am responding in the right way – why? Because I am tired of perfectionism’s black and white outlook, that there is only one way.

VICTORIA: I too find perfectionism’s “black and white outlook” so limiting, yet I seem to be caught by it so often. Lona, thank you for resisting perfectionism’s claim that you would not respond the “right way”. As you can see from my response, your words and thoughts certainly got me thinking. I am always grateful for this.

### Chapter 3: Hard to believe it is just a coincidence

*Chloe recognizes the league as a place for community and solidarity, Victoria echoes the sentiment, and David begins his inquiry of perfection’s recruiting tactics*

CHLOE: Hi David, I just thought I might share an experience I had yesterday that involved a bit of a ‘run in’ with perfection.

When I was at university yesterday, I noticed that the exam results from one of my classes had been placed on the notice board (everyone in the class had their results listed so that you could compare what the top score was). Of course, perfection demanded that I must know what my results were. Unable to resist, I scanned the list for my results (perfection hanging over my shoulder the whole time).

As it turns out I was quite disappointed with my results. In a similar exam earlier in the semester I got two questions wrong out of 30 (2 too many for perfection of course, but perfection was ‘kind’ to me in that instance and begrudgingly let me off the hook for losing those two marks because I got the top mark in the class by a good 10 marks).

DAVID: Chloe, was it significant in any way do you think that this ‘run in’ should take place when the ‘Sisters against Perfection’ (if I can call you that?) had all had their ‘run-ins’ with perfection? And refused to allow that to silence them, knowing that you all would have to endure some punishment for your insolence? Just wondering as I find it hard to believe it is just a coincidence.

CHLOE: I hadn’t put two and two together at a conscious level (that my run-in with perfectionism has coincided with Victoria and Lona’s refusal to be silenced by perfectionism). But now that you mention it David, I’m sure it is more than mere coincidence as well. My resolve against perfection was certainly strengthened by the courageous stance taken by both Victoria and Lona and knowing that they





- DAVID: are 'out there' also resisting. It gives me a sense of community and solidarity. Chloe, would you consider marks on a notice board would be one of the premier sites for perfection to perform itself in our everyday culture? Can you think of any other premier sites?
- CHLOE: Almost anywhere, particularly where there are numbers involved and these numbers can be compared. The list is (unfortunately) endless.
- VICTORIA: Chloe, I was disgusted that this practice would occur. It totally supports the concept of competition, which perfectionism thrives on, and that capitalist patriarchy thrives on too for that matter! It makes me so angry that educational institutes take it upon themselves to do things like this.
- DAVID: Chloe, can you recall what perfection was saying to you while you scanned the board? And how? And why do you consider it was doing so?
- CHLOE: As I was scanning the marks trying to find my results on the board at university, perfection was saying things like, "Don't just look at your own mark, make sure you look at the whole range of marks so that you can compare how you did with everyone else" and "You know you are going to be disappointed because you are so stupid and you should have studied harder...therefore if you get a low mark (which you will) then you have only yourself to blame".
- VICTORIA: Chloe, I can really relate to this. I totally need to know my grades, and then feel terrible, even if I get 100%. I just can't win with perfectionism. That's why it is so manipulative and destructive.
- DAVID: Chloe, you mentioned that earlier in the semester, perfectionism was "kind to you" when you got two questions wrong on a similar exam, because you still gained the highest score in the class. This is the very first time in 15 years that I have heard perfection show any mercy or kindness whatsoever! Was this a ruse? Was it some form of deception?
- CHLOE: It was perfection's way of 'saving face'. By this I mean that in showing me 'mercy' in this instance, perfection was able to claim credibility (e.g. the voice of perfection saying, "See, I'm not that unreasonable after all, I allow you to get two questions wrong, you have nothing to complain about"). In doing so, perfection deflected any potential for a direct confrontation with it. Whereas if it had said outright "you are only acceptable if you get 100%", then I would be more likely to see the impossibility of perfection's demands. So basically, it was perfection's way of keeping me 'on-side'.





VICTORIA: I can totally relate to you here Chloe. In my experience, perfectionism is not even satisfied with perfection.

CHLOE: However this time I got a few more questions wrong. And furthermore, I didn't come top of the class.

DAVID: Chloe, I hope you don't mind me saying this but I am delighted to hear this! Were you even inadvertently doing imperfection?

CHLOE: Well at least someone is delighted because I'm not! It certainly wasn't an intentional act of imperfection. This makes it all the harder because it means I'm all the more stupid (e.g. If I'd done it on purpose then it wouldn't be a reflection of my intellect. But because I tried my hardest, then my marks just show how dumb I am). Needless to say, perfection was outraged (e.g. the voice of perfection, "You are so stupid – how did you manage to get so many questions wrong? – you should have studied harder"). Anyway, I came away feeling pretty bad about myself.

DAVID: Chloe, did perfection tell you that you surely would be 'better off dead' if you failed to be the best, even if you are all alone at the top of the heap?

CHLOE: Yes, and when I tell perfection that I don't care for grades and other such superficialities, it tells me that I am such a failure at everything else that getting good grades is all that I have. (e.g. the voice of perfection, "It would be all very well and good to renounce having to be the best if you were actually remotely 'good' at anything! But as it stands you are a complete and utter failure at being the kind of person you say you value, and so you have nothing left but to succeed in getting good grades").

However, the part of the whole story that I particularly wanted to share with you is that, although perfection gave me a really hard time (and is still putting up a very noisy protest about my marks), it hasn't been able to totally consume me.

DAVID: Chloe, is this the first time in your life that you have been able to utter that? If so, I am thrilled to be part of even knowing about it via e-mail.

CHLOE: When I was telling mum how disappointed I was by my marks and how I hadn't come top of the class, she asked me how far below the top I was. "Half a mark", I replied. We were both able to have a bit of a laugh at perfection together, which was nice.







- VICTORIA: I also sometimes find it good to share it with someone else when I have an experience like this, to get another perspective on the situation. A perspective that is not coloured by perfectionism and self-hatred.
- DAVID: Chloe, am I right in thinking that perfection/anorexia refused to allow you to share anything of importance with your mum for many years? If so, what would you have me understand the significance of the fact that you were able to seek your mother out as an ally in standing up to the absurdities of perfection? I hope you don't mind my curiosity here but I am getting curiouser and curiouser as I scroll down this e-mail.
- CHLOE: While I am still struggling with perfection over this and am still disappointed because I "could have done better", I have decided that I am glad that I didn't come top of the class.
- DAVID: Chloe, can you imagine what kind of music this is to my imperfection-tuned ears to read this in text? This almost brings tears to my eyes!
- CHLOE: ...Because this way somebody else had the chance to feel that they did really outstandingly well in coming top of the class (and hopefully they will actually appreciate the experience and feel good about it without having perfection to destroy everything)!
- DAVID: Chloe, why do you think you can wish such a person so well when perfection has taken away any satisfaction you might have experienced on those occasions when you stood first? Is this worth considering?
- CHLOE: Hmm...now that it is on 'paper' it doesn't sound as good a story as I thought I was going to be, but I thought you might be interested all the same as I know that you are always one for hearing tales of imperfection.
- DAVID: Chloe, who says "it doesn't sound as good a story as I thought I was going to be"? Perfection, you or me/Victoria/Lona?
- VICTORIA: Chloe, I have so much respect for you for taking this step. Sharing this kind of thing about yourself can be a very scary thing to do, and it takes a lot of courage – but you probably know by now that I have come to really admire this strength about you. I am wondering how much of a part you would say your moral outrage played in making the decision to share some of your own experiences in this forum?





And regardless of the grade you get for this paper, I believe that you have earned the highest grade possible – and more. I don't want to say to you that I know how significant this decision has been for you, but from my own experiences, I will go as far to say that I may have some idea of how difficult it will have been to write and actually hand in.

(Just wondering if you left any smudges on it too, by any chance, because we both know that perfectionism refuses to tolerate printer smudges?! Just kidding!)

DAVID: Chloe, how amazing! What does this say about the 'distance' you have come from perfection that you can now indict it in writing? Does this mean that you are no longer so terrorised by perfection that you 'can dare speak its name'?

CHLOE: The reason why I tell you this is because I am doing something quite unlike I have ever done before and am not sticking to my usual 'tried and true' essay format that I know will get me reasonable marks. So there's another 'up yours' to perfection for you to relish!

DAVID: Chloe, would the "tried and true" be an expression of your wisdom and creativity or of perfection's 'boring old fart' way of writing?

CHLOE: 'Boring old fart' way feels much 'safer'. But I must admit that it is less fun and interesting to write. Writing 'off the beaten track' takes a lot out of me though, so I think I'll stick to 'boring old fart' writing for the most part. However don't worry David, I will continue to go off the beaten track every now and then just to make sure that perfection doesn't settle down and become too comfortable!

#### Chapter 4: Sisters against perfection

*David asks the co-research team uncommon questions and Victoria thinks through countless, tiny ways she resists daily perfectionism demands*

DAVID: Victoria, I know I agree with you when you say "it is always wonderful to hear of perfectionism getting grief!" For you, does that have anything to do with the fact that perfection has caused so much grief for you and so many others?

VICTORIA: In my case it does. I become infuriated with perfectionism when it manages to paralyse Chloe, because I know that she is so gifted and has so much compassion and wisdom.





- DAVID: Victoria, when you spoke of Lona and Chloe's outrage allowing you to contribute to the conversation, I noticed that this resonates with Chloe's comment in her recent email regarding 'community' and 'solidarity'. Does the idea of Sisters against Perfection appeal to your mischief-making as well as your moral outrage?
- VICTORIA: It sure does. I truly don't think I would have had the confidence to participate in this conversation if it were not for Lona's reply to you regarding my first e-mail that was full of concern and fear. At first, I also thought that the term 'Sisters against Perfection' was kind of silly (no offence), but it has allowed me to feel supported and able to be involved in this project, knowing that Lona and Chloe are in it with me.
- DAVID: Victoria, you stated, "I just can't win with perfectionism; I need to know what my grades are, but then feel terrible even if I get 100%". I have never known anyone to win with perfectionism, unless you would consider immiseration and death as some sort of victories. Sisters against Perfection, do we need to learn to 'lose' against perfection so it can't tell us we are losers? Do we need to lead 'lives uncommon' (phrase taken from Jewel's song of the same name) to lead our lives at all, rather than 'living deaths'? Is this like anorexia: a matter of life or death? And if so, does perfection have to be contested as fiercely and with the same guile as anti-anorexia?
- VICTORIA: For me it does not feel as much a life and death battle, as did anorexia. But I guess it's kind of a battle between going through life in misery and living life to the fullest. So you could call it a battle between living and surviving.
- As for losing against perfectionism so it can't tell me I'm a loser, I find it more empowering to outwit perfectionism in the most outrageous way I can. Or by directly contradicting it if I am feeling strong enough to do so. This unfortunately isn't always the case though. In regard to living a life uncommon, this is something I strive for everyday.
- DAVID: Victoria, you said, "In my experience, perfectionism is not even satisfied with perfection". Is perfection only satisfied with your immiseration or execution? And if so, what is your counter-morality to support your 'Sisters against Perfection' as well as yourself?
- VICTORIA: I would not call it a counter-morality, but instead maybe trying to listen to what I want and need, rather than what perfectionism demands I must do. This comes into every part of my life; for example, when perfectionism demands I go for a





run, I ask myself if I really feel like doing this and sometimes, if not, I don't go. If perfectionism demands I stay up until the early hours of the morning re-writing an essay I don't really care for, I ask myself if I am tired, and if so, sometimes I just go to bed. Please note though, that I am often not able to resist perfectionism. However, when I do, it is helpful to congratulate myself for doing so.

DAVID: Victoria, in a previous e-mail, you said to Chloe: "I am wondering how much of a part you would say your moral outrage played in making the decision to share some of your own experiences with anorexia in an essay..... From my own experiences, I will go as far to say that I may have some idea of how difficult it will have been to write and actually hand in".

Victoria, do you mind reminding us of how you decided to undertake acts of resistance such as meeting with an acquaintance who was suffering with anorexia? What instills in us the 'courage of our convictions' to live a 'life uncommon'?

VICTORIA: I suppose for me, it often comes down to the price of staying silent. In regard to this acquaintance who was struggling with anorexia, I knew that I had some knowledge that may have been useful to her as she fought for her life. If I was to remain silent about what I have learnt, then I would be giving anorexia more arrows to fire at her. I have learnt that by staying silent about things that matter to me and those I care about, I am in fact condoning them and I want no part of this. I would not call this a 'life uncommon', but speaking out against injustice helps me feel like I am making a difference in the world, and am living out what I believe in. For me, this is very anti-perfectionist and anti-anorexic.

#### Chapter 5: Canaries in the mines

*Victoria shares about the rebellious and spontaneous delight of listening to music, David hypothesizes possible relationships between creativity and anti-perfectionism*

VICTORIA: I just wanted to share with you my big 'up yours' to perfectionism yesterday. I have been attending a workshop on creativity over the past couple of weekends. This experience has been a huge rebellion against perfectionism as I was required to dance, sing, paint, draw, play body rhythms, tell stories... etc, in front of 28 other people that I hardly know at all. To be honest, some of it was totally out of my league, but I did have a wonderful day with a leader who works with sound with her clients

To complete this workshop, I was expected to give a performance yesterday on





'my journey' through creative expression. To say the least, I was not impressed with having to use a combination of sound, dance, and storytelling to share my private and personal experiences with the other workshop attendees. There was an expectation that each person shared some kind of struggle they had been through in their life and present this through one of the mediums covered in the workshop. I totally drew the line here, in terms of sharing past struggles, but did deliver a performance (most of which involved a lot of 'creative writing', shall we say!).

Anyway, here is where perfectionism comes in. First of all, I was told that I could not use photography in my presentation as it was not regarded as an appropriate form of creative expression for this exercise. I debated over this for a long time and complained about it to many of my friends. In the end, I decided, stuff it! I 'm going to do it anyway! So I incorporated photography into my presentation, and delivered it yesterday to the group. This was a huge rebellion against perfectionism for me, as it told me that I had to adhere to the leaders' expectations as otherwise I would risk not delivering a 'perfect' presentation (not that this would have been possible anyway!).

This probably does not sound that 'anti-perfectionist', but it was for me; it is very rare that I purposely chose to take a route that may affect my chances of getting the best grade or delivering the best performance. Perfectionism just does not allow it.

- DAVID: Victoria, when you were talking about the creativity workshop you have been attending, it made me think of how the very workshop itself challenges perfectionism. I have always found perfection to be about straight lines, tidiness and about as far away as you can get from creativity...in fact, I would say perfection can 'bore you to death', wouldn't you?
- VICTORIA: Definitely. It paralyses me to the point where I don't even try things. And this is completely boring!
- DAVID: Didn't perfection try to tamper with your experience of this workshop to ensure that all your creativity got sucked out of you and it would dull you?
- VICTORIA: Sure. It gave me a seriously bad attitude and severe resistance to trying anything in front of the other class members. I do think that most of the stuff we had to do was not that helpful, and unfortunately, also steeped in expectation and judgment if one chose not to participate by exercising their right to pass.





DAVID: What should we make of the fact that you did not succumb to perfection infiltrating this workshop? In fact, you seem to have shaken it off for the time being!

VICTORIA: Deciding to finish the workshop was my resistance to perfectionism.

DAVID: Victoria, can you share with us the wonderfulness of that day you so enjoyed, discussing sound and music therapy? Or at least give us a taste of it?

VICTORIA: I will give this a go David... I was totally captured by the leader of this particular workshop; the leader who started the class by playing the Tibetan bowl. From the beginning of the day she was so passionate about her topic – working with sound as an aspect of therapy – that I found it totally infectious and I could not wait to hear more. The introduction that she performed with a First Nation Canadian greeting and a Tibetan bowl that came from Kathmandu was just magic. It really touched me deeply and I wanted to hear so much more of it. I was fortunate enough to get the chance to play the Tibetan bowl later on in the day. Allowing me to do this was a gift from this woman.

Perfectionism did jump on in here though, as I could not play it as well as the leader could, nor could I play it perfectly. But it was such a rich sound that one day I would love to own one. I loved the discussion around how the vibrations were also very healing for the player and for those sitting close to them. She also played a moose skin drum while we did body drumming, which was very moving. I could just go on and on here David, which is a real sign of just how special the day was for me.

The leader showed us some techniques to use with the guitar and with our voice that allowed pure un-censored expression of emotion through sound. This involved just strumming on the guitar and opening your mouth and letting whatever sound was there break free. This was very anti-perfectionist for me as it goes against the idea that I have to adhere to notes, tunes, etc, and make music sound ‘perfect’ when I play the guitar.

DAVID: Victoria, did you sense during that time you were connected with your creativity? If so, what was it like to be informed by something that isn’t about ‘pass’ or ‘failure’? Or that isn’t a commodity to ‘buy’ or ‘sell’?

VICTORIA: It was just magic David. I was totally buzzing for days afterwards. It has also inspired me to explore this area of therapy and way of living more. The whole experience also illustrated that there are others as crazy and passionate as me





out there, and that I do not have to listen to perfectionism's demands that I must tone my personality down and act more like I 'should' – adult-like, boring, and without passion for anything. This is something I am just not interested in, and when I am not exhausted, I try to resist in every way I possibly can.

DAVID: Victoria, does the term 'Sisters against Perfection' resonate with your very experience of the actions you are taking in your life?

VICTORIA: Yes, it does. I don't know if I've ever felt so much a part of a sisterhood, outside of the relationship I have with my own sister. This is quite an amazing experience actually.

DAVID: Victoria, by referring to resisting perfectionism not as much as 'a battle between life and death, but one between living and surviving' do you mean the distinction between a 'living death- being one of the living dead' and a 'lively life- being one of the lively livers'?

VICTORIA: By saying this, I mean that life under perfectionism's rule is about as much fun as not being alive at all. That life without perfectionism's regimes (if that is possible) is a lot more mischievous, spontaneous and downright enjoyable. Of course, life is never always like this, but at least I have more of a chance of experiencing any of these emotions and ways of living than when I am under perfectionism/anorexia's spell.

DAVID: Victoria, would you say over the last few days you have been 'trying out' a life uncommon? Did perfection say you wouldn't survive more than a minute of such a 'life uncommon'? Can you imagine similarly 'uncommon lives' for Chloe?

VICTORIA: I can imagine a life like this for Chloe, and I have great hope that she will one day be able to experience the freedom that comes with living a 'life uncommon'. In fact, Chloe already lives a 'life uncommon' in that she has refused to be silenced by anorexia.

DAVID: Victoria, for our reference, can you spell out in some detail if you don't mind, exactly if and how you congratulate yourself when you resist perfectionism? At the same time, doesn't perfection try to debase you? How do you take the side of self-congratulation rather than perfection-debasement?

VICTORIA: It does try to debase me continuously, which makes it difficult to even identify acts of resistance in terms of perfectionism. However, I am very fortunate to have people around me who draw my attention to acts that defy perfectionism. I





will also go as far to say that I am getting better at recognising them myself. Despite this, I don't know if 'congratulating' myself was a good choice of words. Maybe I should have gone with 'not abusing myself for being so defiant'. This is a step along the way to being able to congratulate myself. I guess that the fact that I do share some of these experiences with significant people in my life (including yourself, and my 'sisters of resistance'), shows that I do place some value on these anti-perfectionist acts.

DAVID: Victoria, you mentioned that you found yourself in a lose-lose situation in response to a comment made in an earlier e-mail. I am wondering if this could possibly be a point of learning for us: should we be suspicious when anything is reduced to a lose-lose? Should that be a clue that perfection is out to infiltrate us?

VICTORIA: For me, if a situation feels 'lose-lose' (e.g. if I chose either of the options available, I will lose out), it is a blaring neon sign that perfectionism/anorexia is right in the thick of this situation. That it not only has a starring role, but also is directing everyone else involved – including myself.

DAVID: Victoria, you made the comment about having "learned that by staying silent about things that matter to me and those I care about, I am in fact condoning them and I want no part of this. By speaking out, it helps me feel like I am making a difference in the world, and am living out what I believe in."

Anorexia is resigned obedience to that which anorexia endorses and crystallizes, is it not? Do your thoughts 'resonate' with Helen Gremillion's metaphor for those struggling with anorexia – 'canaries in the mines' – who if they sing out loudly enough will save the miners....but should we consider that in doing so, they should also save themselves rather than die for others? I know these are somber thoughts but then again, anorexia is immiseration, is it not?

VICTORIA: Anorexia only knows misery. I recognise what you are saying here in regard to anorexia, but firmly believe that had I not been witness to the destruction and torture anorexia was inflicting on Chloe and others I came across, I would not have been able to recognise the horrors it was putting me through. Your analogy about the canaries, makes me think that maybe the canaries could start singing to warn the miners, but then join together (as we have done) and find the way out together, singing on the way, to alert those who were unable to hear them the first time.

