

Perfection

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There's no such thing as Perfection. But, in striving for perfection, we can achieve excellence.

Vince Lombardi

When Maria passed away, her soul ascended to Heaven and joined the scores of others seeking admittance through the Pearly Gates. She noticed that she was able to make out the appearance of every detached soul, for each bore an image of the deceased as he or she looked at some point in life. She was contemplating the variety of looks in the assembled multitude when a Cherub, a majestic being with four wings – two outstretched and the others covering its glowing body – emerged from the gates and dove like a flaming arrow to land beside her. “Come, Sister,” he beckoned out of one of its four mouths in a voice that resonated like a blaring trumpet. “We have been waiting for you.”

Maria’s soul was as unassuming as the woman had been in life. She replied timidly: “Me?”

The Cherub did not answer but lifted Maria’s spirit and zoomed towards the gates, passing by a very busy Saint Peter, who was thumbing through his book as he assessed the credits and demerits of the applicant who stood in line before him. Peter issued a nod of recognition and the Cherub proceeded inwards, nesting Maria in two of its arms.

Heaven was not a physical enclosure, but an endless space filled by the Deity and innumerable incorporeal presences, the souls of the blessed. The Cherub instructed: “The souls of the chosen commune with each other based on the diversity of their natures and interests, such that each soul imparts its unique qualities on the others and at the same time receives the beneficial traits emitted by them. In doing this, all souls continue to mature and progress asymptotically towards unattainable perfection, carrying out their eternal journey while contemplating God’s immensity. Some souls, however, start this ascent from a more advanced point than others. You are among those.”

“What does that mean?” replied Maria, confused.

“During their stay in the material world, some virtuous men and women develop excellence in a particular aspect of their lives that brings them closer to God’s perfection. For example, see the soul of a plain, bewigged short man dressed in a red topcoat, a gold waistcoat and white breeches?”

Maria nodded uncomprehendingly.

“He wrote music of great complexity and charm and was revered as one of the most beloved composers of all time, for his work exalted the spirits of millions. The man next to him was an artist who created exquisitely detailed paintings, particularly ones of beautiful women; again, his work served as inspiration for the betterment of many people. Near them is a short bald man of slight build, aquiline nose, thin lips, and recessed chin: he was a builder who engineered a self-supporting double-shell dome, effectively launching modern architecture; this again bettered the lives and enhanced the souls of many. And so on.”

“And you say I belong in this group?”

“Yes.”

“Why?” asked Maria. “I was just a housewife from a poor country.”

“Don’t you have a son named Francisco?”

“Yes. Is he alright?” She was suddenly alarmed.

“Yes, he is fine. He is a righteous man who, years from now, will save the world from destruction.”

“But he is only a municipal clerk!”

“He will rise in position and become a leader in your country. He will then have the opportunity of making himself wealthy by taking actions that would lead to a catastrophic nuclear war. At the end, he will resist temptation and will pay for his rectitude with his life. You will meet him again when he ascends to Heaven eighteen years from now.”

“So, I am being rewarded for being the mother of a famous man?”

“Well, not just for *being* the mother of someone *famous*. As another woman who shares your name exemplifies, mothers of truly great men sometimes deserve acclaim for the righteous upbringing they imparted on their children, which in turn lifted up the spirits of many. Plus, you have another accomplishment that is uniquely yours and would independently qualify you to join the ranks of Mozart, Klimt and Brunelleschi.”

“What is that?”

“You invented the chocoflan, a fusion of French crème caramel, Cuban flan, and Mexican chocolate cake, a unique dessert that pairs two radically different feels in a single bite without one overpowering the other.”

Maria demurred: “But I only invented that dessert because I wanted to tamp down the cloying effect of overly sweet flan. The bitterness of the cocoa cuts through the sugar of the custard and provides a satisfying balance of flavors. There is nothing meritorious in inventing the dessert.”

“However, the chocoflan has revolutionized baking and injected new life into the food industry, to the benefit of the lives and souls of many.” The Cherub then pointed to a wild looking dark man wearing a long, high-collared robe with wide sleeves and leather boots with upturned toes and thick soles. “That man lived over two thousand years ago. His name was Khachi Khan, and he was a leader among the Mongols. He invented the stirrup, a metal attachment to a horse’s saddle that enabled warriors to achieve unmatched balance and mobility and facilitated the military expansion of the Mongol Empire. His invention, in modified form, fundamentally reconfigured the world —militarily, socially, and politically. Like your chocoflan, the stirrup was a modest invention that significantly changed human physical and spiritual life for the better. You do not have to discover a cure for cancer like that lady did (pointing to a small, fragile looking woman of oriental features wearing a sari) for your accomplishments to be recognized.”

“You make it sound easy for anyone to go to Heaven” countered Maria, disappointed.

“Not so!” replied the Cherub emphatically. “*Salvation* requires a virtuous life; *advancement* in heaven is achieved in many ways, and the pursuit of excellence is one of them, for it leads to the betterment of human souls. You should revel in your two-fold success and join the blessed in their travel towards Perfection. Welcome to Heaven!”

THE END

Bio: Born in Cuba, Matias Travieso-Diaz migrated to the United States as a young man. He became an engineer and lawyer and practiced for nearly fifty years. After retirement, he took up creative writing. Over two hundred and fifty of his short stories have been published or accepted for publication in anthologies, magazines, blogs, audio books, and podcasts. One of his four novels, an autobiography entitled “Cuban Transplant,” and four anthologies of his stories have also been published.