

The Broken Perfectionist

Interview with Linda Macqueen

In an age of AI, filters and endless possibilities for editing ourselves, perfection might almost seem like an achievable goal. But what if appearing to be perfect isn't all it's cracked up to be?

'I had created a barrier so that people couldn't see the real me. And once you start doing that, you've got to maintain it then because there's this fear that if people see the real me, they might not like me.'

Jo: Today I have with me Linda Macqueen, who has spent a large part of her life working in the communications department of the Lutheran Church, including as an editor of the Church's national magazine. After many years of recording and sharing other people's stories, Linda recently retired and she's here today to share some personal reflections on her own journey of faith and perfectionism.

Linda's Career Journey

Jo: Welcome, Linda.

Linda: Lovely to be here, Jo.

Jo: I'm so interested to hear some of your journey of becoming this integral part of the Lutheran Church's communication team. How did you get here?

Linda: I started off my career straight out of high school in being a secretary - administration. I had the opportunity back then to be either a secretary or a nurse, hated the side of blood, so I became a secretary. It never really quite jelled with me because in my heart of hearts, I was a creative person - more of a writer; I was a deep thinker. And then in my late twenties or early thirties, the job as Editor of *The Lutheran* came up. Now that's the national magazine of the Lutheran Church of Australia, about 25,000 readers. And while I was utterly not qualified for that job, I applied anyway and I got the job. The rest is history.

I spent about 12-13 years doing that, producing the national magazine of the church and editing it. And it was the dream job. Really hard work, really long hours and a lot of stress, and a lot of worrying how on earth I was gonna fill, you know, 40 pages of magazine every month without fail no matter what. But oh, gosh, it was a great job. I was so blessed. Like a duck to water took to that job.

And then after that, the latter 12, 13, 14 years of my life, I was in a broader communications role in the church: Communications Manager. How that all happened... You never know how life's gonna turn out.

Jo: Well, sometimes it comes naturally. And for you, I can see that you fit perfectly into that role. But I am guessing that as an editor of a publication, that there's a lot to do with getting things right, building that perfect persona of the right wording, the right context, the right grab.

Being a perfectionist

Jo: Now, I know you're a perfectionist and I'd love to know a little bit more about where that started. Is it something that you've always had?

Linda: Oh yes, it went way back. In fact, you know, of my, my earliest, earliest memories from childhood was all around being the perfect child, it's always been in me and I think it was fed by the fact that I was always a naturally bright child intellectually.

And so, at school I always did well in class and I always got 10 out of 10 on my tests. And then as I went into high school, it was always A+ on assignments and that came relatively easy to me. But what started to happen without me realising it, was it started feeding this natural propensity towards being a perfectionist. Because, when you do well as a child, your parents are proud of you and pleased with you, and so are your teachers, because you make your teachers look good, and so you'd get praised for doing really well. And somewhere along the line I started to work out that when I did really well, when I was perfect, I'd get praised. I would be good. And that started getting reinforced in other parts of life too. So, the better I was, the harder I worked, the more perfect I was. The more I got praised, the better I felt about myself, and thus the cycle begins. It was always there, I think, but it just got worse and worse and worse unchecked.

I'm not blaming anyone else you know, especially my parents. I mean, most people in therapy, they blame their parents, especially their mother, don't they?

I'm not blaming anybody. My parents did what any parent would do with a bright child - they praised me, of course. But what I didn't understand then, but do now, they would've praise me, they would've loved me, they would've adored me even if I'd failed everything. But I didn't know that then.

I started thinking that my whole value and worth was based on how much I got praised. And that if I didn't get praised, then I wasn't good enough. Or I wasn't worthy, I was just taking up space. So, I just kept trying to be better and better and smarter and smarter and having the right answers all the time and building this perfect life so that I could feel good about myself. And, you know, once you're into that it's really hard to get out of that habit because you can't think of or see any other way of living.

And for me, it started to get to the point where, and this is now moving into my adult life, you know, getting married and having a home, started getting the point where I didn't want to invite friends over to our home for instance, because it wasn't perfect and I didn't have the perfect food for them, and everything had to be perfect because maybe they wouldn't like me if it wasn't perfect.

Jo: What happens, or what would've happened if you got it wrong?

Linda: Probably nothing catastrophic. In fact, probably good things would've happened if I got it wrong. People probably would've warmed to me a whole lot more because they would see me as real and vulnerable. But I didn't know that then. I'd built this life around being perfect, or the facade of being perfect, and that's all I knew. So, I just kept it going, and kept building and building this bigger, bigger, bigger, more complex structure of perfectionism and making sure that I could control my environment as much as possible so that there was very little risk of failure.

And so, I built my whole world and universe around managing risk, controlling my environment, overthinking over-studying, over-preparing so that nothing would go wrong and I wouldn't fail.

Jo: I would find that really challenging, because I'd also find that quite lonely, wouldn't you?

Linda: Totally because I lived in a vacuum of sorts, I suppose, in that I had to protect myself and this identity of perfectionism that I had created. And so that meant not being able to talk to anybody about the things that were going wrong in life. And once you start doing that, you've got to maintain it then. Because there's this fear that if people see the real me, they might not like me. So, you've got to keep this going even when there's deep pain or hurt or doubt, you know, and even faith issues are starting to come in there, and anxiety and mental health issues are all starting to come into the picture too, because you're trying to create this perfect world.

If you let people into that, you are afraid they'll see the real you. So, you deal with all this inner turmoil and brokenness and doubts and faith struggles. You deal with all that yourself, and then you become the only person that can take care of you. You've shut yourself off from other people and you've shut yourself off from God, who's *longing* to take care of you. But I just had myself in such a state of believing that God and others wanted me to be perfect and brave and strong for them to like me that I didn't even consider that they might want to love me and hold me and carry me and care for me in my brokenness. It wasn't even on my radar.

The Breaking Point

Jo: So, what was the turning point then, that sudden revelation? Did you have a revelation or was it a gradual process of discernment to go 'It's okay to me not be perfect'?

Linda: I wish it were a gradual process, but it wasn't, I don't do gradual process. I'm a person that pushes myself to the absolute extreme, and this is what I did.

During this period, my life really was falling apart on a whole lot of levels. So, I'm the front person for the Church's national magazine; I'm the face of the church in many ways, and every month I'm writing these uplifting editorials for 25,000 people. And people are telling me how much my editorials are encouraging them. And I have this persona that I'm this perfect person, this perfect Christian. At the same time, my life is crumbling on all levels. So, my mental health is really suffering because I can't maintain this perfect life anymore. And the anxiety associated with that is really starting to get into what we call mental health issues. And then also at the same time, my marriage is in trouble and I'm getting into a state of depression over that.

Now, just at this point, I know that some of your listeners will know me, and I just want to make clear that I'm talking about my first marriage, not the one now. I'm married to the wonderful Mark, and I'm really happily married to Mark, so I'm talking about my first marriage and it was in real trouble. But me being me with my perfectionist kind of tendency, was determined to make this work no matter what. So I dug deep. I just sweated it out and I braved it out. And I just said to God, 'I am going to make this work no matter what, and I'm gonna tough this out.'

And it wasn't working. And I was getting more and more depressed. And some of those editorials that people told me that were just so wonderful, they were written in between hours and hours and hours of sobbing. And there were weeks and months and months of sobbing. **So everything's falling apart, including my faith at that stage because I felt God was letting me down.**

And there came a day when I admitted that I couldn't do this anymore. It just all fell into this great big crumbling mess, everything that I'd so carefully and courageously and religiously built over most of my life just fell into this whopping, great, burning, smouldering heap. I was sitting there in the ruins of my life and thinking life for Linda had ended.

And you know, to this day, I don't know whether this was a real God conversation or an imagined one, but it doesn't matter because it was profound, I remember hearing this voice of God, and God's sitting there with me saying, 'well, that didn't end well.' And I went, 'no, it's a disaster.' And he said, 'no, it's not. It's a new beginning. Now we can start.'

And it was like an invitation. He said, 'do you wanna do this?' I went, 'yes, I want to do this.' But he said, 'this new life is not gonna be based on you trying to make me love you, okay? This new life is going to be built on *me* loving you. So stop trying to make me love you! I already do. Got that?' **And that's where my new life started.**

It really was that profound. If I would explain my life, it is in two halves. There was that 40 years or so that I was building on these weak, crumbling foundations of perfectionism and trying to earn God's love. And since that time when everything got ruined and wrecked, I've been living on a completely different way of thinking and foundation and it's a whole lot better, Jo.

Embracing Vulnerability and God's Love

Jo: So, in that moment of sitting with God and hearing his voice, how did you respond?

Linda: I had a real sense that this needed almost to happen for me to start paying attention to God and his love. I saw it as a new start, and I was tentative and wary and a bit scared because being a perfectionist and being a control freak, I was never any good at trusting anybody else. Cos I would do it myself and I would do it better, and I would do it the right way.

So, trusting God fully with my life and being vulnerable to others and to God was a big deal for me. But I also recognised that the old way hadn't worked at all, and I felt in my heart of hearts that this was actually the way to the life that God wants all human beings to live. So, I did step into that. I had no other choice really.

I did have this incredible sense that God was very, very close and was with me and wrapping his arms around me and hadn't abandoned me. In fact, I think that's probably the closest I've ever felt to God or God to me. And isn't it ironic because **all my life I'd spent trying to have that experience through being good and being right and perfect, and it was in my moment of absolute destruction and brokenness and vulnerability I can feel God there with me.** He always was. But I could really feel it there in my brokenness because that barrier was gone. I was ready to receive his love and grace.

Words that inspire

Linda: So, about that time in Christian churchy circles, a very well-known Christian songwriter called Geoff Bullock, who himself had been a really, really high profile Christian, and had a catastrophic fall, he also fell into a great big crumbling heap and also experienced the love, grace, mercy, forgiveness, compassion of God.

At that time, he wrote this song called 'I Am Carried'. And it so resonated with me because before this happened to me, I never needed to be carried. I would do the carrying of other people. I was the strong person; I was the super Christian. You could depend on me, but I don't need to depend on anybody else, thank you very much. That had been my attitude, but now this song, it became my theme song.

Because for the first time in my life, I needed to be, and I was ready to be carried by others, by God. So, it's Geoff Bullock, 'I Am Carried,' if any of your listeners wanna Google it, it's everywhere:

*The broken mended, night has ended
The lost and lonely lost no more
For I am carried in the arms
Of grace and love divine.*

*Ever onwards, ever upwards
You've called me on to rise
Above my darkness, all my failure
Every fear and every pain
Always carried, always covered
By grace and love divine.*

'I am carried in the arms of grace and love divine' - That is my theme song for life now.

Jo: Beautiful

Linda: It's a glorious, glorious description of the love of God the Father for us, who just wants nothing else but to pick us up and love us and carry us through the best and worst of times. And I'm so glad that I'm able to be that child now that reaches out to be carried rather than like I used to do, tell God 'no thanks. I'm okay on my own. I can do this. I'll call you when I need you.'

And at the same time that Geoff Bullock was writing that song, 'I Am Carried,' there was a really well-known Christian writer by the name of Philip Yancy. It's about 30 years ago now, I think, it is really, really aging me. And he wrote a whole lot of books, but the ones he was best known for was one called *What's So Amazing About Grace?* And in it there is this phenomenal quote that has become my mantra for life:

'There is nothing I can do that will make God love me more. And there is nothing I can do that will make God love me less.'

So, I've tried to embrace that whole new way of thinking into my life as a sort of like an antidote to my perfectionism. Because I know that perfectionism is in my DNA and I can so easily revert back to it in a heartbeat. So, every morning and every night, I look myself in the mirror, particularly in the morning, just after I've cleaned my teeth and I say, 'Linda, there is nothing you can or will do today that is going to make God love you more. And Linda, there is nothing you can or will do today that is going to make God love you less. Don't try and impress God. It's a waste of time.'

Transforming relationships

Jo: I love this new perspective of your relationship with God, and I can see that transition even in just the way you're expressing yourself. How does that change your interaction relationship with others, perhaps even your faith community? Did it change anything with that?

Linda: Absolutely. And instantly. When people heard that my marriage had broken up, here I was thinking people would disown me or reject me or think less of me. The absolute opposite happened. So, my family, my friends, my work colleagues, my church family, everyone got around me with love and support and care. It was like this one ginormous

group hug in which I could also feel the love of God there too. And also, I felt there was this great big sigh of relief from everyone going, 'She's finally real. She's finally fessed up that she's not a robot or a cardboard cutout. She's a real person! And she gets us now, we get her now, we can talk to her now.' And when I say the change was instant, it wasn't quite instant. It was probably a week before the first person called me and said, 'Linda, can I talk to you about a marriage issue that I'm having?' They couldn't have talked to me before because they thought that I had no idea what they'd be talking about, or I might condemn them or think badly of them. And it was just the opposite. So **it opened up this whole new world of being vulnerable and being real.** I just felt so much more connected to people and hopefully they to me.

I think that's a really important part of Christian community, and even the Bible talks about that we share each other's burdens, and we suffer so that we can share in the suffering of others.

And I think you would know, and I know and probably all of your listeners know that the best person to talk to about an issue or who will understand what you're going through is someone who has been through that themselves. And that's such a beautiful part of community at any level. And the church community - I hope we can do that well too. Because we've got God in the midst of us who is the ultimate carer, and the person who wants to be compassionate to us and love us. So, it's a really important lesson that I learned. And even though I knew it academically, you know, cognitively for all of those years, the penny really only dropped when I was in my late thirties, early forties. I'm a very slow learner,

Jo: I'm challenged with friends who, will say, 'I can't possibly come to church because I'm sure the building would fall down if I walk in.' I can just picture the building actually being held together by these broken people because it's actually God's love that surrounds them and cares for them.

Linda: I think we've done ourselves a huge disservice - ourselves and our communities - by being like I was; pretending that we've got it together, 'we are Christians, we know how to live a perfect life, and we've got God worked out and we are good...' And so we create barriers. And it's almost as though we're saying to people, 'oh, you've got to jump through all these hoops. You've got to be good, and you've got to be an A+ type of Christian before you can get in the door.' That's such an awful message to send. Cos it's all wrong.

And you are spot on, Jo. The reality is that people who are followers of Jesus, people of faith, Christians, are as broken and wounded as everybody else. And the more we fess up, the sooner we fess up to that and be vulnerable together, the better off we're all going to be. Because **it's in community where God comes to us and is in the midst of us and heals us, and gives us hope and carries us.**

Christians in the church need to know that as much as people outside the church. And people outside the church need to see that in Christian community.

Jo: Yeah, I think you're absolutely spot on.

Wisdom from the Bible

Jo: I'd love to know, are there any scripture or verses from the Bible that speak to you in this space?

Linda: Oh there's been lots, depending on what stage of life I've been at. But in working through my trying to get rid of this perfectionism, drivenness thing in me, I came across, a

psalm in the middle of the Bible, which I really love, and It's Psalm 17:6, and it's very, very simple. It reads:

'Keep me as the apple of your eye. Hide me in the shadow of your wings.'

I am the apple of God's eye. So are you, Jo. So is every single one of the people who's listening to us today. God looks at you individually and adores you. He could not love me any more than he loves me now, or you. It's extraordinarily freeing to know that God adores you.

The life of growth

Jo: Something that comes to mind also is that we talk about being comfortable in our brokenness, being comfortable in that space of not having it all, right? But I guess there's still that sense of still wanting to grow. Like, we don't wanna stay there, do we?

Linda: Yeah. It is an ongoing process of growth, isn't it? It's like any other relationship, our relationship with God, in that we want to become more and more like God, and he wants us to become more and more like him - merciful and kind and compassionate, and all those things.

So yes, we want to keep growing and we want to keep knowing, and we want to keep exploring. But it's all about knowing who we are and whose we are and having that safe platform, that safe foundation to explore and ask questions and to doubt and to wrestle, and to grow and all those things. *Knowing* you are resting firmly in the arms of God as you do all those things makes all the difference in the world.

Advice for other perfectionists

Jo: So, for those who are listening to this program, I'd love to ask the question of you, Linda, how do we know when we are stuck in that cycle of perfection?

Linda: Yes, good question indeed. I would suggest to listeners who might think they're in this sort of cycle: take a deep hard look at why you are doing the things you are doing. And now for me - that was having to have all the answers about God, or to be ultra ridiculously prepared whenever I was doing a presentation to make sure that I knew how to answer every question.

So, I'd suggest you have a think about where you are spending a disproportionate amount of energy and time in order to protect yourself from somewhere where you might fail or where you might not look perfect. And think long and hard about why you are going to all that effort. And ask yourself: 'the people that I'm trying to impress, the people that I want to like me, is there a chance that they might still love me and still like me and still be impressed with me if I didn't do a hundred percent every time? And that I did fess up to some weaknesses or that I did stumble or I did make a mistake sometimes?' If I allowed myself to be real with these people,' if we're talking about God, then 'if I allowed myself to be real with God' would God, would these people love me any less or think any less of me?' And I think that that's a really, really hard thing for people with perfectionistic tendencies to do. But I think it's really important. And that means being vulnerable a little bit at a time with people you can trust, and seeing how that goes for you.

What do you want to be known for?

Jo: So, coming full circle, going from this perfectionist life, wanting to be known for being perfect, but then having that shattering moment in your life where everything sort of changed and now you're living in this space of freedom in your brokenness. I'd love to ask the question, Linda, what would you love to be known for?

Linda: I think I'd like to be known as a person who is real, who is flawed, who is broken, who is happy to talk about the things that aren't right in my life, so that I can be a sounding board or a caring person for other people who are also broken.

I think that's how I'd like to be remembered and for the rest of my life, I think I'd like to keep working towards that.

Jo: So where is the hope for people who feel like they're not the perfect Christian, or that they just don't measure up?

Linda: Well, I think it's the same hope for all Christians and all people who aren't Christians or not yet Christians, in that all our hope is ultimately in God who loves us. The greatest story and demonstration of God's love for us is Jesus. We Christians believe Jesus is God in human form among us. And if you read through the stories about Jesus' interactions with people, there's a really common thread in that he hung around with people who thought they didn't measure up, they were broken and wounded, and often people that the religious people rejected. And I guarantee they were people who they themselves rejected; 'I'm not worthy. I'm no good.' And yet Jesus embraced those people. He went into bat for those people and he encouraged those people and he wept over those people. I think if ever we need hope God is still on our side and God loves us even though we doubt ourselves and we think we're abject failures, we just need to look at who Jesus hung around with.

So, there's always hope. **Whenever you look at Jesus, you see hope.**

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