

THE ART OF BEING BETTER

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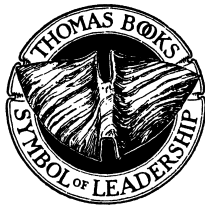
THE ART OF BEING BETTER

An Approach to Personal Growth

By

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For Marjorie Perticone

FOREWORD

We live in a curious time, one in which we are relentlessly bombarded with offers of pills or potions that will take away our pains or mask our inadequacies. As we scan the pages or stare at the screen, we almost begin to feel ashamed that we are growing older or losing hair. After all, what would we be without whiter teeth or more staying power? We are led to believe that these enhancements, along with driving a sportier automobile or redistributing the curves and bulges of our bodies, will make us more appealing to the opposite sex in particular and the world in general. As the myriad of products is paraded by us, we might even find ourselves wondering whether the product that is being sold is actually a potion to instill in us the unwarranted fear that being what and how we are as human beings is never good enough. We are being taught that by masking our presumed imperfections and creating a more desirable appearance, no matter how superficial or external the means, our lives will be happier and more satisfying, that we will somehow be better.

It is easy to understand why we want to get better when we are ill or our health is threatened. It is less obvious, unless we really think about it, why we seem to feel such urgency to appear better, even when doing so distorts who and what we really are. It seems that we have learned to replace ourselves with an idea, an idea of a self that appears better but is not real. Where is the pill that will help us to recover from that?

One possibility is that there is no pill. Another is that there is no need for one. Dr. Eugene Perticone's inspiring and compelling message in the present volume, *The Art of Being Better*, is that the motive and the means to be better, to reconnect with our deeper, more authentic selves, are built into each of us. In the pages that follow, Dr. Perticone invites us to turn our attention inward to rediscover, under-

stand, accept, and appreciate our true nature, and express it wisely in the world. He encourages us to widen our consideration of what it means to be human beings and to attend to those miraculous aspects of life and experience that we often take for granted or fail to notice at all.

An accomplished professor of psychology who has been an enormous inspiration to many students, Dr. Perticone has, for the past 35 years, practiced psychotherapy with individuals who were struggling to be better. In addition, he has devoted himself tirelessly to his own personal self-exploration that in turn has led to his extensive study of great works of literature, psychology, philosophy and spiritual traditions. In the present volume, he presents in a clear and uncluttered fashion a distillation of some of the most significant concepts and practices that have benefited him and his fellow travelers in the journey toward being better.

For those who would choose to embark or continue on the simple but often difficult path of being better, Dr. Perticone suggests a remarkably clear and practical guide that can be of immense benefit to anyone who aspires to grow in living life more fully and authentically. His guidance is based not upon faith, persuasion, or claims of knowledge of “truth.” He presents instead his vision of what being better means and what its attainment may require of us, but he does not regard this presentation of stimulating ideas and possibilities as sufficient. Rather, we are encouraged to explore empirically and experientially the validity of his suggestions through participation in a series of fifty-nine process activities. In addition, he makes the uncommon assertion that learning and being better are actions, not merely ideas. Learning is not the acquisition of information alone, but a process that requires that the information be acted upon in the real world before it truly can be said to have been learned. The reader is challenged to be better not just in thought, but in deed.

At each step of his presentation, Dr. Perticone provides exercises and suggestions so that we, ourselves, are able to consider, refine, and validate notions of who and what we are and how to be better. Our attention is directed to our inner space where we are encouraged to locate and awaken the neglected or dormant resources present in every human being and apply them in the world. We are offered tools that will enable us to wrest free from dogma and conditioning as the

foundation of our beliefs about what being better means. In its place we are urged to reclaim and to be guided by personal truth, a truth that is to be found not in any pill but within each of us.

If art is the giving of expression to an inner vision, then Dr. Perticone is encouraging us to become the artists of our own lives. By increments, we are led to explore and to immerse ourselves fully in life—first our own, then the lives of others, and ultimately the source of life itself. Perhaps it is more accurate to say we are led to realize the connections that already exist, but that we often may not notice. In setting forth in this volume his hard-won insights for the benefit of others, Dr. Perticone demonstrates his own commitment to the principles and discoveries that he describes. His own explorations and discoveries, along with the carefully crafted activities that may help others in their own explorations, are presented humbly but fearlessly, with his characteristic clarity and unmistakable compassion for all of us who want to be better in the truest sense.

JOHN B. RUSKOWSKI, PH.D.

PREFACE

The words that comprise the title of this book, *The Art of Being Better*, were selected to convey a comparative meaning, namely that there is what we are, and there is what we can become. “Being Better” implies a process of improvement, in this case one that is ongoing, but improvement of what? The answer is the improvement of you, the Reader, whoever and whatever you might be. This may seem a bit presumptuous since I don’t know anything about you personally. Then, you may ask, how am I to know that any improvement in you is needed or even possible? Let me suggest something to you. We are brothers and sisters under the skin and more alike than different from one another. It doesn’t matter who you are, how much success you have attained, or how well-respected you might be since these conditions are relevant to the present, while “being better” refers to a goal yet to be attained. You may believe that you are prosperous, happy, and trouble-free, and by your standards you indeed may be all these things, but such conditions are fleeting and subject to change as a result of intentional or capricious circumstances that can arise in a matter of seconds, and even if all goes well, change is inevitable. What provides happiness for you now might not fit the bill as you grow older and your circumstances alter. In addition, and as unlikely as it may seem at this point in your life, you probably are unaware of what your potentials really are or what your true purpose is unless, of course, you have been blessed by some form of illumination provided from a transcendental domain, a source that is not to be found on any road map you can purchase.

I say these things because they apply to you, to me, and to everyone who lives and breathes. There are limits to sensing, perceiving, and understanding that have to do with the way we are made. As members of our species we have evolved over time, but the sensory

and neurological systems that now regulate our bodies and minds are hardly sufficient to permit a full comprehension of the simplest object as it really is, if, indeed, it exists at all. The restrictions imposed on us by our physiology, not to mention our psychology and the conditioning that social circumstances provide, are all the more powerful because most of us are unaware of the extent to which they influence and limit us. Yes, we have scientists, philosophers, theologians, and teachers who strive to bring us closer to what we hope will be a better understanding of our world, but the conclusions they share remain the interpretations and conceptualizations of fallible mortals. The knowledge they offer, therefore, is subject to error and always must be open to revision. Although we may see the steps and degrees of difference in both consciousness and competence that exist between the lower and higher life forms, we cannot really presume that human beings represents the top of the line with nothing beyond that is more competent, cognizant, or knowledgeable.

“Being better” refers to improvement, but not only at one level. In just how many areas advancement is possible one cannot be completely certain, but it seems reasonable to focus on three, the material, mental, and transpersonal. These are presented and discussed sequentially, and you will be encouraged to apply the concepts practically in your day-to-day life so you can demonstrate for yourself what their meaning and value may be.

Throughout its pages, a prime intention of this book is to stimulate an awareness of your *Authentic Self* through the presentation of ideas and practical exercises designed to help you develop a perspective that is wide enough to include these three levels of experience and to profit from what they have to offer. You will be encouraged to consider the option of “being better” than you presently are, not in terms of social prominence or financial gain, but in a greater recognition of the miracle that life represents and an increased awareness of the wonderful possibilities that have been deemphasized, if not ignored, for expanding your consciousness and fulfilling the promise of what you truly can be.

EUGENE X. PERTICONE

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THE ART OF BEING BETTER

Chapter 1

AN INVITATION TO BEING BETTER

WHAT AM I GETTING INTO?

Before getting started, it is important to explain what the aims of this book are and what they are not. *The Art of Being Better* is written to serve two main purposes. The first is to help you to expand your consciousness of, and appreciation for, the experience of personhood. The second is to share techniques the author has explored, experimented with, and applied over many years that have proven most facilitative for him and a good many of the people with whom he has had occasion to work. The work I speak of has to do with the efforts one may undertake in order to be more successful in living a full and meaningful life. The term *successful*, of course, will connote different things to different people, but in this book three aspects are taken into account from which the quality of one's life might best be considered. These are the material (physical and practical), the mental (intellectual and intrapsychic), and the transpersonal (transcendent). The first of these has to do with the day-to-day demands of the phenomenal world and the effectiveness and appropriateness of the responses made to them. The second concerns the very real, but invisible mental and psychodynamic processes that underlie responses to the observable objects and ongoing life events presented to the senses. The third involves the plane of consciousness that connects each individual to the greater whole, that is, to the forces and purposes of *all* creation, the domain of experience that includes your personal history and development, but extends well beyond it.

In no way, however, does this book pretend to be a statement of the only way or the correct way to define *success* because it is ultimately up to *you* to decide what should be included in that term's definition. Nor does the book insist that you abandon your present world view, your values, or your principles. The same applies to any traits or habits, desirable or undesirable, that characterize you. In fact, it leaves any and all changes that you may wish to work toward entirely up to you. Although you are responsible for making your own decisions and plotting your own course, you will be encouraged to expand the awareness of your personhood and face some growth-inducing challenges, little ones at first, bigger ones as you progress. You will be asked to consider, for example, whether or not the decisions you make in daily life are preferences that you *freely choose* or options that you feel *compelled* to adopt. You also will be asked to examine your perceptions so that you may assess your degree of objectivity when you seek to give meaning to experience, and you will be prompted to do some "stretching." This will be something you can accomplish quite easily and without being overly taxed or throwing yourself off balance. "Stretching" means engaging in new learning in a special way, but only at a level that is well within your capability to understand and apply.

In this book, in other words, the ideas and techniques that concern "being better" are presented in a manner that allows you to examine concepts and experiment with them practically and easily so you can determine for yourself their worth and utility. The approach taken necessarily is based on premises that you will be asked to consider and use as guides for thought and action. You are free to reject the premises if you wish, but then this work will not be for you. On the other hand, when the premises are explicitly stated, I am confident that you will find them reasonable and eventually confirm their worth as you apply them in your daily life. Two central premises to which I refer are the following:

Premise: Valuing what is true, rather than what appears to be true, is fundamental to any worthwhile effort one makes to understand what being a better person means and what its attainment involves.
Premise: It is better to act constructively, rather than destructively, when striving to meet goals or deal with life problems.

As you read further, the importance and relevance of these two premises will become clearer, but a few words about them are in order now.

With respect to the first-stated premise, *truth*, or what is *real*, is the basic issue, and while many of us may hold an opinion to the contrary, truth is a very elusive thing. Indeed, even the most sincere and learned individual is likely to forget that what one professes about anything is actually nothing more than a *belief* about truth and not the actual and *experiential knowledge* of truth. This conclusion may fly in the face of what your common sense seems to tell you, and perhaps you will decide to reject the notion altogether. Then again, if you are certain that what you already “know” is the honest-to-goodness truth, why be afraid to subject it to your inspection? Truth certainly should be strong enough to withstand objective scrutiny. A willingness to examine your views objectively is essential to personal growth.

Concerning the second-stated premise, the history of humankind reveals the disastrous results of destructive approaches to goal-attainment and problem-resolution. The costs at the individual and societal levels have been both cruel and staggering and hardly need comment. This unfortunately has been the case in the past and is critically and most dangerously so in the present. Survival itself may rest on humankind’s decision to move from destructive choices to options whose effects are constructive. Doing what is constructive rather than destructive implies that actions taken will have outcomes that are benevolent rather than damaging, an ideal that is sometimes difficult to achieve, but is generally more appropriate than not. It always should be the first consideration where choice is possible.

To return to the purposes of this book, if you are sincere in your desire to be better as a person and decide to make such improvement your quest, you will find that you are doing much more than beginning a project that could have interesting and useful consequences. You may discover that you have embarked on an exciting adventure, and if you stay the course, it eventually will dawn on you that you have been traveling the path of personal growth and discovery all along, but perhaps without a clear awareness that you were doing so. This adventure simply may be your part in the inevitable unfolding of the human tendency to evolve to ever-higher levels of being.