The Best That You Can Do Is a Holy Thing

On the difference between doing your best and meeting the standard — and why only one of them ever lets you rest.

Most capable people have a standard. It got them where they are. It is not a flaw and I would not take it from anyone — the standard is the thing that made you good at what you do, and the world is better for people who hold one.

But there is a second thing that rides along with the standard, and it is not the same thing, though it wears the same clothes. The standard says: this is what good work looks like. The second thing says: and if you fall short of it, you are less.

That second voice is the one that never sleeps.

> *The best that you can do is a holy thing. That's your offering to God.*
>
> TIM O. DAVIS — FROM A TEACHING PASSAGE, LIGHTLY CLEANED FOR PUNCTUATION

I want to offer a sentence that undoes it, and I want to be honest that it is not originally mine — I heard it from my teacher and I have leaned on it for years, so at this point I will simply claim it. The best that you can do is a holy thing.

Sit with that for a second, because the mind will try to hear it as a consolation prize. *Well, you did your best.* We say that to children who lost. That is not what this means.

It means the actual, real output of you — with the sleep you got, the history you carry, the conditioning you did not choose, the temperament you were issued at birth — that output is complete. Not adequate. Not passable. Complete. It is the whole of what a person constituted like you could produce in that hour, and there is no other version of you standing off to the side who could have produced more.

The mind's objection is immediate: *but I could have.* I could have prepared more, slept more, been more patient, not said the thing I said. And yes — in the abstract, some idealized person could have. But that person did not exist. The one who existed was you, arriving into that moment with everything that had ever happened to you already loaded. Whatever came out was what was available.

This is not permission to coast. Notice that nothing in it tells you to lower the standard. The standard stays exactly where it is. What changes is what you do in the gap between the standard and the result — and that gap is where most people spend their inner lives.

Right now, most likely, you fill that gap with a case against yourself. The energy goes into the prosecution. What I am suggesting is that the gap is simply information. This is where I am. That is where I am going. Nothing about the distance between them says anything at all about what I am worth.

Here is what makes it hard for people who have achieved something. The achieving worked. You applied pressure to yourself and results came out. So the mind draws the obvious conclusion: pressure produces results, therefore more pressure, always. And that machinery, turned outward at a problem, is magnificent. Turned inward at yourself, it never finds a stopping point, because there is no version of you that will ever satisfy it. That is not its job. Its job is to find the gap.

So the practical question is not *how do I do better.* You already know how to do better; you have never needed help with that. The question is: **can I do my best and then set it down?**

That is the whole of it. Do the work. Hold the standard. And when the day is over, whatever came out of you today was the whole of what you had, and that is a finished, whole, holy thing, not a draft awaiting your judgment.

You will know it is landing when the evening changes. Not because the day went better, but because the trial does not convene afterward. The work stays where you left it. You get your night back.

And in the morning you go and do the best you can again. Which will also be complete. Which is, I would say, the only sane way to sustain a life of high standards without being slowly consumed by them.

> **THE PRACTICE**
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> *The standard tells you where to aim. It was never qualified to tell you what you are worth. Do your best, and then let your best be finished.*