

Commentary: 'Perfect' speech 'is what it is'

By Steven Hendlin, PhD

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I'm sure you've heard these two simple expressions that have become ubiquitous.

One or both of them spring from the mouths of most everyone around, peppering our everyday interaction. The first one seems indigenous to – but not reserved for – young adults.

I hand the bank teller my deposit, and he says, "Perfect"!

I try on a new pair of shoes and the 20-something salesperson exclaims, "Perfect"!

Or I order the grilled chicken burger on a whole-grain bun, and the smiling young waitress brightens up with, "Perfect"!

Everywhere I go, people are suddenly looking through rose-colored glasses with lenses of perfection. Not a bad thing, really, if using the term is more than just a new and improved substitute for the more child-like and dumb-struck "awesome"!

Perhaps "perfect!" represents a step toward maturity when it comes to our adoption of viral expressions that soothe conversation.

With all of the aspects of life that are problematic and filled with disappointment and suffering, it's refreshing to witness the term "perfect" become the automatic response to mundane behavior.

It is, in a small and even unconscious way, positively reinforcing to have all of our actions anointed with the approval that comes with them being deemed "perfect."

Twenty years ago, the concept of perfection-seeking interested me enough to have written a whole book about it. But my focus was primarily on how striving for personal perfection, rather than a more realistic and attainable excellence, created so many problems in all the areas of life.

Now, two decades later, comes an easily verbalized expression of perfection that insinuates a willingness to find perfection in even the most mundane choices.

The second expression has captured the tongue of all age groups but seems most popular with middle-aged and older adults. Even my father-in-law, now in his mid-80s, offers it up as a way to help come to grips with the disagreeable aspects of aging that are beyond his control.

You know what I'm referring to: "It is what it is." Jean Paul Sartre must be smiling in his grave!

This bit of home-spun existentialism has tapped the pulse of enough people that it has spread like wildfire.

"It is what it is" suggests an acceptance of people, situations and predicaments as they are and whether we like them or not, rather than fighting too hard to change them.

It encourages a letting go of the struggle to alter the inevitable conflicts that exist between people and the unfortunate and unforeseen events that befall us all.

Taking this expression seriously may lead to less obsessive worrying, anger and resentment. Existentialist philosophy was based on confronting the givens of our existence that must be faced by all, such as choice, responsibility, anxiety and free-will in the face of our inevitable death.

Like the term "perfect"!, I view the use of "it is what it is" as a positive development in our colloquial speech because it represents a healthy acceptance of that which we are unable to change.

Repeating this phrase like a mantra may be calming in times of stress. More broadly, it implies making room for others to be what they are, no matter how different from us they may appear in their looks, dress, speech, culture or socio-economic status.

Although the phrase is actually a tautology (necessarily true in itself), it is one of those truisms that helps people come to grips with the world as it is and offers a quick and simple way to face and accept all those things that aren't worth fighting over.

So, when you use these expressions, or hear others using them, perhaps you will consider why they are an improvement over so many others that have come before them.

And for a guy who wrote the book on perfectionism and has combed through his share of difficult existential texts, they're music to my ears.

STEVEN HENDLIN is a clinical psychologist in Newport Beach.