

Making a Mark: What I Learned about Life from My Chinese Dragon

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It is amazing the lessons we learn as kids, how we internalize them, and where they pop up. I was afraid to make a mark on the page; I was afraid to make a mark on my life.

I SAT DOWN AT THE SMALL TABLE IN THE art classroom next to my five-year-old daughter on her first day of homeschooling. The seats were small, not for her, but for me. The row of art tables in a semicircle around the white board and easel were like crayola crayons—the primary-colored blue chair, next to the primary-colored red chair that my daughter, Rachel, sat upon, next to the primary-colored yellow chair that the teacher leaned over as she introduced herself to all the little children. Innocent and excited, this was their first day of art class in their first year of homeschooling. Some moms took the opportunity to go grab a tea and take a break, and some moms stayed. I stayed.

When I was in art class in my public elementary school, I was always a nervous wreck. It all started when I got in trouble in kindergarten for coloring outside the lines of the caboose picture in my writing journal. I had to sit on the fence at recess for a week, practicing coloring in between the lines. A big red “X” marked my creations whenever there was a bit of color where color shouldn’t have been. When my mother got wind of this, she had a lot to say to Mrs. Keleher, my kindergarten art teacher. Coloring between the lines, not outside, became a metaphor for how I conducted my life—don’t take a risk, do as you’re told, don’t speak up, just color between the lines and shut up. I hated art class after that and never considered myself “good” at art.

The art class for my daughter was chosen with care. From the time she was about eighteen months old, her dad and I saw that she had a really great eye. Even her pediatrician commented upon looking at her portable etch-a-sketch, “Wow, most kids this age don’t draw a face with all the features, let alone having all the features in the right place and with the right dimensions.” So, I figured, I had a mini-Picasso on my hands, maybe a Renoir. Finding a suitable art class, one that taught my daughter how to “see” was important to me. The school I chose—Connecticut Art School—had been highly recommended by many people whom I trusted and admired. I wanted my daughter to enjoy art, not be afraid of it like I had been.

The teacher, Ms. Sharon, explained to the children that the first thing they were going to do was draw a Chinese dragon. She explained the significance of the dragon, telling the story like a pro storyteller, children enraptured by the pictures she put up on the board. “OK, everyone, let’s make our own dragons! Ready. Set???” And all the children answered in unison, “GO!” with enthusiasm. I could tell by my daughter’s smile that she was already enjoying the experience.

Ms. Sharon placed a permanent, fine-pointed marker on each child’s desk, alongside one single piece of 11 x 16 white paper. She gave my daughter a set, then offered me a set. Immediately, my palms started sweating,

and I was nervous just as if I had been back in kindergarten myself. “Oh, I’m really not a good artist,” I said to Ms. Sharon.

“Nonsense, everyone is an artist!” She replied. I put on a smile, my most enthusiastic smile to mask my discomfort, and my daughter leaned over and gave me a kiss on my cheek. OK, let’s do this thing, I thought to myself.

I asked for a pencil. Ms. Sharon said, “I actually don’t give out pencils. I want every artist in this classroom to commit to drawing the dragon from wherever their pen point touches their paper. This instills a trust in the process and puts the artist in a position of being creative. There are no mistakes. Just go with it!”

She then showed us some pictures that her last class had drawn. Some looked very much like the drawing she had shown us; others had the dragon head off to the side, only one eye on the page, leaving the rest of the head to our imagination.

Some had the tail of the dragon taking up the majority of the page, as if the dragon had leaned its head out of the picture to look at some other dragon on some other page. I could not believe it—ALL of these pictures were of Chinese dragons, and yet all of them were different from the original picture Ms. Sharon showed us. And ALL of these pictures were art. ALL of these pictures were beautiful, accepted, and OK, even the ones where the colors went outside the lines.

My daughter was off and running already on her own picture, head down close to the page, black marker in her right hand, an earnest look on her face. She had no fear. Me? I was breaking a sweat. For what felt like years, I could not dare to put my pen to paper. My daughter looked over at me and whispered, “Mommy, aren’t you going to

draw a dragon with me? This is so much fun!” If there is ever a good reason to overcome a fear, it is for my own daughter. I put the pen to paper and started drawing the large triangular shaped head. *Hmmm, it is off to the side more than I wanted*, I thought to myself. I swayed my panic into a deep breath and remembered Ms. Sharon’s words: “Just commit to wherever you start, trust your process, and just draw.” And that is what I did. The torso came next; the long tail came last, winding itself around the top and right side of my paper since that was the only place the tail could land. I finished my dragon drawing next to my daughter, and we both started coloring in our creations, making the dragons come to life.

At some point, I forgot all about my fear. I was having too much fun to be afraid. *Just commit to a decision, just trust the process, just trust that it will all be OK*, I coached myself, hearing Ms. Sharon coaching the children. Most of all, I thought, *I can trust myself*, and with that, a tear ran down my face.

My entire life, I did not trust myself, I did not trust my decisions. I would commit to something and be wracked with fear that I committed to the wrong thing, didn’t commit the right way. Sometimes the fear was so tremendously intrusive that I did not commit.

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After art class, I took my daughter to the craft store and we bought frames for our first art class creation together. To this day, any time I am afraid to make a mark on my life, I look at my dragon art, and I believe in myself again. ❖