



LIVE LEARN GROW

Lessons of a Reluctant Tiger

BRANNON BELISO

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Contents

DEAR GOD	1
INVITATION	2
THE NET OVER MY CRIB.....	4
REPORT CARD	8
FOOD STAMPS, DENTED CANS AND PURPLE SNEAKERS	10
TOURNAMENT.....	13
A BIG PIECE OF CARDBOARD	17
MAGIC BOY.....	21
LIVING MY LIFE WITHOUT YOU	23
MISTAKE OR OPPORTUNITY?	29
UNAUTHORIZED THOUGHT PATTERNS	33
NEEDY AND GREEDY.....	37
DR. V	44
DON'T BELIEVE THE HYPE.....	51
THE HOMELESS HISTORY TEACHER	55
NINE CROWNS.....	59
A LEARNING MINDSET	63
FACING FEAR WITH FAITH.....	69
SURRENDER.....	72
SPIRITUALITY	75
HUMILITY.....	77
LIVE A QUALITY LIFE	79
IT WORKS WHEN YOU WORK IT	82
NEVER GIVE UP.....	84

POSITIVE THINKING IS CRUCIAL	86
CREATE A POSITIVE ATTITUDE	89
CHANGE HAPPENS	91
HELPLESS BUT NOT HOPELESS	92
I'M GOING TO DIE, AREN'T I?.....	97
TO DESERVE THE BEST	103
I AM GRATEFUL.....	106
THE POWER OF WORDS.....	109
MEDITATION	113
CENTER MYSELF	117
10 POUNDS	121
BE CONTENT, BUT NEVER SATISFIED	124
CAN YOU BE GREAT WHEN LIFE IS HARD?	125
MAKE THAT CHANGE!	127
A LEAP OF FAITH	130
IT'S A NEW DAY.....	133
LOVE IS ALL THAT REALLY MATTERS	135
HAPPY ON PURPOSE	139
ABOUT THE AUTHOR	143
RECOMMENDED READING	145

THE NET OVER MY CRIB

When I told my sister Lisa that I saw a white grid whenever I closed my eyes to go to sleep, she looked at me with a deep sense of sadness and asked, “You don’t know what that is, do you?”

I shrugged my shoulders and offered her a half-hearted “No.”

Lisa confessed, “That was the net they put over your crib in YGC so you couldn’t climb out.”

YGC, or the *Youth Guidance Center*, was the first stop in the California foster care system, a system that my sister and I were part for about three years. My parents’ stories have never matched up, but I believe Lisa was about 3 years old and I was 11 months when we first went in. What I do know is that my father had taken off to Los Angeles to get away from my mother, who drank heavily. She left us with the next-door neighbor for the evening so she could go out and party. That party turned into a five-day drinking binge.

Sometime during those five days, I became sick with croup and had to be taken to St. Luke Hospital’s emergency room. My windpipe was swelling shut, and

the doctor considered a tracheotomy to help me breathe. The hospital staff asked where my parents were. When the neighbor told them my parents had taken off days ago, it triggered a call to Child Protective Services, and we became part of the system. The only saving grace of this moment was that I responded to the breathing treatments and they did not have to cut a hole in my throat and insert a tube so I could breathe.

During the next three years, my parents were given supervised visitation and, eventually, unsupervised visitation, until they could prove they were fit parents, and we could return to their custody.

I can remember those Sunday visits when my parents picked us up at Mrs. Valencia's, our designated caregiver. Mrs. Valencia had three boys of her own, and they constantly bullied my sister and me. They were all older than we were, but Lisa and I never backed down from their attacks. I still carry a scar on the side of my head from when one of the boys pushed me off the back stairs, and I hit my head on a brick.

During visitations, my parents often took us to Playland, an amusement and carnival attraction at Ocean Beach in San Francisco. Playland is long gone but Laughing Sal, the automated character who graced the front of the Fun House, still holds court in a

museum at Fisherman's Wharf. I have visited her from time to time when we are doing the tourist thing with relatives or friends from out of town. When I do, I find myself reliving those three years with a deep sense of reflection.

One of the hard life lessons I learned from my time in foster care was how a traumatic life experience, especially at a young age, can have such a big impact.

It wasn't until my late twenties that I really understood how much of my past was negatively impacting my present. If I continued to live in the past, I would never be happy. I had to stop blaming my parents for the life I was living. Even though I was physically an adult, I behaved like a wounded child. I justified the poor decisions I made because of my dysfunctional upbringing. I recognized that I needed to *change*. I truly wanted to, and clearly understood that nothing would change until I changed it. I needed to stop being a victim and take complete ownership of who I was and the choices I made in life.

Once I knew I had to change, doors opened, allowing me to act on that knowledge and begin that change. As Confucius said, "A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step." By taking action incrementally, using healthy and balanced life skills, we learn the core values that move us toward our

goals. I wanted to know how to balance my mind, body and spirit, so I read everything I could get my hands on regarding self-help. I attended lectures and workshops. I participated in different churches and learned spiritual practices. I continued to live life on life's terms, but with a purpose to learn and grow into my *truer self*, the person I was intended to be.

REPORT CARD

I was very proud of my report card. I had straight A's! I was 10 years old and couldn't wait to show my father, hoping to earn his approval. I handed my report card to him. He gave it the once over and cleared his throat, just as he always did when he was about to make a point.

"What is this A-minus?" my father asked in a tone of disappointment. Honestly, I hadn't even noticed it. I didn't have an answer for him but felt like my best would never be good enough, so why even try.

This defeatist thinking owned me for the better part of my twenties. I moved from one broken relationship to another, and from starting one mediocre business to another, none ever quite reaching the level of success I knew it could.

Several years of therapy and countless self-help groups brought me to the realization that you cannot live your life simply to please another. In every experience where you live for that approval, you move further away from your truer self.

Lessons of a Reluctant Tiger

I always felt a sense of resignation with each failed attempt to gain my father's praise. I knew at a heart level that trying to do so would never get me the results I desired. I hid behind the rationalization that, when I fell short, at least I could say, "I tried!"

One night, I found myself sitting in a movie theater watching *Return of the Jedi*. In the scene where Yoda instructs Luke Skywalker to use the Force to lift his X-Wing Fighter out of a bog, Luke halfheartedly says to Yoda, "All right, I'll give it a try." Yoda responds with the Zen-like philosophy, "Do or do not. There is no try." It hit me! Either I was going to do this thing called "life" without making excuses and blaming others, or I was going to "try" my way into a life that was never mine. Then and there, I decided I would no longer be a people-pleaser who put my values and purpose second to validation from others.

I walked out of the theater that night with a clear purpose. Nike's "Just Do It" slogan made sense now. I was determined to create a life worthy of the stories I'm sharing with you here. In my mind, I held that report card with straight A's again, filled with pride reserved for me and no one else.

TOURNAMENT

Again around 10 years old, I was competing in The Internationals, one of the biggest martial arts tournaments in the world, and I was in contention for first place. My father, an accomplished martial artist himself, was my instructor and coach. He had a strategy to beat my opponent and his instructions to me were very clear. But once I got into the ring, things didn't work out as planned, and I needed to make some adjustments to win. I was so excited to hear my name announced over the loudspeaker! The tournament promoter, Ed Parker, handed me my trophy in front of close to 10,000 people. I ran off the stage to celebrate with my father but, as I approached him, he was wearing that same look of disappointment he had worn when he saw that A-minus on my report card...with one difference. He was clenching his jaw, which meant he was *angry*.

“Why didn't you follow my instructions and do what I told you to do?” he shouted for all to hear. Again, I had no answer for him. “Get down now and do pushups until I tell you to stop!” he shouted even louder, as he snatched the trophy out of my hands. My father stood over me menacingly as I did those

pushups. I was embarrassed by his reaction, but it taught me a valuable life lesson.

I learned that being an individual, expressing my creativity, and making my own choices based on my personal vision and intuition, were going to leave some people unhappy. At that moment, I understood the saying, "If you're going to make an omelet, you are going to have to break a few eggs."

This experience only fueled the conviction to live to my full potential. No longer would I make excuses or fall in line like a sheep being led to slaughter. It strengthened my purpose and passion to live my best life without limitations.

After the tournament, there was no turning back. While this conviction cost me my relationship with my father, I would have paid an even greater price if I had lost myself (as I had so many times before). Choosing to gain acceptance from my father (and others) over being true to myself has always yielded negative results. And as I continue to learn, I see that it is possible to be true to yourself while offering others unconditional love. My childlike heart and wishful thinking will always long for this with my father, but I humbly accept that has never been the case.

The greatest gift my father offered me was the lesson that I cannot control other people. I saw this in

my relationship with him every day. My father disapproved of me when I thought for myself and did not do what he thought I should. To him, this was unacceptable.

On the flipside, my father taught me acceptance of and tolerance toward others. The reality of these events with him made me realize I am not in control of circumstances and other people. It has shown me how to be more accountable for my thoughts, choices and actions, and for the way I choose to live my life each day. My relationship with my dad is a constant reminder that whenever I am pointing my finger at someone, there are three pointing back at me. I must take responsibility for the fingers pointing back without making excuses or blaming others for my life.

The journey and path to enlightenment are inward. There is nothing anyone can give me that I can't give myself. Every answer I seek is truly within. It has often been my choice to reach for external devices for fulfillment. There is that common belief that more money, a new car, bigger home, different job or relationship, will make us happy. We often chase these things only to find ourselves still unfulfilled and discontented.

The good news is that we all have the ability to change whatever we don't like about ourselves. But beware, this journey feels lonely at times. Such

growth requires willingness to pull back our covers and take an honest look at ourselves. Even when we don't like what we see, this simple act of acceptance is a great place to begin. Only through this honest and rigorous self-assessment can we begin to walk a path toward the person we desire and aspire to be.

A BIG PIECE OF CARDBOARD

In 1950, my dad came to America from the Philippines on a boat. He was 15 years old, had a sixth-grade education, and \$15 in his pocket. The U.S. Immigration Department detained him for six months before releasing him onto Market Street in San Francisco. His first jobs were working in a factory taking pleats out of skirts, and at a racetrack as a stable boy tending to the horses. He stayed in an immigrant family's flat, sleeping on a folding cot in the kitchen. Each day, he rose before everyone else; the family needed the kitchen to make breakfast.

My dad said that the level of racism at that time was not exclusive. The prejudice was aimed at all ethnicities not well-off and white. He was determined to make something of himself, but knew it would not be easy.

I remember this story of my dad's life because he said something that made a profound impact on my life: "At that time, others were smarter than me, richer than me, and whiter than me. But the one thing I knew I had over all of them was that I was willing to work harder than any of them."

My dad instilled this work ethic in me throughout my youth. We were always working on some project together. Whether it was remodeling a bathroom or sheetrocking a wall, we worked hard. My dad's form of punishment was to make my sisters and me do chores. He was determined to teach us to work harder than others, so we understood the value of having a great work ethic.

One day, my dad told me we needed to change the brake shoes on our car. Being from a poor family meant we never took the car to the auto repair shop for any kind of repair. For that matter, we never even went to the doctor unless it was an absolute emergency.

I was bit concerned and wondered what my dad was thinking. He had never changed the brakes on any car, let alone the one that we had to drive around in safely. Back then, you could not simply "Google it" or watch a DIY video to learn how to undertake such a task.

I followed him out to the curb, curious as to how my dad was going to accomplish this chore. Walking slightly behind him, I noticed he was carrying a big piece of cardboard along with some tools, a roll of silver duct tape and a black marker.

My dad proceeded to jack up the front end of our car and remove both front tires. He laid the cardboard down on the sidewalk closest to the left front brake assembly, which was now exposed. He then began to take it apart, piece by piece. As he did, he taped each piece of the brake assembly to the cardboard and numbered it with the black marker in the order it was removed. By the time he stripped it down and reassembled it on the cardboard with duct tape, he had a perfect replica of the left brake assembly.

He then proceeded to replace the worn-out brake shoes with new ones. Then, methodically, using his ingenious self-made instructions (pre-IKEA), he put the brake back together, exactly as if it had never been touched. He periodically referenced the exposed right wheel brake as a way of double-checking what he was doing. After my father completed the left front brake, he repeated the process on the right.

The great life lesson I learned from this mechanical adventure with my dad was the value of being resourceful and figuring things out for myself. A benefit of being poor was that, by default, your only choice was that you had to do it yourself.

This thinking has been powerful in helping me create a life that is all my own. I blame no one for my life because I am the one making it. I have my own big

piece of cardboard and I am writing the instructions for my life.

This *Do It Yourself* mindset built my self-confidence and continues to do so today. It allows me to make mistakes on the path of self-discovery. I'm convinced that no mistake is a mistake unless I squander the opportunity to learn and grow from it. I am too busy figuring it out to have time to climb upon a pity pot of "poor me" and self-entitlement.

The bottom line is that this is my space and my race, and I'm the only person who can live it. To be happy and successful, it requires me to be a thinker who learns the rules, then breaks them to create my own. It challenges me to think outside the box and, better yet, forget the box entirely and think for myself.