

We Still Have The Right

By Tom Doona

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“Every child deserves to feel at home in the world”. That was the line that extended through every inch of Dad’s work as an education and drama specialist. He was driven by the idea that the world must be built with a malleability that caters to every child’s every need. And he used drama to facilitate this. To help each child sow their patch of earth; to root themselves, to find the security and comfort needed not only to grow, but to prosper. To be their best selves.

Over the past year, I have found this line to be increasingly applicable with every class I teach and every session I run. I have worked with countless children across a wide range of ages in varying situations. I have watched them embody Chaplin’s Little Tramp. I have watched them throw their hands to the sky like Rocky Balboa. I have watched as they explore filmmaking as a form of unadulterated creative expression, as a platform for endless fun, and as a tool in the construction of their *place in their world*. And what I have noticed most strikingly is that, close to universally, they know it. Especially at the younger ages. They know this is their home. They know they have the right to belong. They demand it. They take in the world, and they decide whether what it offers is enough. At the most surface, instinctual level. When it gets too loud, they cover their ears and ask for quiet. When they don’t understand, they raise their hand and ask for help. When they get bored, they scour the room for distraction or appear at my feet and say something like “do you want to see my sheep impression?” (this happens with surprising regularity). It is an innate part of their day-to-day lives to tune into their senses and decide whether the world around them is doing enough. They navigate and explore the world knowing that it is their home. And it is both an immeasurable strength and a vulnerability that upon the world they cast their warm, home-comfort tint. Regardless of what is going on around them. Children strive to get what they want. They demand it with an unshakeable, strong-willed assertion. And recently, while surrounded by a room full of firm-footed explorers, I got to questioning something. About them, about me, about us all:

When did we grow out of that? When did instinctual self-assertion get redefined to *selfish* or *hard work*? When did we stop demanding to feel at home in the world?

Of course, we never fully hold our hands up and cave into life's daily downpour. Throughout adolescence and adulthood we still carry a level of demand and integrity that keeps us safe and enduring in the world. Our relationship with the spontaneity of day-to-day life persists in being a call and response, through which we harness what is presented to us and reflect (or refract) it with our own standpoints and expectations. We get cold - we throw a scarf around ourselves. We stub our toe - we stare down a table leg and label it the devil incarnate. We get hurt - we fix ourselves up and make note never to get hurt in the same way again. We do hold our standards. We demand from the world. But I'm not sure how far this extends. I think the tether shortens as our timeline lengthens. I'm not sure we let our dynamic philosophies be as inwardly defined as we did when we were imitating sheep.

But that is speculative. Subjective. It is a point of thought that could bankrupt me by demanding more notepad lines than my budget can allow. So I will magnify it down into a situation that embodies what I am trying to get across. Last week, I ran two festive filmmaking sessions back to back. The first session was with a group of 6-9 year olds. I asked them to stand in front of a camera and tell me 'what makes christmas special to you?'. They didn't ask a single question. They each got up, gave their answer and moved on. Testament to the earnestness of their answers was that no two of them were the same. They each told their truth, because they each knew that their truth was valid. Whether that was "I like mince pies" or "CHRISTMAS IS GOOD BECAUSE YOU CAN STEAL YOUR DOG'S TOYS!" they gave it their all. Sometimes timidly, sometimes with an impressive Saturday morning energy - but always authentically. They never doubted that their place in the task was welcomed, valued and important.

Then I did a similar task with a group of 10-13 year olds, so not much older. I asked them to write a short poem about Christmas, and I told them that the poem could be *anything* (always a risky, albeit interesting, direction). Immediately, heads turned and mumbles sounded. "I can't write poems!", "Mine is going to be so bad", "Can I vacuum the floor instead?". Straight away I saw something I hadn't seen in the group just a few years younger. I saw doubt and resistance. I saw imposter syndrome rear its thorny head. I gave them the encouragement to swap that resistance for a pen and put it to

paper. To tackle the hardest part of writing: starting. But retrospectively, I see the beginning of a change that I can see in a more developed state in my own life. It is a change in the calculation of what the world expects from us, and what we expect in return.

Children don't pay bills. They don't avoid eye contact to stare at sticky floors on their daily commute. They (hopefully) don't buy and cook the food that fills their belly. So at a surface level, of course they hold their hands up less. As adults, we have to fulfil more demands just to survive. We have to shrug our shoulders and grit our teeth on a daily basis. That's just the way it works, and we know there's no good in fighting that. But this can make us lazy. That heedless acceptance can extend too far. As André Aciman puts it in *Call Me By Your Name*: "*We rip out so much of ourselves to be cured of things faster than we should that we go bankrupt by the age of thirty*". And although without its context this quote seems to catastrophise a little, it represents a part of growing up that we negate to question. We accept it as part of the process. We let it in, often in the form of imposter syndrome. It is the inevitable idea that the world need not be our home. It is just a roof, a place for us to sleep, a table for us to eat at. We expect to be welcomed in part, but never whole. We don't expect warmth if we can't light the fire ourselves. We don't expect the day to raise our heartbeat. We don't shelter ourselves from the rain if we feel we would belong more when soaking wet. We don't seek a home in the world. We just enter whichever doorway best fits our shape.

But that is not in-built. I see it with every session and every class. Every child. What adulthood defines as *selfish* and *stubborn* is the exact thing that makes childhood often so fulfilling. Before we know what we really want from the world, we demand it. And we don't give a damn about that oxymoron. This change is most prevalent to me when it comes to creativity: we all listen, watch, read, consume with an open-minded limitlessness. But when we create, we doubt whether it is enough. We dress ourselves as the imposter. We dig valleys between the creative world and the role we can play within it. We view it from a distance. So often when someone shares a piece of creative work with me, they throw in the antecedent of "it's a bit rubbish" or "it's a work in progress". We lower the bar for ourselves, expecting a need to soften a blow. But when I ask a room of nearly thirty 6-9 year olds to give me ideas for the next stage of a story I am met with a sea of eager hands. They want to add to the story because they know they have the right to. And we still have the right. The more we learn, the less we feel

we know. So we say less, make less, expect less. But we have the right to raise our hands. To be seen and heard. To grasp our ideas and inch them closer to the sky. To belong. And this isn't just about creativity. It is about all walks of life. Those 'ideas' can be the standards we hold for ourselves. The things we prioritise, and the choices we make because of them. We still have the right to expect. To live a life that is foremost catered to what we need. Right then, right there. It is not selfish to turn that spotlight inward. As long as you do so from a point of care and consideration - for yourself as much as anyone else. Nothing sustains us longer than warmth and contentment. And that is not selfish, because what better gift to give to the world than that same warmth? It's a wildfire. So when it gets too loud, cover your own ears with the expectation and hope that others will do the same. It's child's play, but it shouldn't only be the child's way. Adult life demands the same. It benefits from it. When you are uncomfortable, unhappy, cold, hot, any distance away from what you know you need. If it is not what houses you, and if you do have the ability and spring-of-step to do so, then have the strength to expect different. Put change in motion. Know that the world is not four walls and a ceiling - it's a home, and one with a doorway that shapes itself around you.

There are so many situations where this philosophy could cause hurt, or be too much, or be the embodiment of what is drilled into us as *selfish*. But is that not the case with all things? Moderation is the antidote. Rationality. Situationality. If each time you are met with a scenario in which your role could go two ways, choosing the role where you are most comfortable and content will always give ease in helping others make that same decision. To support their hand, not guide it. It is the oxygen mask on the aeroplane: the sooner you sort your own, the longer you will be able to help those around you. Children only know their role in the world because they write it with what they know about themselves. They demand what they want only because they know what they need. Then and there. Their senses and their instinct. To feel at home in the world. To feel warmth with the window open. To stay dry in the eye of a storm. To be faced with chaos and to close their eyes to find a calm. They hold their hands up only to share their ideas. They take pride in their livestock impersonations. They know that they are their best when they are whole. So decades down the line - why shouldn't they walk away when it hurts to stay? Why shouldn't they write that poem or paint that picture? Why shouldn't they expect more for themselves, even if that means giving slightly less to others? Why shouldn't they deafen themselves to every whisper other than the one they know is the

truth? Why shouldn't they put effort into holding onto the innate self-prioritisation that makes a room full of 6-9 year olds so full of collective, holistic energy?

And why shouldn't we listen to them? To help them build their home, but also to trace their blueprints and use them as our own. Think of the child demanding warmth, even in the depths of winter. Even when the world has to turn a little faster just to give them what they need. Think of how they put themselves front and centre, with the innocent acceptance that they are peripheral in the eyes of most everyone else. And how that is not a bad thing. It is the platform on which they will build their ever-expanding love and care for the world. They know exactly where that starts.

They deserve to feel at home in the world. And they always will.