

Wishing You An Ish-Ful New Year!

by Tamara Strijack (January 6, 2020)

We have so many pressures put on us – some by others, some self-inflicted – to do things “right”. Welcoming in another new year can sometimes feel this way, too. We make resolutions to eat better, to live better, to work out more. We create restrictions for ourselves and focus on outcomes. As a society, we are good at this. And we start young with our productive mindset.

I was one of those children who felt internal pressure to get things right. My years as an artist were short-lived. By age 6, after a year at school, I figured out that there was a “right” (and therefore, a “not right”) way to do things, and I was not going to take any chances. I didn’t ever want to make a mistake or risk getting something wrong. So I stopped taking risks. Period. I played it safe. I stayed within the lines. In all aspects of my life, but especially when it came to art and music.

Fast forward 30-some-odd years and I stumble across the book *Ish* by Peter Reynolds. I identified with the young boy who loved to draw his world, only to be judged and criticized which eventually shut him down. In the meantime, his sister has been snatching the drawings as he threw them out, creating her own crumpled art gallery in her room. Through his sister’s eyes, he is able to see his drawings differently. His vase may not have been perfect, or exactly how it had looked in his head, but it was vase-ish. His boat was boat-ish. His poems were poem-ish. His world suddenly opened up. And so did mine!

I suddenly had a taste of what freedom could be. Seeing things ish-ly opened a door for me ... a portal into a new way of being in my world. And this was a world that was not about right or wrong, but about expressing the beauty and the heartache and everything in between. A world about taking risks. A world where the process was valued more highly than the outcome.

I began finding ways, slowly and cautiously at first, to colour outside the lines – both literally and figuratively. Inspired by *The Dot* (another Peter Reynolds’s book), I created dot stickers to colour my walls. I began to collage my experiences, stretching outside my comfort zone to get in touch with my internal world. I could taste a type of freedom I’d never felt before.

I wanted this freedom for my children. I wanted to create spaces for them to explore their world, without expectations or a sense of judgment to hold them back. I remember how excited I had been for my youngest daughter’s kindergarten experience: an opportunity to explore new things in a fun and expressive way; to experiment; to move and sing and dance.

Then one day I volunteered in her kindergarten class. This small country school had decided to jump on the early start movement, and bring in middle school teachers to focus early on academics, in order to get ahead. The goals smelled strongly of performance and achievement. One morning, when the eager five-year old students were all seated around their tables (with explicit instructions not to move their legs under the table), they were preparing to colour a worksheet of things that started with A. They were instructed to colour the apple red.

This was simply too much for me! I had a flashback to my own small self, already restricted by the pressures to do what was right, and only what was right. I knew the limits this placed on me, and felt again the pressure and the judgment.

Stirred by this memory, everything in me wanted to lean over to the boy next to me and whisper, “You can colour the apple purple if you want.”

If we are so focused on performance and outcome, we can lose the heart of what learning (and living!) is about. It is about wonder and discovery. It is about exploring our world and finding new ways to see things. We cannot do this from a place of fear and judgment and pressure. Whether we are 5 or 65, we need to feel safe to take risks and to make mistakes. We need the freedom to live more ish-fully. In my experience, this is what leads to emotional health and well-being; this is what helps us reach our potential as human beings.

What if we blurred the edges of those lines we try too hard to stay within? What if we focused less on outcome and on pushing harder for results, and created more space for exploration and discovery? The irony is that we are far more “productive” in the play or exploration mode, where it isn’t about “producing” at all.

When I think of this year coming up, I want to find more ways to live ish-fully – to paint something tree-ish, to write something poem-ish (or maybe even book-ish!), to sing something harmonious-ish.

And to help make the children in my life feel safe enough and free enough to do the same.

A different kind of resolution to ponder ...

Dr. Gordon Neufeld, 2017
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