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Author

Thialan, Radhanath

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Dance – the cause of our fight, the cause of our bond

After twelve years of controversy over his son's study of dance, a dad in Malaysia finally accepts his son's chosen path

by Radhanath Thialan

Did you know? Out of 3.5 million children doing ballet in the United States, only 10% of them are male dancers. This number is not unforeseen, but the reason can be disturbing. According to a 2018 article in the *Huffington Post*, the greatest obstacle for boys who do ballet is often their fathers. As I grew up in a strict, religious household in Malaysia with a dad who was the decision maker and always had the last word, dancing was nowhere near my reach, especially being a boy.

My dad came from a poor family and only had a high school degree. He is now very proud to be where he is—an entrepreneur, owning a nice house, being able to afford his BMW and having a family of five. Education is very important to him and he always told us to study hard and be a university graduate. He is a very spiritual Indian man, raised us to believe in God. He is also very disciplined when it comes to living a healthy lifestyle. Having good manners is his priority, and if orders were not followed, our buttocks would surely be as red as those of baboons. My dad being a health conscious person, we were all not only vegetarian from birth but food had to be organic. Despite his strictness, we loved him very much.

My mom, on the other hand, is a university graduate from Australia, who double majored in accounting and computer science. She worked as an internal auditor before she was pregnant with me. She then decided to be a stay-home piano teacher, so that she was able to be there with us as we grew. My mom is Chinese, and she very often allowed us to have some freedom during our childhood. Sometimes, Mom would buy us ice-cream without our dad's knowledge. She also brought arts into the family. She was my piano teacher since I was 4. She was also the person, who took me to my first ballet class.

I was 5 when I stepped into a local ballet studio with my younger brother. I was a very shy boy. Though there were no other boys in my ballet class, I enjoyed it so much that I didn't care. What inspired me most was that ballet gave me a sense of freedom to do what I desire, express my feelings and to tell stories with the movements of my body, which I could not do at home. Not knowing better, I went home full of excitement and told my dad about my first ballet class. Sadly, he did not respond at all. He acted like I wasn't talking to him. I could tell that he did not like the idea of me dancing. Still, I continued my ballet training for the next few months, and I was selected to be in the school yearly recital. Nervousness did not pop up into my little head thanks to the disciplinary lifestyle at home. I just followed what my ballet teacher told me to do. My eyes glowed, reflecting the colorful stage lights during rehearsals on stage; it felt like I was in a magical kingdom. Little did I know, this magical kingdom would soon turn into a dark place, as this concert was the first and the last time dad saw me perform.

There was awkward silence in the car heading home after my first recital. It was just me and my brother munching on some organic nut and raisins bars that my mother had prepared for us. At around midnight, my brother and I were woken up by my parents' arguing. All I could hear was "boys should not dance!" and it seemed as if it was our fault that we did what we really enjoyed most. My parents did not speak to each other the next day, and I was told by my mom

that we would not go for ballet classes anymore. I was sad, very sad. I didn't know why Dad did not want us to dance, and I was too scared to ask. I had my ballet class music CD and would play it at home every Wednesday at 6 p.m., the time when my dance class was scheduled. One day, my ballet teacher called my mom because she wondered why we stopped taking classes, and my mom told the teacher what was going on. My mom cried over the phone, while my brother and I peeped from the door, eavesdropping on adult conversation that was difficult for us to make sense of at that time.

For two years, my passion for dance grew, even though we were forbidden to dance. I felt empty inside and hated my dad for taking dance away from me. My mom observed that my passion for dance, instead of diminishing, was increasing. I was eight then, when my mom decided to send us to ballet classes again, but without my dad's knowledge. I was so thrilled that evening when I stepped into the ballet studio again after a long break. My dad usually came home from work around eight in the evening, and because my ballet teacher knew our family problem, she arranged our class to be right after school, before my dad got home. If my dad was off on a certain day, so was ballet class. Once-a-week ballet training became twice-a-week, then three times, as our levels increased. Performances, examinations and competitions were all hidden from my dad. White lie after white lie—this was how I grew up as a dancer for the next eight years.

Life was not easy, having to sneak in and out of our own house, hiding from my own father, to pursue my dream. One day, when I was having a conversation with my father, I brought up the topic, saying that I loved and enjoyed dancing. I said his reasonings were unbelievably ignorant and stupid. He said that if you dance, you should only dance for God, such as learning Bharatanatyam or Odissi, as the famous Ramli Ibrahim did. Moreover, dancing would also affect my studies negatively and eventually would be a bad influence. "Have you heard of those perverts who will have sex to get a role they want and use their body incorrectly!?" he said.

Being 16, I concluded that all he said was a lie. Was he crazy to even think like that, just because he did not want me to dance? He wasn't a dancer, what did he know? I was angry and wanted to prove him wrong. I took up Bharatanatyam to satisfy him, burnt the midnight oil to study, to ensure that I would not become the dancer that he described. Now that I am older, I realize that my dad was just concerned about negative stereotypes of dancers. That year, I also took up Latin dancing. I received an academic award as one of the top students in high school, and I also received a scholarship for 5 years consecutively because of my participation in international Latin dance competitions. My dad worked overseas a lot when I was fifteen through eighteen. Those were my golden opportunities for competitions and dance training. "FREEDOM," I would always scream at the top of my lungs, when I knew that my dad would not be home for a week!

My actions of hating my father made my mom sad, but she still fully supported my dream in dance. She paid for all my classes, dance competitions and recital fees, and also my fancy costumes. My mom also never missed a single show or competition until I came to the U.S., despite the many long boring waits. My dad did not show any appreciation whatsoever when I received the dancesport scholarships at school, which saved him lots of money yearly. He only acknowledged my straight A's in academics. In 2014, I started my higher education far away from home, pursuing a business degree at Scottsdale Community College (SCC) in Arizona. I was super excited to find out that SCC had an amazing dance program as well. I auditioned and was offered a partial scholarship for dance, so I could have a double major without my dad's

knowledge. It felt so good and relaxed to be able to dance whenever I wanted without having to hide from anyone at all!

Since I was further away from home, I slowly started to reveal that I was doing a double major in dance while keeping my 4.0 GPA. Surprisingly, my father was not very concerned and did not show any disapproval, but always emphasized that I had to focus on my studies. I observed that he was slowly trusting me more after he received an email from the community college stating that I was selected as the Chancellor's Award recipient! That year, I also auditioned for the University of California, Irvine and got in as a dance major. I told my dad the news and we had a very long conversation that night. He said that he was able to see my love for dance and that he appreciated that I was trying to prove to him that I could achieve what I desired. Even though he had not seen me perform since I was six, my dad told me that when one day I had a performance, he would come to support me. That was an amazing 360 degrees change for my dad. It still seems unbelievable when I think of it now.

After 12 years of dispute, agonizing and stress, finally father and son came to terms, and we are now still making effort to "tie our bond," which had become loose since the day I stepped into the dance world. It is not too late to repair our relationship. I believe that I will do much better with the support from all family members, which will allow me to do my best to communicate without words to audience, through the language of the soul when I dance. Last but not least, I would like to say a special thank you to my mom and siblings, who always supported me throughout my dance journey, keeping my secret safe from my dad.

In June 2018, dancer and choreographer Rad Thialan graduated with a dance degree from University of California, Irvine, where he then entered the MFA in Dance program.