

Stories of Hope

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#1

I had a troubled childhood where my inner and outer worlds were colliding in ways that did me endless harm. At 14 I was placed in care by social services and was assigned a social worker whose name to this very day still eludes me. No matter how much I resisted and rebelled against her she never once let go of my hand. She saw something in me that I couldn't. Her consistent patience and serene smile gave me hope. How could I ever forget the name of someone who so fundamentally changed my life? Perhaps her name was less important than the fact she was an angel who walked into my life and offered me a better future. I think of her often during these dark and desperate times. She still holds my hand to this very day.



#2

A few years ago, my eldest daughter (then 17) turned around to me and asked "Dad when do I know I'm in love?" After an awkward double take my mind scrambled around in the nooks, crannies and chaos of my own life experiences. I was desperately looking for a wise answer that would comfort her and probably me too. A minute passed and I eventually replied "Maybe it's not about how much you like someone but how much you like yourself when you are with them. Are you feeling like you're being the best version of yourself? If so this could be a vital clue that you might be in love." She smiled back at me in that way only children can do to their parents because in that moment she felt safe, protected and hopeful!



#3

As a teenager I had an unconventional education. I lived in a community outside of London in forty-three acres of land. We cooked and cleaned for each other and made collective decisions. The trees, the fields, the river and the open sky were our friends. I was an avid reader and at eighteen I decided to study English literature at A Level. On one particular occasion my lesson was an hour long walk around the grounds discussing Shakespeare's Othello with my English teacher Dave Seddon. With boundless teenage enthusiasm I responded to each one of his questions with what I thought was a clever and competent answer. After a short while Dave said "Why don't we do this differently? Why don't you try answering with another question? The only rule is that it has to be a "beautiful" question. This approach turned my education on its head! This brilliant man was encouraging me to be curious and creative. For him having answers was so much less important than having a voice. He was inviting me to dream and he was teaching me the art of collaboration! I truly believe I wouldn't be the producer I am today without Dave's insistence on the beautiful question. There has been a tremendous surge of human creativity as we remain locked up in our homes. Yet, as we appear to be losing our way of life the one comforting thought is that unlike many other human resources creativity is one of those rare things that the more you use the more you have!



#4

Muhammad Ali was and still is my hero. The man was beautiful, intelligent, graceful, flawed and fought for deep held principles inside and outside the boxing ring. I have his picture on my bedside table. As a family of colour growing up in London in the 60s and 70s there were very few heroes to inspire and embolden us. One of my most memorable family rituals was to sit around our black and white TV watching his legendary fights. He made us feel better about who we were as the world outside found it hard to accept us. I loved this man. I needed him! Yesterday morning after six weeks of lock down I woke up feeling empty and sorry for myself. There is a well-known boxing quote which says "everyone has a plan until they get punched in the nose!" Our way of life has been seriously clobbered and it's going to take a mountain of resilience, love and optimism to lift us out of what feels like the darkest of holes. I looked at my picture of Muhammad Ali and told myself courage cannot exist without fear and I may lose things that I have but I cannot lose who I am!



#5

In 2008, while sitting waiting at an airport, I thought what do I need to be a better producer and person? The following words flowed off my pen. Love, passion, conviction, hard work, consistency, discipline, courage, endurance, strength, grace, rebelliousness, patience, flexibility, optimism, willingness to adapt, good listener, good communicator, a fighter, charm, luck, pride, vulnerability, good taste, good instincts, honesty, integrity, authenticity, humility, creativity, empathy, gratitude and avoid saying "it's mine!".



#6

I started dancing at 21. After my first class, I was smitten by this strange sensation of finding and losing myself in the same moment. Soon after came this overwhelming need to improve which resulted in many years of tormenting myself with the idea there is a "right way" to dance. At 31 I was a member of the Ulmer Ballet in Germany. We were privileged to have some senior dancers from the company of Pina Bausch come to teach us. One teacher, Jean Laurent Sasportes, watched me struggle in daily class trying to fix several things in my body at once. He suggested that for six months I only concentrate on one thing to improve. So I chose to focus on keeping my grand plié smooth and as musical as possible. After a few months I noticed that many of the other things I was trying to fix were beginning to sort themselves out too. It was almost like magic! When Jean came back, he was happy with the changes he saw in me. He told me the reason for this approach to self-improvement is because the body is an intelligent ecosystem that is interconnected. Nothing exists in isolation, and so by improving one thing many things will follow in its slipstream and change with it. It was a valuable life lesson which I've applied to everything I've done since. I have many jobs but when I'm working I only ever do one. It makes me happier, more concentrated and deeply connected to my ideas and my tasks. My flaws trouble me so much less because I no longer have the need to pursue an illusion of perfection..



#7

This year is Akram Khan Company's 20th birthday. It's been an extraordinary journey, and in my mind the most significant turning point was when we failed in March 2002. It was the premiere of our second major work *Kaash* in Créteil, France. Many of the most important international festival and theatre directors attended eager to see the revelation called Akram Khan. Yet, the work was under-developed both structurally and choreographically. Everyone left disappointed and I heard mutterings that Akram was a one hit wonder. The next day the sense of failure sunk in and we felt crestfallen. Perhaps the expectations were too high for all of us. It then occurred to us that "failure" is such a blanket term, and we asked ourselves what kind of failure did we actually make? Was it a failure of skill, nerve, concept, denial or effort? We settled on failure of nerve. We couldn't handle the pressure. So we dusted ourselves off and for the next six weeks we reworked *Kaash* and meticulously wove together all the artistic ingredients so they were coherent and meaningful. I then convinced all those presenters to give us a second chance and return to London in May that same year. They fell in love with the work and *Kaash* paved the way for what came after. It was painful at the time but now I'm truly grateful for the experience as it instilled into Akram's art and working culture resilience, courage, mental fortitude and an innate desire to take insights from the darkest of places.