

A Different Kind of Balancing

By Doris Lee

It's another autumn. This year it feels so different from last year. All the pressure is back on...I'm just in Form 4, but I can feel the DSE exam coming closer, closer. It's still a little less than three years away, but it feels like next week. I have so much school work and studying to do. I'm lucky if I can get six or seven hours of sleep on a weekday.

After we get our test scores back, the teachers would say things like "What have you been doing? Are you studying at all?" or "Do you think this is good enough?" We just look at them. They don't know how much time we spend on studying and tutorials. On top of all the homework, quizzes and tests, we have to go out and do "Other Learning Experiences" in our little remaining time. It's so superficial. We are supposed to go out and discover "different" things in Hong Kong for our "critical thinking", and sometimes it really is interesting, but what's it got to do with our education? In the end, everyone knows the only thing that matters is the DSE score, and getting into university. And if we fail, then we are failures.

But this year on September 28, I couldn't help but remember the same day last year. A pretty big group of the senior students in the school had worn yellow ribbons, openly. I really wanted to wear one too, but I didn't. Little yellow umbrella drawings appeared in toilet stalls or in the corners of school posters. The students buzzed with talk about going to the different actions in the city, to protest for democracy and universal suffrage. I heard some of them did go, and later we heard about the tear gas, the clashes with police, the running.... Those following days, I listened to every thing I could, about the protests and the different student groups and leaders, like Joshua Wong and Agnes Chow from Scholarism, and Alex Chow and Lester Shum from the Hong Kong Federation of Students. I felt my heart flying, when I heard about them. I felt like I could see out of a hole in the walls that surrounded me. I felt like there was really something more, beyond exams and study and a job one day. The routine of life could be totally changed! By students! But I never let anyone hear what I thought or felt about the things happening then.

My mom is a policewoman. Even when she's off duty, you can kind of tell she might be a policewoman. She always has short, neat hair, she stands really straight and confident and talks with authority, and she checks people out really fast, sums up who they are in an instant – age, background, situation. People think that she must be really strict to me, maybe beat me or punish me harshly if

I talk back, or something like that. Actually she doesn't. She has two sisters, my aunts, who she has really close and warm relationships with, and she said when she had a girl, she wanted to have a relationship with her daughter almost like with a sister. So she doesn't really shout at me a lot, or nag me too much. She talks to me almost like an equal. But she does tell me stories, her way of passing down her wisdom to me. Her theme is always: balance. Sweetie, you can't get whatever you want. You don't want to end up as a fool. You've got to have balance. You can have ideals in your head, but in your life you need to keep a balance. So when the teacher says something is right, better not to fight. Don't make things more difficult for yourself.

I think she gets that from Grandpa, partly. Grandpa is very balanced when it comes to eating. He never eats too much or too little. He never eats things too spicy or too sweet or too salty. He always balances out the food he eats – if he has something which is “heaty” then he has to have some soup that will cool him down. And he avoids strong opinions as well as strong tastes.

Mom would tell me about all the good and bad cases of balancing in her family. Grandpa's uncle was a real sincere Communist in China, back in the days. He taught people about Marxism and helped get people to support Mao. But during the Cultural Revolution, he wouldn't give up on his beliefs and his trust in the Communist Party. His own students bullied him and got him kicked out of his own school for being a counter-revolutionary, when he was the exact opposite. He could never get a job in education after that, and only did work as a house repairman. Mom thinks he didn't know how to balance. He could have kept a stable career in education, instead of being just a manual worker.

Mom's sister's husband works in a software development company. He was making so little money for years and some colleagues tried to get him to join them in challenging the boss about the salary. But he refused to join them, and finally those others lost their jobs while he stayed on, with a raise. Mom thinks he knew how to balance.

And Mom thinks women have to balance even more than men. They need to understand how hard it is to be a man, responsible for so many things. They should be understanding and tolerant, do whatever is needed to keep the marriage smooth. I'm not so sure about that, because it seems to me like there are a lot of men who do whatever they want, but then don't keep their promises to their wives. But I don't know why that doesn't change Mom's views. It seems like she always thinks the one in charge knows best and we have to trust them. We are the ones who have to balance out for what reality presents us with.

So when I tell Mom stuff that happens at school, like some teacher yelling at me

for something that was not my fault... she thinks I should balance. I should understand that teachers know already what is best for us, and expecting them to be perfect and fair is not going to help me get anywhere. Sometimes I just don't tell her what happens at school. I think I can't be like her. I put up with teachers who are unfair, but I can't make excuses for them in my head like she does. Mom also tells stories of unfair things she sees at work. But her conclusion is always to just accept the reality, and realize that nobody can easily achieve a perfect situation. I always listen, I love listening to Mom's stories. But a part of me feels that if I have to balance the way she does, I would lose some pieces of my heart. I would be less me.

Last year September 28, I remember I was so crushed between opposites. Forget about balance! I was hot and cold at the same time. I was yellow and blue at the same time. I was happy and miserable at the same time. Around those days, Mom was doing tons of overtime, and looking black in the face whenever she was home. She did not really talk that much about the protests and the police incidents that were getting in the news. But she did talk about the protesters, especially the students. She said they were ruining their futures, and acting blindly and naively. They would get nowhere, they would achieve nothing. They should understand that they were asking too much, asking for something that the government could not give. And people should not criticize the police either, when were doing their best in the middle of so much chaos.

I know my classmates know my mom is a policewoman. But they never teased me. They just kept silent about my mom, while talking about things other police had done to students and protesters. But they treated me as a yellow ribbon supporter, like they were. They just assumed I agreed with them. And they were right.

I can't say my mom is wrong. I know her. I know why she thinks the way she does. She just thinks that we people need to be grateful. We need to be realistic, and not jeopardize a shaky future. We need to balance. I guess so. But a dream's a dream. A dream can be big, and I can't see why even a dream has to balance.

This year, September 28, nothing happened at school. In my heart, I was sad. I was disappointed. Where did our hopes go? For me, they were not gone. I looked at my classmates' faces. I could not see or hear a trace of what we had gone through last year. Our school and the city.

I began to pay more attention to the news in the papers, after that. I saw that one or two students had committed suicide, probably from school or parent pressure. And then one or two more, in the next month. I felt so sad. They didn't know how to balance. And, unlike how I felt last year, they had no hole in their walls

that they could see out of and breathe out of.... they only saw complete walls all around – no way out. Just a future of exams, of “shoulds”, of trying to prove you’re not a failure....

I’ve begun posting stuff on my Facebook account, mainly links to news and opinions. Talking about the umbrella movement, and about the education system and the DSE. I don’t really have my own things to say, yet. But I feel like it’s my way to breathe out of the small hole in the wall around me. To keep myself balanced, in my own way. I share those links, and see what people say. I try to find some new thoughts that I might decide are also mine.

Lucky thing Mom doesn’t like Facebook too much, and she doesn’t mind that I haven’t added her as friend. I guess she wouldn’t really like to see what I’ve been posting. She would probably worry I am becoming a radical. She would probably remind me to be balanced, and consider how hard it is for CY Leung to rule Hong Kong, or for the police to deal with the public’s criticisms, or for schools to come up with policies that don’t squeeze us students so badly.

And Mom would probably not like another new thing happening to me now. I met a girl from another school at a debate competition, and we’ve been chatting alot, and we’ve even met a few times after school. I can talk with her about anything! But the thing is, I think she likes me – as in “likes me”! She told me, “I’m not sure if I like men or women.” And I feel kind of excited too. I don’t know what will happen; maybe it’s an illusion or my misunderstanding. But what I am sure of is that I feel so different from last year. Last year I was so excited about the possibility of a different kind of Hong Kong, but stayed wordless. My mom was a policewoman and I was a secret yellow ribbon supporter in my heart. I was mute and burning with the contradiction. But now I have a friend. And my world is different. Mom, I am achieving balance in my own way. For me, balancing is not for survival. It’s for a keeping a dream alive. With my dreams and own thoughts alive and whole, I can breathe and survive. The pressure stays outside, not inside of me. For me, that’s the right kind of balancing.