The Riot Within

*Why can’t we all just get along?*

—Rodney King

*In the Western world, at least, we do not learn to become our true selves, to become ourselves, but to become a confusion of other people’s selves, false, inauthentic selves. Thus deformed, we go through life attempting to play the roles that are expected of us.*

—Ashley Montagu (foreword to Arno Gruen’s *The Betrayal of Self*)

One truism says that we humans are social animals, that like wolves or deer, we need a network of our own kind to survive well in the world. While I cannot speak for other animals, we tend to complicate our relationships with a nearly constant psychological noise of uncertainty, self-doubt, and angst over how others see us. No one is this more true for than young people, in my experience. Children and teenagers suffer the continual insecurity about who they are, what they will become, how valuable they are to others. We struggle to maintain friendships and connections that validate us, but others inflict cruelties that make us feel that we are somehow less than we should be: less popular, less important, less good. In my own life, I have gone through many periods of such wavering uncertainty: as a child who longed for the right friends,
a teenager who took strongly to religion as a way to validate myself and separate myself from others, and as a young adult who chose friends with very set ways to measure a person’s value. Now, as a middle aged father of a teenager, I see her struggle to find her own place of comfort with herself, but it seems an often impossible task for her, as she tries to see herself worthy of the friendship of certain peers, of the respect of her teachers, of her own place in the world. As a result, she finds herself sometimes in a negative progression that ends in hopelessness. This frustrates her mother and I enormously, since in an ideal world, our unconditional love for her would be enough to provide all that she needs to be happy. However, we live in a world that seems often far from ideal—not just because of the big and obvious problems like global warming or economic insecurity, but also because our individual emotional needs remain unmet by the people we depend on.

When Rodney King asked his simple question in the aftermath of the riots sparked by the police brutality against him, he spoke to the vastly complicated problem that she and so many young people face: Why do we not help one another with love and acceptance instead of tearing each other down with selfish meanness? We often fail to realize the effects our words and actions have on others, but sometimes even the perception of negative judgment can lead others to damage themselves in some way. Sometimes their only way out is to rebel and strike out in a new direction, as keeping my daughter will do, but this can also lead to a sense of failure or even destroy relationships that could have been healthy. In the end, saying “That’s not who I am” to those who want to define you may be the only way forward.

Amy Tan’s “Two Kinds,” an excerpt from her classic book *The Joy Luck Club*, shows a daughter’s journey from feeling dominated by her mother to the crucial moment of rebellion that frees her from her mother’s efforts to define her and lets her begin becoming her own person. In
the beginning, Jing Mei (the daughter) feels as excited as her mother (Suyuen) by the array of possibilities that life in America offers her, seeing herself through her mother’s eyes as a brilliant prodigy: “In all of my imaginings, I was filled with a sense that I would soon become perfect. My mother and father would adore me. I would be beyond reproach. I would never feel the need to sulk for anything.” (1) But as most children learn—often with a great deal of pain—she eventually needs to find her own way into her future and not rely on others to establish or even validate who she is and what she will become. As she tries to be everything her mom wants, Jing Mei fails over and over, fails at looking like Shirley Temple, at knowing the facts Suyuen quizzes her on, at becoming a wonderful pianist. She reaches her nadir, her dark night of the soul:

After seeing my mother’s disappointed face once again, something inside of me began to die. I hated the tests, the raised hopes and failed expectations. Before going to bed that night, I looked in the mirror above the bathroom sink and when I saw only my face staring back—and that it would always be this ordinary face—I began to cry. Such a sad, ugly girl!... And then I saw what seemed to be the prodigy side of me—because I had never seen that face before. I looked at my reflection, blinking so I could see more clearly. The girl staring back at me was angry, powerful. This girl and I were the same. I had new thoughts, willful thoughts, or rather thoughts filled with lots of won’ts. I won’t let her change me, I promised myself. I won’t be what I’m not. (2)

How many of us have such a dark moment, a feeling of utter worthlessness and failure from not living up to what your parents, your friends, your teachers expect of you? Suyuen has good intentions for Jing Mei in trying to get her to explore her potential, but her plans for her daughter all backfired and created in the end a deep sense of remorse: “I t was not the only disappointment
my mother felt in me. In the years that followed, I failed her so many times, each time asserting
my own will, my right to fall short of expectations. I didn’t get straight As. I didn’t become class
president. I didn’t get into Stanford. I dropped out of college.” (8) As she travels from the good
daughter model of wanting to become the kind of person her mom envisions to being who she
needs herself to be, the conflict between daughter and mother becomes central to their
relationship.

The fight between them, the daughter’s push against the mother’s pressure, reached a
peak when Jing Mei invokes the image of Suyuen’s children who had died in China. When she
says, “I wish I were dead! Like them,,” she intentionally pushes her mother as far away as she
can, but in doing that, she also seems to claim her own place in the world, her autonomy and a
way to see herself as worthy without her mother’s approval.

But her freedom comes with a real cost, for it destroyed something vital in the
relationship: “And for all those years, we never talked about the disaster at the recital or my
terrible accusations afterward at the piano bench. All that remained unchecked, like a betrayal
that was now unspeakable. So I never found a way to ask her why she had hoped for something
so large that failure was inevitable.” (8) We might see that unspeakable betrayal in more than
one way, since Jing Mei did betray her mom when she used the ultimate weapon against her, but
she had also betrayed herself when she bought into her mother’s desires for her instead of
developing her own sense of herself. It may seem easier to blame Suyuen for her unreasonable
expectations and lack of respect for her daughter as a person, but in a way, we might also
conclude that the mother’s mismanagement of the relationship pushed Jing Mei to a point she
needed to reach: to where she had to rebel and claim herself, almost as if Suyuen sacrificed her
relationship with her daughter to save the girl.
I may read too much into the story in saying this, but it does seem as if people (especially children) do tend to reach very self-destructive conditions in their lives before they come through as better integrated individuals. We see it in more subtle stories like Jing Mei’s, but also in more obvious ways of “acting out”: abusing drugs, dangerous sexual behavior, intentional failures like Jing Mei’s piano experience. What if we work against our self interest in these ways as a logical response to the impossible expectations of others? The best intentions of others might serve to do nothing but erode our sense of self worth—that is, until we wake up in the dark of night and decide to be who we are, not who others think we should be. Though this may require losing or abandoning some connections, it may be the only way to step back from the noise, from all the real and perceived judgments of others, and claim our unique place in life and in the human herd.