

Sarah Rashed

Mr. Greco

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A Growing Struggle

David Chang is a world famous chef and restaurant owner of the Momofuku restaurant franchise. He has influenced the culinary world with his unconventional Asian dishes which, prior to Momofuku, were limited. Chang's memoir *Eat a Peach* tackles his experience with the notoriously unforgiving culinary industry and how he grew as a chef while suffering from bipolar disorder. The author delves into how his self-deprecating tendencies forced non-stop work in the kitchen and allowed him to be immensely successful with his businesses. He argues that without always expecting the worst in himself and his restaurant through his disease, he would never have grown as a chef or business owner. Learning to struggle with himself ultimately allowed him to pave the way of his success.

The author is clear from page one about his workaholic tendencies and the way his illness fuels his addiction. That voice in his head saying he's no good and can always do better is what forces Chang to keep working at more, greater, and narrowly attainable goals. Chang describes the way he became dependent on his manic depression to gage and create his success. He says, "Momofuku was my identity and it was born of my depression. I couldn't separate a failure in the kitchen, no matter how small, from a failure of the self. I'd actually come to depend on the emotional and mental instability. I wasn't beating my illness, or even trying to, really. I had subdued it by redirecting its energy into my own productivity. We were locked together like two judo opponents. It was always there waiting for me to loosen my grip so that it could flip me

over and pin me to the ground. So I never lightened the load” (101). Chang does an immense amount of self belittling in the kitchen. It’s an act so personal and difficult to comprehend the reasoning behind, since it’s so personal. Feeding into his disease is self sabotage that is otherwise unfathomable to the regular individual, but the judo opponent metaphor effectively depicts the nature of the author’s struggle. To Chang, his manic depression is more than a critical voice. It’s a palpable force that constantly demands more and creates a fear that is very real in his mind. Chang’s use of a metaphor gives the audience a closely outlined idea of his rationale, truly depicting how his illness forces the development of his culinary skills. Coerced development, yes, but development nonetheless.

Chang’s relationship with his bipolar disorder is an ongoing battle. His illness is always ready to tear him down, so his only means of survival is to keep on his toes for each obstacle. Chang describes it almost as a game. It’s as if he’s on one side and his psyche is on the other, the two competing for points. While Chang’s scramble with his illness has proven beneficial to his business, he admits that,

“The only benefit to tying your identity, happiness, well-being, and self-worth to your business is that you never stop thinking about it or worrying over what’s around the corner. If I have been quick to adapt to the changing restaurant landscape, it is because I have viewed it as a literal matter of survival. I have never allowed myself to coast or believed that I deserve for life to get easier with success. That’s where hubris comes from. The worst version of me was the one who, as a preteen, thought he had what it took to be a pro golfer. I believed my own hype, and I was a snotty little shit about it. The humiliation and pain of having it all slip through my fingers is something I’d rather never feel again” (115).

The golfing anecdote at the end where Chang describes his haughtiness as his ultimate downfall is a key idea that is very indicative of the way he functions. The extreme overworking he does is not solely related to having manic depression, rather it was born from experience. The rationale of his illness ultimately led Chang to be overly deliberate because he has seen firsthand how destructive false pride can be. Tying back to Chang's earlier point about being constantly within a duel, he further illustrates how he developed a survivalist mindset in the kitchen from his bipolar disorder.

Throughout his restaurateur years, Chang grew to become more sparing with his expectations in the kitchen. He soon became more giving to himself, encouraging vulnerability and failure for the sake of self improvement. He uses a symbol to describe this, urging that

“Lobsters grow by molting. They shed their old shell to reveal a new, soft shell that will eventually grow and harden around them. By the time they're done, there's no sign of the lobster they were. It's an exhausting, dangerous process. It takes a tremendous amount of energy and leaves them exposed and vulnerable while they're in the middle of it...

Suddenly the lobster became Momofuku's unofficial mascot. Never again would we [staff] fear the grueling work of breaking ourselves down and gluing ourselves back together again. That cycle of building and destroying and rebuilding is not something to overcome. The human equivalent of not wanting to mold is trying to make life easy, refusing to grow or be self-reflective” (235-236).

This is really powerful in terms of Chang's altered mindset regarding failure. Previously, he was always hovering above it and working relentlessly to avoid it, even though he has noted that that is a super risky way to work. Chang is now embracing imperfection rather than tormenting himself with it. He's realizing that in order to grow, improve, and not sell himself short, he must

allow himself to be in a vulnerable position to learn from his mistakes. He has to shed himself of his exoskeleton and expose himself to the world through unconventional dishes and methods of cooking. Taking risks is vastly different than piling on work. There's a learning curve with risk taking where in completing tasks there is only worry.

[context] "I'm striving to be honest about my past shortcomings, but hindsight is not enough. I'm nowhere near as empathetic or aware as I want to be. I can't promise that I'll ever get there, or that Momofuku will become the company we're working toward. There will always be mistakes and miscommunications. The only fatal error would be to stop trying" (227). [analysis]

Chang was dealt the misfortune— and ironically the most necessary tool in his arsenal— of having bipolar disorder. He drove himself into a wall in his early years, soon finding the prospect of life to be limited and not worth his while. He was ready to die as he says early on in the book, and becoming a chef was something he needed to do before it happened. The chances were slim to none of being a success. However, he took his illness and utilized it to survive. He took the bitter and sabotaging part of himself and spun it into his work allowing him to be successful.

While he managed to make it in the culinary world, it was clear to Chang that he couldn't continue living this unbalanced life in fear of his own psyche. Changes needed to be made. Through vulnerability in the kitchen, he grew to be less unstable and cutthroat, allowing himself to accept the fact that mistakes are always a possibility. As long as he could embody the spirit of the lobster, ever growing in its vulnerability, he could never be classified as a failure.

Works Cited

Chang, David, and Gabe Ulla. *Eat a Peach: a Memoir*. Clarkson Potter/Publishers, 2020.

Addendum: Time Doesn't Stop for no Man

“Don't make me go! It's too late to leave now I can't show up, don't make me go!” I pleaded to my mother. It was third grade and I'd overslept my alarm for school. Late for being early, late for being ontime, late for being late. I was late late late late late late late... *this is wrong, unnatural, shameful, and stupid. So stupid, how could I have done this?* I was clenching and shaking, frustrated... just so frustrated. *This is embarrassing and wrong and dumb. So dumb*, I thought, moving around in clunky circles and punching at the air. I grabbed at my head, taking myself to the floor, crying and shakily mumbling about being late. *I can't walk into class, everyone's heads slowly turning towards the door and trailing that humiliating walk of shame to the desk. I've seen that walk, and I vowed never to do that walk. That walk is for idiots*, I told myself. *Real freaking idiots...* but now, that was me.

When I was younger, I couldn't stand to be late. I *had* to be early, and I always was without fail. I'd show up to school about forty-five minutes early in elementary school and 30 in middle school. I wouldn't do anything with the extra time, I would just sit, waiting. I was early—the hard part of getting to school was over— so I could sit.

There was a queasiness that came with thinking about and nearing an impending time. I would feel like I was in a limbo state, like the place between breathing in and breathing out. Thinking about the time would send a shiver along my spine ending with a twitch, forcing my head to the side and my fingers to shoot outwards. It was like my body convulsed in rejection to the idea of being late.

I really didn't want to look bad. I built it in my mind that being late was shameful and rude because that's how I viewed it within other people. When I'd meet with friends to hangout and they were late, it would frustrate me. I felt like my time was being wasted, like it wasn't

being honored, so I looked down on that. But, I especially looked down upon myself for ever being like that or on the verge of it. I took to showing up places extremely and unnecessary early, and before doing so I would prepare myself and my belongings for an unnatural amount of time. I would cycle through the amount of time all my tasks were taking, how long it would take me to actually go to the event, and how early I wanted to be for the sake of being early, all while putting myself down for missing beats along my process. It was a long, time consuming system that I stuck to religiously to avoid the shame I imagined came with being late.

This mentality stuck with me from elementary school through to about junior year of high school. I spent years using time as a self deprecating tool to avoid being less than my expectations. When I was inevitably late, I would cry and dwell about the problem to a point where my preoccupation overtook my mind and it was all I could think about.

The problem was that thinking about time was itself time consuming.

The overpreparation I did everyday was too extensive and with a busier schedule as I advanced in school, I couldn't keep up with it. Spending an hour preparing for school or an appointment became impractical. Dwelling on being a few minutes late became futile.

It was eleventh grade and I'd overslept my alarm for school. *Oh crap*, I thought. I jumped out of bed, quickly got dressed, and drove myself to school. I walked hastily up the path to the language building— I was supposed to be in first period Latin. I walked up to the door of room 912, opened the door, and everyone was completely silent, staring at me. “I forgot to set my alarm,” I said, and everybody laughed. It turns out my teacher had seen me walking up the pathway and told the class to turn and look at me when I walked in. That walk of shame I had created in my head as a third grader wasn't even real. It was a fantastical fabrication I created to scare myself into being constantly early.

Since that point, I have stopped using time to intimidate myself. I have become less neurotic about being early to everything since I saw how trivial it is to fixate on time. While a habit of being late isn't necessarily a good thing, it also isn't a terrible thing. The occasional late appearance isn't the end of the world, as much as my dumb elementary school brain thought it was.