II

“They Little White Donkey”

Here’s a story in favor of coercion, Chinese-style. Lulu was about seven, still playing two instruments, and working on a piano piece called “The Little White Donkey” by the French composer Jacques Ibert. The piece is really cute—you can just imagine a little donkey ambling along a country road with its master—but it’s also incredibly difficult for young players because the two hands have to keep schizophrenically different rhythms.

Lulu couldn’t do it. We worked on it nonstop for a week, drilling each of her hands separately, over and over. But whenever we tried putting the hands together, one always morphed into the other, and everything fell apart. Finally, the day before her lesson, Lulu announced in exasperation that she was giving up and stomped off.

“Get back to the piano now,” I ordered.
“You can’t make me.”

“Oh yes, I can.”

Back at the piano, Lulu made me pay. She punched, thrashed, and kicked. She grabbed the music score and tore it to shreds. I taped the score back together and encased it in a plastic shield so that it could never be destroyed again. Then I hauled Lulu’s dollhouse to the car and told her I’d donate it to the Salvation Army piece by piece if she didn’t have “The Little White Donkey” perfect by the next day. When Lulu said, “I thought you were going to the Salvation Army, why are you still here?” I threatened her with no lunch, no dinner, no Christmas or Hanukkah presents, no birthday parties for two, three, four years. When she still kept playing it wrong, I told her she was purposely working herself into a frenzy because she was secretly afraid she couldn’t do it. I told her to stop being lazy, cowardly, self-indulgent, and pathetic.

Jed took me aside. He told me to stop insulting Lulu—which I wasn’t even doing, I was just motivating her—and that he didn’t think threatening Lulu was helpful. Also, he said, maybe Lulu really just couldn’t do the technique—perhaps she didn’t have the coordination yet—had I considered that possibility?

“You just don’t believe in her,” I accused.

“That’s ridiculous,” Jed said scornfully. “Of course I do.”

“Sophia could play the piece when she was this age.”

“But Lulu and Sophia are different people,” Jed pointed out.

“Oh no, not this,” I said, rolling my eyes. “Everyone is special in their special own way,” I mimicked sarcastically. “Even losers are special in their own special way. Well don’t worry, you don’t have to lift a finger. I’m willing to put in as long as it
takes, and I’m happy to be the one hated. And you can be the one they adore because you make them pancakes and take them to Yankees games.”

I rolled up my sleeves and went back to Lulu. I used every weapon and tactic I could think of. We worked right through dinner into the night, and I wouldn’t let Lulu get up, not for water, not even to go to the bathroom. The house became a war zone, and I lost my voice yelling, but still there seemed to be only negative progress, and even I began to have doubts.

Then, out of the blue, Lulu did it. Her hands suddenly came together—her right and left hands each doing their own imper- turbable thing—just like that.

Lulu realized it the same time I did. I held my breath. She tried it tentatively again. Then she played it more confidently and faster, and still the rhythm held. A moment later, she was beam- ing. “Mommy, look—it’s easy!” After that, she wanted to play the piece over and over and wouldn’t leave the piano. That night, she came to sleep in my bed, and we snuggled and hugged, cracking each other up. When she performed “The Little White Donkey” at a recital a few weeks later, parents came up to me and said, “What a perfect piece for Lulu—it’s so spunky and so her.”

Even Jed gave me credit for that one. Western parents worry a lot about their children’s self-esteem. But as a parent, one of the worst things you can do for your child’s self-esteem is to let them give up. On the flip side, there’s nothing better for building confidence than learning you can do something you thought you couldn’t.

There are all these new books out there portraying Asian mothers as scheming, callous, overdriven people indifferent to their kids’ true interests. For their part, many Chinese secretly
One can see that they care more about their children and are willing to sacrifice much more for them than Westerners, who seem perfectly content to let their children turn out badly. I think it's a misunderstanding on both sides. All decent parents want to do what's best for their children. The Chinese just have a totally different idea of how to do that.

Western parents try to respect their children's individuality, encouraging them to pursue their true passions, supporting their choices, and providing positive reinforcement and a nurturing environment. By contrast, the Chinese believe that the best way to protect their children is by preparing them for the future, letting them see what they're capable of, and arming them with skills, work habits, and inner confidence that no one can ever take away.