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# Can't from *Tumbling Up*

Ask a kid, he'll tell you. I'm no good at that.

I'm no good at math, I don't get grammar, I'm bad at music, at dance, at sports. I don't understand science, I don't like to read. Early on, with a little luck, maybe you'll also learn what you're good at. You certainly hope so. But you definitely discover what you're bad at. At some things, you're so bad it's not a deficit exactly. It's more like a wide swath of incompetence, a void, a yawning empty space. There's nothing there to build on.

When I went off to college I got to know two guys in the dorm, Eddie and Bob, who wanted nothing more than to play football. They were freshmen. They had played high school football all four years. They had build, they had muscle. Football was what they knew how to do. Naturally they went out for the college team. At a smaller university they might have had a fighting chance. Here they did not. They went to practice every day, after which they dragged themselves back to their dorm room in the late afternoon and waited for the dining hall to open. Protein, they would say, they needed protein. I remember seeing their plates heaped with food, watching them eat with ardor, with an attitude akin to religious conviction.

Somewhere in that dorm room were textbooks. I don't remember seeing those. Study. Those guys needed to study.

One afternoon Bob picked up his math book and tossed it on the desktop.

"I hate math," he said. "Pi. What's pi?"

"It's just a number you use," I said. "It's 3.14."

He shot a disgusted look at me, then shook his head. "Pi's fucked."

I thought of classmates in high school algebra who would be incensed about x. What's x? X made them angry. The teacher would say, "X isn't anything. It's just a variable. It's an unknown value."

To Eddie and Bob, x was a guy on a football field, on a chart with arrows and circles, with dotted lines and yard markers. They looked at those charts and knew what they

meant, knew body and mind where to go and what to do. But pi, on the other hand, remained an annoying mystery.

"I suck at math," Bob said.

I told him I sucked at football.

"You're little," he said. "Look at you. If you bulked up a little bit, it would help."

"That wouldn't help," I said.

"Go to the gym. Work at it."

"I don't think so."

He shook his head, pondering the futility, his and mine, math and football.

I felt for him. I remembered my geometry, circles and cylinders, triangles and trapezoids, parallel lines and transversals, theorems and proofs. It was the one visual field I sort of understood, thanks in large part to straight lines. In geometry class I could draw.

In art class, on the other hand, I could not draw. I never progressed beyond stick figures. I learned early that I sucked at art.

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In first grade I sat next to a kid named Bruce Brown. During an art activity one day we were drawing with crayons. I felt comfortable drawing a house. All you needed was parallel lines, rectangles, and a triangle. For a couple trees all I needed was parallel lines and approximate circles. First grade art was a warmup for geometry.

I produced a couple misshapen clouds in the space above the house, added a couple checkmark birds. And an airplane, which looked a lot like an arrow. I colored everything in, staying inside the lines, including the clouds.

Bruce Brown stopped work and looked at my paper.

"Blue clouds," he snorted. "Whoever heard of blue clouds?"

I looked at my artwork. Blue clouds. That pathetic airplane. I was in first grade, and I already knew: I sucked at art.

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“I can’t draw,” I told my mother later that day.

She said that’s okay.

Okay? No, it wasn’t okay. And really, that wasn’t quite the right thing to say. Do you want to draw? Do you want to learn to draw? How can we help you learn how? She said it was okay, I think, because she couldn’t draw either and had managed to establish a meaningful life, forgetting that it’s terrible when you suck at something in the first grade.

We didn’t do art projects in our house. My mother abhorred a mess. Art was messy. I didn’t cut stuff out with scissors. Cutting was messy. I have no recollection of crayons or colored pencils. Some kids had easels, with a tray for paint brushes, a cup holder, and a plastic cup for water. We did not. Painting at the kitchen table was not on the menu of home activities. That was messy.

Down the street at Plesko’s Hardware, you could buy models to assemble. Cars, airplanes, battleships. Ronnie Thurlow applied himself assiduously to these projects. He did precision work, producing museum-quality pieces that could go on a shelf and remain there for posterity. When I bought a model, on the workbench down in the basement or on the steps outside on the front porch, I emptied the box and spread out the pieces and assembly instructions in front of me. A kit came with a tube of glue. Paying more attention to the color picture on the box than the black and white diagram and assembly instructions, I squeezed drops of glue into dot-sized slots and pressed pieces together until I had a facsimile of a race car with a body, a chassis, a windshield, and four wheels. The pieces left over on the workbench or porch went in the trash. Ronnie Thurlow, I’m sure, used all the pieces.

I had no patience for such “fine motor” activities. I couldn’t draw. I started saying that at a young age. Soon I would generalize from drawing to all art in general. I sucked at art.

In six years of elementary school I produced one piece of artwork I was proud of. It was a ceramic dish I made in third grade. What you did was you brought a leaf to school, preferably a large maple leaf. You laid the leaf on the little sheet of ceramic clay Mrs. Hilton gave you, and you traced the leaf with an exacto knife. (My god, she let Danny Leman handle an exacto knife.) Then you shaped a dish out of the fingers of the clay-shaped leaf. The clay was fired. You painted your dish the next day. It was fired again and you were done. Mine was blue. It was kind of shiny. It was short on function. It was not a

dish that could hold anything. It was an object to admire, an object of art. On the bottom, etched with the exacto knife, was the artist's signature. Rickie.

I remember that dish the way I remember my one line from the Shakespeare play I was in my third year of college (I also sucked at drama). I played an unnamed guy who stood, held a pike, and occasionally walked. In Act IV my character said, "Towards Chertsy, noble lord?"

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I tried to the best of my ability to avoid art. There were periodic invitations to draw. And worse. Much worse.

Our school administered the California Achievement Test, evaluating your verbal skill (okay) and quantitative skill (okay), and spatial reasoning (uh-oo). Like most kids ushered into the school library, told to sit at sufficient distances to preclude cheating, I did not approach this ordeal with a can-do spirit. Most of us were sullen little Bartlebys. Once we were seated, the door closed and we were loaned special green pencils to mark our answer sheets. Test booklets were distributed. We steeled ourselves to the task of filling in blanks.

You may begin work. The clock started. Verbal.

Please set down your pencils. The work stopped.

You may begin work. The clock started. Quantitative.

Please set down your pencils. The work stopped.

Then came spatial reasoning, analysis, problem solving.

Torture.

I knew what was coming on the spatial section: cubes; images of sheets of paper with folds; mirror images; diagrams of objects I had to assemble; 3-D rotating figures you were asked to look at from the top, from left and right, from beneath the table, where I wanted to be. These problems went to the heart of my deep-seated insecurity. I didn't even try.

Please set down your pencils.

Today I would say I lacked visual intelligence. Call it VI. I felt about VI the way Bob back in college felt about pi. And still do.

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A glimmer of hope amid chaos.

In eighth grade I took art. The one and only art class I ever took. You were expected to take a couple of those classes that did not involve "book learning," enrichment classes like band, choir, or art; career classes like shop or mechanical drawing. I was in the band already, playing the trumpet. Looking back now, I should have taken choir. I could already sing. I could have learned to sing better, maybe even smarter. The teacher was Mrs. McBride. She was young, she was cute. I must have associated choir with church. Against my better judgment I elected art.

Art class was taught by Mr. Perry, who was mainly a science teacher. Biology, to be specific. In that discipline he conducted labs involving scalpels and frog carcasses, Bunsen burners and test tubes, and he did so with iron discipline. That must have made him a good candidate for art class, where controlled chaos would be the order of the day. In my memory the class is kind of a blur. There was a day or two, it felt like a week, on color theory, the primary, secondary, and tertiary colors. It was the first time I'd ever heard the word "tertiary," which I found both exotic and terrifying.

Sitting at a table with Judy Schillings and Rhonda Marcy, paints and brushes and sheets of paper spread out on the surface, I made a color wheel. Mr. Perry did not explain much. You put a splop of red, yellow, and blue on the wheel. I looked at Judy's wheel. Okay, like that. Then Mr. Perry told us to draw three arrows, through the midpoint in the circle. This, he said, would enable us to identify the complementary colors.

Complementary? I looked at Judy and said, "Huh?"

"Secondary," she said. "Complementary. Same thing."

I looked over at Rhonda's wheel, watched her draw a line. Okay, like that. I did straight lines just fine.

Then we combined splops of primary colors to make orange, purple, and green, dabbing our wheels with paint, rinsing our brushes in little tubs of water, then dabbing a little more.

At this point, I was probably sweating.

On to tertiary. You combine blue and green and what do you get?

"Blue-green," Rhonda said.

You combine red and orange and what do you get?

"Red-orange," Judy said.

You combine blue and purple and what do you get?

"Blue-purple," I said.

Judy and Rhonda said, as one: "Violet."

"That's right," said Mr. Perry.

He told us some colors were cool, and he pointed those out, while others were warm, and he pointed those out. Judy and Rhonda nodded in agreement. I looked at my color wheel, which was a little smeary, and at the desktop. Colors were wet. And messy.

Later on, when we moved on to ceramics, I made a turd-colored ashtray.

I had become my mother.

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When I had kids of my own and they came home with school projects that involved art, I panicked. All those colored pencils and markers. Crayons were obsolete by then. I hated markers. Markers made semi-permanent stray marks, on the table, on the kids' fingers, sometimes on me if I got too close, that were hard to wash off. Of course there was also the scissors and the messes of paper on the kitchen table. And painting. It was all more than I could take.

Mostly it was their expectant looks in my direction that paralyzed me, filled me with terror. Looks that said, Can you help us?

Well, no, I could not.

I married a woman who made her living as a visual thinker, as a draftsman, a designer. She was good at what they called "mechanical drawing" in my high school. She could

help. She could do more than help, she could teach them, inspire their confidence in themselves. Where I ran away, she sat down and engaged.

"A sarcophagus?" she said to our fifth-grade son whose teacher specialized in Egypt. "Sure, we can make a sarcophagus."

"And a mummy?"

"Go find Rio," she said.

Rio was a defunct action figure our daughter was no longer interested in, the male dance partner of a cartoon rock singer she watched on TV named Jem. I'm musical. I still remember the theme song. And I'll tell you: the song was in a minor key. "Jem, truly truly truly outrageous." Rio was pretty wild too, with a shock of bright tertiary-colored hair (blue-purple) that our son had cut with scissors at the kitchen table for fun one day, making a terrible mess. Rio would come out of retirement and be a dead Egyptian for Mrs. Mortimer.

To make a mummy you wrap Rio head to toe in gauze, then paint over the gauze to age the look of the wrapping. Set Rio aside. Where my wife got it I don't know, but the sarcophagus was made out of sheets of ceramic clay, which they laid on the table cut with an exacto knife, assembled, then cooked; then painted gold at the kitchen table. My wife saw all this beforehand, in her mind's eye. She knew how to mix the paint so the gold looked old. She helped our son draw figures on the lid.

"How about a camel?" she said.

"Sure, a camel."

She drew it.

"How about one of those Egyptian dogs?"

"That would be great."

She drew it.

He wondered if she could draw a guy wearing one of the head-dresses with, like, a cobra on it.

She was on it. Guy, in profile, and cobra.

When they were done, when she was done, it looked just like a real sarcophagus, with a perfectly shaped lid that was even kind of rounded, that fit on the coffin and could be removed to display mummified Rio.

“There,” she said.

“This is great,” our son said.

He took it to school. A week later he brought it home, said that Mrs Mortimer loved it, that it was one of the best projects in the class. He set it on a shelf in our library at home, where we kept it for twenty years. Looking at it, all I could think of was Ronnie Thurlow and his jet planes.

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I lived in a 3-D world but was capable of thinking about it only in 2-D. Did it matter? No, not in any practical sense. I rode a bicycle. I learned to ski. In the vacant lot across the street I played baseball with my pals. On the softer sod behind Dean Gaul’s house, I played football.

On days when he was visiting his Aunt Bernardine and Uncle Harold, Ronnie Thurlow played too. He had a good arm. When I was on his team he threw beautiful passes that cut across the evening air in perfect arcs and that I caught and took into the endzone, which was a grove on pine trees in the back of the yard. In our huddle before each play, he held out his hand, palm up, and sketched 2-D patterns I would run down field.

For a brief time, I actually engaged in Mr. Perry’s art class too, felt competent, felt like I had achieved something. In the section on linear perspective, he invited us to draw squares and straight lines. That was my forte. He illustrated on the board how an artist represented depth of field. He drew a square and three lines extending from the square that met at a point on a horizontal line. He called this one-point perspective. On a sheet of paper, I drew my own square, added my own three lines, gradually narrowing the space between them as they approached and eventually met at that point on the horizontal line.

“Look,” I said to Judy Schilling.

“Hmmm,” she said.

I looked at hers.

Mine was just as good. That had never happened before.

Then Mr. Perry drew a 3-D box and we did likewise. Two squares, four lines connecting them, one of them a dotted line.

I looked at Rhonda Marcy's. Mine was just as good as hers.

Mr. Perry drew two legs of a small triangle up in the upper right and connected three points on the cube (now he was calling it a cube) to the three points on that triangle. I did the same. Mine looked just like his.

Then he went kind of crazy.

"So let's rotate the cube," he said. This involved squares, but messing with the angles and lengths of the legs in the squares, and drawing three lines to the left and three more lines to the right. We were going a little too fast. And then he started shading the background along the lines, darker the farther you got away, lighter closer to the cube. And I began to sweat. Why were there only three lines, I wanted to ask, when a square had four points? How could a cube be a cube and not consist of actual squares on the surface of my paper (but still look like a cube)? It was more than I could take in.

I didn't want to look at Judy's and Rhonda's work. I didn't want to look at my own.

Around that time, in Mr. Reid's math class we were beginning to solve for x. I got that. I liked it. In the weeks to come, sitting in Miss Beamish's English class or Mr. Sager's science class, I occasionally drew a square on a sheet of paper. And three straight lines that narrowed and approached each other as they stretched toward an imagined horizon. It was cool. I could do that. I drew cubes, no longer worrying about the dotted line.

These little draws were a source of satisfaction. But deep down I knew: I sucked at art.