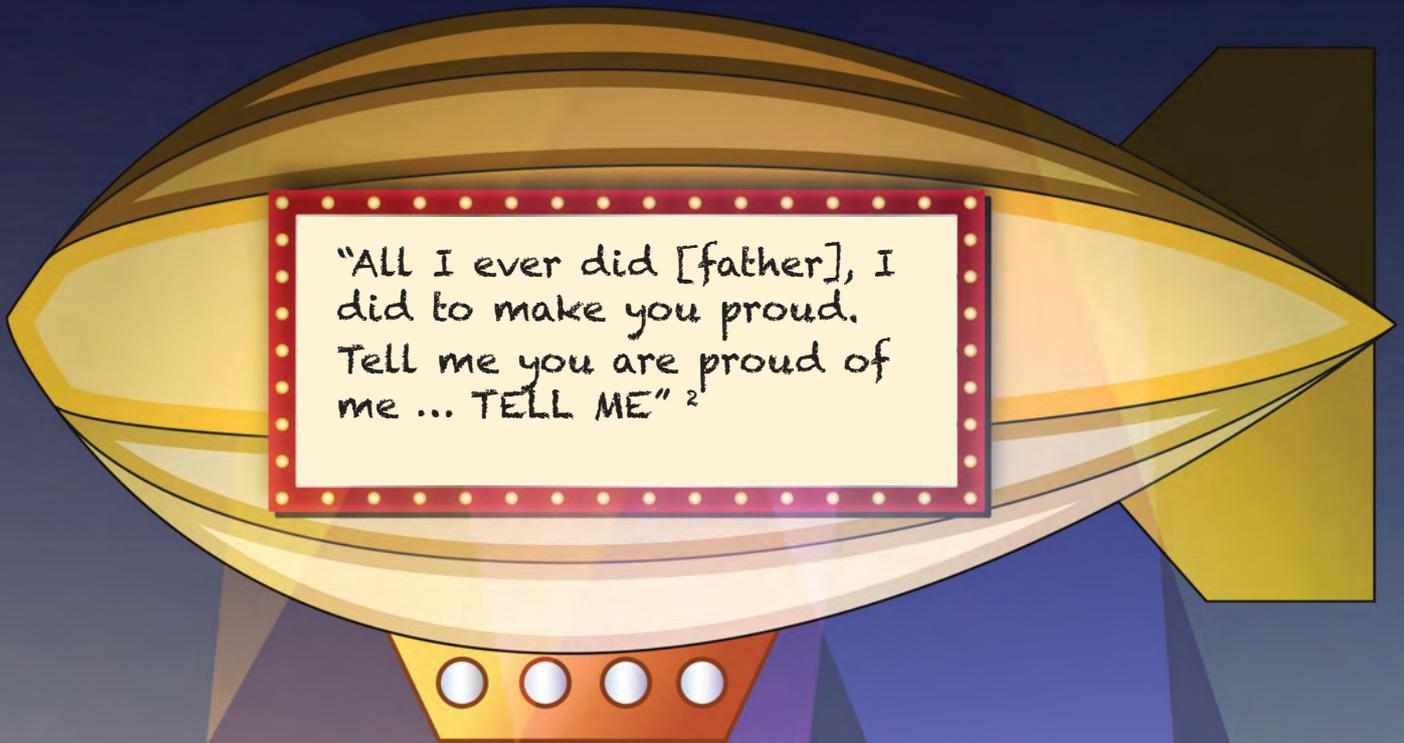


THE TAI LUNG JOURNEY FROM THE HOLLYWOOD MOVIE – KUNG FU PANDA

By Mike Hackett



Embracing 'evil' – the development of compassion and empathy using a reflective approach to a Movie Therapy session.

Abstract

Using the vehicle of movie therapy, we have the ability to exercise our various therapeutic muscles and engage in our own personal growth by accompanying the characters portrayed on-screen as we get to journey through their lives in full Technicolor™ on screens large and small. In particular though, by focusing on the journeys of the anti-heroes, the villains or the bad-guys, we are presented with an opportunity to; employ our empathy and compassion; to gain new perspectives on the human condition, our own personal journeys; and the wider lessons these films portray to ourselves and to our children. This reflection aims then to demonstrate how just such a journey can provide such opportunities for connection and reflection, by really encountering the humanity one such bad-guy, the villain of the popular children's movie – Kung Fu Panda.

In dark movie theatres amongst others, or in our private homes on our own, we are transported. We encounter characters onto which we project aspects of our own life's story, and the influences both people and situations have on our very being and our individual journey. These characters (some of whom we love, some we loath), stir feelings within which leave us enriched, ashamed, joyful, angry, disconcerted, and more, indeed, they bring us into contact with myriad feelings as broad and as deep that we as human beings can fathom. Movies are, after all, stories from the minds of writers, imaginations of directors and portrayals of human emotions by gifted actors. But more than that, when these creative forces combine on screen, they have the power to transform our very emotional being for a time, and contain the potential to influence the course of our lives in strange and subtle ways.

It must also be acknowledged however, that the power movies exert over us is merely an echo of the range and depth of feeling which we already have the capacity to experience. We cannot be 'touched' by these stories if we are incapable of connecting to that inner world which exists within us. Every feeling, thought or mystery awakened by movies are then ultimately, aspects of ourselves. These aspects are represented on-screen, compressed into 90-minute journeys of cold reality, escapes into the wilds of imagination, or reflections of our past/present/future thoughts, hopes or fears.

And yet it is not the inner power which movies possess, but what must also be recognized is the external power – that of the movie industry and it's ability to influence us in other ways!

Movies today are synonymous with one place – Hollywood also know as 'The Dream Factory'.

“While the Lumiere Brothers are generally credited with the birth of modern cinema, it is undisputedly American [Hollywood] cinema that soon became the most dominant force in an emerging industry. Since the 1920s, the American film industry has grossed more money every year than that of any other country.”²

With so much wealth, comes enormous power – especially when we welcome the messages, which Hollywood films convey into our homes, our families and our lives. In particular, I wonder

what Hollywood children's films convey and especially, the messages that they impart to our children.

To more fully expand on this curiosity, it perhaps is fitting then to elaborate on this theme by means of my own experience with one such Hollywood Children's Film – Kung Fu Panda!³

It began in a personal development context in which we were invited to view and reflect on the movie – Kung Fu Panda. The effect on what, on the outside at least, seems such a typical Hollywood children's film, left me with feelings, which remain very much alive months after the viewing, and has thus become the inspiration for this reflection.

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Our story begins with the Hollywood hero of the story – an overweight Panda called Po;

“In the Valley of Peace, Po the Panda finds himself chosen as the [Kung Fu] Dragon Warrior despite the fact that he is obese and a complete novice at martial arts.”⁴

And though your mind may automatically jump ahead, thinking that this will remain a 'typical' story of the Joseph Campbell 'Hero Journey'⁵, for me, it is not the hero, not the wise man, not the side-kicks nor any of the other archetypal characters portrayed in the film which touched me most, but the anti-hero, the villain, the Snow Leopard – Tai Lung.

Tai Lung's Story:

“Shefu [the Red Panda] found Tai Lung [a Snow Leopard] as a cub and he raised him as his son. And when the boy showed talent in Kung Fu, Shefu trained him, believed in him, told him he was destined for greatness. It was never enough for Tai Lung, he wanted the Dragon Scroll. Uguay [the Tortoise] saw darkness in

his heart, and refused. Outraged, Tai Lung laid waste to the valley. He tried to take the scroll by force, and Shefu had to destroy what he created. But how could he? Shefu loved Tai Lung unlike anyone he had loved before, or since. And now, he has a chance to make things right – to train the real Dragon Warrior.”⁶

In this summary of Tai Lung’s journey from infant to prisoner, we are presented with what appears to be a straight forward villain, because in truth doesn’t every story need a ‘good’ villain? But perhaps, in altering our perspective, flexing our empathy and compassion emotional muscles, and meeting this ‘villain’ with an open ear, an open heart to his story, can we hold our beliefs about villains so rigidly?

In the story, Tai Lung is portrayed the classic evil monster, powerful, terrifying and threatening. He is the anti-hero, the shadow, and the dark force in an otherwise idyllic hamlet. He is the one whose name is spoken in hushed tones amongst the villagers, a source of shame and fear in the very place where he grew up as an orphan. An entire community cowed by the arrogance and selfishness of one of their own. The name Tai Lung has become synonymous with the bogey-man!

Tai Lung’s crimes, were so heinous that our first meeting with him directly, is in his underground prison, in the dark, alone and encased in iron and suspended by huge chains - essentially immobilizing him. He is bound and gagged. Silenced in the dark, deep, damp and devoid of anything but the beating of his own heart, and his own conscience in his ears. The only light which can be seen, is revealed as the light of pure malice, shining from the eyes of this bound and lonely Snow Leopard. He has been held in this state, removed from the light, isolated and confined, alone and vilified for 20 years!

Pause! For a moment, can you imagine what Tai Lung feels? Sit with the idea of this for just a moment. What stirs within you? What must it be like, to be Tai Lung?

It is then I came to understand that Tai Lung’s confinement, is not simply a defeat of his liberty, but actually amounts to a double imprisonment – a prison within a prison, the physical walls which are his cell, perhaps not as cloying as the cell

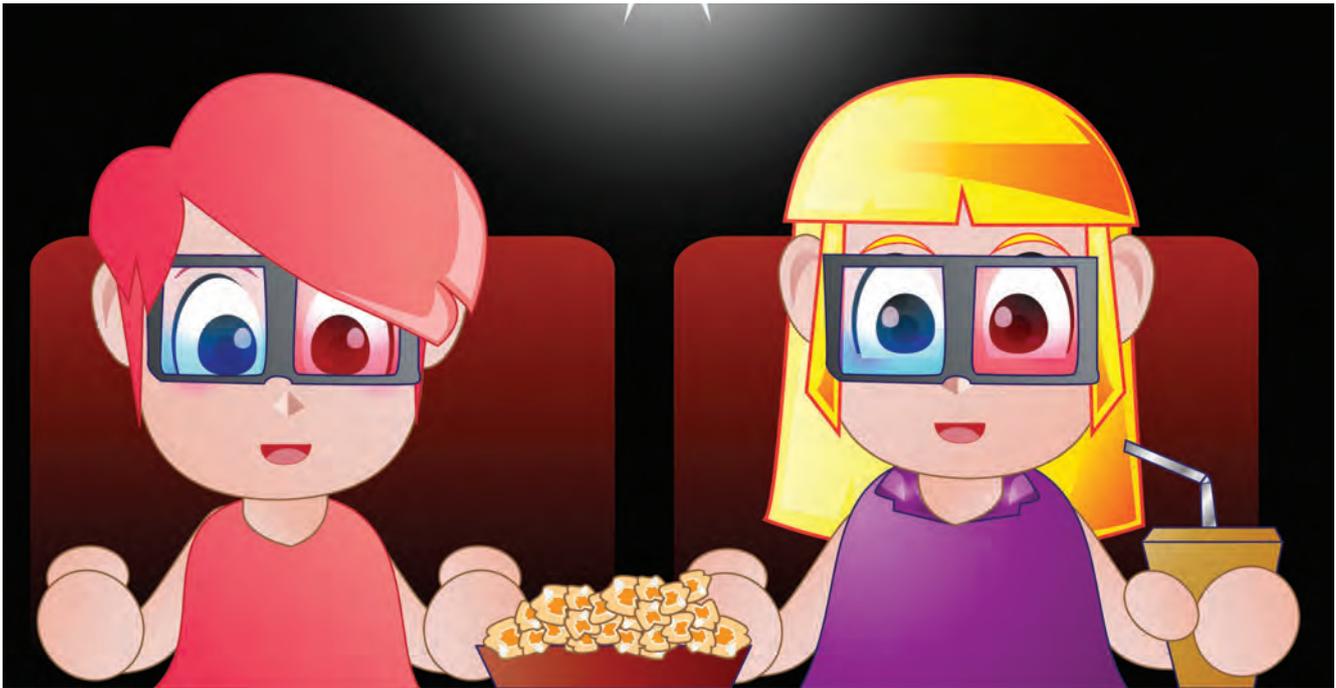
made by his thoughts and feelings roiling in his enforced silence. He must have been truly terrible to deserve such a fate.

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However, as we collect the pieces of his story, from the fragments of his tale, we realise that this is a soul who has suffered three major rejections in his life. First, his abandonment by his mother, left on the steps of the monastery – cut off from his kin and his history. Second, in his failure to be the ‘son’ his adoptive father wanted him to be, coupled with his acting out, he is rejected and committed to prison forever. And the third – rejection by society and his internment to solitude and silence, his very name, and so his very Self, becomes synonymous with what it is to be Shame – something to be denied, hidden and forgotten forever.

The pieces of his journey thus come together. His story is one of abandonment as an infant, finding a father figure, reclaiming hope in the love, attention and connection with his surrogate father, being raised with the dreams and expectations of a father’s love and pride, seeking his approval and acceptance, trying to fit in. Eventually, coming into his prime as a young man, a warrior: years of training, discipline and expectation heaped upon expectation. We come to meet a new version of Tai Lung, very different to the one we see in that first scene of a smiling, vulnerable, abandoned infant left on the steps of the monastery. He has labored under the pain of his abandonment, failure to meet the ever increasing standards of his father, failure to manage his sadness and anger stemming from his orphanage and in possession of training, strength and discipline above any other member of the community, with an opportunity to seize the ultimate power ‘The Dragon Scroll’ and in so doing, find his identity as the hero, claim the love of his father, and his place (finally) in the world despite the cost.

And so, in a moment of impatience, frustration, loss and anger, Tai Lung acts out. He makes a break for power (the scroll) and clashes headlong into a battle with his father – an epic, Kung Fu



battle no less! And in so doing, his father, in the way of all parents in a similar situation perhaps, must choose between crushing/supporting his son and protecting/abandoning the greater good of the community!

Shefu chooses the greater good. And time moves on.

And so, in time, a new hero rises, and Tai Lung is consigned to his fate. Life resumes, normality returns, and Tai Lung is forgotten, relegated to myth, consumed by hate and shame.

But just as a hero must inevitably rise, so too must a threat to the hero's position, and reveal the crisis the hero must overcome. And so we see the return of Tai Lung!

The confrontation between Tai Lung and Shefu:

Tai Lung: I have come home master.

Shefu: This is no longer your home, and I am no longer your master.

Tai Lung: Ah yes, you have a new favourite. So, where is this Po? Ha! Did I scare him off?

Shefu: This battle is between you and me.

Tai Lung: So, that is how it is going to be?

Shefu: That, is how it must be.

Tai Lung: I rotted in jail for 20 years, because of your weakness.

Shefu: Obeying your master is not weakness.

Tai Lung: You knew I was the Dragon Warrior, you always knew. But when Uguay said otherwise, what did you do? What did you do? Nothing.

Shefu: You were not meant to be the Dragon Warrior. That was not my fault.

Tai Lung: Not your fault? Who filled my head with dreams? Who drove me to train until my bones cracked? Who denied me my destiny?

Shefu: It was never my decision to make.

Tai Lung: It is now. Give me the scroll.

Shefu: I would rather die.

[Father and son duel kung-fu style in a mighty battle of limb and will]

Tai Lung: All I ever did, I did to make you proud. Tell me how proud you are Shefu. Tell me, TELL ME.

[Tai Lung beats his father until he is sprawled on the floor]

Shefu: I, I have always been proud of you. From the first moment I have been proud of you. And it was my pride which blinded me – I loved you too much, to see what you were becoming, to see what I was turning you into. I'm, I'm sorry.

[There is a tender moment of meeting eyes between the two]

[Tai Lung retreats into his head, years of pain, anger and fear grip him, he growls and attacks his father again, unable to forgive, unable to weep, anger takes hold and spills over into aggression]

Tai Lung: I don't want your apology, I want my scroll. Where is it? (he looks up to see the scroll missing from its resting place).

Shefu: The Dragon Warrior has it, and it is safely half way across China by now.

[Rage wells up in Tai Lung]

And here again, my inner self reacts; this powerful interplay between father and son. The overwhelming range of emotion; the regret, the sorrow, the disappointment, the abandonment, the fear, the anger, the frustration, the rage, the failure to meet for more than a mere moment of apology and recognition. I simultaneously feel empathy for both father and son and compassion for their individual positions, an understanding of their perspectives. And yet this is not enough. The deeply wounded son must be damned. He has truly become - evil. Hollywood in this moment, damns Tai Lung forever as the villain, a slave to his rage, his greed for power, his arrogance, and it is the travesty of his story that in this moment, he utterly loses himself. And in some ways, just like others in his life, he too

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abandons the vulnerable orphaned infant within in order to seize the role he has now been cast into. The travesty is that he has now learned to damn himself.

As Po, the hero, and Tai Lung meet in the final battle – the classic Hollywood clash of good meeting evil, the struggle for supremacy – the lesson that sometimes fists and feet are necessary to vanquish evil. The characters fight over possession of the fabled Dragon Scroll. Until Tai Lung makes a dramatic lunge and seizes it...

Tai Lung: Finally, oh yes, the power of the Dragon Scroll is... Mine!

[Tai Lung unrolls the scroll to claim the wisdom, which would imbue him with ultimate power. Suddenly he realises the scroll is simply mirrored parchment, revealing only his own reflection.]

Tai Lung: It's, it's nothing!

Po: It's ok, I didn't get it the first time either. There is no secret ingredient – it's just you!

[The realisation of what this means suddenly dawns, Tai Lung roars, cheated, confused, he lashes out, his hopes and dreams for salvation in ultimate power frustrated for the last time. He attacks Po once more. Until... Po in a special Kung-Fu move, seizes Tai Lung in the 'Wooshi Finger Hold']

Tai Lung: The Wooshi finger hold.

Po: Oh you know this hold.

Tai Lung: Shefu didn't teach you that hold.

Po: Nope, I figured it out.

[A look of fear and recognition crosses Tai Lung's face, his features contort – for the first time, out of fear]

Po: Skidoosh.

[In a blinding flash of light, Tai Lung evaporates – annihilated utterly. As the dust settles, Po emerges as the Dragon Warrior to the acclaim of the village. Tai Lung is no more.]

The final mention of Tai Lung in the story is made when Po reports to Shefu that he has defeated Tai Lung. Shefu takes a breath and reports he is now at peace. In the Village, spontaneous celebrations break out; the hero is greeted excitedly to whoops and hollers. The only cost... the utter destruction of an individual, and after all, he was a pretty rotten egg!

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The implications of this story resonate with me still! Is it possible that stories like these teach kids to accept blindly the judgment of another soul as bad/evil and forever fixed as such? Does it deny kids the opportunity to explore the 'what if' of another's story to imagine what it would be like if they found themselves in the villain's place? Does it further teach kids that there is only one moral standard (our standard) thus denying them other salient facts or views, and with it, an opportunity to see a different perspective, and as a result learn the skill of discernment – the act of making an informed view?

And so, perhaps, dear reader, you may now have a sense of my discomfort with this particular Hollywood treatment of 'a hero story' and the consequences for other characters in the context of the messages to ourselves and to our children. It is perhaps an opportunity then, an opportunity toward awakening, to be ever vigilant to those stories which are served to us 'Hollywood Style' and a reminder, that all of what we see is indeed, only part of the story. 



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