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Chapter 1

My Art

The beginnings



My childhood best friend — and still to this day — is Errin. She has been a part of my life since we met in the seventh grade. I did not grow up with a stable family life, so Errin's friendship was profound to me in many ways. She had the family I longed for. They ate dinner together every night and inquired about one another's days. They took yearly vacations and were present at every school event and activity. I looked up to her in everything that she did, so much so that I applied to some of the same colleges that Errin did. Fast forward to the end of college, and she told me she wanted to become a dentist. I had never really considered what I wanted to do after college, but I followed in her footsteps and applied to dental school.

Before I talk about dental school, I should mention that I had other special interests growing up that I never could fully understand or accept. Interestingly enough, they were all under the umbrella of art. I did performing arts as a dancer and always loved the visual art electives that high school offered.

I enjoyed the way the arts made me feel in creating, moving, and envisioning how the next step would unfold. So while I was following in Errin's footsteps for the big life decisions, I didn't yet possess the self-awareness to recognize the passion and talent inside of me. Looking back, I can now see that my creative journey began even before I was ready to believe in myself.



The appreciation of beauty and the esthetic perspective is different for each individual, and I believe our culture influences our beliefs. Perhaps being raised in the Asian culture where being introverted, quiet, and demure are embraced had much to do with how I expressed my art. My Vietnamese parents instilled in me that being thoughtful and diligent was preferred over self-expression. I admired my American friends whose concepts of extroversion, ambition, achieving success, an open mind, and thinking out of the box were encouraged. Perhaps I internalized the belief that I could be good — but never too good — at anything unless I became the doctor or lawyer my parents wanted me to be. Who knows?

I could be creative, follow my dreams

While I excelled at dancing and began winning scholarships and competitions as a soloist in ballet, my parents made it very clear to me that it was a nice "hobby" but not one that would be deemed a respectable career in their eyes. Even my parents' friends frowned upon them for letting me pursue such a hobby. They said it would distract me from my studies and the life they envisioned for me. But dancing in a way, gave me the permission to be something else — at least for the brief time on that stage. I could be creative, follow my dreams, and be anything I wanted to be.

It's funny because I hated being in front of the camera. Yet, I loved being a dancer on stage. To me, the camera was


able to "see" who I really was. At times, that could be a bit uncomfortable, letting others see my flaws, insecurities, and fears. The concept of failure was crippling for me. When I was a dancer performing on stage, I was allowed to be whatever I wanted, and for those few minutes, I was the most confident, successful, carefree person in the world. This photo of me is the antithesis of my cultural belief. It is the dancer-me. I didn't choose to pose this way because I didn't feel safe to be that person in front of the camera.

The photographer was able to see and capture me without constraints and the fear of being judged. I was able to share my inner dream of being outwardly confident, secure, and the best version of myself.

and be anything I wanted to be



How do you capture that moment?



As photographers, we have to start with our eyes. What do you see about the person in front of you? What do you know about them? How do you capture that moment big or small, that reveals their true self? It is the same idea when it comes to esthetic dentistry in many ways. We need to start with our eyes. Then we have to be able to show the patient that our eye for esthetics and their eye is the same. When that happens, they trust you. They feel safe, and they show you their true selves.

I don't always get the right shot the first few tries. I don't always get the right shot after 1,000 attempts. But through the process of shooting over and over again, I begin to see better ways to capture the essence of the subject being photographed. In those 1,000 shots, there most certainly is the one.

You alone own that Art

I am just one person whose journey of art is shaped by my childhood, culture, and beliefs. We are all sculpted by our personal story. What you see as beautiful is unique to your eyes, and only you can "see" it. Other people may agree that an image is beautiful, but what meaning it possesses and the feeling it conjures is exclusive to you. What I have realized is that art can be learned in many ways. Some may possess more natural aptitude for it, and some may come from environments that encourage it more readily than others, but it can be learned! You cannot fail at art. It is a journey that belongs to everybody.

You can be better at it no matter where you are currently! And dentistry where you can most definitely fail at doing a procedure, restoration, or treatment plan for your patient, photography frees you from that failure risk. While there are some basics you must learn, it will only take short amount of time to grasp the art of photography versus the mechanics of dentistry. What I am trying to tell you is that you can fail at dentistry but at photography — you cannot fail! I encourage you to learn the fundamentals you need, pick up your camera, and start shooting.

Don't try to get the one perfect shot, but instead just take as many as you can and see what images are produced. Does an image speak to you? Which images don't move you? You alone own the art you create and you alone determine the emotion that it evokes.

