

Blots and cracks

A few years ago I was in an Art Room at another school. I was looking at the GCSE exam pictures. As you may know, for Art GCSE, your exam is not like other exams – instead you have eight hours to produce a picture, which is a final piece of work after several weeks of preparation. The paintings were all pretty good, but one caught my eye – and it had an interesting story connected with it. The piece was on A3 paper and was a number of very neatly executed drawings of skateboarders and young people. But what caught the eye was the dynamic smudge of colour that ran across the centre of the drawing. It was in a very diluted watercolour paint and was bright pink. The smudge began in small dots at the foot of the paper and made an impressive swirl through the heart of the drawings, giving all the movement the drawings tried to capture a real life and energy. I immediately picked it out for its unusual nature and the boldness with which the artist had risked all the tidy careful drawings with this bold splash of colour.

Then I was told the story of the painting. The pupil who did it had spent all but the last few minutes of the eight hours in doing his drawings. Then he showed it to the teacher, who told him to stick it to some backing paper. He placed his drawing face down on the table and stuck on the backing paper. Only when he turned it over did he see that he had placed his art work face down on a puddle of paint left by a different artist. A disaster. He had no time to redo the work and his first thought was that he had ruined everything. But with 10 minutes to go to the end of the exam, he did the only thing he could. He gathered his courage and set about trying to fix things. He extended and developed the smudge and made it part of his painting. He took the disaster and turned it into brilliant success. If truth be told, his initial drawings were not very interesting – they were too safe and controlled. It was clear to all that the painting was massively improved by the smudge, not ruined.

A similar story is told of John Ruskin, the famous art critic and artist. One day a woman, who was a friend of his, showed him a handkerchief made of very precious material. A blot of indelible ink had fallen upon it, and the lady was complaining to Ruskin that the very valuable handkerchief had been ruined beyond repair.

Ruskin asked if he might have it. The lady could not see why he should want the ruined piece of material but agreed. Some days later Ruskin brought the handkerchief back, and on it, beginning from the blot, and making the blot the centre of the whole matter, Ruskin had drawn the most intricate and beautiful pattern and design.

What both John Ruskin and the GCSE Art pupil had realised is that what matters is not *whether* disaster strikes, but what you do about it *afterwards*. Do you throw your hands in the air and give up? Do you complain or look for someone else to blame? Do you decide that life is unfair and that you are a victim? Or do you pick yourself up and try to find a way to get round the problem. And sometimes we find that what we first thought was a disaster becomes the heart of a brilliant new design, which we would never have achieved without the setback.

Leonard Cohen, the Canadian singer-songwriter put it very well in a song called 'Anthem'. One of its verses runs as follows:

"Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There's a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in."

These stories tell a reassuring tale. The stain on the picture seemed to have ruined it, but actually made the painting work better than it did before. The blot had apparently spoiled the handkerchief. But Ruskin saw matters differently to the lady. He took it in, worked on it, and gave it back as something beautiful.

Leonard Cohen asks us to forget our worries that we cannot achieve perfection and instead reassures us that it is sometimes through our faults and flaws that we can be saved: There's a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in.

Very few things in life are perfect and whole – maybe none are. Sometimes it seems as though our lives are a constant struggle with our own and others imperfections. We start with the best intentions, we set off in great hope, but all too soon we find that there is a block in the path and we are halted or diverted. What then? That is when we are called upon to take the blot and turn it into something beautiful – to look again at the broken edge and understand that that is how the light gets in. The Japanese have a saying, *Nanakorobi yaoki*, which means: 'Fall seven times and stand up eight.'

Seen this way, it is possible to find positives in what might seem to be flaws and failures. We shouldn't allow ourselves to despair because we recognise the faults in ourselves and in the world. Nor should we allow ourselves the excuse that we cannot make it perfect to stop us from trying to improve things. Above all, we should not underestimate the power of a small group of people working to make the world better – after all, it's the only thing that has worked in the past.

We are now almost half way through the term. I hope that most things went well for you. I hope that when we return after the break all will go smoothly. Inevitably, however, some will not – and that is when you will need to show character, perhaps remember these stories and find some new way to turn the setback into a new opportunity to find success.