

FOREWORD 1

An Inspiring “Miraculous Journey”

Dr. Darold A. Treffert

Children don't come with an owner's manual. So every parent is on their own when it comes to day to day operation, fuel, schedule for various fluid 'changes', overall care & maintenance and 'what-to-do-if' troubleshooting. That's a good thing because then each parent can form their own style of childrearing, individualized to each differently shaped soul given to them for tender, loving care.

And children with disabilities don't come with an owner's manual either. So once again the parent is left to develop their own style of dealing with that child, hopefully concentrating as much on strengths as on any deficits, and with the knowledge that love is a good therapist too.

I had the privilege of meeting Ping Lian and his family when they made the formidable trip across the world to Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, USA in 2007 for an art exhibit I had assembled called “Windows of Genius: Artwork of the Prodigious Savant”. Ping Lian was a star at the exhibition, captivating the audience with his in-person “live and in color”, instant, on-site production of beautiful artwork. If there is such a thing as perpetual motion in art, Ping Lian qualifies. He was the colorful, literally, energizer bunny of drawing and painting.

But what I also saw on-site, and in this book, was another beautiful work-in-progress—a mother with great patience, ingenuity, determination, optimism, pride, untiring spirit, perseverance, discipline, faith, hope and

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a dream carefully and lovingly helping to discover, tend, nourish, and then bring to full bloom whatever special gifts her child have might have, however buried and hidden they at first might have been.

This book then is an owner's manual of sorts, providing a chronicle of what did work—stylized but painfully slowly, for this mother, Sarah Lee, for her son Ping Lian in helping him on the road toward realizing his full potential as an artist. But even more importantly, helping him also to attain the best communication and social skills he could on the road toward eventually being as independent as possible.

In my work with savants I advise parents, teachers, therapists and whomever has contact with these special people to “train the talent” because with that comes better communication, social abilities and independent daily living skills. So this book is also an instruction manual for “training the talent” containing a multitude of useful ‘for instances’ from real life experience. For Sarah Lee Ping Lian’s “I want to be an artist” wish was an achievable goal with his God-given special abilities. Obstacles were temporary opportunities to be overcome. A trip to the United States for an exhibit? Where does one get the funds? You ask an international courier company to help cover the costs of transporting the artworks to the United States and you ask the local airline to provide the tickets for such a worthy venture. And both proudly agree. Is it too high a goal to have Ping Lian’s artwork on exhibit at the United Nations Headquarters in New York City or to have a permanent showcase of Ping Lian’s works at the Art Commune in Malaysia? No. It is another opportunity, and with perseverance it happened.

Sarah Lee terms this a “miraculous journey”. And indeed it is. Books by other parents about the journey from childhood to adult for their son or daughter with disabilities are usually retrospective recollections after the fact. But this book, because of the careful journal entries and copies of e mail and other correspondence kept diligently by Sarah Lee, as the journey happened, allows the reader to accompany she and her son on

this journey contemporaneously tiny step by tiny step along the way. Mother acknowledges the change from blame and burden to privilege and “purpose”. Other parents have shared with me that same transition, but none quite so personally and eloquently as Sarah Lee does in this book.

This book of course contains some of Ping Lian’s remarkable drawings and paintings including some of my favorites. But it also contains some insights into ‘the rest of the story’ behind many of those works. And here we can see that Ping Lian is not just replicating what he sees like a copy machine, but instead he displays feelings and emotion such as humor, sometimes sadness, but mostly joy. Who says autistic persons are flat and without emotions? A careful look at Ping Lian’s works dispels that myth. Further, in my journey with savants, I have seen a rather predictable but remarkable transition over time. They usually start with replication often with astounding precision. But then gradually improvisation occurs with a slight addition or deletion from a real-life scene. And finally creation of something entirely new occurs as the pinnacle of that remarkable transition. And Ping Lian is well along the way of that predictable passage. More surprises and fulfillment to follow.

We don’t know the cause of autism. Hopefully some day we will. But this I do know. That within each child with autism, no matter how withdrawn and isolated he or she might be, there exists an “island of intactness” and it is our task, and opportunity, as parents, teachers or therapists to find that ‘island of intactness’, just as Sarah Lee did, and then tend it, reinforce it and ‘train’ it because with that comes improvement overall. For some that ‘island of intactness’ is an ‘island of genius’—the prodigious savant—as it is with Ping Lian. The special ability, whatever it is, and however small or massive, is not a frivolous, “gee whiz, look at that” quirk or curiosity. It is the very language of that autistic person speaking out to us if we are astute enough to recognize it and inventive enough to ‘train it’.

Until we know the cause of autism we will not be able to prevent it or

cure it. But like Sarah Lee, our plea for a 'cure' can be modified instead to a dedication to 'help'. And this book is a manual on helping. The goal is not a cure, but instead the goal is to help each autistic person achieve his or her full potential and the highest social, communication and independent daily living skills as possible. In Ping Lian's case he went from a young boy who was non-verbal, with limited verbal skills, to being an artist at age 15 with his own art gallery. While that full measure may not be possible for every child with autism, such progress is possible in part at least in every instance and this book hopefully will inspire every parent to embark on that same journey of optimism and love for their child just a Sarah Lee did for hers. The results attest convincingly to the manner and worth of such a journey.

Darold A. Treffert, M.D.

www.savantsyndrome.com www.daroldtreffert.com

Dr. Darold Treffert, is *Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine in the U.S. He has worked with savants and researched this rare condition for nearly 50 years, and was a consultant on the award-winning movie 'Rain Man', in which Dustin Hoffman plays the role of an autistic savant.* His most recent publication, *"Islands of Genius: The Bountiful Mind of the Autistic, Acquired and Sudden Savant"*, was published by Jessica Kingsley, Inc. in April 2010 in both the United States and England. It recently won gold in the Psychology/Mental Health Category at the 2011 Independent Publisher Book Awards and silver in the Psychology Category at the ForeWord 2011 Book of the Year Awards.... His earlier book, *"Extraordinary People: Understanding the Savant Syndrome"* was the first work to comprehensively summarize what is known about this fascinating condition, originally described a century ago, and to introduce the reader to a number of present day prodigious savants. In 2016, The Treffert Center opened on the campus of St. Agnes Hospital in Fond du Lac.

FOREWORD 2

Ping Lian Yeak

John McDonald

In his writings on *l'Art Brut* – 'Outsider Art' being the English-language term - Jean Dubuffet made a passionate case for those artists who remain outside of the institutional mainstreams. "Those works created from solitude and from pure and authentic creative impulses – where the worries of competition, acclaim and social promotion do not interfere – are, because of these very facts, more precious than the productions of professionals."

This description could have been made for Ping Lian Yeak, whose elaborate paintings and drawings are produced within a bubble of concentration that many mainstream artists might envy. We know enough about autism nowadays to understand that Ping Lian's condition is both a disability and an ability. Regardless of the difficulties he experiences with other tasks, when Ping Lian has a pencil or brush in hand he is alone with his motif, free from distractions and anxieties.

Many would-be artists have talent but lack the discipline necessary to make work of a consistently high standard. Ping Lian is a natural artist who responds to a motif with a complete lack of self-consciousness. When he paints the Sydney Opera House he is not thinking about all the other artists who have been there before him. He is not trying to compete with the Opera House pictures of well-known painters such as William Dobell or Brett Whiteley. His only concern is to capture the most vivid record of his chosen subject.

But perhaps it's not quite so simple. Because Ping Lian's verbal skills are limited he may be unable to discuss his ideas and motivations, but that

does not mean he works in a purely mechanical fashion. In this book Sarah Lee points out the hidden faces and other figures found in many of her son's drawings, such as a *Swimming Pool* picture of 2004. Although speech may not come easily to Ping Lian his works testify to a lively imagination and a vibrant inner life. In many pieces he is not simply recording, but inventing. This ability to transform the everyday into the marvellous is a sign of the true artist. Technical ability can be learned, but imagination comes from deep within.

At first acquaintance with Ping Lian's work one is struck by its tremendous sense of detail and the wondrous, wistful line he employs. That line, so fluid and confident is Ping Lian's trademark – his unique signature style. One can learn a lot about an artist from the way he or she draws. Each drawing entails a complex interaction between eye, mind and hand. The lines of communication may be clumsy at the beginning, but with practice it becomes a matter of pure instinct. Ping Lian has arrived at that point where drawing has become a second language through which he conveys his thoughts and feelings. His cheerfulness and openness of heart are apparent at a glance, especially in his drawings of animals.

There can be no doubt that Ping Lian owes a debt to his 'tiger mother', Sarah, who recognised his talent at an early age and worked so tirelessly to help him develop his artistic facility. One need not share Sarah's faith in either God or motivational literature to realise she has found a set of techniques that have brought out the best in her son. She may prefer to give credit to the Supreme Being but it is her unconditional love, devotion and support that have turned this "poor boy" into an artist of formidable powers.

John McDonald is art critic for the Sydney Morning Herald & film critic for the Australian Financial Review
www.johnmcdonald.net.au