



‘Turning Red’ Reminds Us of the Importance of Youth Voice and Agency

March 26, 2022 by Educator Barnes

“The number one rule in my family: honor your parents. They’re the supreme beings who gave you life who sweated and sacrificed so much to put a roof over your head, food on your plate ... an epic amount of food. The least you can do in return is every single thing they ask, of course, some people are like, ‘Be careful. Honoring your parents sounds great, but if you take it too far well you might forget to honor yourself.’” Meilin “Mei” Lee, “Turning Red”

The words above are the opening words to the recently released Disney/Pixar film "Turning Red." The main character, Melin "Mei" Lee is a Chinese Canadian who lives in Toronto. She strives to please her family even if that conflicts with who she wants to be and what she desires.

Although this film centers around a Chinese family, I was excited to watch it because there are not enough books or films that center Chinese families. Although there was some pushback to the film because it centered around a Chinese family, I can affirmatively say that my Black sons loved it. The period scene caused them no distress even though some people were offended by it and thought it was inappropriate for children.

They will be in middle school next year. They are two years younger than 13-year-old Meilin, but they could relate to her. In the midst of figuring out who she is, Mei has to deal with morphing into a red panda.

Later in the film, Mei says to her mom, "I'm finally figuring out who I am, but I'm scared it will take me away from you." This coming-of-age movie, centered right in the middle of puberty, is relatable to all children regardless of race or background. Yes, representation matters, but it also matters to the people who are not being represented in the film. My Black American sons could relate to a Chinese American girl. These stories are needed to show how much we all are connected.

The hardest part in life is wanting the best for your children and accepting that what makes their life the best may not be on the path you want for them. I'm saying this from experience.

Not only am I a mom, but I am also an educator. Too many times, student voice and choice are removed from education. We want to preach to students about what they should do to be successful, and we don't stop long enough to hear what their desires and choices are.

I can't watch "Coco" because "Remember Me" reminds me too much of my dad. I wasn't expecting "Turning Red" to also pull at my heartstrings like "Coco." The relationship between Mei and her mom reminded me of the relationship between my dad and me. I tried to do every single thing my dad wanted even if I wasn't happy because I cared more about him being happy and proud of me and being on the path, he wanted more than my own happiness. Luckily, way before my dad passed away last year, we moved past that. My dad realized that I would be okay, and I realized that he had accepted my life choices and was, indeed, proud of me.

If you haven't watched this film yet, I highly suggest it. If you watch it with your kids, reflect with them about how they feel about Mei's relationship with her mom and how it evolved during the film. You might just learn something new about your child.