



I Am a Mighty Dragon

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“We’re not buying it,” I said firmly. We were at the Goodwill, a low-ceilinged, cramped space that smelled of old carpeting and discarded leather shoes, where the racks were bulging with unwanted things. My daughter, Sofia, almost four at the time, stood before me clutching a stuffed purple and pink dragon, studying its every feature.

“I *really* like this.” It was a girly-looking dragon with mascara-perfect eyelashes. When you pressed her belly, she flapped her pink metallic wings and enthusiastically said a few things, the first of which was “I *am* a mighty dragon.”

“Put it back,” I repeated, indicating the large cardboard box with stuffed animals. We had come looking for items to enhance Sofia’s pirate get-up for a birthday costume party; I had what I needed and was ready to check out. The stale air was getting to me.

“No,” she said, her tone perfectly calm.

I was shocked. This was a first. Sofia was a good-natured child who always took ‘no’ for an answer with little more than a grumble. Looking at her now—she held the dragon to her chest, not budging—I was actually impressed that she was taking a stand. Considering I never bought her toys and this clean-looking dragon cost a mere \$1.50, I decided to give in.

Sofia never named her new friend that she couldn’t live without. As with any toy, she was excited about it for a while, and then it got ignored, collecting dust on her windowsill next to the basket of musical instruments.

About half a year later, it was her younger brother, Alexander, who brought the dragon back into play. Once he began to walk and explore the world above the floor, he spotted the dragon—pointing and shouting “This! This!”—clamoring for me to bring it down. He was fascinated the first time she flapped her wings and spoke: “Well, scratch my scales.” Because he wasn’t strong enough to give her belly a firm push, I had to do it for him. Now and again and twelve times more, over the days that piled up into months of full-time motherhood, I would hear the dragon’s cheery remarks.

One morning on which I felt particularly tired and still needed to serve my children breakfast, pack Sofia’s lunch and snack, prod her to use the bathroom and get dressed, fix her hair, walk her to school, schlep to the grocery store to puzzle out another nutritious-delicious dinner, and then return to face our messy apartment and a difficult toddler son, I stood at the foot of the bed in my pajamas, unable to move. I couldn’t face the day. Every inch of my body, including my brain, was exhausted. Then, as I returned from a big stretch, I heard myself say, “I *am* a mighty dragon.” Out loud. Apparently prompted by subconscious forces, the words marched straight out of my mouth. And in that moment, I felt a lift. Instantly, I knew that I had stumbled on my personal mantra.

Not that I had been looking for a mantra. Searching for missing caps to magic markers and wayward Tupperware lids consumes enough of my time. But suddenly, I saw how useful this particular one could be. Besides lightening my mood, saying “I *am* a mighty dragon” helped me to collect my strength for another busy morning. It was like discovering a nifty tool that I didn’t know existed; I slipped it in my pocket for later use. (Sofia had had the right instinct with this dragon; she was a keeper.)

My mantra has continued to come in handy, especially when I'm overwhelmed. That's when every room in the apartment is a disaster and, as I try to restore order, I'm reminded that the spaces in which I'm putting things—the toy box, linen closet, etc.—are disheveled, too. Or when, as I'm cooking supper, three-year-old Alex throws a tantrum while Sofia calls from the other room, asking for help with her first-grade homework. Amid the noise, their needs, the mess, calmly affirming that “I *am* a mighty dragon” helps me quell the urge to bang a frying pan over something (or someone) and, instead, snuff out the fires one at a time.

I'm also finding this mantra very useful in my efforts to write. Trying to compose thoughts at the end of the day—once I've hosted play dates, coaxed meals into bellies, mediated sibling squabbles, picked up toys, enforced time-outs, read stories, and brushed the teeth of an uncooperative mouth—is tough. My final gram of energy is squeezed out simultaneously with the Thomas the Train toothpaste. After kissing the kids goodnight and masterminding a way to fit that one final item into the dishwasher, this tired dragon feels like parking her tail on the couch and relaxing next to her husband, maybe with a TV show or a magazine.

But evenings provide my longest stretch of uninterrupted writing time; I can't squander this portion of the day when nobody needs me. By reminding myself of the kind of dragon I am (and sometimes with the added boost of coffee), I will myself to sit down at the computer.

Occasionally, I write in the early morning when my family is still asleep. When my cell phone alarm vibrates under my pillow at the dark hour of 5:30 or 6 a.m. and I struggle between my exhaustion and my ambition, telling myself that “I *am* a mighty dragon” strengthens my resolve. On these chilly, silent mornings, as I sit on the living room couch with my laptop, watching its first displays of light, I must repeat the mantra a few times to activate the lights in my brain. Later in the day, when I'm dragging, I make it a special point to be a patient and attentive—even fun—mother because, well, that's what mighty dragons do.

It's a self-fulfilling prophecy: You tell yourself something repeatedly, and you believe it. I've convinced myself that I'm a mighty dragon. I refuse to be intimidated by my circumstances. Saying this mantra, I become bigger than whatever obstacles lie before me. For maximum effectiveness, I must say it like the dragon does, with the emphasis on the verb: “I *am* a mighty dragon.” It's as if deep down she sensed it all along but just found proof. Following this pronouncement, I breathe some fire, and I charge toward my next challenge. (Okay, maybe I don't *charge* toward the challenge, but I suck it up and face it.)

“I *am* a mighty dragon” may initially sound like other motivational phrases, but it is unmatched. Nike's blunt “Just do it” zeroes in on a single task that needs doing. But it says nothing about the enduring capabilities of the doer. The little engine's “I think I can...I think I can...” while hopeful, lacks immediate conviction. It requires repetition and momentum to build its power. I'm a fan of “You go, girl!” but it requires someone else to deliver that encouragement. All of these mantras can be successful morale-boosters, but, my fellow villagers, “I *am* a mighty dragon” dominates the land. It's large. It's fierce. If you say it with your heart and feel it in your bones, you, too, could be unstoppable.

I should clarify: “I *am* a mighty dragon” is not a magic spell. Saying it doesn't make the container in the fridge with the stinky, slimy leftover rice from two weeks ago

vanish. But it does give me the fortitude to lift the lid and deal with it. And it persuades me that I can, in the same week, pitch in at the school fundraiser, take both kids to the dentist, create some decent meals, get an essay up and running, mail that birthday package on time, and keep everyone in clean underwear. Maintaining family life while inching my way toward personal goals is tricky. I find that a great mantra helps to pull it all together.

“*I am a mighty dragon*” serves not only as inspiration, but it can also double as praise. Once in a while, I use it to pat myself on the back when I’ve accomplished something, whether it’s completing a series of to-do items, or disciplining one of my kids effectively. In the demanding job of motherhood, where typically no one compliments my work until the second Sunday in May, a self-congratulatory “*I am a mighty dragon*” now and then is good for my soul. (Who needs a therapist? For a buck and a half, I’ve got a purple and pink dragon from the Goodwill guiding my way.)

Neither of my children plays with the dragon much these days. Mostly, she sits on a high shelf in their bedroom, quietly presiding over the Barbies and various vehicles shelved below. While we’ve donated lots of neglected toys to charity or passed them to others, the dragon will remain with us always. Sofia and Alex don’t realize it, but she is mine now. In fact, I treasure her, for she led me to discover my invisible wings. And with those wings—regardless of the burdens that land on my path, tiny or immense—I know I can fly.