Work in Progress
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UNCONVENTIONAL THOUGHTS ON DESIGNING AN EXTRAORDINARY LIFE

LEANNE FORD AND STEVE FORD
Avocado Be Gone!

I am going to make everything around me beautiful. That will be my life.

—ELSIE DE WOLFE

Leanne

We grew up in a suburb just thirty minutes outside of Pittsburgh, with rolling hills and crabapple trees and modern brick houses built to last. We had a lucky life growing up; we were always insulated and cared for. Our mom still lives in the same house we grew up in. I’ve spent so many of my adult years moving around the country, throwing everything I own into the car and redecorating each old rental along the way. I felt comfortable doing that, I think, because Mom’s house was my safety net. I always knew I had our childhood home to go back to.
Mom’s style was traditional, with a hint of trend. But when she decorated her house, she took creative risks.

Growing up, we had an Asian-themed living room. Peach-white walls and rice wallpaper. You could see the lines in the matching peach plush carpet from where Mom vacuumed. This room was considered off-limits, except for special occasions. Then there was the bamboo furniture and Asian four-panel silk screens. We had two matching couches facing each other, covered with images of bamboo trees and Japanese blooms.

The peach-hued Asian-themed living room, which, our mom wants you to know, has since been updated, remained for thirty years. “Mom, you’ve had this living room so long that you’ve gone out of and come back into style,” I told her once. “If you keep waiting, you’ll be back.” Mom was ahead of her time four times in thirty years.

It’s also worth noting that the artificial Christmas tree in the living room always matched the color story and theme of the room. The ornaments were peach. The ribbons were peach. Everything on that tree was peach. It was Mom’s pride and joy—besides us, I hope. (But who can be sure?)

Now, the tree in the family room was a different story. This is where the real Christmas tree lived. And it was a free-for-all. This was the big one, covered with all the colored lights three kids could dream of. We threw every single ornament we’d ever made or collected up on that gem of a tree.

My bedroom also had a theme: let’s call it “French country.” I’m talking Laura Ashley bedding and pink-and-white striped wallpaper with a floral border—all of which I passionately chose in the eighth grade. The furniture was (and is) matching white wicker. I decided on a rocking chair with white pillows, pink tassels, and lace, along with a narrow, white wicker highboy dresser. If you open the lowest drawer
and stick your head underneath it, you will see the list of all the cute boys’ names I had written down on the bottom side. I’d get down on the floor, slide my body beneath the open drawers, and scribble names on the wood in red pen: “I ❤ William 1/23/96.” My teenage heart, engraved on the bottom of a drawer.

A little note card on my door reads: “The Laura Ashley Room.” This was a recent touch my mom made five or six years ago. She calls it her little bed-and-breakfast. When her friends and sisters come to stay, they get to experience the first room I designed. (I’d like to apologize to my relatives for going with a twin bed.)

The kitchen at my parents’ house was also very traditional, with a few trends thrown in. With its dark brown wooden cabinets, jungle wallpaper, and natural cane cantilever chairs—you know the ones—it was somethin’ else. All of the appliances were avocado green, which was a hot color in the 1970s! We make fun of those appliances now, but when Mom picked them out, she was cutting-edge.

I think about those avocado appliances when I’m designing people’s homes. The truth is, we really should avoid trendy appliances. Your appliances have to last for years. They’re one of the major expenses in your kitchen, so they should be classic and simple. Let your wild, artistic side come out in other ways. Although sometimes I break that rule—as I do all rules, even my own.

There I was, twelve years old, with only one design project—my Laura Ashley room—under my belt. But I knew something in that kitchen was wrong. Very wrong. As in, the refrigerator. Our avocado-hued refrigerator was quite simply the wrong color. It was the first time that my sense of right and wrong coincided with my natural instinct for design.

No one expected me to become an interior designer. Mom thought I was going to be the principal of a school, or a judge. But I started
noticing design in other families’ homes. I realized that there were better refrigerator colors out there.

One day I had an epiphany: our refrigerator needed to be white.

Kids are often more intuitive than we give them credit for. Mom understood this. She was big on listening to our ideas. She didn’t shut me down if I had a crazy suggestion.

We had a lot of freedom to create projects. For instance, I used to collect old, used candles and leftover candle wax to make new candles. I would spend an afternoon melting down candles in Mom’s pots. My mom’s reaction: “That’s a fun project, honey!” When I was done melting down candles in the pots, Mom would just throw the pots away. Then she would go to Goodwill, buy some more old pots, and let me melt more candles in them. Recently, one of my sister Michelle’s friends asked her, “Is Leanne still making candles in the house?” (My answer is yes, by the way.) That was her strongest memory of me. Michelle called me “pioneer lady.”

We had a balance of real boundaries with our parents, but they also gave us so much freedom. There were rules, restrictions, yes. But not when it came to our imagination. Mister Rogers was from Pittsburgh, so that concept of “I like you just the way you are” rubbed off on our family. It really was my parents’ philosophy.

When I was in the fifth grade, I had a school project where we were told to make a business card, a slogan, and a logo. I was working with Dad, designing the business card, and Dad asked me what my slogan was.

“My name is Leanne. If I want to, I can.”

Dad laughed proudly; he was so impressed that he ran to tell Mom. That slogan became, in a way, a slogan of my life. My family still quotes it to me when they want to tease me.

Anyway, one day, I came home from school and stared at that ugly
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avocado-colored fridge. I turned to Mom and said, “Let’s paint the refrigerator white.”

Mom’s response: “You can’t actually paint refrigerators.”

“Yes, you can,” I said. “I’m sure you can.”

(My name is Leanne. If I want to, I can.)

Maybe, just maybe, it’s possible that I took my little “my name is Leanne” pep talk one step too far. I felt invincible—if I just put my mind to it, I could create it. Funny, I still have that same outlook about decorating. It’s what Steve and I argue about most.

Steve

Exactly. Just the other day, for instance, Leanne gave me a ten-foot door to put on an eight-foot wall.

Leanne

“Cut it down two feet,” I told him. “Let’s make it work!”

Steve

It doesn’t really work that way, Leanne. First off, you have to frame the opening. Then I may have to reframe the whole wall. Then the door is eight inches wide instead of five inches wide. And then we have to build a whole new wall out on the inside.

She sees it like this: “Oh, the door is pretty. That’s the door we need.”
Leanne

So you’re saying it does work, Steve . . .

I will say this: as the youngest of three, I had to fight for what I thought was right. I’m still that way. If it’s the door we need, then it’s only right that we get that door.

I’ve been like this with everyone in my family as long as I can remember. When I was around fifteen, for example, Mom had become a little, let’s say, lackadaisical about wrapping Christmas presents. It was a slow degradation. At first she would write the name of the gift on the back side of the label. (Like, Sweater or Monopoly—which, by the way, was banned from our house because we had the biggest fights ever over that game.) To me, this was injustice. Writing the presents on the label killed the surprise—it ruined the joy of Christmas! That was just the beginning. A couple of years later, she didn’t even hide the wrapped presents. I would have to wrap a few of them myself. I was only fifteen. I had at least three more years of real kid time left!

I would go through those presents and write my name on the gifts. Oh, there’s a new bike. Label that Leanne.

Wait a second. I was handy, but this was ridiculous!

“Still a kid over here!” I finally said. “Mom, please hide the Christmas presents!”

Again, it didn’t matter if it was the injustice of unwrapped Christmas gifts or if I was fighting with Steve over the size of a door. I wasn’t good at backing down. (I’m still not.) If I saw an unfairness, I’d fight to change it. (Hence, why my parents thought I should be a judge or a lawyer.)

But anyway . . . where were we? Refrigerator. When I was ten and I saw that avocado-colored refrigerator, I knew I could paint it. I knew we must paint it. No one was going to tell me any different.
Except, maybe, Dad.

Dad could put the kibosh on painting the refrigerator. Mom had gotten on board with painting it white. She loved the idea. She agreed that we could figure out some solution to paint it, but she needed to clear it with Dad first. So Mom and I went to Dad to deliver the news.

“Dad, I have a great idea. I want to paint the refrigerator white,” I said, my face glowing, my dimples perking, and my mother by my side.

“Absolutely not,” Dad said. “You’re not going to ruin a perfectly good working appliance.”

Mom wasn’t thrilled about this. She wanted us to have freedom about our choices. I got that from her. I’m not afraid to try something new. And—let’s admit it—she wanted a white fridge! Steve is probably more like my dad in that he questions the practicality of things. I always think, Well, why not try it? Which was precisely Mom’s thinking: Who was it hurting to paint the refrigerator white?

I look at renovating houses the same way. I tell people to look at the bigger picture. I ask this of people all the time when they’re making a big change: What is the greater good of the project?

“We’re all stuck in concrete,” Mom said when we recently discussed the refrigerator story. “We don’t like change. We like the status quo. Creating is all about getting out of the box, and we don’t like to get out of the box.”

Dad had no idea how to paint a refrigerator; therefore, he decided it couldn’t be done. He refused to even consider it.

Steve

Generally, though, both our parents were open-minded. They gave us any opportunity that we wanted. They were supportive of us. It wasn’t
like they said, “Here’s a paintbrush.” But they did say, “Oh, if you want a paintbrush, we’ll help you and run out and get one.”

Leanne

Except in the case of the refrigerator. Dad certainly wasn’t buying any paintbrushes for that project.

But then Dad left town for the weekend. *(Insert sneaky laugh here.)* He and Steve, who was about thirteen at the time, went on a ski trip together.

Knowing me, I probably pushed the issue. I probably walked by that avocado-colored refrigerator, felt disgusted by its presence, and convinced myself that it had to go and it *had to go now.* I was a persistent kid. It’s a great quality to have as an adult. As a kid—not as much. Persistent kids can get themselves into trouble. But this time I had an ally: Mom.

Of course, Mom had to be on my side. I was only ten. After all, someone had to buy the paint!

I had seen an article in a home improvement magazine about how to paint your refrigerator. It was fate. We went to the hardware store, got what we needed, and while Steve and Dad were skiing in Colorado, we painted that ugly thing. We worked through the middle of the night, like little elves; it had to dry before they got home.

It was G-rated sneaky, our secret. It was late on a Saturday night. The two of us: renegades on a mad mission.

You understand that this wasn’t a professional job by any means. “We did a shabby job,” Mom even admitted recently. That wasn’t the point. The point is that Mom allowed me to have this vision. And if she were nervous about taking creative risks, I’m sure it would have been passed on to us. But this was a woman who put jungle wallpaper in her kitchen.
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The refrigerator was built into the cabinets. Remember: I was just a little kid. Mom and I couldn't pull that refrigerator outside of the cabinet to paint the side. So we settled—we painted the door and only half of each side. When Mom got rid of the refrigerator years later, she said that the sides were half-white and half-avocado.

The refrigerator dried on Sunday, and we placed all the magnets back on it, with all the papers and photos and reminders they held in place. Pretended like nothing ever happened. Except now, we had a glorious white refrigerator.

Dad and Steve came home Sunday night, and neither of them said a word. Mom didn’t even say a word until a few weeks later. “Honey, you know we painted the fridge, right?” she finally said to Dad. But remarkably, Dad never made a big deal about it. It’s entirely possible that he liked the white color or didn’t want to admit he was wrong. It’s also possible that he didn’t notice!

Steve

I noticed. I seem to remember that avocado color scraping up from under the white. I remember seeing green stuff. When you opened the fridge, you could see the avocado inside. It scratched green forever. All the magnets scratched it off.

Gotta use primer first, Leanne.

Leanne

Got it, Steve. Always use primer . . . yeah, yeah.

Painting that refrigerator was a monumental childhood moment.
For one, it was the first time I realized that painting something white will instantly improve it—in my humble opinion, of course. A few months later, I was at a party at a friend’s house, and they had an all-white kitchen. It was the first white kitchen I had ever seen, and I was blown away. I had never seen white kitchen cabinets before. Our cabinets were a dark wood.

“Mom, Dad,” I said, when I got back from the party, fresh off my refrigerator caper. “We have to paint these cabinets white.”

“Let’s do it,” Mom said.

That time, we didn’t do the painting ourselves. Mom hired someone to paint the cabinets. (For the record, you absolutely can paint your own cabinets. I’ve been known to do it in the past. You just have to do it right. You have to sand it, use the right paint, take the right steps. But at the end of the day, it’s like painting anything else. The beauty of painting your kitchen cabinets is that it feels like you’ve transformed the entire room. When it’s done, you feel as if you have a whole new kitchen.)

Here’s the thing: Dad and Mom raised us in a way where we felt uninhibited. Painting the refrigerator didn’t have dire consequences. Our creativity was appreciated and applauded, not penalized and belittled. Our ideas were considered important. We weren’t just children whose voices didn’t matter. Our voices mattered, and our interests mattered, and that forever impacted me and how I lived the rest of my life.

Steve

Mom and Dad gave us the best foundation we could possibly have, the perfect mix of boundaries and encouragement to explore. The way they taught us to live when we were kids has been at the root of everything
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we’ve both been able to accomplish. Most of all, they taught us to care about and strive for the right things—the things that really make life worth living.

WORKING ON PROGRESS

Here are some tips for supporting the original thinkers in your life:

1. Hear them. That’s right. Don’t just listen; hear them. Don’t laugh, no matter how wild their wacky idea sounds. Just listen. Let your original thinkers—whether it’s your child, your friend, your spouse, a partner—explore their ideas. Look into if it’s an option; find out how it can be done.


3. If you have the ability to help and to find or create tools to help the idea come to life—do it!

4. Let it go if they let it go. This path may not be the be-all and end-all for an original thinker. In fact, most likely it’s not. So be okay with the evolution of what’s next. Nothing created, thought of, or inspired is in vain.