



FLOWERS FALL

Field Notes from a Buddhist Mom's Experimental Life

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PRIMORDIAL MIRROR

YET, THOUGH IT IS LIKE THIS, SIMPLY, FLOWERS FALL AMID OUR LONGING,
AND WEEDS SPRING UP AMID OUR ANTIPATHY.

— Dogen Zenji, *Genjokoan*

This morning Azzie and I ate breakfast at her little table, chatting about the upcoming day, random facts, and lists of all the people she knows. The routine. But last night T and I watched the vice presidential debate, so I was listening to the radio more intently than usual, desperate for reassurance that the world saw through Sarah Palin's robotic performance. Perhaps I had a faraway look on my face, indicating that I wasn't 100-percent present with the little darling as she munched away on her veggie sausage, reminiscing about how she fell off her stool last night, "but my boo-boo doesn't hurt anymore right now."

"Great!" I answered.

She continued, "Mama, look! Jimmy [the cat] just jumped onto the table! We don't jump on tables!!!" She stared at me, as if on pause, her eyes and mouth aghast, ready for confirmation that, "No, we don't jump on tables! Silly cat!" accompanied by a big tickle. But instead, distracted by reports of Palin-lovin' voters, I simply responded, "It's okay, honey, Jimmy can do that."

Obviously unsatisfied, Azzie asked me, "Mama, why do you have your head like this?" turning her own head toward the radio.

"I guess I'm trying to listen to the radio."

So, of course, she walked over to the radio and turned it off.

Before I had children, I would have read the above and clucked to myself, thinking, "So? Turn it back on!" Part of me still agrees, but it's not as simple as it looks. Take this morning: If I had just marched up to her like in the movies and said, "Azalea! You may not turn off the radio while mommy is listening to it," I would have instantly engaged in a power struggle, which most certainly would have included at least one tantruming body thrashing about, and certainly two minds spending the rest of the morning vacillating in drama. Yuck! If I said nothing, knowing I could listen to the radio later, I would have "given in," encouraging more spoiled behavior, or so I feared. If I took a moment and softened my body, approaching her with exaggerated surprise, pretending I was "shocked!" that she be so bold and made a big, gentle joke out of it, adding some fart noises on her neck, then I would most likely been able to listen to the radio fuss-free, Azalea would have gotten the picture, and harmony would be restored. If I were more like Sarah Palin, I would be able to do this all the time; my talking points would never be far from reach. But, what can I say? Sometimes "I just don't waaaaaant to!!!"

I have had a lot of relationships in my 39 years. In every other, the way Azalea treats me would be considered unfair at best and abusive at worst, and all my friends would advise me to leave her at once. I mean, look, she is totally control-

ling, needs to be at the center of the universe at every moment, is completely unappreciative, and can't even wipe her own fanny! Girl, you can do better!

(But you should see the way she looks at me, and the way she smells...)

So I understand why it's difficult to always remember, "Oh, right, she's not just acting like a two-year-old," and refrain from have an even bigger fit myself. The thing that freaks me out is how I am not just learning how to do this thing (i.e., being a mature adult), in a classroom or on my meditation cushion, but live, with the most rapt audience one could ever hope for, or recoil from, depending on one's disposition. The girl totally studies me—literally watching—then immediately copies the way I greet a friend, cross my legs at the table, talk to small things, cave under pressure, and push the hair out of my eyes (apparently, I couple that gesture with the comment, "Oh my gosh, my hair really is really in my eyes a lot today."). As someone who's not always crazy about what she sees in the mirror, it can be brutal to see myself parading around in the body of a two-year-old.

Part of what's been so healing about Zen has been learning to trust my teacher, Daido Roshi. I tend to think that my teacher, being "enlightened" and all (whatever that means), should be perfect, not in the Buddhist sense of a person being completely oneself, but in the—dare I say—Christian sense of measuring up to some standard. It is humbling to see my teacher's truly perfect imperfection and appreciate that yes, he is teaching me in every moment that I am his student, but that doesn't mean he is walking around thinking, "How can I teach Bethany about compassion today?" It just happens, and it happens between us.

Likewise with Azalea. Sometimes I am really "parenting," but mostly, it just happens. Unfortunately, she hasn't exactly chosen me as her teacher (though some Buddhists would disagree); also, when we met, she was a one-second old infant, not an already-formed person coming to Zen and looking for answers; and I was, and still am, quite deluded. In other words, she's so vulnerable! Luckily, Azalea also has a devoted father, extended family, and loving community to help show her the way. But it's painful to think of my own darkness—my impatience, anger, judging mind—and imagine that, as hard as I try not to, I'm transmitting that mind to her—the one I love so, so deeply. How could I not? I am transmitting myself.

I had the good fortune of attending a "mondo" (a question-and-answer session with the teacher) at the monastery the other day. One of the first questions I heard was from a student who asked about forgiveness. She was teary, talking about people she wanted to forgive, but wasn't sure how. Daido was so gentle when he answered, "Forgive yourself."