



# FLOWERS FALL

By Bethany Saltman

## Why Have Kids?

Yet, though it is like this, simply, flowers fall amid our longing,  
and weeds spring up amid our antipathy.

— Dogen Zenji, *Genjokoan*

One of Azalea's best friends told her that Elvis ate too many cookies, then died. Every now and then, in a particularly contemplative moment, Azalea will ask, "Mommy, why did Elvis do that to himself?" It's a good question. Why do any of us do what we do? Even though there are infinite and unknowable karmic causes to every action, I wish we could at least ask Elvis what he *thought* he was doing when he exceeded himself into oblivion.

Even when people are alive and well, asking "why?" doesn't seem to get very far. What can seem like such an open-ended, heart-in-the-right-place approach, actually, once it hits the air of a real conversation, feels like a dead-end, at best, or accusatory, at worst. Take me asking my mom why she married my dad (*He was a good dancer. Say what?*) Or why she had kids (*Because, honey, I really wanted to be a mom.*). Actually, take asking anyone why they had kids, especially if they are in the midst of the dealing with said kids in the moment. Usefulness and appropriateness aside, I wonder about it all the time. Obviously there are many good reasons to procreate, not the least of which is the next generation of humans. But...well...it's complicated, too.

So I was intrigued when *New York* magazine recently ran a cover story called, "All Joy and No Fun: Why Parents Hate Parenting." In the piece, Jennifer Senior, herself a parent, refers to many of the recent and well-publicized studies indicating that parenting is very low on the list of what makes us happy (one particularly stunning study shows that Texas moms rated childrearing #16 on their list of pleasurable activities. Housework was among the 15 that were more fun.). While this data is not new, what was interesting to me was how Senior developed the question: are people deluded into thinking that parenthood will make them happy, or is there something about parenting itself (expectations, guilt, etc.) that makes it such a significant hurdle to happiness?

One of the most intriguing parts of the discussion came from a conversation Senior had with Daniel Gilbert, a Harvard psychologist and author of *Stumbling on Happiness*. He had this to say:

"When you pause to *think* what children mean to you, of course they make you feel good...The problem is, 95 percent of the time, you're not thinking about what they mean to you. You're thinking that you have to take them to piano lessons. So you have to think about which kind of happiness you'll be consuming most often. Do you want to maximize the one you experience almost all the time—moment-to-moment happiness—or the one you experience rarely?"

In other words: what is it about parenting (or anything for that matter) do we *think* we are drawn to? Or repelled by? Is it the *idea* of parenting that we like, the happiness that we "experience rarely," or the actual work of raising

children that gives us a good feeling? And, I would add, can we just schlep the kid to piano lessons, or do we have to think about that, too? It's another way of asking: Who am I? Really! Are some parents "hating" it because they don't like the activity of raising kids or is that they are not, in fact, experiencing it all? Because they are so busy thinking about whether or not it makes them happy?

I made the decision to have a child because I was curious. Initially drawn to monastic practice, which in the Mountains and Rivers Order requires childlessness, I realized after two years of residential training, that this was not the path for me. However, I felt like my body had this other, equally compelling capacity for exploring human-ness that I would be crazy to ignore. And luckily T was on board. So we went for it. Which was the easy part. Staying curious is more difficult. Does being a mom make me happy? As my late teacher Daido Roshi used to say, "Only you can make you happy."

And since Azalea was born, it has been clear that this life would be a challenge to the ways I had always made myself happy. The love and connection I felt with Azalea was immediate and profound (and is the most stable love I have ever known), but the vocation of being a mom did not come as easily. As we know, babies and children need constant attention, and this was difficult for me to give freely. In fact, it wasn't until I became a parent that I realized the depth of my own needs, and saw that I had pretty much constructed my entire life as a way of protecting some boundary that felt critical to keeping me—if not happy—at least not actively freaked out. At the same time, I knew I really, really wanted to become more flexible, to open my heart as wide as it could go. And that letting go of my self-concern required more than a weekend retreat about compassion, which is another reason why I had wanted to be a monk. I needed to sign myself up for life. So instead of committing myself to a life of service to a sangha, I made a vow to Azalea. Either way, the practice is the same: Devote myself to the life of another. Realize who it is that gets in the way.

Right now, Azalea is in her grandparents' car, driving back from the beach, smelling like sunscreen and sweat, maybe asleep. Hopefully happy. But who knows? At any moment, she will arrive and this happiness I feel, sitting alone, writing, thinking of her, will transform. My attention will shift away from my ideas of parenting to the thing itself. I may resist it, and even ask why—why did I do this, why is it so hard? If I believed in God, I would pray to be returned to my vow. But no such luck. I have to do it myself. And I will. And my questions will continue, through the sand-washing and feeding, the negotiating and the playing, and all the answers I need will run through the house, begging to be chased. ●