



FLOWERS FALL

Field Notes from a Buddhist Mom's Experimental Life

BY BETHANY SALTMAN

THE INCREDIBLE DISAPPEARING DRAMA

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

— Dogen Zenji, *Genjokoan*

A friend of mine is having a baby. Her third. May the Force be with her. Today I gathered up goods for this newest little one, poking around in my two-year-old daughter Azalea's room. In one basket I found tiny socks, miniature tights, and never-worn sneakers the size of a snail. In another, piles of receiving blankets, some still scented with overpriced laundry detergent and others bespotted with, indeed, "puke green" stains only a mother could love. Could I really get rid of all this stuff? Out of nowhere, the afternoon light around everything softened. My heart sped up, but my mind slowed down, cheeks tingling, melancholia rushing in. Oh, geez. It was turning into that kind of day.

On another shelf I found what I was actually looking for: the cloth diaper covers my friend would dutifully fasten around her new baby. I tossed them out onto the floor, transforming them from trash to treasure.

My husband, T. (whose name is being abbreviated for some professional privacy), and I tried using cloth diapers when Azalea was a baby, but I am not the most patient person in the world, I'll admit. So when her little bum started rashing up, even though we could have tried experimenting with new diaper-washing methods, et cetera, I insisted we give up, actually relieved to be back to basics, as it were, but still off the hook because, hey, we tried, ok?! So we used the covers at night, over the disposables.

Looking through the covers today—some blue, one fuzzy and bright pink, others covered in tiny creatures—I could feel Azalea's little life having been wrapped up in them, her incredible sleeping body, unconscious, yet comfy, and I felt like I was opening a box of old journals, transported to a heart I used to have—ah, the agony and the ecstasy. I struggled so deeply in those early months of being a mother, the days when those dumb diaper covers were a ubiquitous part of my daily grind. But today, holding them in my hand, poised to pass them on, I felt sad to see them go, and uncharacteristically proud that I had done as well as I had. Azalea is a "Mama, I love pancakes because Iuuuuuuuuv them!" two-and-a-half-year-old toddler. And I am still a person. Most of the time, anyway. It's a miracle.

In the midst of the cloth or disposable diaper dilemma, and, believe me, that was the least of it, the brave folks at Chronogram asked me to write a blog about being a Buddhist mom. They knew I had been practicing at Zen Mountain Monastery for many years and recently had a baby. T. and I—who met there—had moved out after two years of residential training and we were in the midst of yet another major life transition: not only from nonparents to

parents, which is enough to blow anyone's mind, but also from community participants to necessarily more marginal ones. It wasn't easy. So I was intrigued, but not sure what I would write about: I mean, what in the world is a Buddhist mom? But with all the warrior spirit I could muster I took it up as an experiment, devoted to seeing my mind, and then reporting back to blogosphere. Now that we are taking the plunge into print, it is important to note that I am definitely in no position, as Zen student or mom, to offer anything remotely resembling advice. All I have to offer is my commitment to asking questions, and my faith that asking—in and of itself—transforms. I know it has for me.

When I accidentally discovered Zen, I was trying to change my miserable life, but it just wasn't happening. One day I wandered into the self-help section of a Manhattan Barnes & Noble. Gazing at all the seriously lame books, I implored the universe: "Okay. I give up. Shoot me." I was serious! Luckily, before any all-powerful force turned "its" attention toward my demands, I glanced to the left, to the "Eastern Thought" section—a place, for the record, I had zero interest in investigating—where I saw a beautiful book called *Nothing Special Living Zen*. I pulled it off the shelf, sat down, and read the chapter called "The Cocoon of Pain." That was it.

I wasn't looking for a more spiritual life, a community, or even a teacher. I was just obsessed with one question: Why was I so determined to ruin my own life? I knew better, and yet I felt powerless. Call it addiction, compulsion, neurosis, or insanity, the bottom line is that I was totally lost, and I knew it.

Thankfully, a community and a teacher found me and I was (and still am) able to practice Zen in plenty of very challenging company. And I was even able to find some relief—intermittently, of course. However, when I gave birth to Azalea, I was very soon struck by how much I could love a person—so truly, so sincerely, so totally—and yet still struggle to manifest that love. My little pea-heart was just so taxed! My inner and outer states were not in harmony. It was the same old dilemma, but with new, higher, unfathomable, stakes: Where is the disconnect? What can I change? What is real? Who am I?

Being a Buddhist mom, for me, means living a big experiment: hurting, loving, wondering, watching my heart—and everyone else's—open and close. Sometimes it feels like I am going over the same drama again and again. But upon closer inspection, and when I let it, the drama disappears.

Read Hillary Harvey's blog, *Swimming Upstream*, about her ongoing experiment in homeschooling her daughter Zoe, at www.chronogram.com.