



FLOWERS FALL

Field Notes from a Buddhist Mom's Experimental Life

BY BETHANY SALTMAN

HAPPY NEW YEAR

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

— Dogen Zenji, *Genjokoan*

Happy New Year. There is so much to celebrate. Why not start with an ode to chicken fat? One of my favorite moments in the whole world is when the perfectly roasted chicken's been carved and eaten and I am "clearing the table." I stand over the stove where the roasting pan, filled with toasty brown bits and sticky, caramel-colored jus waits for me, and we commune. Scraping the spoon along the bottom of the pan, my desire—my entire body—is so totally consumed that I am no longer a Jewish mother (one of many at any given moment, I imagine) shoveling grease into her mouth. Nor am I Buddhist. There is only, as they say, *this*: salty, fatty, sweet delight. Okay, maybe it's an inherited pleasure (Thanks, Dad...I think), an acquired taste, but it's one I would like to impart to my daughter. Not the lust for drippings, necessarily, but a deep appreciation of earthly bliss, homey pleasure, of life handled with care, attention, even passion.

'Tis the season, after all. Short, cold days, a fire in the wood stove, lavender-scented water steaming on top of it...an out-of-nowhere urge to bake cookies. Some people fantasize about their kids going to a good college, getting a secure job, or subverting the dominant paradigm. Doing great things. I have daydreams—on a regular basis I might add—about Azalea's inner life, feeling-states I hope she experiences. For instance, I hope the blue lights we strung up in her room brighten her heart like they do mine; and that the pine incense T and I burn when we do zazen will always remind her of the ordinary pleasantness of mornings in her childhood home. And maybe one day a table set with great-grandma's buttercup Wedgwood, Moroccan glasses, and batik cloth napkins will make her...happy, as happy as setting it for her makes me. It's not complicated, really. It's just pleasure, right? However we can find it. The world is going to hell in a hand basket. We do what we can.

And yet, there's more. The love I feel for Azalea is such a mystery to me. As I have written here before, I am not always able to behave in accord with my feelings every minute of every day, and those moments of disconnect, though everyone tells me that they're normal, still cause me anguish and her, I'm sure, suffering as well. Ouch. So when I find ways I can really give to my girl, I need to let it rip. Cooking for her has become one of those ways—introducing her to delicious-ness, and fortifying her little body, one well-planned meal at a time. I have always been a fairly whole-foods cook, but Azalea inspires me to be more wholesome, to cut down even more on packaging and processing, to really get to the heart of her food, putting my hands on everything she will eat, as in, *Let's make yogurt!* And I feel more motivated to take care of everyone else too, by generating less waste, taking the time to make more mindful choices, reigning in my own desire and laziness. What can I say? I love her so much, I want to churn butter.

Of course the truth is that Azalea would be happy to eat grilled cheese for every meal, and I feel self-conscious about spending so much money on organic produce and grassfed meat (Go Fleisher's!), and of becoming this woman who thinks about "feeding her family" all day long. (Ummm, when, exactly, did I start reading "women's magazines" and finding them helpful?) I also feel ridiculous trying to wedge my edgy self onto the cozy-train, the quiet, gentle revolution of hipster knitting circles, Etsy-mania (a website—www.etsy.com—where crafty people sell their insanely cute homemade wares), chicken coops cropping up like cell towers, homesteader reality-TV shows, growing packs of "unschooled" kids, oodles of blogs with names like "Thoughts on Literature, Food, Faith, and the Subversive Power of Living Small," where mostly women wax poetic about things like pasture butter, family dinners, and comparing pictures of their...pantries. It's enough to make an average do-gooder such as myself feel like a coarse couch potato. And we don't even own a TV. Believe me, I am riveted by pantry porn, but I don't think this Michigan girl is cut out for that much grooviness. As hard as I try, I will never be that earthy.

And maybe my longing for Azalea to live in a beautiful world is just so much preciousness, and limited by my own narcissistic fantasies. Probably. Just watch—she'll become a utilitarian computer nerd who never combs her hair (in which case maybe she'll throw me a bone and let me put some Australian sandalwood on the dreadlocks that will surely sprout?). Or maybe I am just making excuses in lieu of doing more to really heal the world, trying to convince myself that my job as Azalea's mom is important enough to actually get into...as in, how dare I *enjoy* planning menus for one well-heeled toddler when people—billions of real, live, other-mom's-children, people—are suffering; in fact, *starving*? It's a really good question, and one that I don't take lightly. Who exactly *am* I to do such a thing? Who granted me this privilege of having enough? Who could possibly deserve such bounty? Maybe the billions of suffering masses. But me?

And finally, beneath all the tender homemaking I can muster, there is the haunting truth that it is all a dream. No amount of bean-filled mason jars or hand-knit sweaters can hide the chaos, the fact that Azalea may not come home from school today. T could fall in love with someone else. Our home could burn to the ground. And worse.

My vow for this New Year is to appreciate my life. That doesn't mean I let myself off the hook, or stop trying to stretch myself beyond the comfy walls of even the most joyful kitchen. Cooking for Azalea is great. Feeding the universe is profound. Allowing myself to be nourished is cause for celebration. ●