

FLOWERS FALL

BY BETHANY SALTMAN

Inexhaustible

IN LOVING MEMORY OF MY TEACHER, JOHN DAIDO ROSHI,
ABBOT OF ZEN MOUNTAIN MONASTERY AND ZEN CENTER OF NEW YORK CITY
AND FOUNDER OF THE MOUNTAINS AND RIVERS ORDER
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THE AUTHOR AND DAIDO ROSHI ON A CAMPING RETREAT IN 2000.

When I lived at Zen Mountain Monastery I was the editor of the *Mountain Record*, a Zen quarterly. This was a great job that gave me a lot of contact with Daido Roshi, who had... shall we say... strong opinions about what went out for publication.

In the winter of 2003, I suggested one of my all-time favorite topics, *Desire*, for the next issue. I was surprised by how easily Daido okayed the subject and excitedly went to work, finding articles that I thought would add some juice to the “Desires are inexhaustible; I vow to put an end them” routine that we chanted nightly. I indulged myself completely, fully expecting to be reined in by Roshi when I showed him the issue. But instead he just said, “Looks fine.”

The layout guy and I eagerly set out to find the perfect cover for *Desire*. We went for fires, violent things, total drama. We were having a great time.

Until five covers later, after Daido, who was apparently roused by our discouragement and really getting into it now, kept saying, “No, hell no, and not even close! That’s attachment,” he told me. “*Desire*’s a good thing,” he added. “We need it to live. What are you thinking?”

One day we were meeting about something else, looking at his old photographs, when I saw a black-and-white photo of two pigs in a field, the sow just

standing there, her four piglets sucking on her teets. I picked up the photo and asked, “How’s this for *Desire*?”

“Okay,” he said.

I wouldn’t say that Daido Roshi’s teaching lacked the typical hallmarks of Zen: The stick-wielding machismo was in no short supply, especially in the early years. However, what really killed me was his spaciousness, his quiet commitment to waking us up, one deep-seated delusion at a time.

Since the time I met Daido Roshi in 1996 I’ve moved through some identity-rocking life events—not the least of which was the difficult transition from Zen warrior to nursing mom. During that tender time especially, I craved something solid from him, something that I could use to light my way, or fight against. But instead, he pretty much just went about his business, holding the door of practice wide open or manifesting the Italian grandmother, nagging me to give more blankets, more hats, more warmth, to my baby. And showing me, as he moved his own body through the monastery buildings, and winding through his own life and karma, how to be a real person, settling down, into reality, which includes everything. Even my desire for the people I love to live forever. ●