



FLOWERS FALL

By Bethany Saltman

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

— Dogen Zenji, *Genjokoan*

Taking the Attachment Parenting Challenge: A Week in Italy!

This month T and I are celebrating our 10th anniversary. I just looked through some pictures of our gorgeous, crazy Buddhist wedding at Opus 40. Man. I always used to say that marrying T was the best thing I ever did for my family, being the football-playing, normal, supernice guy that he is, a far cry from the moody bookworms of my past. But in fact, marrying T was the best thing I ever did for myself. For the same reasons, but more, too. Not the least of which is our life as parents, together. This wild road of self-study, of learning how to be bodhisattvas, of learning what it means to love—each other, our child, the whole catastrophe (as Daido Roshi used to say).

And so, as parents who, like most, feel deeply grateful for our lives, but stretched, too, we figured it would be nice to take a moment (a week to be exact) to be alone, to celebrate our 10 years of marriage. I've never been to Europe and was dying to go. So after much hemming and hawing, we decided to take the plunge.

By the time this hits the stands, T and I will be in Italy, and Azalea will be with T's parents, her beloved Jean and Pop-Pop. It's not like we have never been away from her before. We have stolen away for a few weekends over the last five years, done several retreats, and gone on many dates. However, traveling abroad, and for so long, feels pretty radical. We planned the trip last year, when Azalea was four, figuring that by the time she was five, she would be even more okay with a big separation than she was then. Unfortunately, this may not be so. In fact, maybe because of our impending trip, and kindergarten looming ahead, or some combination of it all, along with the inevitable mystery that is always guiding any human unfolding, Azalea is feeling more tender than usual, a little more fearful, actually less secure. Yikes. This morning when I asked her what she wanted to do today, she responded, "Be with mama."

And so, when I randomly received *Natural Life* magazine in the mail, and then read the article called "Separation Anxiety?" by the well-known author and turbo-attachment-parenting advocate Naomi Aldort, I was in a perfect position to receive her teaching, such as it is.

"By nature, there is no such thing as 'separation anxiety,'" Aldort writes. "Instead, there is a healthy need of a child to be with her mother [sic]. Only a deprivation of a need creates anxiety... The concept 'separation anxiety' is the invention of a society that denies a baby and child's need for uninterrupted connection. In this vein, we can deprive a child of food and describe her reaction as 'hunger anxiety,' or we can let her be cold and call her cries 'temperature anxiety.'"

In another paragraph, Aldort writes, "We create anxiety when we deprive, manipulate, and try to stir the child with our expectation that she be what she is not."

Reeling from the words *deprivation, denies, uninterrupted connection, deprive (again), hunger, cold, deprive!!, manipulate*, I felt a need to tell Aldort how I felt. So I wrote her an e-mail.

Hi Ms. Aldort,

I write a monthly column called *Flowers Fall* in a Hudson Valley magazine on being a Buddhist mom, which I am. I just read your piece in *Natural Life* and might discuss it in my next column, and I was wondering if you might like to comment and/or be interviewed. In a nutshell, while I agree with much of your basic premise about how our culture seeks to cut the cord way too soon and privileges independence ridiculously early (and from the Buddhist perspective of interdependence, quite impossibly), I find some of your language to be very harsh toward parents, and accusatory, and I don't see how that helps anyone. Saying that we are "denying and manipulating" our kids feels mean and could easily lead to already anxious parents feeling more wound up, which ultimately lands with their children. Guilty parents don't tend to offer themselves "authentically," to use your word.

And she responded right away:

Dear Bethany,

[...] Generally, I give lots of credit to parents and count on them to be able to depart from old dogma without feeling guilt or taking it personally. I do often put in words like, "No need to feel guilty... it is a learning process." In a way I don't treat parents with soft gloves. Neither does Zen Buddhism. I think parents can only make progress from facing the truth head on. It is ruthless kindness. When we drag a person out of the stormy water, we don't do it kindly, and yet it is the kindest action.

I hear what Aldort's saying, though, for the record, Zen practice, as I know it anyway, is nothing if not devoted to delivering its *profoundly tender message of perfection* with skillful means. Guilt and shame aren't usually that skillful. But I digress. I appreciated her willingness to go there with me, a stranger, and to add some softening caveats like "it is a learning process." And, in fact, much of what she says about how to trust and respect children and their needs I totally agree with, and I admire her very much. And when I told her in another e-mail about our trip, and asked for her take on it, she admitted that she does not know Azalea, and that there are no rules that fit all. However, she added, "The child who is ripe for separation will have only good sense of herself and her independence. Never anxiety. Even one premature experience can delay that sense of confidence for years and leave marks for life."

Only? Never? For life? I guess the main thing Aldort and I completely disagree on is certainty. It's as though she knows something the rest of us don't, like exactly how everything works. Confidence is one thing, and it can be developed by truly trusting each moment, but to be that sure about a complex human process actually scares me.

Do I feel ambivalent about going? Totally. Do I think that our lives and relationships are more mysterious than anything that can come out of one trip or most single decisions? Absolutely. While I won't be able to report back on whether or not this trip will scar Azalea for life, I will write when we return and describe what I can see as the effects of our having taken up this challenge with our hearts and eyes open. I know for sure that I will miss Azalea, and that she will miss me. I wonder what else we are all missing. 🍵