

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! Part 2

Last month I wrote about how T and I had planned a mommy-and-daddy-only trip to Italy for our 10th wedding anniversary. Azalea was to stay with T's parents, who love her like crazy and the feeling is mutual. She wouldn't be left with a random babysitter who answered an ad like some people (from Michigan, named Bethany), and yet, we felt sad to be without her for a whole week, and, reading the cues she was putting out in her special five-year-old way—for instance, saying, *Please don't leave me*—we were genuinely afraid we might be making a big mistake. Might we, in the words of attachment-parenting unschooler Naomi Aldort, create “marks for life” by inflicting upon her “even one premature experience” of being separated from me, her mom? (In keeping with the often biblically influenced tenor of attachment parenting advocates—*pssst*: Dr. Sears and his wife Martha are born-again Christians—Ms. Aldort rarely mentions fathers.) Setting aside the fire-and-brimstone tone in describing what might happen if a child is unplugged from her “power source,” as Ms. Aldort refers to mothers, T and I had our own genuine concerns.

But we went.

And now we're back!

And I am happy to say, we all lived to tell about it.

The first few minutes were excruciating for me. After saying good-bye, Azalea's sad little kiss-blowing face burned in my mind, I cried. Wondered if we should be doing this. Too late! T said, rightly. So we went. To the airport, waiting in lines, sitting at the gate. (Alone... conversation, thoughts meandering...) Nine hours on the plane (Talking, reading, sleeping). Finding the train to Rome from the airport, then just getting on the train. Walking from Rome's Termini station to our cute little room, which actually stayed really tidy. The first cappuccino we bought, the taste of that creamy foam in the little ceramic cup, no to-go containers anywhere! Famished, our first meal, a salad with corn, tuna, shredded carrots, romaine, mushrooms from a little fast-foodish place. Unbelievably delicious, fresh, fruity olive oil, balsamic, salt, and pepper. Did I miss Azalea and want her to try the light, oily focaccia, cut with scissors? To see all the fancy ladies in their high heels? To hear the sound of Italian, all those vowels, the song of such a juicy, relaxed place? Heck, yes. And did I miss her like mad? The entire time, actually. But it was also quite delightful to experience it all on my own, with T, simply, with so little confusion or interruption or explaining. Just two people in the world.

Meanwhile, Azalea was being chauffeured to various beaches, restaurants, pools, and homes with a collection of her favorite admirers. We Skyped with her every day, around midnight Italy time (after our oh-so-civilized dinner). She always looked totally comfortable on her grandparents' laps, fiddling with their bodies the way she does with mine. That hurt to see, but I knew it was a good sign. She often seemed a little distant, even wanting to go because they

were on their way to someplace fun. I worried that she was mad at us, but I also figured that would be very natural, and that we would deal with it when we came back. It was pretty clear that she was not suffering in any terribly acute way. Even so, I fully expected, upon our return, a cold shoulder and/or a meltdown, at the very least, and a complete disruption of our family flow, at worst. However, none of the above has happened.

We arrived back to Jean and Pop-Pop's in the evening. She was just really happy to see us. She gave us big, relaxed hugs, told us all about everything, seemed happy as a clam. And then we all slept together, then drove home to our blue house in the Catskills the next morning. Driving up here, I kept waiting for the shoe to drop, but instead, she took a nap.

We've been home for a week now. While I hope to never be as sure of anything as Ms. Aldort is about, apparently most things, I feel pretty clear that I am very glad we went. By ourselves. Ten years of marriage is a long time, and five years of marriage with a child in the mix feels even longer. T and I needed the time together to regroup, to have some conversations that just can't happen as we're dropping off to sleep or brushing our teeth or cooking or cleaning or hiking with our beloved Azalea. Or planning for the future, which includes our lives together as parents of this spectacular human being.

I know that the attachment parenting folks mean well. And that “separation anxiety” is real. But from a Buddhist perspective, being on the same continent, in the same bed, strapped skin to skin with the power source 24/7 is no guarantee of intimacy. Separating is something we do in our minds and hearts, in the viscera of our internal organs, in the tiny hairs along our arms. We separate from our lives, from the people we love, and from ourselves because we think we can. And we suffer from the hell of that futile effort, and the confusion that ensues. Are there tried-and-true real-life methods that make small mammals develop into happy big ones? Like being close, and receiving lots and lots of loving attention? Of course. And maybe our leaving for a week is a larger, deeper rupture for Azalea than I think and I am just rationalizing my own wants over what is best for her. Anything's possible. Including the notion that the activity of attaching is not necessarily the same as being intimate.

Since we have come home, Azalea has expressed, again, very directly, her need to know that we are not leaving her again. When we have been in the house together, she's called out, every few minutes, *Mama? Where are you?* And I answer, *Here! In the kitchen!* Clearly, she feels nervous, or hurt, probably pissed off. But starting yesterday, the routine changed. Instead of calling out for my whereabouts, she started calling out, again, every few minutes, *Mama? I love you!* And I answered, from the other side of the doorway, *I love you, too.* And boy, do I. And I am so glad she is asking a hundred times a day, so I can tell her everything she needs to know about my love for her. ©