



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*

The Treasure So Precious, There's No Word for It: A Conversation with Amy Chua on the Intimate Practice of Tiger Parenting

Amy Chua is the Yale law professor who, overnight, became the most talked about mom in America when an excerpt from her book *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* was published in the *Wall Street Journal* with the title “Why Chinese Mothers are Superior.” Everyone, including yours truly, wrote about this stunner, most of us without reading the book.

Now that I have read the book and gotten to know Professor Chua, I am not only a big fan of the hers—she is unbelievably nice, funny, dynamic, and *smart*—but I also feel strongly that when we sift through the details, the hours of forced piano practice, the threats to burn stuffed animals (much of which was included in the book as Chua’s meant-to-be-funny confession of her own over the top-ness), and our own envy of a mom with that much confidence, we will see that there is a message here that just might be worth our time.

Bethany Saltman: You write, “Happiness is not a concept I tend to dwell on. Chinese parenting does not address happiness.” Don’t you think that the kind of values you instilled in your girls is what you believe leads to happiness?

Amy Chua: You’re right. I think about happiness all the time. I am still trying to figure this out myself, but lately I’ve been thinking that it would be good if you could combine hard work and discipline, which I do think contributes to a strong sense of self-esteem, and apply this to a much wider and more experimental out of the box kind of choices. You don’t want a whole country of violinists and mathematicians. Now that Lulu is playing tennis [instead of the violin], I am so much less miserable! I don’t have to force her. The thing is that I still believe you should put 110 percent into everything, whatever it is you choose.

I feel like there is a very confused message out there, which is one of the reasons I loved your book. I feel like it really nailed this thing about how to be clear and determined with your kids and express your unconditional love at the same time.

Exactly. That part is a struggle for me, now that I’m older. Among my regrets, I wish I hadn’t used such harsh words. And when my girls speak harshly and I say, *don’t do that*, they say, *but mommy you do!* There is always teaching by example.

Did you ever read *Open* by Andre Agassi?

I was scared to read it, thinking, Oh my god I am going to be compared to him.

Well, it’s interesting. Andre Agassi was a trained monkey, and he hated tennis. And he hated himself and ended up becoming a drug addict. It might seem obvious that his pushy father was terrible, but, maybe it’s a stupid question, how does one know one’s own motivation?

You’re right. You’ve put your finger on it. I think one of the reasons I wrote the book is because I was losing sight of that with Lulu. I am still a super tough mom, but I do feel thankful to her because she was telling me loud and clear, you may think you are doing all of this for me, but it’s borderline now.

We hear so much about in the Western parenting world about the narcissistic extension, making our kids do things for our own gratification.

That’s tricky for me. For the Chinese, the child is just an extension of yourself. But that’s not considered a negative thing. When you attach it to Western psychotherapy, the narcissism has negative connotations. There’s this Chinese word *bao bei*, which means a treasure that is so precious, there’s no word for it. I always thought of my daughters that way.

In Zen we would call that intimacy with your daughters, not separate.

Yes, exactly. The negative side of that is when the child is separate and you’re basically using the child.

That’s very helpful to me because sometimes I worry that I do push my daughter for myself because my parents didn’t push me, and I am working out my own thing on her.

It’s also just part of human nature, in some ways it might protesting too much to say, *oh no, this has nothing to do with me*. It could be more complex.

Right! When I am forcing her to do something she doesn’t want to do, which is not a popular method in my little subculture, in some ways I am doing it for myself because I know how important it is. I’m in the equation.

You’re so right. “I’m in the equation.” I love that. One has to acknowledge that. And it’s a very Western question, are you doing this for your daughter or for yourself?

We often hear about how if we push kids into things, they might do it only to please us, and not out of a genuine love of the thing itself. What do you think of that? Is that a real distinction? Does it matter?

I think a lot of people in the West today romanticize the idea of “affinity” or “talent” and are always looking for their child’s “innate gift” when so often what later seems to be a “gift” is just the product of hard work and a good attitude. Lulu did not show tremendous “affinity” for violin until after 1-2 years of screeching. Then she took off. And she really showed zero affinity for math—the opposite actually—but after me bearing down and showing her what she could do, today at age 16 math is her favorite subject and her friends think she is a “whiz.”

In Western parenting, which includes me, of course, I feel a laziness that is really disheartening. We want to plug our kids in and hope for the best. I know too well what that leads to.

Someone I know wrote an article about my book and said something like, *I think the key to our kids’ innovation and happiness is they need to walk on the beach more*. I know that is sort of true in the sense that they need space, but if that were the only thing parents needed to do, it would be so easy, right?

Right, and one of the things I am trying to meld this together with is the idea of simplicity parenting, blocking out all the excess bullshit, all the hoopla and software. Our kids need attention, they need devotion, they need to have meaning, and know they can do stuff! It doesn’t take any special anything to be able to do that.

Exactly!

It takes a lot of discipline to prioritize play in this culture.

Right, when I was young, we had a lot of free time.

People worry that if you are too strict you will have to deal with a big rebellion, but my intuitive feeling is that I am not worried about that because we’re connected to our daughter. It’s not like we’re just laying down the gauntlet and saying, screw you, this is the deal.

That’s my 100 percent answer. And so far, Bethany, knock on wood, it totally works for me. I feel like I am so much closer to both of my daughters than so many people I know. I know what’s going on in my 16-year-old’s life. And I have never been afraid to come down and say no. That connectedness, when you have it, you know it. But it does come from work. It comes from devotion. 🍷

A longer version of this interview can be read at www.bethanysaltman.com.