



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*

Is This My Chair?

I recently read yet another parenting book, this one called *Bringing Up Bebe: One American Mother Discovers the Wisdom of French Parenting* by Pamela Druckerman. Though many have found it a bit silly, I actually really enjoyed it, and found plenty of juicy little *things that make you go hmmmm*.

For instance, French kids (for more of the author's use of this and other massive generalizations, read the *New York Times* review) sit through entire, three-course, real-food meals. They know how to wait for things. They're polite. French mothers bake each weekend with their kids but are such masters of their own domain (as a result perhaps of their guilt-free pleasuring, described below) that they don't necessarily feel compelled to eat any (or all) of the cupcakes themselves. The best part was about how French mothers don't feel guilty. About anything. This includes drinking, working, not working, going out sans the kids, eating everything, and with pleasure, not eating, spending money on classy lingerie and make-up, and just generally being nice to themselves. It was kind of stunning, actually.

Last night, after A went to bed, T and I sat outside and looked at the night sky, trying to feel French-ish about a shared guilty pleasure. I told him about the book and he asked me what all these parenting styles and my study of them have to do with my Zen practice. A good question. I answered that I get excited when I feel like there is a way to help A experience the confidence and containment I felt when I found Zen and started working with my teacher. And about how, odd as it may seem, something like this so-called French parenting style is, in fact, so Zen-like in its insistence on manners, mores, and limits, and yet, with a kind of lusty freedom and pleasure at the heart of it all. And then I started rambling about how I am always trying to figure out a way so leap out of being so....myself....the uptight, dorky, neurotic, pragmatic, shrill American....that I....(gulp)...am.

And there it is.

The search: for a better me.

It's not that shifting our priorities, slowing down, and highlighting what we love isn't valid, but enough already with my incessant pursuit of some ideal state where my entire life will (forget about *looking* like) actually *feel* like the string of curated vignette Flickr photos of a burlap tablecloth + flowers + butter on a plate + happy-all-the-time, heaven-on-earth existence I so crave.

When T worked at a nursing home, there was a sadly demented resident there whose particular refrain was, "Is this my chair? Is this my chair?" All day long, every day, regardless of the proximity of any sitting implements whatsoever. *Is this my chair? Is this my chair?* I get it. That's how it feels sometimes, searching for the perfect way to live, and to parent my baby girl, who just turned six and who is outside, at the moment, yelling in various Ramona the

Pest-inspired voices, giving life to the beautiful and heartbreaking, complex human drama. She is not wasting time wondering who she is or where she fits. She's just working it out! It's like the entire world is her chair, and when she needs a breather, she just reclines into it.

Unfortunately, samsara will catch up with her, too. Even the Buddha had to fight the Prince of Darkness, Mara, the Tempter of Human Beings, for his chair. It all started with the Buddha's obsessive pursuit of ascetic perfection, which nearly killed him. When a little girl found him, exhausted and starving, and offered him a bowl of rice gruel with milk, he made the decision to eat it, to preserve his life instead of destroying it, figuring the answer he was seeking could only be found with a healthy body. So after that magical meal, the first taste of his own teaching on the Middle Way, he sat, as he was, under a tree, for 49 days. Near the end of that time, Mara, knowing that Shakaymuni's likely enlightenment would lead to his own demise, pulled out all the stops in an effort to distract him, which included armies of dancing girls, demons, lightning, insults, challenging the young man's right to sit there, in his own seat.

Finally, the Buddha responded:

"Here on this seat my body may shrivel up,
my skin, my bones, my flesh may dissolve,
but my body will not move from this seat
until I have attained Enlightenment,
so difficult to obtain in the course of many kalpas."

He then touched the Earth, which itself responded: *I bear witness to you.* Mara disintegrated. The morning star rose and Shakyamuni, now an enlightened Buddha, said, "I and all sentient beings on earth, together, at once, attain the way."

As my late teacher Daido Roshi said about this moment: "The Buddha essentially declared, 'Trust yourself.'" Daido went on to say, "This is a wonderful life. And the key to that wonder is sitting right where you sit. Find out about it."

Okay. This scrappy corner, all these random, not pretty Post-its, my husband's horrifyingly cluttered "area" behind me. The running list in my head. My gut. My temper flare-ups, my wrinkles. Oh, god. And my longing. All mine. I see it, but Mara has such convincing reasons to keep me chained to all of it, very sophisticated arguments explaining why I am not worthy of freedom, especially the more I practice and the closer I get to accepting all my nuttiness. It's a drone of insistent ranting about how I should keep looking, keep looking, improve myself, be different.

And yet, I know, deep down, that this seat of mine is so vast, so total, and so complete, it is immobile. Those are the facts. This is my chair, this dumb Ikea mod knock-off. Is it the Buddha's jeweled throne of enlightenment? I have no idea. But it does the job. And it keeps me sitting here. ●