



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*

Right Effort

When A. was born, Daido Roshi, my beloved, Italian-American, tattooed, tough, but total softie Zen teacher who has since died, gave me a bit of parenting advice: “You should always,” he said, “*always* be able to give your kids *the look* [which he then demonstrated, his soft brown eyes widening, bulging, bearing down], to get them to stop whatever bullshit they’re about to do.”

I liked that. It made sense to me. As someone who grew up without a lot of boundary setting or comforting adult authority, I knew that I wanted to provide what the French (I’m still reading and loving *Bringing Up Bébé* by Pamela Druckerman) call the *cadre*, or frame, which they strictly enforce, and within which kids are given a lot of freedom. Not unlike, as I pointed out a couple columns ago, Zen training. The French, apparently, even have a thing called “the big eyes,” which one person referred to as “a facial expression that was stern and annoyed and not happy.” It indicates a kid is on thin ice. I guess this is something both the French and the Italians do. Maybe it’s just a human thing. We all get annoyed, right? But using our irritation as a way to keep our kids in line? Is that really ok? Isn’t it...mean?

A is six years old. I have been giving her the look, harping on the details, telling her what time it is, for a while now. She is, by all accounts, a “good girl.” God bless her. She loves rules, for their own sake, following them, and ushering others into the light of total compliance. Or maybe she’s just terrified of the proverbial hammer-drop? At the same time, though, she is a total nut job whose home life is dominated by roving, solitary, antiperformance theater (we aren’t supposed to watch or even listen), a near-constant narration of intricate story lines in a cast of pretty hilarious imitated voices, most inspired by listening to the Ramona the Pest series in the car (told by none other than Rizzo, aka Stockard Channing). I love nonlistening to her. Not only does she crack me up and give me a window into the zaniness of her mind, but I also get to feel pretty good, like, *OK, so I am kind of up her ass a lot, but apparently, she is working it out*. She’s going to be all right. There’s freedom there, in that big human heart of hers. At least for now.

And yet, I get nervous sometimes, like yesterday when I picked her up from school, happily, as I feel I usually am, and once she got all settled into her booster seat in the back, and I started driving to Kingston for our Panerathen-gymnastics Tuesday, all primed for fun and connection, feeling pretty darn good, I must say, about her, about the world, about me...and from the back I hear:

Hey, look, we aren’t arguing!

Do you think we argue a lot?

Pretty much all the time.

About what?

Just you being annoyed at me.

With a little more probing, and just a wee bit of sulking on my part (better than the alternative!), turns out she feels like I always rush to leave school, and

she doesn’t like that. Fair enough. And the accusation that I am always annoyed, well, OK, I can take that in, the gestalt of it at least, since of course I am not *always* annoyed. But I can imagine that, in a way, the big eyes loom larger than all the sweetness in the world. I can only hope (pray) that, in fact, it is the more consistent experience of love and affection that will take root in her body and mind and she will know she is welcome here on Earth, in my field of attention. But maybe not.

In any case, this whole thing of French vs. American; authoritative vs. authoritarian; being in charge vs. being a bully; am I OK or am I just this, that, and the other thing—oh, it’s exhausting. While I love learning about being human by reading about parents and kids in all contexts, and what I read definitely helps me appreciate my own situation more deeply, investigating all this stuff in hopes of finding the perfect path is a lost cause. This is samsara, after all. It is imperfect. We suffer. All of us. And we can practice. But how? And how hard should we try?

The Buddha said: “Over-aroused persistence leads to restlessness, overly slack persistence leads to laziness. Thus you should determine the right pitch for your persistence, and attune the pitch of the five faculties [senses] to that.” This is called Right Effort. Indeed, there is trying, and then there is *trying*. Hopefully I will never stop taking steps to meet my daughter, and take stock and shift gears as needed. For instance, I do wonder if A is “good” because she is afraid of my wrath. A question worth investigating, for sure. But to do so in the pitch of Right Effort is to wonder, yet simultaneously accept the mystery that I may never know, while continuing to trust myself, and do what feels right in the moment, including being pretty strict. I feel an impulse, in myself and in the fraught world of public conversations about “parenting,” to check myself, as if some terrible motive or consequence lurks just around the bend all the time. In fact, that kind of determined hypervigilance and sensitivity to my own internal ticking has served me well. It carried me into dharma practice in the first place; it has helped heal me from some pretty gaping old wounds; it has allowed me to notice the moment-to-moment manifestations of my karma as I inadvertently oozed it all over my daughter, at least enough so that my interactions now feel cleaner. Not mess-free of course, but more true.

That high-strung persistence that comes so naturally has served its purpose, but I’m restless. I long for the Middle Way, for the perfect-pitch of real, big, intimate trust, for Right Effort. And I feel so grateful to Daido, for his tireless effort to empower me, from the moment I flung myself into his realm when I was in my 20s, up until my terrifying transition into motherhood. In my mind I can see him clearly, standing there, all thin and tan and slouched, in his baggy green coat, leaning one elbow on the altar in the dining hall, the place where students left notes and gifts for him. He is so totally flawed. And so totally relaxed. And he’s giving me the look. 🍌