



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*

Dealings with Feelings on the Last Day of School

This summer I will put my girl on a bus for pony camp. And though this will be a new level of distance, I do have some experience with this separation business. All year long our beloved friend and neighbor drove her to kindergarten every day, and off she went. And every day, there was something eerie about watching my baby's head, motionless, moving away from me, with no giant skull-thrashing struggle to stay close. Sometimes I could see that her head was turned slightly toward her friend, or I imagined (hoped for) little tremors of laughter. Any way I looked at it, however, she was in another car. Even though we share the essential unity of all things, not to mention a lot of DNA, it is also true that her body exists in another world. And I have some feelings about that.

And I also have some options in how to deal with those feelings.

T and I have been talking a lot about the idea of orienting toward pleasure, a concept he came across in his work with Somatic Experiencing, a body-based approach to trauma, which I have studied a bit myself. Does “orienting toward pleasure” mean just doing what feels good and avoiding what doesn't? This happens to be the Buddha's definition of suffering—that continuous search for the perfect moment, perfect life, penultimate meal, seamless relationship, otherwise known as *samsara*, otherwise known as *hell*. So...maybe it means just making my house prettier? Appreciating what I have? Stopping to smell the roses? Looking on the bright side? Sort of, but optimism is kind of creepy. And replacing one set of conditioned responses with a knee-jerk other is not exactly the liberation I have in mind.

And so, when I see my girl's little noggin moving away from me, and I have that thought: *There she goes*, and my body falls into its familiar groove of melancholy, which often results in feelings of loss, or sadness (or guilty relief!), or some form of self-doubt or even, on a really dark and stormy day, self-hatred (as in, *Look at how you've squandered this, that, and the other!*), what can I do other than what I have always done, or its opposite?

To orient toward pleasure, I first have to notice my habitual tendencies (see above). And wait. Take a gulp of not-knowing, allow a few beats of nothingness to arise. Using my senses, instead of my head, I can listen to the wind in the trees, feel my skirt against my legs, smell spring rising from the dirt. I can orient my self-habits in a new direction, toward open-heartedness, see what else is possible. I mean, my god, the universe is vast. There must be ways of being other than the handful I ricochet between. Even my more pleasant pings and pongs are reactive, in some way, seeking another dose of familiar comfort, which always leads to more familiar desire. But allowing myself to rest in the genuine experience of being alive, even in the face of real sadness or disappointment or loss—that's the orientation I am going for. After all, resting, even in a bucket of shit, is better than spazzing out, and much more effective as I make every effort to get the hell out.

However, one of the reasons I find this reorienting so difficult is because of my determination to not get ensnared by a trap called “spiritual bypass,” a term coined by a guy named John Welwood, who defined it this way:

Spiritual bypassing is a term I coined to describe a process I saw happening in the Buddhist community I was in, and also in myself. Although most of us were sincerely trying to work on ourselves, I noticed a widespread tendency to use spiritual ideas and practices to sidestep or avoid facing unresolved emotional issues, psychological wounds, and unfinished developmental tasks.

When we are spiritually bypassing, we often use the goal of awakening or liberation to rationalize what I call premature transcendence: trying to rise above the raw and messy side of our humanness before we have fully faced and made peace with it. And then we tend to use absolute truth to disparage or dismiss relative human needs, feelings, psychological problems, relational difficulties, and developmental deficits. I see this as an “occupational hazard” of the spiritual path, in that spirituality does involve a vision of going beyond our current karmic situation.

Bypassing comes in all flavors, not just Buddhist ones. Who wants to face the mess when we don't have to? The problem is, we really do have to. Or the mess ends up facing us—in the mirror, across the table, or in the lining of our gut.

And yet.

The belief that I have to face the music *all the time*, that tendency to be hypervigilant, on guard against denial lest I get embroiled even deeper in some unresolved mishap is my “karmic situation,” and it is rooted in fear. It's compulsive, habitual, some deal I made with the devil long ago, with the idea that if I kept *myself* spinning I would be safe from anyone else being able to turn me.

The thing is, it's a lie. I can be turned, affected, let down, hurt. Bigtime. There is no safety from that. Though of course this has always been true, since giving birth...it's different.

This morning A went to her last day of school with a tummy ache, not interested in her smoothie or cheese, just sad. So I let her munch on a piece of nutty chocolate as we moved through the morning routine, wanting to give her a little sweetness and some energy. As I stood behind her, braiding her hair, cleaning her brand-new earrings, I listened to her little mouth munching, one of my favorite sounds in the whole world. I asked her if it tasted good, and she softly nodded. When I asked if it went down okay, like felt good in her tummy, she shrugged. When she was all tidied, I reached down, she turned around, her arms flew up, and she did her little jump into my body, squeezing me like a tree with her strong legs. My little monkey.

God help me just love this love. ●

Check out Bethany's latest writing adventure, “Is This My Chair? Notes on Being,” a blog at Isthismychair.com.