



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 Human Way

This was the hottest summer on record in the Northeast. Finally, after a lifetime of feeling like the grump on the sidelines, demanding that the dark side be taken into account, I am basking in the glory of this muggy madness, driving everyone crazy with my big smile and bring-it-on attitude. I can't help it! This kind of soft, moist, close air soothes me. It's like a hot box that helps me transition from reptile to human. Who knew evolution felt so good?

Okay, maybe it's not just the weather that has me feeling so human. Even though I have been almost completely absent from the monastery this summer, my practice feels strong. I am sitting a lot, working hard, learning to play tennis (my first attempt to play a sport...*ever!*), taking care of the steady stream of CSA veggies that we signed up for, running with T, hanging with friends, visiting family, figuring out the right amount of indulging in summer backyard fun. And in the middle of it all stands the most glorious 6.5-year-old girl. Like a tree in the valley, green arms reaching in every direction. Of course motherhood is shocking. What miracle isn't? But wow. Never in a million years would I imagine I—me, selfish, mean-ish, impatient me—could care this much, or more to the point, this way. Which way? The human way.

One of my Zen heroes, Charlotte Joke Beck, who died last year, had this to say about being truly human:

“The natural state is what practice is about. To be a natural person doesn't mean that one turns into some kind of a saint. Without a sense of separation from the world, however, there is always an innate goodness and appropriateness of action. For example, our two hands don't behave inappropriately toward each other, because they are part of the same body.”

The word *appropriate* reminds me a very significant interaction I had with another Buddhist teacher and mom, Judith Simmer Brown, in an interview in this column three years ago.

“Me: I recently noticed that since my daughter turned three and became so much more verbal, I gave myself permission to be a little more liberal about what is appropriate, as if she wasn't a baby anymore and could handle more of me. It's been a hard year because of that.

“JSB: You lost your seat as an adult.”

Indeed. This idea of losing, then finding, my seat as an adult, of ever *having* a seat as adult, has been my guiding parenting principle ever since this conversation. More than any of the various shticks and perspectives that get me jazzed—simplicity parenting, French parenting, tiger parenting, mindfulness parenting—this notion of finding my seat as an adult has been so powerful because it points to a feeling (it's slipping, it's slipping...woops...there goes my chair!), asks a question (where did it go, and how can I get back on it?), and gives such clear feedback (aaaah, now that's one comfy situation). This path of finding myself as I parent my daughter is mysterious, but also crystal clear. There is never any doubt when one hand starts grabbing at the other.

For instance: Miss A (natural children aren't saints either) has been really testing the waters of bratitude. When told it's time to do one of her very few

household tasks, such as set or clear the table, she makes a face, contorts into a tantrum mudra, whines, and delays. Unacceptable, of course. A friendly but stern encouragement is followed by a threat, which is followed by making good on the threat. *Okay, Miss A, no superspecial downloaded Brady Bunch episode for you! Now finish setting the table so we can eat.*

Not so fast, she says. And spirals into despair, *wailing* over how much she wants to “sit on our yellow couch with both of my arms around you, watching something together that you watched when you were little and I love you so much and want you to be happy and please smile or feel sorry for me and let me tell you my feeeeeelings!!!!!!”

I stay firmly in my adult-size seat, listen to the outpouring of everything wrong in a 6 year old life, comforting but clear. We move on. We eat. Clearing the table is not perfect but ok.

Bath time: not okay. This kid has hair like there is no tomorrow, long, tendriled, thick hair that I would be pleased to cut into an Annie-style Jew-fro, but she really wants long hair, so...when it's hair wash and condition and comb night, the girl needs to chill. And not stand up and whine and complain and squeal. Which she did last night...so I yanked her (uh-oh) out of the bath and squeezed (*Mommy, you're hurting me!*) her half-washed hair dry, and marched her into bed as she bawled, *No mommy, no, I will be good, I promise!* Actually having the thought that I should close the windows, lest the neighbors be alarmed, I pointed to her bed, yellow sun streaming onto the blue and white quilt and said, *Go. To. Sleep*, then closed her door and went and sat on the couch (where's my chair, where's my chair?), my heart racing, listening to her encore lament, which was, I must say, heartbreaking.

So what did I lose? And why does it matter?

I lost my seat because I lost track of myself. T and I have been talking a lot about this bubble that blows up in our heads as we wander into karmically rigged territory. I, for one, am terrified that Azalea, who is growing up with far more comfort and privilege than I did (jealous?), is being spoiled. There is some internal storm of ambivalence raging about this, and so when our perfectly earth-bound interactions slip into a realm where I get triggered, this bubble blows up and I am no longer connected to the moment, the girl, or myself. I lose my seat and act out of an idea of *what might happen when*...we all get catapulted into some future state where A is a miserable, entitled brat, it's all my fault, and life totally sucks. Not only are we no longer present, we aren't even human. We are an idea, some combination of a trip I am on about how unspoiled children ought to behave, combined with my ex-life as a horrible (and miserable) teenager, coupled with the humiliation of being here *again*, topped with a dose of garden-variety delusion.

And then the bubble bursts and there is a human being who walked out of her room and is standing in front of me, gigantic see-through tears rolling down her face, illuminating her gray-blue eyes. It is me; it is not me. It doesn't matter. All hands on deck to clean up the mess. ●