



# 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*

## Non-Duality for President

*The policy [that legislated verbal consent at every level of sexual activity] emerged when 30 feminists disrupted a campus government meeting in November, 1990, demanding institutional rules to deal with rape, says Bethany Saltman, Antioch '92 and member of the original group, the Womyn of Antioch. Even at this tiny (650 students last fall) alternative college, the administration seemed to prefer to keep rape reports under wraps. Faced with vehement, relentless protest and a flurry of local news attention, the administration reluctantly accepted the feminists' demand to remove any accused perpetrator from campus within 24 hours of a reported rape. But the rule was adopted on the condition that a committee of concerned staff and students would work to retool the policy while the administration consulted lawyers about its constitutionality. Womyn of Antioch demanded the policy out of strength, not weakness, notes Saltman. "We get to say who touches us, and where."—Bonnie Pfister, On the Issues magazine, 1999*

One of the things I love about kids—okay, especially my kid—is how when she asks a question such as, “What’s a de...bate?” And I answer, “An argument or conversation that happens in public,” she says, “Oh.” I love the “Oh.” Like, message received. How often do adults actually say, “Oh?” Instead, we often say, “Uh-huh,” when someone answers us, which is another way of saying, “Right,” as in, “I knew that.”

By the time this hits the stands, we will be days away from the presidential election. So there have been lots of questions in our house about who is winning, who was president when A was born, and did George W. Bush have the same rules as Barack Obama? A couple weeks ago A asked me if there has ever been a woman president and when I said, “No,” she answered, “Oh.”

In A’s nearly seven years we have not made a fuss about the fact that she’s a girl and “can do anything!” It has hardly seemed necessary, obvious as it is that she is bright, capable, curious and kind. And come on, so we haven’t had a female president, and girls cut and starve and fold in upon themselves and have babies early looking for love, are left high and dry, and are abused and taken advantage of, and are programmed to think too much about princesses and not enough about math, but... But it’s not like our girls are going to get shot for wanting to go to school like the brave little Malala Yousafzai, the 14-year-old Pakistani girl, shot by the Taliban.

Right?

How to approach girlhood is confusing for this ex-self-identified-radical-feminist. And believe me when I say I used the term “radical feminist,” not in the sloppy way of the common parlance, but with precision (though with a Marxist-feminist slant), in order to cast my lot with the other “womyn” who saw patriarchy as a system of oppression that must be dismantled at its very base, idea by idea, root syllable by root syllable in order to be free, *radically free*. What freedom was, I had no idea. I just wanted the depth of my misery to be met by the depth of available relief.

It was in this haze of possession that I, and a handful of other young ladies,

went after the alleged perps of date rapes on our college campus. Clearly, date rape is bad. And it happens, a lot! and needs to be addressed! But when I think back to how pumped I was (and please note, I am talking for myself and certainly not for any of the others involved) to be on Team Right, and to have the administration be afraid of me, to be a leader of *something* powerful, I feel truly embarrassed, and when I think of the young men who were accused and the way they were treated, I am ashamed.

The long and the short of it is that I played an instrumental role in getting this Sexual Offense Policy passed, the one wherein each new level of sexual contact needed to be verbally consented to. When the national press guffawed at it, and when “Saturday Night Live” lampooned it in a quiz-show skit starring Mike Myers, Phil Hartman, Shannen Doherty, and the late Chris Farley, called “Is It Date Rape?” and then more recently, when a *Los Angeles Times* writer, in response to Antioch’s latest fiscal and managerial crisis, wrote an article called “Who Killed Antioch? Womyn” (ouch!). I wish someone had pulled me aside and said, “Girl, get ahold of yourself.”

Finally, after years of struggle I did get a hold of myself, literally, by the seat of my '90s pants, sitting my ass on a cushion and seeing my insanity up close. After a few years of zazen, feeling literally saved by Zen practice, I took to talking about how “feminism failed me.” Another swing of the fist—I mean pendulum. What I meant was that I was looking for something true (freedom from my suffering, much of it, indeed, related to being a girl in the world), and what I got was something illusory (a vital set of politics that I morphed into a self-aggrandizing shtick).

Now I am charged with raising a daughter. I know the world is unfair to girls, even privileged ones like mine, and even more to the less fortunate, and that we are deluded to ignore it. I also know that the most revolutionary act I have ever taken was to take all the crazy energy I had been putting out there and use it to see what was inside.

So how do we practice within the world that needs us?

The lay adept Vimalakirti, who lived during the Buddha’s time, said,

*What is the elimination of sickness? It is the elimination of egoism and possessiveness. What is the elimination of egoism and possessiveness? It is the freedom from dualism. What is freedom from dualism? It is the absence of involvement with either the external or the internal.*

I look at A, asking her questions, and wonder what kind of passions she has. An “absence of involvement” certainly doesn’t mean avoiding the heat. Instead, it means learning how to stand thoroughly in the midst of it.

I can’t wait to watch my girl learn how to play with her own fire, and when she moves, as she naturally will, from one extreme to another, I will be do what I can to gently nudge here back where she belongs, which is right smack dab in the middle. ●