



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*

A Big Change

The term *samsara* is used in Buddhism to refer to the “endless cycle of birth and death,” or the “conditioned wheel of existence,” which describes the way we stay stuck in the small and stifling drama of our ignorance and delusion. We think we are getting somewhere by continually trying to find some comfort or arrange the world to suit us. But instead, because we so believe in ourselves as this little, limited, separate self, instead of the vast, interdependent manifestation of luminous emptiness that we are (!), we can’t get off the wheel and just keep chugging along. We fundamentally misjudge the very nature of who we are, and thus, instead of seeing the ways we create anguish, the world perpetually rubs us the wrong way, which actually keeps us from being able to act in the face of tragedy and despair. We stay mired in the quicksand of our suffering.

Another definition of *samsara* I heard once is simply “bumpy ride.” Though I can find no further evidence of this, I was told that the word actually comes from the wheel makers of ancient India, and that dreadful feeling of riding in a cart with a messed up-wheel. That’s what it feels like to be caught in *samsara*: not quite right. A sock scrunched in your shoe as you schlep through the six realms of existence for all of eternity.

Oy, *samsara*. I know you well.

And indeed, I have spent the past six years chronicling my bumpy ride here in this column as a mother, as a Zen student, a wife, a writer, a devoted melancholic, and an ordinary meatball. Lord knows, I have not been wanting for material. And having the audience of strangers (a trick I have to play on myself in order to be honest, though of course I know many of you) has helped me hunker down each month, attempting to organize and offer the details of my delusion into something useful.

What a lucky pleasure to have a record of this wild ride: the first seven years of my daughter’s life on Planet Earth, and the first seven years of my life as a mother, and what both have taught me about my favorite conundrum: Being Human.

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Even before the folks at *Chronogram* and I began talking about broadening the scope of the magazine’s parenting content, and even before that conversation hinted at the possibility that “Flowers Fall” may need to shift its focus (or close up shop entirely), I had been hearing a voice tell me that it was time to stop writing about the intimate life of A. She is turning seven in the New Year. As she has grown up (my first column was published as a blog just before her first birthday), I have mentioned less and less about the details of our interactions, partly because they are less little-kid-universal (e.g., the first time she ever threw up, all over me; the time she said I looked like a mean animal; references to diapers and nursing and tantrums—hers and mine!), but also because our

relationship, while still certainly typical in many ways, feels more privately particular. And the nitty gritty of A’s life belongs to A. Also, and this is good news, things feel generally less fraught. It will come as no surprise to anybody who has even marginally read my column that motherhood has been a shocking and destabilizing experience for me. And that, over the years, it has gotten easier.

While I have always loved my girl so much it hurts, I have now come to love being a mom, too. I really do! Crazy.

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The Jesuits believe that when kids turn seven they enter “The Age of Reason.” I see this happening in A’s life, big-time. I would also call it entering the Human Realm. She is less unpredictable, more grounded, less fragile. She seems like a person who has arrived in the world. The girl still can’t scramble an egg, but she sure can hold her own.

In terms of my own life as a mother, I could say that I, too, am turning seven, and entering a more human, a bit more adult, phase in my own life. One of the ways I have noticed this happening is the space that seems to be opening up around my need to take care of things other than me, or A, or T, or this house, or our food, or my job, or some other form of just keeping myself together. I have returned to some of the deep and meaningful aspects of my life that for the past seven years have felt utterly out of reach. And that little bit of progress has been thrilling.

And in my writing, I want to reach out. I want to explore the same questions about parenting, about raising decent human beings, about living well in this world, but from a wider vantage point. So in this column, which, starting in February, will now be called “Field Notes: Investigations into Family Life,” I will continue to wonder out loud, but my perspective will shift. Instead of focusing on me, and A, and Zen, and my inner landscape, I will look closely at questions and concerns and curiosities that affect parents more broadly, in the Hudson Valley and beyond. For instance, I have an interview with Andrew Solomon, author of *Far from the Tree*, lined up. I want to explore topics like school lunches, moms in prison, and, sadly, gun control. I will continue to talk to smart people who will get us to question what we think we know about families, and about ourselves.

It’s a big change. And I won’t lie (ever) and say I haven’t been sad to say good-bye to “Flowers Fall.” I will miss the opportunity to consistently explore my own habits of mind as they relate to motherhood, and connect to readers in this way, but I am eager to learn about other things, other people, other visions, other types of barriers, and other forms of freedom within our complex lives together.

While the material will be different, there is no doubt that it will still be a bumpy ride. And I will, as always, need all the help I can get. 🍌