



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*

It's a Beautiful World: Kim John Payne on Simplicity Parenting

Kim John Payne has spent the last 27 years studying families. As a school counselor, consultant, educator, and private family counselor, his work has taken him around the world, and he is a longstanding participant in the Waldorf movement. Payne's latest book, *Simplicity Parenting: Using the Extraordinary Power of Less to Raise Calmer, Happier, and More Secure Kids* (Ballantine Books/Random House, 2009), pulls together his central ideas into one tight, smart, and compassionate argument: Just slow down. And Payne tells us how, through the four paths toward simplicity:

Environment: De-cluttering

Rhythm: Increasing predictability

Scheduling: Soothing schedules

Unplugging: Reducing the influence of adult concerns

While below are some highlights from our conversation, I encourage anyone interested to check out his book. Payne's style is so warm and nonjudgmental, even the most overwhelmed among us can find some support.

Just this morning I had a conversation with a friend about how her two kids have too many toys and she doesn't want them to feel disappointed by something going missing. What would you say to her?

I think we're living in an undeclared War on Childhood, and that perspective comes from working in war zones. It doesn't come as a throwaway comment; it is very serious. I think our children are suffering from sensory overwhelm, like a sensory tsunami. But we, unlike a lot of wars that we see in the world, can declare peace in our homes. There's so much booming and buzzing in the world, so wanting to have a peaceful home is just establishing a balance.

In your book you talk about how we overwhelm children with words, as well as with stuff. Can you say more about that?

Explain less, and be more. Don't just say something; stand there. Let them actually develop the inner experience. Rather than they bring you a painting and you say, *Good job, let's bring that down to Kinko's*. Rather, just look at the painting with love in your eyes and be quiet.

Shouldn't we help kids verbalize themselves in times of ordinary stress?

My take on this is that even with the most ordinary stress—for instance, bickering between kids—what's happening is that the behavior that we have been told by society is normal doesn't need to be. Our children, in their relationships with each other, are overcontrolling and micromanaging and being hyper-sensitive in their play with each other because they're living an out-of-control lifestyle.

Even in a house like ours where we are mostly unplugged, very quiet and unscheduled, we are being so verbal it can be overwhelming, you would say?

That's right. Shouting has become the new hitting, and now the new shouting is explaining.

Ha!

What's happening is we're taking children to places that neurologically they're not even close to being able to go. They can't make those choices, or verbalize what we're asking them to verbalize. When we ask children to go to their feelings or to use their words and they don't have the frontal-lobe, neurological capacity to find

the words we're demanding or explain their feelings, what we're doing, unwittingly, over and over and over, is saying to the child, "You're stupid."

I am beginning to see how this desire on my part to have my daughter verbalize can actually be aggressive.

It can be. I agree 100 percent. And we're reinforcing this message that they're not good enough. Some children get a kind of verbal diarrhea because they're subject to too many choices, too many questions, and they either collapse, they flee, or they fight, and they become really feisty. And when people simplify, so many difficult situations disentangle. Does it heal everything? No, but in the short term it creates a sensible space to sort problems out rather than this stressed space of fighting for control.

I think I try resolve my ambivalence about our privilege by trying to educate my daughter about her entitlement, which can lead to a lot of talking and even shaming.

Our children, when they come into this world, what they need to understand, first and foremost: It's a beautiful world. This is a world full of goodness and kindness and beauty, and you are welcome and you are safe here. The problem with making our three-year-old's heads shine with information is that they become nervous and anxious. Too much information, and they do not have the neurological capacity to process it. They totally do not. It's a fact. When people talk to their children about global warming, when they talk to their children about the guilt of enjoying out-of-season fruit, when we, at every mealtime, talk about some global catastrophe, when they're little, what happens is when they're 14 or 15 and we absolutely want to engage them in that kind of conversation, they're done. They roll their eyes and say, *There she goes again*. This same effort to make children world-wise makes them world-weary.

You say we give our kids too many options. How do we respect our child's desires and preferences and not overwhelm them?

In the early phase of life we really need to be benevolent monarchs. We need to be kind, warm, and firm. And that is what secures our children. This is vitally important. We parent little ones like we want to be their buddies, and then when they're 14, 15, we try to become the dictator, and the genie isn't going back in the bottle. Your child doesn't get a lot of choices when they're little because they don't have the neurological ability to make them. It's just quite bizarre to say to a four-year-old, *Shall we get in the car?*

So what do we do if tomato soup is for dinner and our little one doesn't like tomatoes?

Okay, if the child goes into a gag response, then we wouldn't make it with tomatoes next time. One of our children is very sensitive to food texture and we gave her the tiniest amount, like almost an eye-dropper, of broccoli, and we did that, and it took 10 to 12 times, and now she will literally eat anything.

And for the sake of argument, so what?

Well, that means, first of all, as a parent, I was in charge. I am a big fan of children learning creative compliance in their first seven years. But what mommy and daddy ask is fair, it's doable—to learn the difference between a request, which is what most parents do, and a firm and warm instruction. To make the instruction small, stay close, and not ever go into negotiation, to not ever say anything twice. It's ultimately about connection. ●