

Conditioning Book for Flowers by Thu Hang Tran

Conditioned love is what I give my flowers before arranging and displaying them at the entrances and the information desk of the Museum of Fine Arts. I follow the directions in a binder called “Conditioning Book for Flowers,” a compendium of years of collected wisdoms from volunteers creating floral designs for the museum. I think about my parents, sometimes, as I prep the flowers, wondering if they used a “Conditioning Book for Children,” rearing us eight kids. We grew up successfully, but I wouldn’t call it, with un-conditioned love. We were conditioned, like the museum flowers, to perform, becoming teachers, engineers, doctors, and lawyers.

The conditioning twenty-four hours before arranging helps the flowers stay fresh for a longer period of time. Unconditioned flowers wilt relatively quickly. For most flowers, I give a fresh cut, add some flower preservative in cool water, and let it rest overnight in the cooler. Flower preservative has three main ingredients: sugar for food, bleach for disinfectant, and acid for a pH balance. Some flowers need special treatments like dipping stems in boiling water for thirty seconds, or taping the fresh cut to prevent splaying, or cutting stems cross-wise at the bottom, or submerging for two hours in cool water, so on, and so forth. The flowers do last longer, but I wonder how they feel about the treatments, especially the dip in boiling water.

I wrestled with this question in rearing my three children. How can unconditioned love be expressed? I confess to walking a fine line between conditioning for performance and boosting self-esteem for happiness. I asked my children for their best effort. My parents asked for the best grades. These two requests are not so different since I thought my children’s best efforts would produce the best grades. I thought I was being more nuanced than my parents, but that did not stop one of my children from mincing, at age eight, “Sure, you think there are three ways to do things: perfect, perfect, and perfect.” At my sister’s Harvard Law School graduation, my father had asked “What does it take to make summa?” when he saw “magna cum laude” next to her name. One of my other siblings had made the mistake of explaining the three levels of Latin honors. He expected the best. Period. Not second best.

Human beings are not flowers so pondering their conditioned versus non-conditioned environment might be a flawed pastime. If the flowers could write, would they enter this contest, writing about how they would have been happier at the Museum of Fine Arts, if they were not subjected to the prescribed conditioning prior to being showcased in arrangements? Perhaps my siblings and I would be happier if we had grown up with less conditioning to perform. I hope my three adult children do not know about this Unconditional Love essay contest because I would be afraid to read their writing.