

The Better World *John & Lynne Diamond-Nigh*

You Can't Have Too Much Grace – Or Too Many Flowers

Q: Giving flowers can be so tricky. Why risk sending the wrong message or giving the wrong flowers for the occasion?

A: Err on the side of giving. My first memory is of snapping daffodils from my mother's flower garden and taking them to a spot where my tiny fists had scratched up some bare earth—coaxing the stems into the ground just far enough that they stood up. Then I summoned my parents to see *my* garden. "Just how did those flowers get there?" they asked. "I gowwd dem," I insisted proudly. I was too young to know that a lie was a lie, or if I had an inkling of what a lie was, why it should even matter in light of my enchanting little daffodil domain. I got my first spanking. I was bewildered. I still am. Even now I'm not sure that truth should have precedence over the enchantments of beauty.

There is a splendid fresco in Florence, Italy, of the Last Supper. The whole Renaissance, of course, was an effort to translate the dogmas and ethics of Christianity into a very Italian language of luxuriant *beauty*. This particular fresco is by the painter Ghirlandaio, who happened to be Michelangelo's teacher. Far from containing even a hint of the gloom of betrayal and of Christ's imminent death, it is the most summery and delightful picnic you could ever imagine. The table is laden with wonderful food, and here and there the painter has bestowed exquisite bouquets of

Tuscan flowers. After he got the first flower down, I like to think, the pure enchantment of a Tuscan summer day up at the villa just took over, and the grim Bible story was more or less forgotten.

Any Renaissance scholar, of course, will tell you that those flowers (like birds and animals) symbolize all kinds of things, from purity to valor to envy to you name it. We still cling to some of those symbols, which in turn often dictate which flowers to send, and when to do so (if in doubt, ask your florist). In France, for example, you do not bring yellow flowers to a host or hostess. In that culture, they are the flowers of mourning. Your host may think that your daffodils betray a secret death wish. We attended a Jewish funeral in July. No flowers. I was surprised—very unlike the Protestant funerals that I'm used to. Different cultures, different customs.

This has been a summer of flowers. We visited friends at Chautauqua in July, and instantly noticed that almost every porch in that fairy-tale place had a lovely bouquet of gladiolas. Just a tradition, we were told (though if you want to get technical, gladiolas symbolize grace). In August a family member passed away, so each day for a week or so flowers arrived at our house, and while it might be a cliché to say they cheered our spirits, they *did*. Enormously. Opening the door to a deliveryman on the porch, obscured by a huge spray of flowers, is always a moment of surprise

and pure enchantment. Rule of thumb: life can never have too much cheer or enchantment. Or too many flowers. Ask Ghirlandaio.

But flowers don't have to have an occasion. Every month or so, a friend sends flowers to the classroom where his wife is teaching. Do I even need to mention that they have a celestial marriage? Or that her students, in the process, learn a wonderful lesson about love? In our home we have a fall tradition. I sneak out to buy the September *Vogue*, concoct a little mélange of chocolates and a bottle of Grand Marnier, attach it with ribbon to the fat magazine, then swaddle the whole in flowers and give it on bended knee—oh, yes!—to my wife. A little ritual for summer's end. And I'm king for the day!

Recently, we entertained guests for the weekend. Our friend teaches at a college affiliated with a monastery, and his uproarious tales of the antics and idiosyncrasies of the monks was all the reward I could have wished for. A day or so later I heard a knock, and when I opened the door, there, once again, was a lovely bouquet of flowers and a note of thanks.

Some were gladiolas. You can't have too much grace!

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