

LASTING PEACE - THE WORK OF EDUCATION

Marta Donahoe

Sooner or later all the peoples of the world will have to find a way to live together in peace, and thereby transform this cosmic elegy into a creative psalm of brotherhood. If this is to be achieved, man must evolve for all human conflict, a method which rejects revenge, aggression, and retaliation. The foundation of such a method is love.

~ Martin Luther King

Address delivered in acceptance of the Nobel Peace Prize, Oslo Norway, December 10, 1964

We Montessorians have a number of advantages in the world of education. While other schools have as many theories of learning and beliefs about education, and respect, and kids, and teaching as there are teachers in the building, we have an inspiring philosophy, a beautifully spiraling curriculum, and a belief that everybody does better when everybody does better. As far as it is possible, Public School Montessorians must be vigilant in the face of state mandates to hold ourselves and our schools accountable to that philosophy, that curriculum, and that idea.

One way I help myself remember that everybody does better when everybody does better is by doing what Montessorians do best; observing children. When I feel off center from benchmark testing, it is paying attention to the children that realigns me.

Recently I stood to the side and watched the activity in the lunchroom at Clark, a school for 12-18 year olds; a school of both rich and poor, inner city and suburban, fairly equal numbers of black and white students, and I see the cafeteria phenomenon that experts write about. Some tables are mixed by age, race, and gender, but another table is filled by black girls, another by white boys. In spite of the fact that students have grown up Montessori, in schools that honor diversity and teach peace, they still tend to segregate at lunch. On the surface this is an upsetting fact. Then when I look more deeply at what is happening, I understand the difference. Because of all of their years in Montessori schools (cosmic education, peer mediation, community meetings, collaborative projects, grace and courtesy), these students understand the power of community and know when and how to act on it.

A friend recently asked me, “What does educating students have to do with peace?” It’s like being asked “What is Montessori education?” Even after 25 years I still find myself taking a deep breath and looking for the monosyllabic sound-bite. If we both have the time and inclination, I might offer my friend a cup of tea and conversation. We may start with an assumption based on my own fallible observation, that most of us Americans do not know much about people who are different from ourselves, including people in the rest of the world. We tend to be so busy getting ahead, looking out for number one, protecting what we have rightfully squirreled away, is that we have not even a remote notion that we could be part of creating a world where everybody might do better if everybody did better.

What stands out to me about Montessori high school students is that they have had the opportunity to be in a community that reaches many types of people. And that community is held together in a deeply respectful way. For that reason they are able to see past the myths and stereotypes that make us cautious and fearful of one another. They may still choose to sit at lunch with friends to enjoy the things they have in common. It is part of being human to want to be with others who are roughly like ourselves.

As we respect that part of human nature, we need to be cautious of this tendency. The adolescent is in a sensitive period for understanding the value of community and, for better or worse, will form community in some way or another. To create healthier groups they need the guidance of wise adults who create prepared environments that minimize gossip, hazing, and other forms of false community. Rather than condemn clusters of similar folks, we need to organize platforms and experiences and lessons that encourage the value of individual voice and that simultaneously develop collective values so that healthy, true community can form.

Clearly one of the challenges we face as we create schools for the adolescent is how to plan for and carry out educational philosophy of communal values into the high school. For most of society, this notion becomes suspect. Westerners may be too narrow in their ideas of freedom and community. Einstein once observed that Westerners have a feeling that the individual loses his freedom when he joins a union or any group. Given the opportunity to have a deeper experience of freedom and community, prize-winning author Studs Terkel, says, “The individual discovers his strength because he has, along the way, discovered others share his feelings – he is not alone, and thus, a community is formed. You might call it the prescient community or the prophetic community. It’s always there.”

Along with the fact that most of these adolescents in the Clark lunchroom have been educated in Montessori pre and elementary schools, several things have made a difference for them. In this high school they have regular experiences with group initiatives for community building; they have opportunities to work on projects with one another; they have ongoing classroom conversations that engage and embrace edgy topics about race, gender, politics; and they are the beneficiaries of curriculum inspired by Montessori and written by their teachers that does not shy away from examining the importance of compassion in the world and that invites genuine dialogue. When schools engage in that sort of careful and purposeful preparation, an atmosphere of trust develops. Trust in the greater good is an essential aspect of a peaceful society.

That is exactly what Montessori urged us to do when she said, “establishing lasting peace is the work of education.” By creating schools as safe containers in which dissent and respect stand side by side, and where the child with learning quirks sits equal to and in the same class with the child who is the National Merit Scholar, we do just that. Just as diversity in the seed bank is insurance that we can survive a blight on the wheat crop, valuing diversity in the human population is a requirement for survival. When we cultivate critical thinking and human heartedness in the souls of our students, we are helping them understand the inherent beauty of the world. By doing that, we nurture the only seeds we have in this world for lasting peace.

For years I worried that the students in the lunchroom were exhibiting the cafeteria phenomena the experts talked about. But now I see that the lunch tables are not groups of cliques; they are not exclusionary groups rallying against one another. There is a subtle but profound difference in the clustering that these students are doing. They are committed to the larger community. They are generally kind to one another and they are more likely to call one another on mean or hurtful behaviors.

For example, I got a call from the mother of an 11th grader named Simon. She said that the night before she had been recalling a story to her son about his cousin who went to another high school. The cousin had been teased and tormented by a group of students until a scuffle broke out and they were all sent to the principal’s office. Simon immediately said that that would not happen at Clark. His mom was surprised by that statement and asked why not. “It wouldn’t make it to principal’s office because we don’t let each other act like that,” he said.

Actually, I wish real high school life was always the way Simon describes it. We have all the classic kid stuff any school has; it’s just that we don’t have that much of it. How do we do that? As in all successful Montessori schools, we try hard to take time to mediate problems. We are

always trying to mirror the best in every child, whether their best is apparent or not. We do our best to not engage in power struggles. We are mindful of appropriate boundaries and guidelines. (As Parker Palmer says, “Boundaries create the space for reverence.”) We work hard to challenge and support every student to give her best effort. Teacher preparation and education are fundamental to this effort, and just as significant is the fact that we all pledge to treat one another the way we expect the students to treat one another. We take issues directly to the person we have problems with. We expect the best of one another. We agree to disagree when we can’t reach a solution, which isn’t often.

Just as we invest so much time and effort with the prepared environment for the younger child, setting up a functional and just community is the up front and ongoing hard work we invest in for the adolescent environment. Building and maintaining community and diversity is not easy work. We often associate community with the personal nurturing it affords, but when we invite diversity, we must deal with the challenging issues of political and economic justice that it will open. The payoff is invaluable. I have to admit that walking into my school building after listening to the morning news, a building in which the adults and students have pledged to uphold those values, is uplifting. Adults and students - we are all happy to see one another. It’s easier to feel that way when we work with other adults to develop curriculum that helps lead young people to find their place in society. We inspire ourselves, and are enlivened to do the very thing that Montessori asks us to do with adolescents – nurture in them a sense of hope and progression of the human spirit. And what happens when they prepare to leave us?

Amazing things happen for adolescents who have had 15 years of Montessori education. I have at least one story for every graduate, but Vonnie told one of my favorites to me. It is one of my favorites, not because it is about my high school, but because I think it illustrates the power of what happens to the adolescent when, because she has grown up in an environment that follows Montessori’s advice, she recognizes possibility. Last year, after a two-week immersion course, Vonnie, a bright faced African American senior, came running into my poetry class. She had just returned from the Diversity in New York Intersession and couldn’t wait to tell me about her experience. The students had broken into 5 teams to research the history of each borough and planned an outing to each part of town. They arranged the transportation, lined up interviews, and prepared a student-led sightseeing tour. On the first outing day, the students and teachers were in the subway waiting for their train. A street musician was playing “Heard It Thru the Grapevine”. The Clark kids started to hum along and then, one at a time they began to sing along. Then they started to dance. There are moments in your life when you know something is true and real and good. Our intersessions are designed to maximize the possibility for those

moments to occur and I could tell from Vonnie's story that this was one of those moments for her because during the singing and the dancing, Vonnie was touched to the point of tears. She looked over at her teacher who was also visibly moved and ran to her crying out loud, "Jo! Jo! We are going to change the world! Clark kids are going to change the world!"

What else matters? I'd like to think I am growing older and leaving things to young people who are inspired to change the world for the better. Still, I am often asked by parents, "What will happen to our children when they have to deal with the *real* world?" And I say to them "What kind of real world do you want?" There is only one way to create a better world and that is to create organizations and institutions that elicit the best in human nature, that challenge our assumptions and unconscious elitism by creating a container that holds the values of hard work and human dignity and that embraces the notion that everybody does better when everybody does better. What sort of adults do we want our children to become? And how can they know ways of being more firm, loving, gentle, and resilient if they have not experienced those ways?

What sort of schools and organizations must we create if we want the world to get better? The work of educators to create not just a respect for, but a love of, diversity seems more urgent and radical today. Given the values that are most prevalent in society at large, it's no wonder many parents and educators who support this Montessori education for younger children, find it hard to accept that adolescents who are trained to cooperate rather than compete will be equipped to deal with the "real world." When adolescents reach secondary school, institutions teach them to leave behind the activity of reflecting and renewing community based on goodwill and abundance. Students are expected to enter schools based on scarcity; a mini-society that decides who gets what, and how much of it based on competition and test scores.

At the beginning of this school year, the parents of a young fellow who had just moved to town appeared on at my school's doorstep. They had been recommended by people in town to send him to one of the highly academic, competitive schools. The boy had been in attendance there for two days and had come home sobbing both afternoons. This was, the parents assured me, not usual behavior for their son. I agreed to interview him.

When 12 year old Roman arrived, I gave him a quick tour of the school. "This isn't a school for everybody, you know," I told him. "You have to work really hard, do service work, and be willing to see the best in people who may be really different from you."

“That’s what I want,” he said. “The whole time I was at the other school I kept thinking, ‘Why would we make schools like that if we want the world to get better?’” Roman should probably be the one writing this essay. And he may go on to be a great leader, I don’t know. What I do know is that every person who finds her place in society is most likely to be a steward for the community, and that broadens the definition of leadership and empowers every person to appreciate the difference they can make.

How do we create leaders? Meg Wheatley says that we must provide opportunities for leadership by creating and supporting communities that develop new practices. Those communities within our direct realm of influence are our schools and teacher education programs. Within those organizations, we must look honestly at the challenges posed by the purposeful creation of community and the nurturing of every person as a leader and a steward. This task is increasingly difficult in a world that values competition over cooperation and the individual over the collective. There is a deep ambivalence in our society between creating a culture that values the messiness and hard work it takes to develop community and one that celebrates unfettered individualism.

It is important to understand that community and individuality are not mutually exclusive. As a matter of fact, a balance of both is essential to the health of the organization. In the pamphlet, “A Place Called Community”, Parker Palmer says, “In false communities the group is always superior to the individual, while in true communities both individual and group have a claim on truth.” Montessori reminds us of the superior knowledge that humans have accumulated and the supreme responsibility that goes with it. What wise and kind and radical acts must we embrace to make the world better? What might the world look like if we supported opportunities for brilliant leaders?

Victor Havel, one of those brilliant stewards and leaders in this world says, “*Consciousness precedes being.*” This is a reminder to me that no matter what is physically apparent, no matter what is being, it is not the scores on the state exams, but it is spirit and the conscious heart that are the fundamental factors in this life. I keep this as a personal mantra while I simply work on my own capacity to envision possibility. As Montessorians, we must keep asking questions and following Montessori’s advice as well as we know how. For me that means that I continue to pave my own way to be a better steward for the young people I work with, to show them to the best of my ability that all work is noble, to believe in the dignity of every human being, and to trust that everybody does better when everybody does better.

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