

Where is Everybody: Valorization in a World that Could Be

Marta Donahoe

According to the United Nations Education Social and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in the next 30 years, more people in this world will have been formally educated than in all of recorded history. Yet we do not appear, at least yet, to be making significant inroads toward equipping young people to deal with the problems of the times in which in which they live. Montessori wrote frequently about the need to create a kind of practical education that would address this issue. Consequently, Montessori secondary schools are springing up, one by one, all over the country to further the practical kind of education that the teachers of younger students have been doing for decades. By practical, I mean a kind of education that teaches not only academics, but the work of the heart and the hands. Educating young people in this way, challenges secondary teachers to establish the legitimacy of their work similarly to the challenges that the pioneering preschool and elementary teachers faced before the word “Montessori” was a household word.

Here’s an example: when I give high school tours, I am regularly asked what will happen to a child when, after her Montessori education, she is faced with the real world. That question used to put me on the defensive. I had a feeling that Montessorians were on the right track, but I had no idea how to articulate this feeling. Then several years ago, upon rereading *The Absorbent Mind*, I noticed a passage that had never stood out to me before. It read, “The work of education is like an island where people cut off from the real world are prepared for life by exclusion from it.” (p.11) and I began to answer the real world question with, “What kind of real world do we want?” That’s what I think Montessori was talking about.

I’m talking about the real-world-we-want-idea as expressed in a scene I witnessed in the hallway this morning. It embodies that nebulous flowering of the heart—the spirit and joy I’d like to see more of in the world. Neil, a handsome, popular African-American senior, came out of a classroom into the hallway. He did not know I was also in the hallway. Upon seeing Jerry, a Caucasian nonverbal multi-handicapped student, Neil said, “Hey, Jerry! How ya doin’, buddy?” Jerry awkwardly held up his hand to high-five Neil, and the two of them walked down the hall together, Neil with his arm around Jerry’s shoulder, talking away to him, “Ya goin’ to class? I’ll walk you to your class....”

Thinking of our schools as mini-societies of grace and courtesy that might ripple out into the rest of the world gets me excited. It makes me think about the implications of the finer points of our work together—how we project ourselves to the public, how we as teachers spiritually prepare ourselves for our work, and how we make choices about guiding our students on their paths. It makes me notice things I might not have noticed before, like when I recently found a slick pamphlet on a table in a meeting room. It was a Montessori promotional publication and on the brilliantly colorful front was the bold statement “With graduates like these... We Must Be Doing Something Right!!!” It had seven photos, including actors George Clooney and Helen Hunt, and the founders of Google and Amazon.com. My first thought was, “Wow!” This thought was immediately followed by another reaction. It reminded me of when a former elementary student of mine came to visit me after leaving the city and our integrated school to attend a rural all-Caucasian school. When asked how she liked her new school, she said, “I miss how much more interesting school was here, but mostly I just walk down the halls and think, *‘Where is everybody?’*”

“Where is everybody...” I whispered under my breath, and I smiled to myself as I imagined a pamphlet that had a photo of Tony, Best Custodian; Monica, Great Lunchroom Manager; Peg, Invaluable Secretary; Eva, Awesome Montessori Teacher; or John, Seeker of Truth and Wisdom. I think of William Ayers’ essays on hope and justice, particularly when he talks about the need for teachers to be intensely aware of what they value, what they honor, and what they stand for. He says, “This requires wedding consciousness to conduct, and it involves taking responsibility for ourselves, for our work, for the world we see and understand, and a world that could be but is not yet.” (Ayers, p. 22) For the rest of the day I am absorbed by two queries: Is it possible that being a regular, “unfamous” person may no longer be good enough? And how do we solve the paradox between bragging rights and a world that could be?

My concern in the search for “everybody” is only partially justified. Montessori tells us to make sure to have students study the lives of people who serve as role models (Montessori, 1948, p. 79). Evolutionary biologists tell us that identification with those we admire is a natural part of human development (Strauss). On the other hand, James Houran, a psychologist with the Southern Illinois University School of Medicine recognizes that there is an unhealthy preoccupation with what he calls “Celebrity Worship Syndrome” (Strauss). Houran says that while, at best, celebrities can inspire us to be better than we are, they are no longer simply people with special talents and attributes. “They are simply marketing products.” (Strauss) His study may not be a red flag, but a yellow caution light for us.

I say proceed with caution because (nothing against George Clooney) when we use celebrities to market Montessori education, it is possible that we fuel the likelihood of creating more expectations for our students to live up to, rather than possibilities to live into. What I mean is that, when celebrities are held up to be the pinnacle of a Montessori education, it could be that rather than uncovering their own unique paths to adulthood, our children can become the projection of our own unfinished business; to be, well... celebrities.

In our attempt to refocus and pay more attention to the world we can see and understand, it is notable that the fascination with celebrities and marketing cannot be separated out from the preoccupation with the accumulation of stuff. Sometimes you don't even have to pay attention. Sometimes it just hits you square in the face—like it did for me when I was headed home on the biggest shopping day of the year, the day after Thanksgiving. As I looked from the expressway, I saw that the parking lots at every mall were filled at 5 a.m. The combination of the celebrity pamphlet and the thousands of shoppers (including me) who got up at 4 a.m. to hit the malls, compelled me to run home and work again on finding ways to guide students to develop a sense of stewardship and social justice. This is not to say that there is no good reason to go get a great bargain, or that I, if there had not been a great shoe sale, might not have been there myself. I humbly count myself among those in need of further enlightenment.

Assuming celebrities and more “stuff” do not necessarily lead to a path toward a fulfilling life, maybe helping guide children to discover their authentic (essential, true, natural) selves would lead to more people on the planet developing a greater capacity for joy. And maybe more conscious, happy people would set up a more functional, sustainable world. It seems logical to me. Montessori says we do this by paving the way for “Valorization of the Personality” (the correlate to “Normalization” for the younger child) (Montessori, 1948, p. 64). The characteristics of valorization are joy, selflessness, optimism, confidence, dignity, self-discipline, initiative, helpfulness, ability to work with others, and good judgment. Montessori noted that a child who has been deprived of the opportunity to develop valorization through experiencing the challenges of “self-help,” not given the chance to experience of some level of economic independence, or not given the richness of mingling with people of different ages and social classes, will “with difficulty become worthy of becoming a leader of anything.” (Long, p. 128). With that in mind, it would be wise to revisit the ways in which we nurture those characteristics in our schools, with our students, and with one another as adults.

Ironically, one of the major inhibitors to valorization is the expectation (and unintended judgment) well-meaning adults place on children. Those people are sometimes referred to as “heli-

copter parents.” We have all seen one or been one. This parent withholds the opportunity for the child to experience the necessary challenges that can help him grow up with confidence in his abilities. At the same time the parent may place an unwise burden of expectation on a child’s academic or social performance. Ron Goldblatt, executive director of the Association of Independent Maryland Schools, puts it this way, “As a child gets older, it is a real problem for a parent to work against their own child’s independent thought and action, and it is happening more often” (Strauss).

Parents are not the only ones facing a dilemma of judgment and pressures. Montessori teachers are pulled at both ends of the spectrum: on the public school end, by the lackluster and anxiety-provoking constraints of No Child Left Behind, and on the private school end, by the competition for students whose parents may be largely concerned with high school and college entrance test scores.

Again I go back to the teachings and readings, seeking some insight, and I realize it has taken me a long time to internalize much of what Montessori was trying so hard to help me know. As I remember all of those lessons from the 6-12 training with Martha McDermott, my own Montessori teacher—the beginning of the universe, the angels and clouds, the timelines, and progression of life and love—I am compelled to call her to say, “Martha! All of those lessons and I finally get it!”

Kind of. I probably still have a hundred layers of meaning to peel, but here is what I understand today. Montessori was laying the groundwork for us to understand that from the beginning of the universe, every atom has organized itself for what was coming. The Milky Way and the other 250 billion galaxies are answering the call of the universe to simply create possibility. On this planet not one atom, vegetable, mineral, or single-celled animal had any intention other than becoming its own true self. Many Montessori timelines later in the course of geologic events, the stage was set for humans. And what if we realized that our only job is to join in the cosmic task of creating possibility by answering the call of God, the universe, the cosmic self (whatever you want to call it)?

We don’t need to even know what it means to open up to that idea. We simply need to accept the humble notion that must create ourselves as a possibility. And we must realize when we honor that process in ourselves, teachers create the conditions that lead to appropriate nurturing and challenge for our students to blossom. At that point we should get out of the way, so that we and

our students become midwives to the mystery of what might be born of that spaciousness... an expansive heart that can hold fire, rain, heartache, curiosity, and joy.

If we could do that, just maybe we wouldn't need to head for that mall at 5 a.m. to simply get a shopping fix on the day after Thanksgiving. Maybe we would be able to choose more wisely when to intervene on behalf of children and when to trust them to move through their challenges on their own. Maybe the contributions to the world of the earthworm, the spotted owl, the heirloom tomato, or of a graduate who becomes a happy and well adjusted custodian would be just as important to us as the graduate who becomes an Academy Award-winning actor. Maybe if we were more confident in the value of spirit and joy, the unfolding of the heart, that which we cannot measure or buy, we'd be more willing to notice and ask, "Where is everybody?"

References

Ayers, W. (2004). *Teaching the Personal and the Political*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Long, J. (2001). *Toward key experiences for the adolescent*. NAMTA Journal, 26(3), 63-77

Montessori, M. (1948). *From Childhood to Adolescence*. Oxford: ABC Clío.

Montessori, M. (1967). *The Absorbent Mind*. New York. Holt, Rinehart, Winston.

Strauss, V (2006, March 21). Putting parents in their place. *The Washington Post*, A08

MARTA DONAHOE is Program Coordinator at Clark Montessori Junior and Senior High School in Cincinnati, Ohio, (and the owner of an Imelda Marcosian collection of shoes). Contact her at marta@cmstep.com.

Published in *Montessori Life*, volume 20, number 3, 2008