

Widening the Circle

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A human being is a part of the whole called by us universe, a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feeling as something separated from the rest, a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty. ~ Albert Einstein

For older students, students over 12 years old, we know how to put together a forum to present academics. We can lecture and power point, we can write on the board, outline, and lecture some more. We can show movies and video clips and have students look things up on the internet. But in our unique approach to education, Montessorians are challenged to create the academic forum that engages the mind and the hand, and most importantly, the heart. It is in essence the heart of the adolescent that gives birth to the adult. The mind and the hand come along as side-kicks.

There can be, however, barriers to accessing the engagement of the heart. Technology, (including, but not limited to, television, computers, internet, email, and cell phones) gives us two impressions. One is that the world is small, which it is. The other is that we can hold at arm's distance a world that is facing ever increasing frequency of catastrophic events, which we can't. It is easy to become numb or jaded from the barrage of bad news that grabs at us each time we turn on the radio and television. The steady stream of buzzing dots, light and sound, packaging jingles, and slice-of-life commercials, the real and pretend violence and product hype is confusing to most of us, but especially to children. Sometimes I think I'd like to covertly (since it goes against my core beliefs) sponsor some sort of legislation to limit media for teenagers. Instead, as an educator, I know my real charge is to help my students learn to navigate the ocean of psychic data. Considering this, I am left with the question: how can teachers and guides use the readily available information systems to encourage hope and compassion?

Webster's Dictionary tells us that hope is "confidence in a future event." How does hope emerge? Where does that confidence in the future come from? How can we expect that something good will indeed occur? How do we teach hope?

The dictionary defines compassion as "sympathetic consciousness of others' distress together with a desire to alleviate it." How can we develop compassion when we are overwhelmed with images of human suffering? How do we avoid feeling helpless? How do we teach compassion?

When we connect our own fate to the fate of the world there exists a power that can either paralyze us or enliven us to action. Two days ago a dear friend of my family, Romendi, a young man who works with my son on a two-person landscaping crew, lost his parents, wife and two little children. They were swept away by a big hurricane in Guatemala. I was out of town and my daughter and son took food and a card to him. My son called today to say that Romendi can't stop crying. He carries his children's pictures from room to room with him inside the card they had written. My daughter asked Romendi to remember that we are all connected in this world, especially in sorrow. I looked at pictures in the paper. The image of a rescue worker carrying a toddler out of the hurricane rubble in Guatemala brought me to tears. Of course, because I have this specific personal connection, the world is up close to me. Those pictures meant more to me than they would have had I not known Romendi. I would have been sad, but I wouldn't have cried. We all have personal stories of moving forward to help others in need because we make a personal connection. I found that one thing I could do besides check in on Romendi, was to help him find an immigration attorney.

We can't do something about everything, but we can do something about something. Doing something brings out the more noble parts of who we are, brings us closer to our most authentic selves. It reminds us that we are all connected in the mystery of life and spirit. Serving brings both hope and compassion into the realm of education. That is why I believe that it is important to help students connect to service projects and to understand the difference between helping and serving. Helping means seeing life as broken or helping those less fortunate, while serving is a healing act, an act of joy between equals. Rachel Naomi Remen says, "When you serve, you see life as whole."

It is no surprise that we need to support one another to reconnect our hearts and minds. All of our television-viewing lives we have been trained to look at the world out there, somewhere, apart from ourselves. During adolescence (ages 12-24) we can counter this distancing by inviting our students to intersect their life stories with the stories of the world. When our students begin to do

this, it gradually dawns on them that they cannot simply carve out a lovely life in the middle of the pain of the world. They begin to recognize their own life implied in the fate of society.

Without guides to help us see more clearly, it is easy to slip into the prison of the optical illusion that we are separate from the world around us. Bernice King, the daughter of the late Dr. Martin Luther King, spoke to our students several years ago and illustrated this point in a fable. She told the story of a man and his son who planned an outing together. They were beginning to have the usual parent-teenager distance growing between them and the father hoped that spending time fishing together would be helpful. After they rowed out to the middle of the lake, the boy looked down and noticed water seeping in around the feet of the father. “Look, Dad, water is coming in around your feet.” The older fellow took a plastic scoop and began to bail water out, but the water came rushing in more quickly than he could get rid of it. He was working quickly and asked his son to help. When he got no response he looked up and saw that his son was laughing. He asked why his son was laughing and the son said, “Because you are going to go under and drown!”

As an advocate for the inherent goodness of the adolescent, I hate that the story portrays the young man as the ignoramus. Obviously the young fellow never made the connection that he and his father were in the same boat. I would expect that he may have watched too much unsupervised television and he clearly never had the advantage of going to a Montessori high school. If he had been fortunate enough to attend a Montessori high school he would have had the gift of courses that were designed to engage him in the work of the world. Cosmic education for the young child involves being captivated by the big wondrous picture of the universe. Montessori courses for teenagers must continue to impress and engage the imagination, to make connections, to help them make sense of the world and who they are in it. They need projects that expose them to big work like Habitat for Humanity. They need projects that help them connect to the stories of the people they are serving. They need to know the stories of one another, so that they can begin to develop an inward capacity for relatedness. Only then can we human beings uncover what Thomas Merton called the “hidden wholeness” of things. These sorts of insights may be nudged along with an extrapolation of the pedagogical methods that Montessorians use with younger children. Insights happen when we engage in the careful planning of impressionistic lessons that give the adolescent an experience of connectedness and vision of possibility. They happen when we take time in our courses for students to tell their stories that relate to the themes and events they are studying in their classes. They happen when the development of the classroom and the school as a community become central to the way we think and learn.

Time is always in short supply and there are no shortcuts to developing curriculum, community, and conscious awareness. One of my faults as an educator and a person is that I get in a hurry. I don't edit emails, I get more interested in checking off duties than performing the task, I run off (not too far) without my keys, and I multi-task. When I slow down and enjoy each activity, each interaction, I am present and involved directly in my own world. It takes more time, but paradoxically, I end up feeling like I have more time.

It takes time, as well, to help adolescents process the world in which they live, even though the SAT's are coming up. Being responsive to the current issues that affect our students is cumbersome but important and necessary. When Cincinnati had episodes of civil unrest a couple of years ago, one of the high school teachers brought in a video of the play that Anna Devries Smith made about the Crown Heights riots in New York. We watched clips everyday for several days in our advisory groups and talked about the similarities between Cincinnati and Crown Heights. When the shootings happened in

Columbine, our principal went from classroom to classroom and talked to all the students about what had happened. He reminded them that as a community we have to take care of one another and pay attention to one another. In either case, we did not come up with any big solutions to the big problems, but we became the solutions to the problems in our own small way. We were engaged. We felt safe with one another. We cared.

Our schools are microcosms of the world community and as such, our task to widen our circle of compassion has far-reaching implications. I am reminded of Parker Palmer's wisdom, "If you ask what holds a community together, what makes the possibility for relatedness possible, the only honest answer I can give brings me to that dangerous realm called the spiritual. The only answer I can give is that what makes community possible is love." How else do we prepare adolescents to take their place in society? We talk about the events of the world as if they really matter. We create a safe place for the expression of truth. We encourage ideas in the context of hope and compassion. When we do these things with love, the love of learning and the love of the learners, it makes powerful medicine for adolescents and for this world.

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