

The Way We Gather **Marta Donahoe**

“... Transformation occurs when we focus on the structure of how we gather and the context in which the gatherings take place; when we work hard on getting the questions right; when we choose depth over speed and relatedness over scale.”

Peter Block, Community

Recently my eight-year-old granddaughter was staying at my house during the school week. One morning she marched into the kitchen where my husband and I were preparing tea and packing lunches, and announced to us, “Guess what I read? The way you make your bed is the way your day will go!”

“Good deal, let’s do it!” said her grandpa, and off the two of them went to make sure her little bed upstairs was neat as a pin. She left for school soon after that and I assume she had a great day while I went on to consider the further implications of the way one makes one’s bed. If making the bed means paying attention to the finer details and setting the tone for the way they ripple throughout our day, perhaps there is wisdom in noticing the tone that is set in other parts of the day.

The way in which we gather is an extension of the making the bed analogy, and I would say it this way: The way we gather is the way our school days (classrooms, staff meetings, etc.) go. In other words, the mindfulness we bring to the little ways we behave with one another sets the tone for the entire organization. We do this by looking at the point of any get-together and organizing accordingly. There are two main reasons for school gatherings: to attend to business in meetings or to celebrate the community at large.

Regardless of the specific reason to gather, it may be helpful to remember that when Montessori spoke of allowing the individual to remain independent throughout all the stages of development, she is not asking us to create a pull-oneself-up-by-one’s-bootstraps individual; rather, she is asking us to consider the way in which we honor the blossoming of each person, and we do that in order to benefit society. We honor the unfolding of the personality petal by petal within the context of our relationship to one another and out of respect for our interdependence. Montessori says, “Intelligence, a balanced personality, and the unity of all mankind as a single organism are man’s wealth.” Montessori is speaking here of the big picture – the importance of the individual to the function of all humankind. I enjoy wrestling with how to translate Montessori’s big picture ideas to everyday school life, how to bring mindfulness to the little picture. As soon as we show up as individuals within a group, we have the opportunity to see the small frame within the larger frame; we have created a microcosm of the larger society with the potential to display man’s wealth – “the unity of mankind.”

Community Meetings with Students or Staff

On a practical level, we can display “the unity of mankind” in meetings by structuring meetings and being creative to achieve the community sense that people will remember. Many meetings I have attended over several decades often run into problems of one of two types. They are often too loose or too rigid. The loosely run meeting is an attempt to make sure everyone’s voice is heard and every idea surfaced. These meetings can be too free flowing to take care of business

very well. Loose meetings last longer than necessary and make folks feel that their time is not valued. The rigid meeting gets business done efficiently at the expense of relationships.

Here are a couple of ideas to consider for designing meetings, those microcosms of the larger society, to be more intentional and thoughtful.

- When planning meetings with students or faculty, oversee the carefully planned agenda so that participants pay attention to the process that occurs during the meeting.
- Begin a meeting by lighting a candle and having a moment of silence, then reading an appropriate quote or poem.
- Save some time in the agenda for participants to acknowledge one another for individual acts of kindness, compassion, or support community members have received from one another or noticed about one another.
- Sheila Coad-Bernard begins her community meetings with her students briefly stating Gifts and Drags (or what is going well and what is not going so well.) For example, I heard one student say, “My gift is that I got to play with my new puppy last night and my drag is that I didn’t sleep much because my little sister and the puppy tried to sleep in my bed with me.” I love the idea that there is a platform for surfacing light and shadow that let’s us know more about our students’ lives.
- Whether meeting with students or with staff to discuss items on the agenda, take care to choose words thoughtfully, stay on topic, not ramble, listen well, and stay within time constraints.
- Close a meeting in a way that honors or reenergizes the group and avoids dissipating the collective energy.
- Close by blowing out the candle and passing it, asking each person to say a one-word gift or challenge they received during the meeting, or having a group cheer.

Really all these ideas are ways of making the bed, smoothing out the wrinkles and fluffing the pillows. Unlike bed making, which is done privately or with a partner or child, these rituals happen in front of colleagues and peers, so you may feel vulnerable. You just have to be a little brave, come up with your own ideas you can live with, and try them anyway. They work because they allow us to choose depth over speed and relatedness over scale. The intention with which a meeting is planned sets us up for the way the time together will go.

Celebrations and Graduations

There’s nothing like getting the whole community together for a school party. Gathering for school celebrations creates an opportunity to remind the entire community of the Montessori mission and vision for educating for peace by validating the individual in the context of the school society. There can be a tendency to resort to more traditional practices because that is what we are familiar with. Just as we want to teach and guide classes with our students in a Montessori way, we look for parallel ways of being together as a group to pave a better way.

Consider graduation as a rite of passage. A celebration of this sort may happen in a school at the end of any hallmark year in the child’s life (6, 9, 12, 14 or 15, or 18.) Some ceremonies or gatherings I have attended have inadvertently spoken to the opposite of what Montessorians might want to stand for. When we ask a student to stand for a special honor or award in front of the school community for her top performance, the highest GPA, or the best attendance, the

message is loud and clear, “This child is more special than another child.” The unintended and divisive message that may be communicated, rather than celebrating the abundance of the community, is “there is only so much good stuff – not quite enough for everybody.”

Of course we must notice great things about our students. It becomes confusing and complicated when we do not realize that there has been a shift from the simple and humble joy of the great accomplishment to the reward of a prize, an award, or a possession. Great accomplishments can show up in the school newsletter, in community meeting acknowledgements, and in the graduation booklet. But when gathering as a school community, let us celebrate community. Not one individual over another.

Montessori said, “Two paths lie open in the development of the personality – one that leads to the man who loves, and another that leads to the man who possesses. One leads to the man who has won his independence and works harmoniously with others, the other to the human slave who becomes the prisoner of his possessions as he tries to free himself and who comes to hate his fellows.” There is a fine line between supporting the individual to grow into her fullness and creating a culture that values the possession of the award. When we celebrate the individual with awards, we do that at the expense of the community.

One Montessori 18 year-old put it this way, “I am an excellent academic student. In another school I would be asked to stand in front of the school community and be given acknowledgements and awards that would make my parents proud of my accomplishments. But the important thing to me at graduation is for everyone to know that I am here because of the reason that all my classmates are here – because of everyone who loved me and believed in me, not just my family and teachers, but each individual in my class. We have been through a lot together and whether or not each of us has a learning disability, or a great high school resume, or full ride to college, we all worked so, so hard to stand there at graduation with one another – side by side. I stand in that candle ceremony¹ with people who learned to give their individual best. We did it for ourselves, and we did it for each other.” In the work place or in the classroom, the way in which we lift and hold one another as individuals, the way in which we validate the importance of each person creates a sense of stability and safety in the group. That can only be accomplished when we value each person – regardless of his or her individual accolades.

The way in which we gather can loosen the grip of modern society’s predominant message that there is not enough to go around. The way we gather can help us realize we are sufficient. The way we gather carries the potential to illustrate the essence of Montessori’s call to peace and the nurturing strength of a school community. We gather to let our young people know that they are moving from and into a world of abundance. This is the essence of Montessori’s message to us in the work of cosmic education. As Joanna Macy puts it, “... it is an extraordinary privilege to be accorded a human life, with self-reflexive consciousness that brings awareness to our own actions and the ability to make choices. Let us choose to take part in the healing of our world.”

¹ After two students, who are chosen by their peers, speak to the audience, they each light a candle. All seniors stand and come up to the stage, standing side-by-side at the front, each with an unlit candle. The speakers stand in the center of the line and light the candles to their sides so that in the dark room, the line of candles slowly extends the entire line of students, illuminating their faces and symbolizing the light within each individual. It is very moving to watch the collective beauty of all the candles and all the faces. At the end, a junior approaches the stage to light a candle from one of the seniors, symbolizing the passing of the light of leadership to the junior class.