

FIRST EDITION 2017

AMI/USA JOURNAL

AMI

AMI
USA

It's For Life: Montessori's Vision of Peace Through Education

Paula Preschlack

Our presidential debates this past year revealed a new level of rudeness and animosity that has become a societal challenge. These days, many of us find it exhausting to sift through the daily news, dodging abrasive opinions, feeling called to battle on some days and limping away on others. What gets accomplished – one has to wonder – when a combative approach becomes the norm?

Arguably, young Americans are growing up in a negative, confusing time, with coarse language, gross humor, and a worship of the screen. Depending on your neighborhood, many families routinely replace their weekly church or spiritually-oriented gatherings with competitive sports. Some rarely sit down for dinner to make conversation a main activity with their loved ones. Spending hours with screens has become a common family pastime. And it's probable that many children are not being routinely connected to experiences that strengthen their minds, bodies and spirits, such as time in nature, reflective time with good books, playing and interacting with friends and family, or contributing to others.

Such thoughts can make us feel pretty low. But we have a pocket of hope here, in the Montessori schools where our children spend their days. Our children have beautiful, peaceful places to focus on building themselves into people who can decide the future. And it starts with a very special mindset, forged by Montessori.

Maria Montessori witnessed the massive challenges of her own day: When she began her work in the late 1800s, women couldn't vote; she saw the Fascist, Communist and Nazi parties gain popularity and overtake entire countries in the first half of the 20th century; the tragedies of genocide and two world wars ensued.

In the face of all this, Montessori focused on what is good and beautiful in the world. She held a rare reverence for life and for humanity. She zeroed in on the incredible feats, the stories of survival, the generosity, and the love that life offers in all times. She seemed to know that children need these stories, to adopt this outlook and develop a firm belief in humanity. She sensed that this would help them to navigate and overcome the challenges of their own times. To strengthen them in

goodness was her logical answer, for she believed that education should support the growth of life.

For positive forces to be the victors in life, Montessori believed that we must support the efforts of nature to promote them. In other words, she saw that the environment must be prepared void of unnecessary obstacles, and with keys to the world supplied generously by the teacher. This way, children could grow healthy and strong in body and mind. Furthermore, Montessori suggested that this be done with complete respect for each child's individuality. In *To Educate the Human Potential*, she wrote, "Not in the service of any political or social creed should the teacher work, but in the service of the complete human being, able to exercise in freedom a self-disciplined will and judgment, unperverted by prejudice and undistorted by fear." (p.3) If we can do this, children will become their own, unique, true selves, ready to participate and serve others. "...Our pupils [will be] equipped in their whole being for the adventure of will and judgment, illuminated by imagination and enthusiasm. Only such pupils can exercise rightly the duties in a civilized commonwealth." (p. 1) Thus, children who can become their true selves will be the best of humanity.

In some schools, adults decide for the children what cause to support, what morals to believe in, and what actions should be taken. This is not Montessori. Yes, children do need our example and our guidance, but Montessori had seen with her own eyes how adult greed, fear, prejudice or ego can shape younger minds, and she did not design her approach to imitate such a process. Instead, she recommended that we model grace and courtesy, leave impressions, tell stories, and then give each child time and freedom to think his or her own original thoughts and execute his or her own actions. Through the responses of others and the environment to these actions, children adjust their behaviors and find their true paths. In a very natural sense, Montessori invites the spiritual being in every child to participate in his or her entire, personal growth and education.

What might this look like at each stage of a child's journey through their Montessori education?

At Forest Bluff School – as in many of our

Montessori schools – we have a Young Children’s Community, designed for roughly ten to fifteen children ages 18 months to three. The children come to school for three hours every weekday morning, so that we can help them develop their coordination, the ability to communicate with language, and to develop the will and ability to concentrate. They learn about being in a community, contributing by preparing food and sitting down to eat a daily meal together, singing, and interacting naturally with each other, living in a shared environment with their teacher and her assistant.

When I walk into these classrooms, I can see how the physical space calls out to the children: there is sunshine illuminating the glass vases, and the wooden tones in the shelves, tables, chairs and floor warm us. The cloths are clean, fluffy and folded neatly in stacks, nestled into small baskets. Language cards with beautiful, detailed images of birds, butterflies and mammals lay snugly fitted into little matching trays. Everything is straightened and clean, waiting for the children to come. This place is a spiritual gift. The teacher bends down to the children with a warm, loving smile and gently shakes each one’s hand in greeting when they arrive.

The children begin the day by caring for themselves, taking off their coats as independently as they can, and then by turning their attention to the environment, doing activities that help them develop their hand-eye coordination, language, concentration, understanding of sequences and self-control. The teacher helps each child connect with purposeful work. Their love and respect for life and others grows as they learn to care for plants by gently cleaning each leaf with a damp cotton ball, or feed the fish, sweep the floor, wash their glass dishes, carry and eventually prepare materials for the next child who may come along after them. This is how they develop awareness of others and for their surroundings.



Courtesy of Forest Bluff School

The Primary classrooms for three to six year olds are alive with color in the flags of the world, large puzzle maps, geometric solids and the pink tower. There are options for activity everywhere you look, with the Language, Mathematics, Geometry, Geography, Art, Music, Biology, Practical Life and Sensorial materials. The children develop persistence through the longer cycles of activity and build up concentration and self-control. They learn to channel their energies further to be a part of an organism of people through the Grace and Courtesy lessons: they learn to speak with a volume that does not disturb others who are working, to handle materials, furniture and each other gently, to step carefully around each other’s bodies and around rugs that have work on them. With effort, they hone their balance by walking on the line, carrying pitchers of water without spilling and by carrying the large puzzle maps.

The ultimate experience of being an individual within a community lies in the key Grace and Courtesy lesson called the Silence Game. In it, the teacher invites the children to still each part of their bodies until they are all “creating the silence together.” Though it may last for only a few moments, three to six year olds delight in the challenge. They seem to love the moments of peaceful quiet and the meditative feeling of this self-reflective and communal act. This is an experience of integration and cooperation.

In our Elementary classrooms, the children – having developed their abilities to concentrate with minds which were absorbing everything around them previously – now engage with the environment with minds that have a newly powerful imagination that can envision things which are not in front of them, can reason, and which have remarkable stamina. At this stage, with their minds open and ready to truly empathize with other human beings, Montessori instructs us to give grand stories that include such wonders as the vastness of space and the generosity of plants in giving us oxygen and food. She asks that we point out the symbiotic cooperation between living creatures, and the gifts that humans from earlier times gave us – language so that we can communicate our needs, and mathematics so that we can measure and build and locate what we need.

Montessori asks that the Elementary teacher emphasize the ways in which all human beings, from the beginning, are more like us than different: for instance, even the early humans had minds that could think, visualize, and abstract; they had hands with opposable thumbs, so that they could make tools and useful objects that they had envisioned with their minds; and they had

the ability to love others with compassion, making them stay together in social groups to protect their offspring and survive in threatening conditions. Humans were vulnerable because unlike animals, they did not have the fur, fangs, claws or fast legs to help them survive. They were not driven by instincts that decided for them how to live. But with the three gifts of mind, hands and heart, they adapted and flourished as a species. The children conclude that we have these same gifts today, which we use to care for ourselves, our environments, and others. We build homes in the hot, dry deserts of Africa, the icy tundra of northern Alaska, in prairies, on mountains, and in jungles. We are all born with the same potential to figure out how to work with our various surroundings to survive. Because our surroundings and supplies differ, our houses, clothing, customs, foods, and languages differ, but we still have core fundamentals in common.

Developing gratitude and respect for all peoples and what they offer is a constant theme: "Let us in education call the attention of the children to the hosts of men and women who are hidden from the light of fame, so kindling a love of humanity: not the vague and anemic sentiment preached today as brotherhood, nor the political sentiment that the working classes should be redeemed and uplifted. What is first wanted is no patronizing charity for humanity, but a reverent consciousness of its dignity and worth." (Montessori, p. 26)

Montessori saw that Elementary-aged children have an undeniable, relentless desire to be with others. She therefore designed the Elementary work to be pursued in groups, giving the children constant opportunity to learn through communal experience and develop their cooperative abilities. Through their experiences, each child creates his or her own moral map by unconsciously "wearing different hats:" discovering for himself or herself what it is like to be the liar, the thief, the peacemaker, the mean one, the victim, the cheater, the truth-teller or the loyal one. Every child seems to need to try out the good, the bad and the ugly, and thus form a personal moral compass. The adults, while modeling, also help the children to talk out their feelings and relate to each other. They steer the children towards empathy and appreciation of differences, and give them security with their supportive and guiding presence.

As with other Montessori adolescent programs, Forest Bluff School's twelve to fourteen year olds leave the school for long trips, offering their service to others out in the world through visible acts. The students build wooden structures for other organizations and remove invasive plants from oak savannas. They cook

together and sleep in tents outside, in peaceful natural surroundings and working together to fulfill all their needs. Each evening, they conclude the workday with laughter and stories, and share their feelings and thoughts. There is often discussion of wanting to improve and deciding how to better support each other in the coming work day.

When I hear stories about our graduates, the word that continues to come up is brave. As high school students, Montessori graduates are known to successfully try out for sports teams, choose challenging academic courses, and approach strangers to forge friendships, all with brave hearts. These are not young people who have been raised with flowery notions of idyllic communications, who see themselves as fragile, or the world as unfair and evil to be fought against. Rather, theirs is a realistic world, one filled with challenges, beauty and also hardship. They were raised with reality. They know, "when I was two and I dropped a glass, it broke into sharp pieces. I did not stand to the side helplessly and watch with shame while an adult swept it up – I went over to the broom I was learning how to use, and cleaned it up myself or with the help of a friend or adult. Any feelings of shame or guilt were replaced with a sense of purpose, satisfaction and an internal focus on how to do better next time. I got lots of practice with mistakes and built inner-resilience in my Montessori classrooms."

Our Montessori graduates know, "When I was seven and my friends wanted me to gang up on a classmate, I had a bad feeling in the pit of my stomach when I saw that other child start to cry. One person encouraged the others to change the game and it became more fun when we all joined together. I experienced some ugly feelings of envy or hatred, and I felt hurt at times. These experiences widened my capacity to empathize with others, whether good or bad. I learned that I must first empathize in order to persuade. I got tons of practice in working with people."



Courtesy of Forest Bluff School

Montessori education gives children the ability to positively affect others with the respect that they build inside themselves – respect for others, for themselves, and for the natural environment. They construct their individual skills for cooperating with others, communicating clearly, for self-control, autonomy, perseverance, resilience, and finally, compassion and a sincere appreciation for others. These attributes form the necessary foundation to be a peaceful person. This is why Montessori called hers an “Education for Peace.” She recognized that the ways we support our children to form themselves will bring peace. Montessori said, “These children then will have grasped the banner of freedom, which is the banner of peace, and which is power and the promise of the future.” (The 1913 Rome Lectures, p.14)

I can't help but wonder how differently presidential candidates might debate, or how differently our leaders and citizens might express themselves and connect with each other, if they had the opportunity as children to develop themselves through Montessori educations. Would we all be better prepared to communicate our thoughts and work together in our efforts? How much more effective would our individual contributions be? I invite you to picture this. Through our children, I believe it will happen!



Paula Lillard Preschlack is certified by the Association Montessori Internationale (AMI) at the Assistant to Infancy, Primary and Elementary Levels. She has taught and served as Head of School for a collective twenty years at Forest Bluff School in Lake Bluff, Illinois. Paula gives presentations about Montessori to parents and educators around the country. She is the mother of two Montessori adolescents. Please see her blog about parenting at home with a Montessori approach at forestbluffschool.org/blog.