

MONTESSORI AND STRUGGLE

by Paula Polk Lillard

Paula Lillard believes one of the key approaches in these hard times has to be reaching out to existing parents. In this parent talk, she speaks of struggle over the generations, pointing up the value and importance of change itself and the positive impact of less affluence. A heightened sense of purpose and community can emerge from need. The resulting universal projection of optimism in times of trouble incorporates Montessori principles as a means of transcending time, culture, and place in defining one's identity and ability to think for oneself.

The warning clouds began gathering as early as the winter of 2008. The economic storm began breaking in earnest the following fall. It is now clear that for the time being, as Montessori parents and teachers, we are going to live for some time in a period of financial uncertainty and challenge. How are we going to respond to the struggles ahead, and more importantly for the future of our world, how do we help our children and youth to adjust to the changes of these turbulent times in their young lives?

In response, I ask you to consider three points, and to think of them in relation to Montessori's stated goal for education, the "formation of the complete human being, adapted to his or her time, place and culture" (cited in Lillard 3). At our school, we refer to this purpose as one of so building the human spirit and intellect within each of us that we are equipped to deal with reality. Reality means periods of struggle, rapid change, and hardship, as we are experiencing now, as well as periods of relative calm, consolidation, and comfort, as we have lived through in the recent past. To lead a full life of service and contribution, we need to be prepared for both.

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LIFE IS CHANGE

My first point is that life is change. We all know this, yet there is a human tendency to see life as keeping on going forever in the present direction. This false perception leads us to folly, excess, and even “irrational exuberance” in good times, and despair, discouragement, and depression in hard times. As a personal example, my husband and I were born in the Great Depression. It is quite possible we may die in another depression. Yet there was a great deal of living in between. There were the usual personal hardships and disappointments that no one escapes in life. Globally, there were wars: World War II, the Cold War, the Korean War, and Vietnam. There were the economic challenges of the early 1970s, rampant inflation into the early 1980s, and the technological bubble of the early 2000s. Overall, however, our lives have been full of God’s bounty and blessings with these last years the best of all.

We are living, after all, in a world where everything around us is in continual motion: the leaves on the trees that bud, mature into fall colors, die and crumble to the ground, the ocean waves with their ceaseless roll onto the beach and back again, the winds that drive

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flocks of clouds over the azure sky. Perhaps this is why nature is so healing for all of us. It reminds us that we live in a world where nothing is permanent. Creation is founded in possibility and relationship, and all of life is based on constant change.

What is more, there is a silver lining in our present hardship. It is difficult to raise children well in periods of ease and affluence. I have watched with growing concern over the last twenty years as increasingly the tools, privileges, and freedoms of adults are given to children. Just as one example, when I was a child, the beauty parlor was for mothers, not children. My mother cut my hair and brushed it into curls around her finger before school each day. She caught them in a rubber band left over from the daily newspaper and tied a fabric ribbon through its loop, guaranteeing that the rib-

bon would still be there for ironing and reuse the next day. When I was old enough, she showed me how to clean my own nails with a brush, then file, rub nail cream on, and polish them with a buffer. She made all my clothes for me, teaching me how to sew in the process. Thus she gave a great gift to me of self-reliance.

Raising children in affluence gives us the possibility, even encourages us, to give them too much choice in their young lives. Children get the impression that this is a “free choice world” in which they do not have to earn things with truly hard work. Because there is sometimes confusion about Montessori’s emphasis on choice for children, it is helpful in this period of economic change to put her discussion of it in historical context. Montessori lived before the time of effective birth control. Families of five or more children were therefore common. With such numbers, choice in the household tended to take care of itself: what to eat, how to dress, whether to help with chores, what and whom to play with. It was not that the children were to have what they wanted to make them happy, whether at home or school, that Montessori was advocating when she discussed choice for children. When she advocated choice for children, Montessori was presenting a radical idea primarily for their schooling. She insisted that in order for meaningful learning to occur children needed to follow their interests in the classroom. Therefore they would have to have a choice of materials and activities there.

Neurological studies of brain formation now bear out Montessori’s pioneering observation concerning the importance of choice in children’s education. In order for depth of learning to occur, human beings need to be motivated and emotionally engaged. Montessori made this observation that so many before her, and even today, miss because she was extraordinarily compassionate and intuitive about the state of childhood. Although she herself was a brilliant student, she noticed that many children did not learn and memorize easily. For some, their neural speed seemed slower. For others, it was difficult to integrate their thoughts and to develop them into abstractions. In spite of these difficulties, however, these children appeared highly intelligent. Needless to say, the regular approach to learning, with its emphasis on drill and dictation of pre-digested material, developed in these children no enjoyment in the learning

process itself. As a result, their self-formation and appreciation of the strengths that they did possess were actually hindered, rather than helped, by their schooling. Thus it was that Montessori went on to develop an approach to learning based on interest and choice, initial presentation of concrete materials and information, with follow-up individual and group work and a time span for mastery that allowed each individual to come to abstract thought on his or her own timetable.

THE PARENTS' ROLE

My next point involves our role as mothers and fathers in a period of crisis and hardship. We, of course, are the ones responsible for creating the spirit within our homes. I want to suggest to you the family spiritual life needed for children to thrive by a story from my own childhood.

When the Great Depression hit, my father was responsible for a wife and two small children, as well as the families of thirty employees of a small machine tool shop in Dayton, Ohio. All orders had simply evaporated. He was only twenty-six years old and he must have been scared to death. Yet my strongest memory of my dad then, and throughout my childhood, was of his coming briskly down the hallway at six o'clock each morning to awaken my brother and me. He was singing with gusto a favorite hymn that began with the words, "Awake for the dawn is breaking." He was off and out the driveway then to his beloved factory. As the war years came, and he and his men and women together met the challenges of war production, he was so proud of that factory and what was being accomplished there. He would take my brother and me there on Sunday mornings and show us the giant machines that were giving thousandths of an inch in measurement to industry for the first time in human history.

My mother, too, must have been frightened with two small children, a world war raging, and her only brother, aged nineteen, serving in Europe as a bombardier in the air force. Yet my earliest memories were of her in the garden, working hard and happily, producing the vegetables for our dinner and flowers for the house, or in the house scrubbing and cleaning, which in those days involved brooms and carpet sweepers and lots of elbow grease. I remember a spirit of determination and optimism about her and an appreciation

for the beauty in her surroundings. She never allowed any sense of unhappiness or anxiety about life to invade our home.

Thus our home met the two strongest needs of children in order for them to focus on their own self-formation: to feel safe and to see the world as a good place to grow up in. The world is a good place, of course, in spite of its ups and downs. Human beings are fundamentally courageous, creative, and collaborative, or we would not be here. Montessori children learn in their elementary years, through the Great Lessons (an approach to history that Montessori called Cosmic Education), that human beings survived from their earliest years by their ingenuity and support for each other. They hunted and gathered together by day, inventing better and better means for doing so, and they huddled together at night for safety and comfort.

There is a modern perception, fostered too often by the media and instant technology, that the world is dominated by politics and self-interest. All investors are rapacious and interested only in their own gain at the expense of others, for example. Yet

I knew we would have to meet two goals. We would have to keep costs as low as consistent with the children's best education, and we would have to save money in the "years of fat" for the inevitable rainy day in the future. We promise our parents that, in the future as in the past, we will remain faithful to our core mission: "to keep it simple," for the needs of children in formation are indeed simple, direct, logical, and economically possible.

the investors that I know are actually similar to Warren Buffet in their approach to their work: fascinated with helping businesses to grow and finding joy in bringing the personal dreams of others to fruition. In a *Wall Street Journal* editorial, Peggy Noonan comments on the heroic response of Wall Street to the attacks of 9/11 and the service that business people give to this country on a daily basis. She quotes from a book by Michael Novak, a Catholic theologian, titled *Business as a Calling*, which I highly recommend to all parents, teachers, and those who influence our young.

We need to counteract the human tendency in a crisis to demonize our leaders, whether in government, business, or finance. There

are bad actors in these areas of life, of course. They seek power and are filled with greed and corruption. They are guilty of poor judgment and lack wisdom. Government leaders pushed the CEOs of Freddie Mac and Fannie Mae to make loans they should not have. Opportunists and swindlers like Bernie Madoff robbed thousands of their savings. But there are also fine young leaders in every area of life. To solve our problems, we have to free up human energy. This is a goal that Montessori education is uniquely designed to do, and a topic that I will return to at the end of this article.

THE ROLE OF THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY

We have discussed now life as change and our role as parents in helping our children to deal with that change, particularly when it involves hardship. For my last point, I want to describe the role of community in times of dramatic change. When we began our school, our goal was to form a community of adults—parents and teachers—in support of children’s self-formation. Patience is required as the base of any such community. This is true because it is human to strive for perfection. Yet, as human beings, we are fated to fall constantly short of any such idealized goal. This is the reality of our life on earth. Therefore, to succeed as a community, we have to approach our children, ourselves, and others with forgiveness and humility, which is another way of saying with openness and a willingness to learn.

Furthermore, we have to trust each other. As parents, you have to trust that we are setting wise guidelines for your children, based on our deepening study and understanding of their self-formation in childhood and young adulthood. As teachers, we have to trust you to follow those guidelines to the best of your ability as parents. This is hard. It is hard because the guidelines that our school establishes, as a Montessori school, are based on life as it is, not our fantasies of what we would like it to be. I remember vividly in 1982, as we were founding Forest Bluff, that I told my husband we were going to tell parents that their children should not watch any television. “Well, no one will come to your school,” he said. “Parents need those Saturday morning cartoons!” I knew that he could well be right. At the same time, I also was convinced that if we wanted to build a great school, one that truly served the best self-formation of children and was built to last, we would have to take this risk.

In the intervening years, we have added other prohibitions for the sake of the children, such as limiting use of computers and mobile phones. We would not think of letting even a twelve- to fourteen-year-old drive our car out the driveway. Yet parents routinely in our society today allow access to the Internet, mobile phones, and unsupervised computer use to children. These tools are an extraordinary boon to the adult world. Children, however, have one essential mission in their early years: They must form their own selves, their own brains, intellect, and character. They are hampered in this vital mission of self-formation when they are distracted with the latest technology of the adult world. High school teachers, for example, tell us that today their students continually text each other in class and out. The respect for others necessary for contributing in class, and the lessons to be learned in face-to-face social interaction with teachers and peers, are too often missing.

In addition to patience and trust, there is one final aspect of the community we have created together that I want to mention. It is a factor that is always important in any human enterprise, but it is particularly significant in today's period of economic struggle. I refer to the financial challenge of creating an institution "built to last." When envisioning Forest Bluff School in 1982, we were determined to make it as affordable as possible in good times and in bad, and to treat our parents' money as if it were our own. Partly, my personal determination to do so came from watching my husband work so hard to pay four children's tuitions to private schools in the 1950s and 1960s, a time when private education cost a fraction of what it does now. Partly, it came from growing up during the Depression and the deprivation of World War II, and partly it was the result of the Old Testament Bible stories read nightly to me as a child by my mother. She was a beautiful woman, and her voice was lyrical and dramatic. I took to heart every word, and so the "seven years of fat" and the "seven years of lean" became a part of how I viewed financial reality.

From the beginning, then, I knew we would have to meet two goals. We would have to keep costs as low as consistent with the children's best education, and we would have to save money in the "years of fat" for the inevitable rainy day in the future. We would not

grow an expensive bureaucracy but administer the school ourselves, following the British tradition of a “teaching head” as the school’s chief operating officer. We would pay off mortgage debt as our first priority and then build a permanent endowment that allowed only a low percentage draw. We promise our parents that, in the future as in the past, we will remain faithful to our core mission: “to keep it simple,” for the needs of children in formation are indeed simple, direct, logical, and economically possible.

I mentioned that we would discuss how Montessori frees up human energy to solve the challenges of the world through the education of children. Indeed, Montessori called children the “Hope of the World” and “both a hope and a promise for humanity.”

It is this ability to treat others with dignity, whether they choose the professions, politics, government service, philanthropy, business, or finance as their calling, that sets Montessori graduates apart from so many of their peers.

To fill the human destiny of childhood, this woman of world wars, revolutions, economic depressions, a refugee almost her entire adult life in different countries and continents, created an “Education for Peace.” She did it by focusing on the child’s self-formation: a formation of human spirit and intellect for an encounter with the real world. Every aspect of the Montessori classroom is built on the civility and respect necessary for civilized human community. For the little ones, there is only one of each material and its care is emphasized repeatedly. Each material leads to further independence and mastery of the real world. Lessons of grace and courtesy help the children to be continually conscious of themselves, of others, and of their environment. Older children learn together in small, largely self-formed groups to collaborate in their studies and interests, to create oral and written reports as a team to share with others, and always in their exploration and discovery to look for the moral consequences of their actions and the responsibility to others that their freedom requires of them. As important as any other aspect, the story of humanity is presented in an optimistic light with gratitude for the gifts and sacrifices of all who have come before us that make our present lives possible. It is indeed an education to change the world.

Montessori children do grow up with a great desire to change the world. If you want to see a group of such students gathered from all over the world, go to Montessori High School at University Circle in Cleveland, Ohio, and witness their ambitions and plans for yourself. Or trace the careers of graduates from a Montessori adolescent program after they have finished college, and see the diversity of paths they have chosen to make a difference in the world. Yet it is not so much that they are trying to make the world a better place that impresses; it is how they are doing it. For uniformly, they are doing it not by stepping on others, or stifling their potential, or demeaning others by treating them like inadequate children as, unfortunately, international aid programs the world over so often do.

Rather, they do it by extending a helping hand to enable others to help themselves. I am reminded of Montessori's quote from a young child at the beginning of her work with children in the early 1900s: "Help me to help myself." It is this ability to treat others with dignity, whether they choose the professions, politics, government service, philanthropy, business, or finance as their calling, that sets Montessori graduates apart from so many of their peers. They are simply reflecting the dignity with which they themselves were treated from their first days in the Montessori young children's community, when they were eighteen months old, through their young adolescent years of ages twelve to fifteen, and now, for some students, even their high school years of ages fifteen to eighteen.

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