

THE SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE ADULT

As my understanding of human development deepens,
I see how essential it is that I withdraw
in order for the Child's potential to express itself
and for a new human being to appear.
How I can achieve this 'disappearing act',
is what I have chosen to focus on, in this paper.

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Based on a paper prepared for the
26th International AMI Montessori Congress
Chennai, India, January 5-8, 2009
Reworked in Athens, where the temperature is rising,
debts are mounting and spirits are flagging.
June 2010

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Introduction

“When I am with children I am a nobody and the greatest privilege I have when I approach them is being able to forget that I even exist...”
(*Montessori 1949/1992, Pg. 87*)

To make such a statement about herself in 1949, when already a scientist and educationalist of world renown, Dr. Montessori reminds us how we should be when in the presence of children: to be a nobody and to forget our existence. Dr. Montessori is asking of adults (parents as well as teachers) to elevate themselves to a higher level of being – a tendency we all have but which we must be sure to activate, in order to serve the Child.

“All have a tendency however vague and unconscious, to raise themselves up; they aspire to something spiritual ... both the individual and society have this in common: a continuous tendency to progress ... there is a tiny light in the unconscious of mankind, which guides it toward better things.”
(*Montessori 1949/1988, Pg. 191*)

This implies that we turn our gaze inwards to focus on the person we are and see whether we have the qualities, which will allow for the transformation of the children in our care. We begin “by looking for [our] own bad tendencies and defects” (*Montessori 1922/1965, Pg. 46*) and do all we can to rid ourselves of these and awaken the finer qualities of love, patience and compassion. Our spiritual preparation therefore begins with observation - we learn to observe ourselves.

“Of vital importance...is the way in which we regard a child... an instructor must be prepared inwardly and must consider his own character methodically with a view to discovering any defects within himself, which might prove obstacles in his treatment of the child. To discover defects that are already rooted in the conscience, some help will be required, some instruction e.g. if we want to know what is at the back of our eye, we must get somebody else to look and tell us. In this sense the teacher must be initiated into her inward preparation...”
(*Montessori 1922/1965, Pg. 45*)

This kind of spiritual preparation needs guidance. It is an arduous but necessary journey, which Montessori considered to be far more important than the technical preparation that most teachers receive in Training Colleges. This does not mean that we negate the significance of a technical training (*Montessori, 1998 Vol.2, Pg. 103-5*). On the contrary, whilst cultivating the patience, humility and love of a Saint, Dr. Montessori confirms the importance of also developing the rational mind and sharp eye of a Scientist!

“The vision of the teacher should be... precise like that of the scientist and spiritual like that of the saint. The preparation for science and the preparation for sanctity should form a new study for the attitude of the teacher which should be at once positive, scientific and spiritual.”
(*Montessori 1917, Vol. 1, Pg. 137-8*)

If education is to enable the developing child to create his personality and become an individual through his own efforts, then the adult who is there to guide him must inevitably “cease to existso that the child may enter the void and fill it.” (*Montessori 1949/1992, Pg. 87*) Scientist and Saint join forces in the Montessori teacher. The Scientist, performs exact tasks and detailed observations to reveal the truth and discard preconceived ideas and illusions whilst the Saint, cultivates in himself love and patience, so that the teacher will “cease to exist” and create the void, into which the child will step and grow.

Although Scientist and Saint may appear to be diametrically opposed, they in fact form a perfect marriage. Bertrand Russell, reiterated this coupling several years later in his book *On Education - Especially in Early Childhood*:

“There is only one road to progress, in education as in other human affairs and that is Science wielded by love. Without science, love is powerless; without love, science is destructive. All that has been done to improve the education of little children has been done by those who loved them; all has been done by those who knew all that science could teach on the subject.”
(*Russell, 1926/1957, Pg. 185*)

Both Scientist and Saint are driven by love, the ability to observe and the need for silence.

- **Love** is the main attribute of a Saint, and it is what lies behind the passion with which a Scientist applies himself to his work.
- **Observation** lies at the heart of both Scientist and Saint. Whereas the Scientist steadfastly observes the objects that lie outside himself, the Saint observes with the same intensity that which lies within himself.
- **Silence** is a prerequisite for both, since neither Saint nor Scientist can exist without that inner stillness which brings about understanding, allows for observation and enables love to grow.

Love, observation and silence, are 3 qualities, which serve to elevate the consciousness of Man and perfect our humanity. If the adult does not make a conscious effort to turn his attention inwards in order to shift his consciousness and acquire a new understanding, then we shall continue to place obstacles in the path of development preventing the young of our species from realizing their full potential.

Help and instruction of some kind are required for our inward preparation. Although Dr. Montessori does not claim to provide this kind of instruction to adults, her writings certainly provide clear indicators as to the direction this journey should take. It is a direction common to many spiritual practices where love, observation and silence pave the way to spiritual development. In this paper, therefore, I will focus on these three attributes and see how they can serve to elevate our understanding of ourself and others.

What is Spiritual Development?

In the first years of development, the child's attention is drawn outwards. This should not surprise us, since the individual is born with a potential - physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual - that can only be realized in a human setting. All his efforts therefore go into interacting with the people and objects in his environment. By experiencing himself in relation to the outer world, the infant becomes conscious of himself. It is in this way he gathers the knowledge necessary in order to adapt to his world so that his physical, intellectual and emotional development may take place.

An adult however, may choose to turn his attention inwards and to focus on the Self - the inner Self that lies beyond mind, beyond emotions and feelings, beyond the narrow confines of personal identity. Here we become aware of a different reality, one that does not have to do with the physical world. It is a reality governed by a different logic, with different laws, giving rise to a different consciousness. This 'higher' consciousness brings with it a certain kind of knowledge, which enables us to acquire a new understanding of our relationship to ourselves, to others and to our environment. This new understanding, is 'spiritual development' and with it comes purification (of our thoughts), illumination (to see the Truth) and perfection (of our being). It is thus that we come to learn "the art of arts and the science of sciences..."

"... a learning which is not a matter of information or agility of mind but of a radical change of will and heart leading man towards the highest possibilities open to him, shaping and nourishing the unseen part of his being and helping him to spiritual fulfillment and union with God."
(The Philokalia, Pg. 13)

For development of any kind to occur, the existence of an Ego is an essential prerequisite. It is the foundation from which our potentials develop. It provides us with a sense of belonging, an awareness of an independent existence and a sensitivity to the emotions and feelings of self and others. It is that which ultimately activates the Will so that in fact it becomes our *choice* whether we turn our attention inwards or outwards!

Becoming a nobody as Dr. Montessori suggests, by tempering our personalities and retreating to the periphery, requires strong, individuals prepared to embark on a rigorous journey of self discovery and self awareness. Surprisingly, our greatest enemy in this process is our own Ego - that Ego which was copiously built in the first stage of development and into which we

incorporated experiences we were exposed to during our formative years. Yes, that Ego, which we worked so hard to build in order to become a Person - the Ego we strengthened and consolidated during our childhood, which formed the foundation for our social identity during our adolescence and which continues to expand during our maturity. Yes! That Ego becomes an obstacle to further development! It is as if it has served its purpose. We now need to tone it down or better still, let it dissolve, so that the true Self may reveal itself.

Obstacles to Spiritual Development

Dr. Montessori is very graphic in the way she describes the attributes an adult should or should not have. In fact some of us, find her words out dated, Victorian and politically incorrect, so we choose instead to skip those passages, expressing derision at what she has to say. The fact is, that Dr. Montessori calls a spade a spade and this is necessary, if we wish to come face to face with what we are so adept at hiding from ourselves and from others.

Dr. Montessori reminds us of all the bad tendencies and defects that take root, deep within our conscience “like weeds in a meadow.” We have many defects, but she believes anger and pride are the worst of all. We need to consider these methodically Dr. Montessori suggests, since they “might prove obstacles in the treatment of the child” (*Montessori, 1922/1965 Pg. 45-50*). They are in fact the biggest obstacles in the path of spiritual development. They inflate our Ego giving it airs and graces, far above its station, preventing us from communicating and understanding others. Many will deny having such emotions, for they erroneously believe to be free of such base feelings. And yet one has only to scratch a little below the surface and they jump out at us, ready to snap at whoever provokes them!

St. John Cassian, a Roman theologian writing in the 4th century AD, claimed that so long as **anger** dwells in the heart of men, then “we can neither discriminate what is for our good, nor achieve spiritual knowledge, nor fulfill our good intentions, nor participate in true life....and our soul cannot become the temple of the Holy Spirit” (*The Philokalia, Pg.83*). In other words, if we are full of wrath, there is no space for pure thoughts, good thoughts, thoughts, which encourage life and support growth. If our meadow is full of weeds, there is no room to plant seeds, which will nourish.

So, what do we do? Different spiritual practices suggest different things. However, in all instances, it is important we acquire an awareness of how and when our anger is triggered. This in itself, is a difficult exercise, requiring patience, stillness and observational skills!

Eastern mysticism tells us that when we have a desire and it is thwarted, we turn angry, for it is the energy of desire that turns into anger. I want something. When I do not get it, I get angry. If things don't happen, as I want them to, if I am spoken to in a way I do not wish to be spoken to, I get angry. It follows therefore that if I have no desires, my anger subsides. According to Indian philosophy, attachment of any kind (ideas, objects, people) lies at the

root of our anger. This connection between desire and anger is expressed very clearly in the Hindu text of *The Bhagavad-Gita*.

“62. Let a man but think of the objects of sense - attachment to them is born: from attachment springs desire, from desire is anger born.

63. From anger comes bewilderment [*inability to distinguish right from wrong*], from bewilderment wandering of the mind, from wandering of the mind destruction of the soul [*destruction of both the intellect and will and their dissipation - what we would now call a nervous breakdown*]: once the soul is destroyed the man is lost.”
(*The Bhagavad-Gita*)

The early fathers of the Church, suggest that instead of trying hard to hold our tongue when we are irate, it would be far better were we to try and purify our heart from rancour and hold no angry thoughts against our fellow man. How many of us “not only maintain [our] anger until the setting of this day’s sun, but prolong it for many days” unable to rid ourselves of the thoughts that keep this anger alive, overpowering and overriding any other sentiment that might arise?

How many times do we choose “not to express [our] anger, but keep silent and increase the poison of [our] rancour to [our] own destruction” - believing that it is preferable to withdraw into solitude rather than express our anger openly? (*The Philokalia, Pg.84*)

“Our passions grow fiercer when left idle through lack of contact with other people. ... Poisonous creatures that live quietly in their lairs in the desert display their fury only when they detect someone approaching; and likewise passion-filled men, who live quietly not because of their virtuous disposition but because of their solitude, spit forth their venom whenever someone approaches and provokes them.”
(*The Philokalia, Pg.85*)

The anger we keep within us festers and grows. It can become so strong, that we can express it even to inanimate objects! St. John Cassian describes what happened to him:

“I can remember how, when I lived in the desert, I became angry with the rushes because they were either too thick or too thin; with a piece of wood, when I wished to cut it quickly and could not; or with a flint, when I was in a hurry to light a fire and the spark would not come. So all-embracing was my anger that it was aroused even against inanimate objects.”
(*The Philokalia, Pg.85*)

Even in our urban settings, we are familiar with such feelings - anger at a traffic light for turning red, at a train for running late, at a heel that breaks! “The final cure” St. John Cassian says, “for this sickness is to realize that we must not become angry for any reason whatsoever, whether just or unjust” (*The Philokalia*, Pg.86). We must shed all types of anger, for there is no such thing as ‘justifiable or reasonable anger’. Anger whether expressed in malicious thoughts, hateful words, or cruel actions - no matter what provokes it - blinds us and “obstructs our spiritual vision” (*The Philokalia* Pg. 83). If we seek to pursue the path toward perfection, then we must rid ourselves “of all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamour, evil speaking and all malice” (*St. Paul Eph. 4:3*). We need to remain in community with others and within this communion we can practice acceptance, forgiveness and reconciliation. This is what helps clear the heart and mind of anger and lead us to a state of pure thoughts.

Schools of Psychology claim that anger is the result of unexpressed feelings. The Adlerian school for instance, believe that anger is an intensified moment, at which an individual arrives, in order “to bring about a change of the situation in favor of the individual” who gets angry. In other words, when all else fails, we turn to anger or other types of aggressive behaviour, in order to assert ourselves. This often indicates not only poor linguistic skills, but also a lack of confidence, a feeling of inferiority:

“... One aspect of the emotion [of anger] is a feeling of inferiority or inadequacy which forces its bearer to pull together all his strength and to carry out greater movements than usual.”
(*Ansbacher & Ansbacher*)

What is this feeling of inferiority? How can I change it? What gave rise to it? Were we to build the confidence of an individual and encourage a more positive image of Self through action and words, would this anger then subside?

Three different interpretations ... and yet perhaps not so different, for one complements the other! Each interpretation has something to say which touches our reality. In all instances anger is considered a destructive force, an indication of an imbalance preventing us from realizing our full potential. ‘Being blind with anger’ (as we say) means that we no longer see the truth. Anger forces us into isolation and prevents us from being in true communion with others. We become obsessed with our own anger, keeping it alive, stoking the fire that feeds it. So all our attention is turned inwards, and our only point of reference is our angry self, so

whatever we see is coloured by suspicion, malice and distrust. We ask the question, how does this relate to me? How can an angry adult therefore, serve the needs of others?

“... anger is mixed up with another moral disorder which appears less ignoble and is therefore the more diabolical: pride.”
(Montessori, 1965 Pg. 46)

The second great obstacle to personal development is **pride**. It might seem strange that pride should be seen as an obstacle, when the word is used so often to raise self esteem and provide a positive self image (e.g. Gay Pride, Black Pride etc.) In fact ‘pride’ *can* be seen as something positive: it is the satisfaction and pleasure we feel when we have accomplished something and have met the goals we set ourselves. However, the question is one of degree. For when an individual expresses an excessive pride in all he says and does, in his body language and attitude, then it becomes an indication of low self esteem, a clear expression of protection of self from others. Psychologists, state clearly that if pride emerges it is usually a false front designed to protect an undervalued self.

For those in the caring professions the question of pride must be tackled, for our pride often becomes confused with the love we believe we are giving and the good we believe we are doing. We need to examine our motivations. We need to stop and think to what extent we are wrapped up in the identity we are projecting through the work we do? Are we really ‘givers’ and ‘carers,’ or are we vulnerable ‘victims’ of our own circumstances? Are we driven by love or by a need to exercise power and authority? Many people give of themselves in order to receive something, be it power, the neediness or usually the love of others. To what extent do we need these things in order to confirm who we are, to boost our Ego, to inflate our self esteem giving us this false sense of pride, that we have achieved and accomplished something by giving?

“Through pride we are ever deceiving ourselves. But deep down below the surface of the average conscience, a still small voice says to us that something is out of tune.”
(Jung, 1963/83)

These are difficult questions, which are not to be answered with a simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’. We need to consider these issues not in general, but in relation to ourselves. If we are to give selflessly to those we serve, then we must overcome the needs of our wounded psyche and learn to give not through pride, where we expect something bigger in return, but through love,

which has no worldly desire attached to it and is therefore truly selfless.

It comes as no surprise therefore that in Christian theology pride is considered the worst ‘demon’ of all! Whereas other vices prevent us from developing specific virtues (e.g. greed weakens self control, anger prevents the emergence of gentleness etc.), “the passion of pride darkens the soul completely and leads to its utter downfall” (*The Philokalia, Pg. 92*). St. John Cassian compares pride to a deadly plague, which does not just attack one member of the body, but the entire body. Pride, it seems “attacks the perfect above all and seeks to destroy those who have mounted almost to the heights of holiness” (*The Philokalia, Pg. 92*). For it is when we have arrived at the top, when we have achieved, when we are being acclaimed by others, that we soon forget all those hands that have helped us along the way - we believe we are self made and infallible.

So once again, what to do? How do we protect ourselves from this negative attribute, which like anger blinds us from the need of others and keeps us isolated in the company of our own conceit. Dr. Montessori gives a straightforward answer. She says we need to eradicate “the ancient mixture of pride and anger with which (our) heart is unconsciously encrusted” (*Montessori, 1922/1965 Pg. 45-50*) and “instead of the proud dignity of one who claims to be infallible,” to assume “the vestment of **humility**” (*Montessori, 1917 Pg. 105*).

This new concept that Dr. Montessori introduces – the concept of humility – is again a difficult one and merits a lot of study and thought! Broadly speaking, there are two kinds of humility. One, is the servile attitude of an adult trying hard to be self effacing, whilst subjugating his own Will and denying himself certain things, in order to be ‘righteous’. Then there is a humility, which comes naturally when one has acquired a perspective of creation and has placed oneself within it, so that everything and everyone assume their right dimensions and proportion. The role that all have to play becomes clear and your specific role becomes apparent. An awareness of one’s place in this cosmic order, inevitably gives birth to a humility which is gracious, which opens the individual outwards, becoming both receptive and sensitive to the needs of others. No sooner is this acknowledged and practiced, that a natural joy bursts forth!

By “learn[ing] to humble ourselves” (*Montessori, 1938/1972, Pg. 153*) we then become free to love from the heart, with a love that is unencumbered from conditions, prejudices, fears and

threats. With humility come love (charity), patience and tranquility. These qualities will automatically reveal themselves not just in our movements, thoughts, or words but in everything we do - we will in fact *be* these things! So that when Dr. Montessori asks that the adult be “attractive, pleasing in appearance, tidy and clean, calm and dignified” with movements, both “gentle and graceful” (*Montessori 1949/1988, Pg.252*) these will in fact emerge effortlessly, as the natural attributes of a superior personality. Instead of teaching, we will observe. Instead of “facility in speech,” we will acquire “the power of silence” (*Montessori, 1912/1988, Pg.151-3*). All will come, as soon as we stop walking on the path of the ‘fallen angel’ (pride and arrogance were the cause of his downfall!) and return to the path of the ‘guardian angel’ who propelled by love, protects and guides Man.

The Adult – a new way of being

When I started working with children, I found myself working with families. Time and time again, I came face to face with the question of the spiritual development of the adult. In fact, I remain grateful to those families, who gave me countless opportunities to reassess all those attributes within myself - good and bad - which I had so arrogantly dismissed. When working with adults, my starting point has always been the Child ...and yet more often than not, we talk about the Adult. I state I am neither psychologist nor counselor, just a nursery teacher with Montessori training but this, strangely enough encourages the discussion even further!

I have listened to housewives, businessmen, seamstresses, artists, accountants, dancers, lawyers, plumbers, pilots, architects and students, as they each, in their own time, gradually give voice to their anxieties. And I begin to see in those brave hearts, the many wounds received in their own battlegrounds of infancy - wounds, which have unknowingly covered themselves for protection, with the panoply of anger and pride. Gradually this audience turns its attention inwards. Pencils and papers are put aside and people start to listen.

At a certain point it becomes clear that something deep inside us needs to change. This change begins the moment we step back and look at the Person we have become. We begin to face the things that do no good, the things that perhaps we do not like. It passes our mind, that perhaps we should consider changing these things, or at least, step away from them. Once something in us shifts and it need only shift a little, then we begin to see much more clearly and effortlessly that which otherwise we would have to learn. If the strained relationship that is characteristic between adult and child is to disappear, change has to occur. It is the adult who needs to change - it is the Child who instigates it, by serving as a catalyst.

“...it is the children who have made this beautiful staircase that mounts ever higher.” Dr. Montessori writes. “It is clear that nature includes among the missions she has entrusted to the child, the mission of arousing us adults to reach a higher level. The children take us to a higher plane of the spirit and material problems are thereby solved.”
(Montessori, 1965, Pg. 261)

It sounds so easy! An adult can rise to spiritual heights simply by being with children! And yet you will tell me there are many adults who are with children and continue to remain most firmly rooted – nothing has risen and chances are, nothing will ever rise with them! Therefore

we could say, that although with children, we are not in fact with them and although we watch, we do not see.

So if we are to benefit from this ‘beautiful staircase’ the children have made, we need to do something more. We need to be with them in a specific way and train our eyes to see what is there to be seen. By cultivating and maintaining this particular way of being, we enable an inner change to begin.

What is this way of being? Dr. Montessori tells us that we need to keep alive two qualities: our **imagination** and our **faith**.

It is important, whether teachers or parents, regardless of what is going on around us, that we always hold in our imagination an image of what Dr. Montessori calls ‘the normalized child’: A child where the two energies of body and mind are working together harmoniously, resulting in an individual who is of a higher spiritual expression (*Montessori, 1949/1988, Pg.252*).

We need to create a strong image of a child who shows independence and takes initiative, who has a love of work and a surprising love of silence. We must envisage a child who arrives at deep concentration through work that is freely chosen. Who in fact greatly enjoys working on his own and is at the same time capable of cooperating with and helping others, showing kindness, affection and concern for those around him. A child with a striking degree of self-discipline, whose self esteem and confidence, allow him to subjugate his own will to obey the will of another.

Above all we need to see, a child who cares for his environment and is thus firmly grounded in a reality that he loves “with all his heart, with all his mind and with all his hands.” The joy that results from being able to live in such harmony reflects a balanced individual where inner and outer needs become one, and the child is at peace.

Isn’t this how we adults, would also like to be? Isn’t this an image of humanity having reached its fullness? Of a complete human being, living within a sphere of compassion, awareness, love and joy? Let us keep this image alive, let us give it space in our mind’s eye, and allow it to grow, let it expand - for it is a sacred image.

But it is not enough simply to imagine this, we must also believe it. We must have the faith that a normalized child will be, because only then will a normalized adult come into being.

Love

An inexperienced teacher, an anxious, over-protective parent, any well meaning adult, will almost always act on impulse when with a child. As a consequence we are constantly interrupting, interfering, showing, correcting and assisting the child who we believe is 'weak, helpless and needy.' Such actions obey "a sentimental impulse..." couched in 'goodness and love'. Such actions do not aid growth. In order to grow, we need a love that is "...used with discernment". In being with children Dr. Montessori tells us, we "...arrive at a new kind of love, (one) which does not become attached to the individual person..." (*Montessori, 1949/1988 Pg.257-8*). When we are with children, we become privy to the secrets of a life that is unfolding. When such moments occur, it matters not who the child is, or where he comes from. What matters is that the spirit of man be given its freedom. When children show "their real natures, we understand, perhaps for the first time what love really is. And this revelation transforms" (*Montessori, 1949/1988, Pg. 258*).

"It is something" Montessori says, "that touches the heart and little by little it changes people. Once these facts have been seen one cannot cease from writing and talking about them. The names of the children may become forgotten but nothing can cancel the impression their spirits have made and the love they were able to awaken."
(*Montessori, 1949/1988, Pg. 258*).

In working and living with children we are in effect serving the spirit of Man. We are serving the needs of a life unknown, of a life developing. We are not serving the child. This subtle difference has been shown to us by the children themselves who with dignity have repeatedly turned away from our imprisoning embraces, towards purposeful activity.

"The difference of level has truly been set not by the teacher but by the child. It is the teacher who feels she has been lifted to a height she never knew before. The child has made her grow till she is brought within his sphere..."
(*Montessori, 1949/1988, Pg. 258*)

"...(It is) the children, who by their revelations of spirit have profoundly moved their teacher, bringing her to a level of which she had not known the existence, now she is there and she is happy..."
(*Montessori, 1946/1963, Pg. 86*)

It is this inner satisfaction the adult gains, that enables us to feel the value of our work and appreciate what we have accomplished. But what exactly is it that we have accomplished? This needs thought! What we have accomplished is not what the child reveals. We are not the creator of the child. Such is the nature of what we have accomplished, that no sooner is it

accomplished and it disappears! What we have accomplished is to have stepped back and to have allowed a void to appear. No sooner is a void created, that a child steps into it and fills it. Our void, disappears! What moves us is the revelation of the child who by moving into this space, comes unto himself. Being witness to such a revelation, and at the same time recognizing the importance and yet ephemeral quality of our action as teachers, touches our deepest feelings. It is a moment in which we experience in our hearts, the greatness of Man and the insignificance of the individual - love and humility in the face of both!

These are the moments, which serve to elevate us, not as teachers, but as individuals. These are the moments, when the Child becomes our Teacher and pulls us onto a higher level. Such is the power of love that we grow, for “love” Dr. Montessori says, “is the essential fire in man, without which he cannot live” (*Montessori 1949/1992, Pg. 90-1*). It is the driving force, the creative energy that comes not from the intellect but from the heart. And if we could but sustain those moments (when we bear witness to a child’s becoming), then we could begin to observe what it is that happens when we find ourselves in Truth.

Witnessing a child who fills the void, implies a looking that comes from the heart. A heart that is open and waits, that bears no judgement, no criticism, no preconceived ideas or expectations. It is as if the heart begins to see with a love that is naked, so that it sees what is to be seen. If only we could maintain that quality of openness, which allows us to see and love without desiring – if only we could suspend that moment for ever! But how can we love in such a way? It is not so easy and many of us blame our own infancy for having crippled our heart and our ability to love so openly, unashamedly, simply.

Let me tell you a story:

“A group of students visited a Zen master to hear him discuss one of the basic dilemmas of philosophy: Do people have free will or are they victims of their circumstances?”

The master spoke about the dilemma of free will but the students felt they hadn’t received an answer to their question. After the lecture one of the students asked:

“Childhood experiences have a crucial effect on what will become of a person, don’t they?”

The master smiled and nodded his head: “You are right.” Another student asked:

”But isn’t it rather that a person can, irrespective of his past, determine by himself what becomes of himself?” The master kept on smiling and nodding his head:

”You are right.” A third student couldn’t resist the temptation to comment:

”But aren’t you, master, contradicting yourself when you agree with both of them even though they’re opposing each other?” The master thought about this for a while and then said with a friendly smile:

“You are right. You too are right.”

(Furman 1997, Pg. 113 – 4)

“The question of how our childhood affects us ... has troubled Western man since Freud presented his psychoanalytical doctrine at the beginning of the century... Past experiences certainly affect us, but not in any straightforward way.”

(Furman, 1997, Pg. 113 – 4)

Furman gives us an example:

“A human being is not a billiard ball, whose reaction to a collision can be mathematically calculated. A human being is rather like a dog hit on the head by a stick thrown by someone. The dog may leap up at the person who threw the stick, or it may run away, or stay still and whine, or think that the person wants to play with it. Its reaction depends on many factors.”

(Furman, 1997, Pg. 114)

Events in our distant and immediate past do affect us. We cannot change those events, but we can however change how we perceive them.

Observation

Broadly speaking we have learnt to react to our suffering in two ways: either to express it or to suppress it. But we know that this is not a solution. By expressing it, we just place our misery elsewhere and generate a wider field of negativity around us. By suppressing it, we are escaping the issue and keeping the negativity within us. In both instances, although there may be a momentary relief on a conscious level, we are pushing the negativity deep into the unconscious. S.N.Goenka, a renowned Indian teacher of Vipassana Meditation, (a very ancient tradition with its origins in Buddhism) describes this situation:

“On the surface there is a layer of peace and harmony, but in the depths of the mind there is a sleeping volcano of suppressed negativity which sooner or later may erupt in a violent explosion.”
(Goenka, 1980)

There is however, another way of dealing with our suffering. We can observe it. Goenka, explains why observation is a good solution:

“...it avoids both extremes – suppression and expression. Burying the negativity in the unconscious, will not eradicate it and allowing it to manifest as unwholesome physical or vocal actions will only create more problems...As soon as you start to observe a mental impurity (*a problem which generates anger, fear or other negative feelings*) it begins to lose its strength ... (it) begins to wither away... and you are free of it.”
(Goenka, 1980)

The solution therefore is to detach from all that is raging within, to step back and observe the storm as it passes. When we become emotional, the energy of our consciousness is out of control, and our mind becomes agitated. We lose ourselves in thoughts. We generate scenarios, recreate events, re-live situations, thereby constantly feeding the fire that strengthens our fear, our sadness, our suffering. By withdrawing the energy that our emotions need to sustain themselves, our anger fizzles out – it loses its strength. By watching it, our anger dies, otherwise, it becomes our Master.

Our work as Montessori teachers, is based on observation. Our observation skills are created, practiced and strengthened throughout our training. We become skilled and astute observers of children, watching them in their entirety but also in all their detail: the use of their hands, the position of their feet, the alignment of their bodies. We take note of tiny movements which might tell us that a child has been humiliated, wounded, hurt, saddened by something seemingly insignificant to us. We are capable of watching how a child's breathing changes,

how his little chest heaves, how he uses his fingers, his lips, his eyes, to express his anxiety, excitement or great joy.

These skills, we should value! For not only do they make of us good practitioners, but we can use these very same skills for our own spiritual growth and development. We need to turn that same eye inwards and watch with the same intensity the tiny details of our own behaviour. We can begin to study the reactions of our own body when a happy or sad thought enters our mind. When does our breathing quicken? When does our heart beat faster? When do my eyes water? ...and my stomach turn? If I observe myself in this way, in the same detached manner that I observe children, I will gradually come to know my physical reactions to my emotions. I will begin to recognize the beginnings of those feelings.

“It is not always imperative to see big things” Dr. Montessori writes “but it is of paramount importance to see the beginning of things”
(Montessori 1949/1992 Pg. 87)

... and beginnings are seemingly so insignificant! Through my observations however, I will come to recognize the significance of even the smallest of details and I will give value to these little things which are so simple but which we know “provide us with precious truths” *(Montessori 1949/1992 Pg. 87)*. And when confronted with truths I did not expect, I will have the humility to renounce all those “cherished ideas” to which I cling so proudly. I will remain a detached observer, who watches, as things pass.

In order to carry out such observations, be it with children or with oneself, we need to relinquish our Ego and become a ‘nobody’. The trappings of the Ego, are such that they will not allow us to see the truth. In order to diminish the Ego and weaken the ‘I’ that is always in control, patience above all else, is required. We cannot force this change and we cannot push the Ego out.

Silence

We need to work indirectly and that indirect route takes us straight to the heart! We need to place our attention there in order to create a space. We do not know what will happen in that space and that is important, so we allow room for the unexpected, for illusions to vanish, for truth to appear, for things to unfold, develop and reveal themselves. This takes time. The Ego will gradually weaken and the heart will begin to see things as they really are. But as we know, the heart does but whisper! It is the mind that shouts! So how will my heart be heard?

Only when Silence comes do we hear the heart and silence comes when we detach from the outside world. Then we discover that there are many degrees of Silence: the gentle sounds of a clock that ticks, an insect that moves, “the chirp of a sparrow in the garden, the flight of a butterfly” (*Montessori 1914 Pg. 76*). Then, those constant inner sounds of our own heartbeat, our breath, perhaps the sensation of our very being. “The world becomes full of imperceptible sounds which invade that deep silence without disturbing it,” Dr. Montessori says, “just as the stars shine out in the dark sky without banishing the darkness of the night” (*Montessori 1914 Pg. 76*). And then? Then, we arrive at “... an absolute silence, in which nothing, absolutely nothing, moves” (*Montessori 1912/1988 Pg. 130*).

We need to infuse the spirit of Silence into our daily lives for it is the beginning of all transformation and spiritual ascent...arriving at a point of stillness where we begin to serve our spirit. It is Silence which opens the way for compassion, understanding, forgiveness, acceptance, love – the silence of the present moment, that focuses attention on the Self. This silent attention restores, replenishes, strengthens. It heals and makes whole. It sharpens the senses and stills the mind, enabling us to see the truth.

“*Chup Sadhana* is the practice of becoming quiet, both inside and outside. Before one starts to talk there is Silence, and after the words come to an end here is Silence. *Chup Sadhana*, is the practice of also feeling the Silence underlying the words, the Silence that supports sound.”
(*Mansoor*)

In his book *Chup Sadhana, The Yoga of Silence*, Mansoor, reminds us that even before we spoke as children, we knew how to be quiet without making any conscious effort. In this Silence lies Transcendence, Infinity, Timelessness – all are synonyms for Silence and this Silence is present in all – it is “the silent ground upon which all the experiences of life are playing” – “it is that ‘Nothing’ in which all potentialities exist”(*Mansoor*).

In Indian philosophy it is said that between two thoughts there lies a gap. We often fail to see this, because our thoughts are moving so quickly, but if we slow down the movement of the mind, we begin to recognise these gaps and as we give them more attention, they grow and the Silence within us becomes stronger.

“In these gaps, one gets a glimpse of who one really is ... Experientially it is a feeling of coming together, of merging, of becoming whole ... These states of spontaneous Silence have actually appeared in the lives of many people, as some expanded peak experience, some incredible feeling that lasted a few minutes or a few hours.”

(Mansoor)

They are those moments when we might have felt as one with the elements, or have had a feeling “of the boundaries and definitions falling away.” We may have felt “an overwhelming sense of purity” or a “sudden intense love for total strangers,” a feeling of security, or an “all encompassing compassion for every living being, for every tree, for every plant.” Such is the power of Silence that it can fill us with a “deep sense of wonder or simply a profound rejoicing in being.” *(Mansoor)* They are moments of stillness which allow the Truth to be seen. Mahatma Gandhi, (who would spend one day a week in silence), emphasised this point when he said:

“In the attitude of silence the soul finds the path in a clearer light, and what is elusive and deceptive resolves itself into crystal clearness.”

“It is almost the discovery of a new world where there is rest,” Dr. Montessori writes in her Handbook (*Montessori 1914 Pg. 76*). “It is, as it were, the twilight of the world of loud noises and of the uproar that oppresses the spirit. At such a time the spirit is set free, and opens out like the corolla of the convolvulus.” She compares this expansion of the spirit to the feelings we have when we witness a sunset: “...when all the vivid impressions of the day, the brightness and clamour are silenced” and we become more sensitive and open to our inner feelings (*Montessori 1914 Pg. 77*).

Dr. Montessori was fully aware of the significance of silence. She fell upon it by chance in her work with children, but recognized immediately the transformative power it has. Children emerged from silence kinder, calmer, gentler, more loving, more disciplined, more sensitive, more refined in their movements, more alert to sounds and noise. (*Montessori 1994/1988 Vol. 1, Pg. 81*).

When the game of silence was played in the Children's House, Dr. Montessori described it as if "life gradually vanished" or became "suspended". The room appeared to be slowly emptying "as if there was no longer anybody in it" (*Montessori 1912/1988 Pg. 129- 132*) and the children gave "themselves up to a kind of spell" as if "wrapped in meditation" (*Montessori 1914 Pg. 76*) "waiting for the call that came in the silence" (*Montessori 1994/1988 Vol.1, Pg. 80*).

And 'the call' did come, for Dr. Montessori called each child by his name and they came and stood before her one by one, arriving "like ships in port, after having experienced the efforts, the emotions and the delights of silence" (*Montessori 1912/1988 Pg. 133*).

Whether or not we choose to undertake this journey of spiritual elevation is something that each of us must decide on our own. No training college, no person can force another to embark on it. Working with children means that we are constantly faced with the decision of taking on this challenge. It is a personal journey that can only be undertaken when and if we wish it. Some say it requires tremendous self-discipline. Others say it is a natural path of development so no effort or discipline should be involved to attain the heights the human being is capable of! There are many routes that this journey can take. Each one must search and find that which suits him or her.

But regardless of the route that each one of us chooses, regardless of the method, the teacher, regardless of the journey itself, it is the decision to set sail that is the most difficult decision to take. It appears as if we have to leave behind that which we know and set a course towards the unknown. But this is not so. All we need do is decide to set sail. Once that decision has been taken, then the course is set – we all know that we will be heading for home.

APPENDIX 1

Swami Sivnanda

Swami Sivananda, a highly esteemed Hindu spiritual teacher, summed up the essence of his thoughts, into these simple teachings.

“Be good, Do good”,

“Serve, Love, Give, Purify, Meditate, Realize”,

“Bear Insult, Bear Injury – this is the highest Sadhana” (*practice*)

UNIVERSAL PRAYER

Grant us an understanding heart,

Equal vision, balanced mind,

Faith, Devotion and Wisdom !

Grant us Inner Spiritual strength,

To resist temptations and to control the mind !

Free us from egoism, lust, greed, anger, jealousy and hatred !

Fill our hearts with Divine Virtues !

Let us behold Thee in all these names and forms !

Let us serve Thee in all these names and forms !

Let us ever remember Thee !

Let us ever sing Thy glories !

Let Thy Name be ever on our lips !

Let us Abide in Thee forever and ever !

APPENDIX 2

A Plea...

Directed to myself as much as it is to others...

When speaking of transformation we are speaking of things transcendental and metaphysical. We are speaking of processes, which we are not that familiar with. Something changes in us, that is for sure, something shifts - we could even say that something 'happens'. But when we speak of transformation it usually means that nothing happens! It is because nothing happens, that the 'I' recedes, and the space it relinquishes allows for something other to reveal itself. We talk of 'something' because it is so difficult to define. We see things differently, but our eyes have not changed! We hear differently, but our ears are the same!

Since these 'things' are so difficult to define, we use metaphors. All great spiritual teachers use metaphors - to give substance to that which is insubstantial, to give shape to that which is formless. These metaphors are taken from myths and stories, reflecting our cultures and religious traditions. Dr. Montessori used many metaphors and often referred to the Child and the Adult, in such a way. She was widely read so her sources were varied. She drew from writers and poets and she drew heavily from the Bible. Her biblical references are frequent and they are the ones that cause 'the most trouble'.

All this 'religious stuff' (as it is often referred to even by serious students of Montessori's work) is quickly dismissed, as if it means nothing, conveying that it is in fact, superfluous to our understanding. There is an unvoiced fear that if we dwell on these biblical references, then we will become identified as Christians - alas, perhaps even as Catholics! So rather than have to explain Christian belief or dogma, we mumble something about Dr. Montessori's Catholic background and turn the page.

However, this is not an attitude worthy of any serious scholar. I would like to make a plea that these references that Dr. Montessori makes are addressed head on, like we would with any reference. By understanding the biblical context from which Dr. Montessori draws her metaphors, our understanding of the Child and the Adult will increase. That is the purpose of metaphors: to give a clearer picture, a larger picture, to give emphasis to details and particular aspects, which are otherwise difficult to convey.

The Bible is one of the most important cultural references of the West and its influence on artists, musicians, poets, writers, cannot be dismissed. If we are not familiar with its content because its influence is diminishing in our culture, that is no excuse – we need to familiarize ourselves. Just as we would research the precise context of a quote taken from Dante by turning to the actual source, we must do likewise with the biblical references, which are so many. We need to find commentaries on the Bible, which will deepen our understanding of the metaphors used.

Dr. Montessori was a deeply spiritual person. The context, in which her spiritual growth took place, was undeniably Christian and Catholic. Her sojourn in India and her contact with the Theosophical Society clearly influenced and expanded this context. As students of her work, we have the responsibility of attempting to understand all she says, regardless of our own education or beliefs.

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