

Observation & Freedom

By Julia Volkman

In what other industry do you know of a requirement to sit down and do nothing for 15 minutes every day? This is a perk, a true perk of being a Montessori guide! And yet how many of us allow ourselves to enjoy this benefit? And why not?

*“We are so accustomed to abandoning ourselves to our own impulses. We are so convinced that our actions are always useful to others. We are so certain that we can do well that which others do badly; so sure that we can perfect that which is imperfect. Because in this world these impulses are considered good impulses, we have never performed exercises in order to control them.”*¹ Maria Montessori

Even in Dr. Montessori’s day, contemporary culture did not encourage in any way the restraint of good intentions. When we feel we can help someone in need or offer assistance, we are encouraged to do so. But so often when it comes to the developing child, these same impulses serve only to interfere with the child’s development. When the child is struggling to pull on his socks, we feel the impulse to use our own hands to help pull up the sock. But we know that this does not help the child. This retards his development. Our intellectual minds know that if the proper preparatory work has been done, if the hands have adequate muscular development and the fingers a minimum of coordination, then what we see as a struggle is actually helping the child. It gives him the reason to exercise his muscles, to refine his motor skills, to exert his will upon the world and see that he can accomplish something. It is exactly these “struggles” that free the child. And yet we intervene again and again and again.

Sometimes we have no choice. Sometimes we have obligations to others, usually temporal obligations that do not allow us to offer the child the time to do the task at hand. Okay. That happens and we are required to gently hurry the child through and move on. But more often, there *is* time but we step in anyway, out of habit or frustration or the misdirected desire to help.

Dr. Montessori knew all this. She saw it again and again in teachers with the best of intentions. She realized that specific training in learning to control the impulses driven by these good intentions was needed. She knew that in her day (and in ours), contemporary culture did not encourage in anyway learning how to control this kind of impulse. And yet it is that internal discipline, when practiced by the adult, which can offer so much to the child.

¹ Montessori M. *Some Suggestions and Remarks upon Observing Children*. Course 1921, Lecture 3. Reprinted in AMI Communications 2008/2. p17.

So here is Dr. Montessori's prescription, the exercise regimen, as it were, for strengthening *our* ability to control these impulses and by so doing, be of greater assistance to the child.

1. Sit down. Look at the clock and vow to yourself that you will not get out of the chair unless there is injury, destruction, or gross disrespect for 15 full minutes.
2. Remain still: "*...the first thing the teacher has to learn is to master herself, and to remain motionless beside the child.*"² Maria Montessori
 - Restrain yourself from speaking, commenting, showing approval/distress, or responding in any way.
 - "*Show no manifestations of enthusiasm, pleasure, or joy.*"³ Maria Montessori
3. Observe one child but keep your peripheral vision open to take in the overall events of the room. Focus on one but remain conscious of the rest.
4. Take notes. These are for your own reference but this action also provides a visual clue to the children that you are working and, thus, deserve the same respect as you offer them when they are working. You have permission to focus, to concentrate, to be absorbed by your work. Enjoy it!
5. Observe yourself as an observer. If you are struggling to stay in the chair, to not intervene, take notes of what is happening in you.
 - Notice how often you need to restrain these impulses (this will abate over time and with practice).
 - Notice that there is a sense that you will be able to somehow fix the perceived problem/challenge/difficulty.
 - Notice that the situations in which you felt compelled to intervene resolve themselves without your intervention.

*"If we wish to observe the child, we must observe. If we see that he is working with great effort and difficulty, and if we see that it takes him a long time to do what we could do very easily; then we are observing. That is the observation. If there is a difficulty that is perfectly apparent to us, but which the child does not see, we leave him thus. That is our observation."*⁴ Maria Montessori

There is so much wisdom in these instructions. We are instructed to observe not just to see what a child is doing or to identify what lesson could come next but also to train ourselves. The act of sitting to observe is the best Montessori educational program you will ever experience.

² Ibid, p17.

³ Montessori M. *Some More Suggestions and Remarks*. Course 1921, Lecture 11. Reprinted in AMI Communications 2008/2, p19.

⁴ Op cit. pp17-18.

“When we learn to stop, we begin to see, and when we see, we understand. Peace and happiness are the fruit of that. In order to be with our friend, a flower, or our coworkers, we need to learn the art of stopping.” Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Art of Living*

Daily observation, like daily exercise, nutrition, or meditation, is a gift to our well being. It strengthens our own inner discipline. It frees us to pause, to witness the incredibly beauty of the children around us. It shows us that our work is of great use as we notice the children calming, focusing, rejoicing...normalizing. It rejuvenates our spirit, so weary from battling infection and misguided policy and confused parents.

We work in schools. We don't usually get taken to lunch or sent to exotic locals or receive financial bonuses. But we are asked to sit down and abide in the gorgeous true nature of the child for 15 minutes each day. So I ask you, are you ready to accept this gift?

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