

Grace and Courtesy and the Adult

"The vision of the teacher should be at once 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 soul, for the attitude of the teacher should be at once positive, scientific and spiritual.

Positive and scientific, because she has an exact task to perform, and it is necessary that she should put herself into immediate relation with the truth by means of rigorous observation...

Spiritual, because it is to man that his powers of observation are to be applied, and because the characteristics of the creature who is to be his particular subject of observation are spiritual." (Dr. Maria Montessori, 'The Advanced Montessori Method - I', Clio Press Ltd, 107)

Our Montessori classrooms are peaceful, collaborative environments within which we believe that each child's needs are met and each child's development served. We do not presume that the benefit of one child must come at the expense of another, or that the "controls" of the environment need to be heavy-handed or coarse. Rather, we prepare environments which protect children's inherent goodness, their inherent peacefulness and their intrinsic motivation to learn.

How often, though, do we assume the same of our peers or colleagues? We recognize children are inherently good, but we treat other adults with hesitation and suspicion. We recognize that children are inherently peaceful, but we treat other adults as our adversaries. We recognize that children are intrinsically motivated to learn, but we expect other adults to require rewards or punishments to be invested in their own work.

We are trained by our experiences, our pains and our obstacles, to assign blame or judgment to other adults. When we feel misunderstood, we accuse each other of a lack of compassion. When we feel challenged, we blame each other's need for control. When we feel powerless, we presume someone else is holding too tightly to her power. We create us-es and others. We create adversaries. Imagine how different our adult communities would be if we presumed the same of each other as we do of children: if we presumed adults to be inherently good, inherently peaceful and intrinsically motivated to learn. It seems daunting to imagine on a global scale, across national boundaries or cultural differences that often drive us apart. But what if we just imagined it of the people we encounter every day, in our homes, our neighborhoods and our schools.

In Montessori classrooms, we believe that children demonstrate their natural state because they are given an environment prepared to protect it. If we struggle to imagine each other as good, peaceful and motivated, perhaps it's because we haven't yet prepared an environment within which we can be those things. The essential standard of the prepared Montessori environment is *freedom within limits*. Children's freedom is limited when it begins to intrude on the freedoms of another. In practice, this requires a constant balancing and rebalancing, a collaboration based on the tenets of grace and courtesy that allows the give and take of classroom needs to align itself fluidly.

While it may be hard to imagine each other as inherently good, inherently peaceful and intrinsically motivated, it may be a little easier to imagine changes to our adult interactions that would move them closer to freedom within limits and the tenets of grace and courtesy. What if we treated each other with an acknowledgment that my freedoms intrude on yours, and yours on mine? What if we treated each other with an acknowledgment that when I take something (be it materials, or resources, or time), I leave less for you, and you for me? What if we treated each other with the same grace and courtesies that we practice in the classroom: waiting for another to finish speaking before offering our own perspective, saying please, offering gratitude, returning work to a condition appropriate for another to use, asking to help, offering service...

When I treat you as though I believe you are as good, as peaceful and as motivated as I want to be myself, when I offer you grace for your mistakes and share with you mine, when I protect your work for you as I'd want you to protect mine for me, I am preparing an environment for adult normalization. When I count my words and when I respect that your great work may not be the same as mine, when I offer you reverence and care because I believe you are still in the process of becoming, just as I know I am, I am preparing an environment for adult normalization... both of ours.

For practical purposes, in my primary work as a teacher, by offering grace and courtesy to my peers, I am modeling for the children in my classroom that adult relationships are no less complicated, and no less deserving of attention, than the relationships that form among children. I am modeling grace and courtesy in a community larger than our classroom, encouraging the children's ability to imagine it in their own communities as well.

But engaging other adults this way is not only for the benefit of the children. When I prepare an environment for adult normalization, I help to protect a space within which the peacefulness, goodness and motivation we enjoyed as children might be restored. It's difficult to imagine, no doubt, but just as we respect the challenging child in front of us because of the child we believe he is capable of becoming, we can allow ourselves and our colleagues to become more, to become more peaceful, more motivated, more good, by treating each other as though we already are.

Namaste