



The Way We Gather

Transformation occurs when we focus on the structure of how we gather and the context in which the gatherings take place; when we work hard on getting the questions right; when we choose depth over speed and relatedness over scale.

—Peter Block, *Community*

By *Marta Donahoe*

One morning, when my 8-year-old granddaughter was staying at my house, she marched into the kitchen, where my husband and I were preparing tea and packing lunches, and announced to us, "Guess what I read? The way you make your bed is the way your day will go!"

"Good deal, let's do it!" said her grandpa, and off the two of them went to make sure her little bed upstairs was neat as a pin. She left for school soon after that, and I assume she had a great day while I considered the further implications of the way one makes one's bed. If making the bed means paying attention to the details and setting the tone for the way they ripple throughout our day, perhaps there is wisdom in noticing the tone that is set in other parts of the day.

The way in which we gather is an extension of the making-the-bed analogy: The way we gather is the way our school days go. The mindfulness we bring to the little ways we behave with

one another sets the tone for the entire organization.

When Montessori speaks of allowing the individual to remain independent throughout all the stages of development, she is not asking us to create a pull-oneself-up-by-one's-bootstraps individual; rather, she is asking us to consider the ways in which we honor the blossoming of each person, and that we do that in order to benefit society. We honor the unfolding of the personality, petal by petal, within the context of our relationship to one another and out of respect for our interdependence. Montessori says, "Intelligence, a balanced personality, and the unity of all mankind as a single organism are man's wealth" (Montessori, p.99). Montessori addresses the big picture—the importance of the individual to the function of all humankind. I enjoy wrestling with how to translate Montessori's big-picture ideas to everyday school life, how to bring mindfulness to the little picture. When we show up as individuals within a group, we have the opportu-

nity to see the small frame within the larger frame; we have created a microcosm of the larger society with the potential to display man's wealth—"the unity of mankind."

Community Meetings with Students or Staff

On a practical level, we can display "the unity of mankind" in meetings by structuring meetings and being creative to achieve a sense of community that people will remember. Many meetings I have attended are problematic for one of two reasons: they are too loose or too rigid. The loosely run meeting attempts to make sure everyone's voice is heard and every idea considered, often becoming too free-flowing to take care of business very well. The rigid meeting gets business done efficiently but at the expense of relationships.

Meetings, those microcosms of larger society, can be designed to be more intentional and thoughtful. A carefully planned agenda directs participants' attention to the process that occurs.

Consider the following:

- Begin a meeting by lighting a candle, having a moment of silence, then reading an appropriate quote or poem.
- Allow time for participants to acknowledge one another for individual acts of kindness, compassion, or support received from one another or noticed about one another.
- My colleague Sheila Coad-Bernard begins her community meetings with her students by mentioning Gifts and Drags (what is going well and what is not going well). One student said, "My gift is that I got to play with my new puppy last night, and my drag is that I didn't sleep much because my little sister and the puppy tried to sleep in my bed with me."
- Take care to choose words thoughtfully, stay on topic, listen closely, and stay within time constraints.
- To close the meeting, blow out the candle and pass it, asking each person to say a one-word gift or challenge they received during the meeting, or ask for a group cheer.

Celebrations and Graduations

Gathering for school celebrations creates opportunities to remind the community of the Montessori mission and vision of educating for peace by validating the individual in the context of the school society.

Consider graduation: a rite of passage. Some I have attended have inadvertently contradicted what Montessori stood for. When we single out a student in front of the school community for a special honor or award for top performance, the highest GPA, or the best attendance, the message is loud and clear: "This child is more special than another child." The unintended and divisive message that may be communicated is "there is only so much good stuff—not quite enough for everybody."

It is confusing and complicated when there is a shift from the simple and humble joy of great accomplishment to the reward of a prize or the gift of an award. Great accomplish-

ments can be featured in the school newsletter or in other venues. When gathering as a school community, let us celebrate community, not one individual over another.

Montessori said,

Two paths lie open in the development of the personality—one that leads to the man who loves, and another that leads to the man who possesses. One leads to the man who has won his independence and works harmoniously with others, the other to the human slave who becomes the prisoner of his possessions as he tries to free himself and who comes to hate his fellows (Montessori, p.57).

There is a fine line between supporting individual growth and creating a culture that values the possession of an award. When we celebrate the individual with awards, we do so at the expense of the community.

One Montessori 18-year-old put it this way:

I am an excellent academic student. In another school I would be asked to stand in front of the school community and be given acknowledgements and awards that would make my parents proud of my accomplishments. But the important thing to me at graduation is for everyone to know that I am here because of the reason that all my classmates are here—because of everyone who loved me and believed in me, not just my family and teachers, but each individual in my class. We have been through a lot together, and whether or not each of us has a learning disability, or a great high school résumé, or full ride to col-

lege, we all worked so, so hard to stand there at graduation with one another—side by side. I stand in that candle ceremony with people who learned to give their individual best. We did it for ourselves, and we did it for each other. (personal communication)*

The way in which we gather can loosen the grip of society's message that there is not enough to go around. The way we gather can help us realize we are sufficient. The way we gather carries the potential to illustrate the essence of Montessori's call to peace, the essence of Montessori's message in cosmic education. As Margaret Wheatley puts it, "If we look at the evolutionary record, it is cooperation that increases over time. This cooperation is spawned from a fundamental recognition that one cannot exist without the other, that it is only in relationship that one can be fully one's self. The instinct of community is everywhere in life." (Wheatley, p.5)

References

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- Wheatley, M. (1998). The promise and paradox of community. Retrieved from www.margaretwheatley.com on October 20, 2010.

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* Two senior students, chosen by their peers, speak to the audience, each lighting a candle. The rest of the seniors come to the stage with unlit candles. Both speakers stand in the center of the line and light candles so that, in the dark room, the line of candles slowly extends the entire length of students, illuminating their faces and symbolizing the light within each individual. Then a junior approaches the stage to light a candle from one of the seniors, symbolizing the passing of the light of leadership to the junior class.