

The Greatest Love: Separation and Letting Go

By Mary Zeman

Beginning a new school year is a complex event for Montessori families. Taking on a rhythm of daily routines, adjusting to a collection of new concepts, new relationships, schedules and expectations can be a dramatic turn for the entire household. But far and away at the top of the list is what perhaps the most complex challenge of them all, and that is the task of separation. During Orientation Week for new parents, I usually introduce Montessori's concept of the secret of childhood. It certainly serves as a potential backdrop for the fact that we might as well admit it from the beginning: the child at work in the task of self-construction is a process that requires a certain privacy and conscious distance from the overview of their parents.

In her writings on the secret of childhood, Montessori transforms the popularly held sense of the word secret from something which may be sneaky or covert into a valuable component of human development. In that we have chosen the Montessori approach to education, we understand the importance of the child's independence and autonomy.

It is simple as this: a child cannot become autonomous unless we support that "secret" process. That is, that which occurs apart from us. And that requires Letting Go.

It happens at our school every day. The farewells at the classroom door take form in hundreds of ways. Sometimes there is much grace and ease, and sometimes less. Either way, there is poignancy and drama. I would venture to guess that once we have said goodbye, if given the chance to return unnoticed through the back door and watch our children in the classroom, most of us would jump at the chance. Because we like to see. We love knowing how they're doing, what they choose, who they know, how they are. And this feeling doesn't go away.

I had my comeuppance at a football game last fall. There in the stands, brand new 400 millimeter camera lens in hand, I found myself following agile moves of our high school senior on the field. Through the mighty magnifying device I barely missed a move. And then it came to me: echoes of the same speeches I give to parents all through Orientation week at school. They will leave you. They Must. And I started to laugh. For as simple as is the urge to take one more peek at the classroom door, observing our children as they grow becomes increasingly complex. The metaphor is perfect: What do you do as they grow further away? You get a bigger lens.

Or maybe not!! And therein lies the art of parenting. To know when to pick up the lens, and when to let the moment pass. When to ask, direct, coddle or intervene, and when to remain silent, or simply to make way. To allow our children the grace of their best and most authentic development, we must allow them room to grow. Apart from us.

Recently I heard a most disturbing story of adolescent gang violence on the radio.

"What could they have been thinking?" asked one adult in response. Or were they thinking? Our news is filled with the perils of our times: adolescents facing increasing exposure to violence and a sea of worldly temptations with short-lived rewards. We pray for wisdom to guide them and are well aware of our limitations.

It comes down to this: it's up to them. Just as in a Montessori environment, ultimate safety and responsibility is achieved not by offering non-breakable dishware and dulled utensils for the preparation of food. Children are safer and more competent when they learn the truth about carrying a pitcher with care because it can be a thing of danger. How very receptive our children are rising to the occasion. And how very important is the role of the adult. It is a fine tuned dance, Montessori's call to "follow the child." As our children respond to their own inner directives, we respond to our children by keeping our promise to meet them on the high road. "Indefatigably," as E.M. Standing says, "irresistibly, joyfully, the child is working to create the adult."

A story is told about a young child and her dad. In later stages of toilet training, the father had very simply ritualized a gesture of privacy in the bathroom. After the child settled into the task, the father would leave the room for a minute or two and wait outside the door. Once, after gently closing the door, he unwittingly flipped down the light switch in the hallway, leaving the bathroom in complete darkness. Waiting outside, he realized what he had done when he heard the gentle voice of his child from the inside: "Where did I go?" she said.

Not "Hey! Who turned out the lights?!!" but in the child's inimitable honesty, she looked first to herself. To see if she was still there.

We might shift the story only slightly, imagine it as symbolic and remember the call to core Montessori theory. Dr. Montessori teaches us that the greatest task in the first six years of life is the construction of the self. Self-Construction. Not you, as I need you to be, but you at your best. This is why the lessons, presentations and work in the early Montessori school years are geared to individual children, one-to-one. Montessori teaches us to honor the sacred task of each single child's developing character and self-awareness.

One afternoon, two of the elementary students invited me to come quickly to the classroom to witness a discovery they had made. Their enthusiastic reverie began before we crossed the threshold of the classroom door:

"First we were working with the cubing material, and we noticed how the cube of the three reminded us of the pink tower we used to use in Primary. We decided to go borrow a pink tower from one of the primary classes and bring it back here. We stacked the pink tower next to the cubing material and found it was identical... all except for the ten cube which raised it too high. We removed the ten cube and then realized that they are identical with-out it. Then we realized that it's because you can't cube double digits. So of course that's why the ten cube didn't fit!"

This story is an everyday example of Montessori education at work. The symbolic process and the practical process are interdependent aspects of education for life. Having a concept in your head is one thing. To imagine it, then enact it, test and declare it, allows even greater authority once something is learned. What is learned this way becomes personal property in a most personal way. The Montessori environment exists for no higher purpose than such discovery. As these students made their discovery, they came full circle. Reaching the end of their Montessori material, they found themselves returning to the beginning to validate the whole of their finding.

Our days are not lived in isolation. Not only in education, but in relationship, in family and in the lives we intend to share together, as long as we are true to the goals of our highest purposes, we will continually discover how one piece fits with another, and how the beginning and then end have everything to do with each other. Recently when we sent our son back to college by train, I had the idea of putting a penny on the track. After those reluctant farewells and that last sweet hug, we waved until he was out of sight. Once the train had passed, the penny had flown off the track and laid there in the darkness only a few feet away. It had flattened into a shining, paper thin slip of copper. As I rubbed my thumb over the surface I discovered only one remnant of its original penny-state. Most of the word Liberty still remained intact across one edge of the coin. Sometimes the messages we receive are subtle. Sometimes they are inescapable. And this one I needed to hear again: Saying good-bye is saying good-bye and that means letting go and meaning it. Physical and psychic Liberty. Montessori calls us to this most difficult task as parents when she mandates us to Follow the Child. Follow does not mean to hover over, but rather something much more difficult to realize. When we truly honor our children's growth, we also honor the incremental stages of releasing them as separate and honorable – and eventually, wholly apart from us. It's a lifetime process, and it begins with the mystery of life itself. Just as the in utero process occurs where we cannot see it, the psychic growth of human life occasionally has its comparable autonomy. When we refrain from inquiring after our child's every thought, and give them space to find their way, check in with themselves, a chance to report the news of the day without having known it first ourselves, we take the early steps. As our urges would have us ask and ask, or slip back around the corner to peek into the classroom and try to catch them unaware, we are reminded, as I was when I nearly tried to lick up his tracks, that liberty truly gained does not have strings. To follow the child includes their incremental release and the courage to allow our children to try this world out, inch by inch...apart from us.