

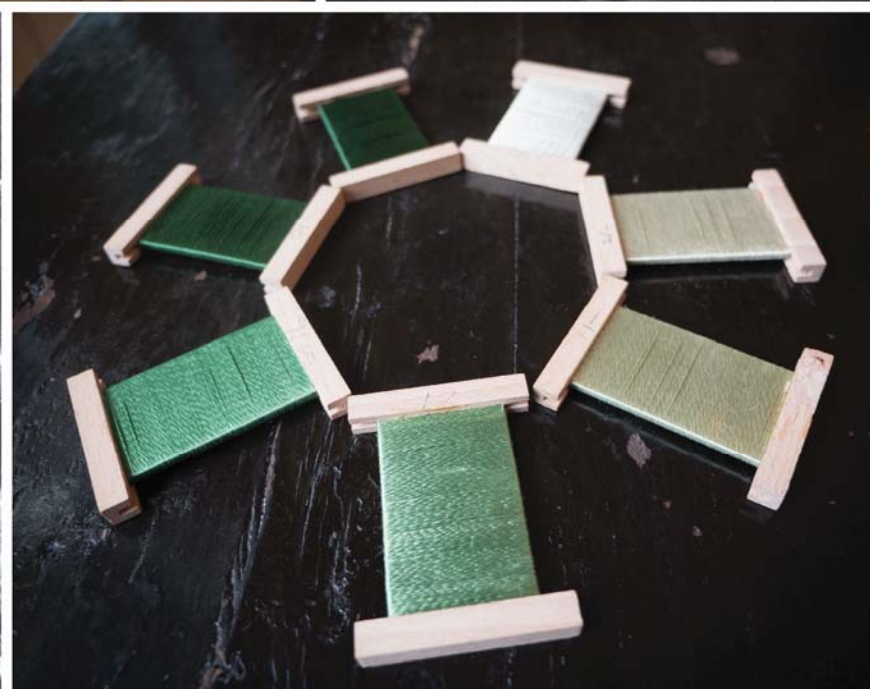
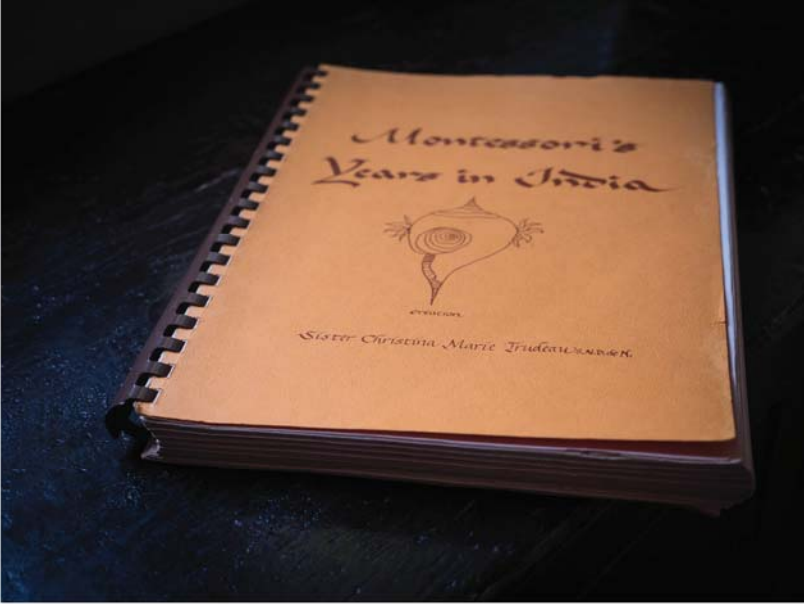
Mrs. V. R. Goldthorpe's Notes of
Maria Montessori's lectures, London 1957

The title of this series
of lectures is

Philosophy.

You may think we are going to initiate
you into a method by which you may teach
Philosophy, because many have interpreted our
method in this sense.

Some think we teach the use of certain
material or enable the child to concentrate
study or in this way lead on to culture
through the study of works up to the University



Journey to Sacred Montessori¹

Philip Snow Gang

“Do not let the present mar your mind and your soul; retain that freshness of spirit and love that are so necessary to carry out our work...”

...I trust to God that you – who are my spiritual children- may find in your love and in your intelligence the means of making Mammolina’s message and work penetrate mankind’s soul.”

-Mario Montessori in a letter to Binda Goldsbrough, September 1939

In December 2015 I was invited to meet with a group of Montessorians in Toronto to make a presentation that would help the community come together. I began looking for core things that I might share and was inspired to review letters that I had received from Mario Montessori, Ada Montessori and letters that were gifted me by Binda Goldsbrough who was a course assistant to Maria Montessori before and after world War II. Her father organised Maria Montessori’s visits when she came to the UK.

In those letters I found evidence. I had seen the letters before; I had read them, but they came to me in such a profound way this time that I knew there was a back-story that had to be told. That back-story was about the spiritual core of the Montessori vision.

Since then I have had some ongoing reflections and today, I would say that it is more than the spiritual core of the Montessori vision. I think it’s our journey, my journey and your journey, into Sacred Montessori.

¹ Based on the 2016 video <https://vimeo.com/193975285>

Cosmic Education

When one thinks about Sacred Montessori, one must consider the concept of cosmic education and how everything in the universe has come forward over 13.7 billion years in an unfolding, beautiful chaotic harmony of being... and that we humans are the Universe's most recent response to conscious awareness.

Observation and Reflection

The journey to Sacred Montessori is an exploration of self as well as an exploration of Montessori's vision. It is deep looking. It is deep observation. It is deep reflection on what is core, the essence of Montessori. It dances with the question: What makes it work?

Today, when I look at the letters that I received I am keenly aware of how Mario continually directed us to the facets of normalization... in ways I never really completely understood before.

Normalization...

is the unencumbered, unconditioned response to being in communion with one's environment.

I also notice how often the Montessori's acknowledge the spirit of the child, the soul of the child, the soul of the adult. I think some of that has been lost over the last 80 years. These are letters that were written in 1939.

In one of them Mario mentions the Swedenborg movement. Emmanuel Swedenborg was a mystic, an architect, and a spiritual teacher from the 18th century. Since Mario said he hoped that Montessori would someday be as popular as that movement, I have reasoned that they probably knew a lot about Swedenborg and aligned with some of his philosophy.

*"Love is the essence of spiritual fire."
-Emmanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772)*

Another insight that came out of those letters was that Maria and/or Mario Montessori had created an informal alliance in England, before she went to India, and called it the "Vahib". According to Binda Goldsbrough this was a small circle of people who came together to talk about cosmic and spiritual ideas.

Montessori's Indian Experience

When one thinks about the spiritual life of Mario and Maria Montessori, you have to revisit their time in India where everything seems to have shifted, as she became part of the Indian culture. During India years between 1939 and 1946 the Montessori's lived at the Adyar compound that was once the home for Mahatma Gandhi. It was established by the Theosophical Society.

During these years, Montessori continued to explore her ideas about the evolution of the new human. Whilst in India she wrote,² amongst other books, *To Educate the Human Potential*. That is quite a profound and inviting title —starting with an infinitive. And she wrote *Education for a New World* as well as *Reconstruction in Education* and *The Absorbent Mind*.

Though some of these were published later, they were all based on lectures given in India.

1942 Reconstruction in Education

1946 Education for a New World

1948 From Childhood to Adolescence

1948 To educate the Human Potential

1949 Childhood Education (The Formation of Man 1955)

1949 Education and Peace

1949 The Absorbent Mind.

Indian spiritual practices imbued Montessori's living-working life as she applied her approach in a predominantly outdoor environment that included gardens. With Mario she observed the children's relationships to plants and animals. That is where Cosmic Education was deeply explored... in dialogues with Mario about how everything is connected to everything else. They could actually see it in the gardens and in the forest.

Some of this I have culled from an association with Sister Christina Trudeau. In 1988 I met her in Hawaii, and she gave me a manuscript titled *Montessori's Years in India*. I had explored the manuscript before, but now I retrieved it again... before I went to Toronto to share stories and insights. I found myself sensing how profound those years were. Seven years that changed the way she knew children. Reading between the lines, and sensing what happened there, I think she went through a personal transformation as well.

² Most of the books that Montessori "wrote" were transcribed lectures taken from participants.

Mario Montessori

In thinking about the Montessoris' notion of soul and spirit I can only ride alongside them through their words. Actually, in knowing Mario over time, you could see deep love in his smile, in his eyes, in his compassion. I was young and not aware enough to be able to dialogue about such things. In 1981 Mary Loew and I interviewed him during his last trip to the United States. When watching that interview, you can see it in his eyes, you can feel his heart... this deep appreciation for the soul of the child; that no matter what one tries to do to suppress, it will emerge.

"I only feel that Mario had the real gift for pointing out the essence, and I am afraid people may lose themselves in the details."-Ada Montessori Pierson, 15 June 1982

When I think about soul and spirit, the first thought that comes to mind is deep observation, which is a sacred core part of the Montessori way that needs more light. One just cannot observe purely in a scientific way, one has to observe without prejudice, which is quite a challenge.

The challenge is to quiet the mind. What has helped me over the last 25 years has been the work of Jiddu Krishnamurti who addresses the process of unconditioning. That is, when we work with the child, we create an environment where the child operates in present tense and where we are also in present tense, without past and without future. That is when seeing becomes vital. It becomes imminent because without past and without future we are in the now. And it is a profound joy to experience that. And you see immediately. It is easier for a child to do than for an adult. Seeing without prejudice is our work if we want to embrace the child at the very core. That is our great work in being with children. And it's our mandate as teacher educators in working with the next generation of Montessori teachers.

The Adult Montessori Environment

We have to develop ways of working with teachers that are congruent with the way we want them to work with children

I have been creating adult Montessori environments for more than 25 years. This experience is embraced in the TIES Master of Education program in Montessori Integrative Learning. We did not set the intention to create adult Montessori environments, but it turned out that way. Many students and graduates of our program have an awareness that they are experiencing Montessori for adults.

I want to draw a parallel between working with adults and working with children. As our faculty works with adults, we have created a prepared environment where they can explore deep questions in their lives. In exploring one's own way in the world you are also unconditioning oneself.

In the same way, when teachers work with children, they are in the moment. There is no past. There is no future. In that child-teacher relationship there's freedom. When there is no past nor future, we live in the what-is of now. The child's soul or spiritual virtues can be revealed. They glow.

In one of the letters that I received from Mario... [Actually, it was not a letter to me but to the Association Montessori Internationale (AMI) sponsoring committee. I was going to be a Montessori teacher-trainer and he was recommending me.] ...he identifies some of my qualities that I didn't even know I possessed. One of them was the ability to recede when the timing was not right and to appear when the timing was appropriate.

Subsequently, I actually withdrew from the training of trainers' process because I felt it was not congruent with the way we wanted teachers to work with children. This is not a criticism; today's teacher training programs originate with Maria Montessori's own way in the world. She knew how to work with children, yet she worked with adults in a very traditional, European way. When you look at Montessori teacher training over the years it is has replicated the way Montessori went about it. Giving information. The information is how to work with children. There is philosophy and there is practice. My contention has always been that you can give information and practice in a process that is congruent with Montessori's ideas. That is what I have come to discover.

The Montessori Classroom: A Natural System

I was recently reading Steven Johnson's book, *Emergence*, where he addresses the phenomena of how things morph in ways that are quite profound and unique. He gives an example of slime mold where, depending on weather conditions, slime mold exists as a whole entity, a unified being. And in other conditions slime mold disintegrates into individual cell structures. In the past scientists thought there was a particular cell that would call attention and draw all the cells to aggregate together under certain weather conditions. Now they know it is just in the nature of slime mold to behave as a collective. Johnson goes on to show an aerial view of Hamburg, Germany and says that without knowing it, human beings built cities that replicated the way the brain looks. These are just two examples of the way systems work in nature. So, I began to wonder if that that might have relevance to human systems.

My focus turned to a Montessori classroom. I asked myself. "What would we see if we viewed a classroom from the height of 100 meters? What would we see?"

One would observe beings that are still -not moving around- as well as some moving from place to place: stopping; engaging with other beings; working individually and collectively to create... and then separating again. I realised how similar this is to cellular processes. Might the Montessori prepared environment be a natural system, the experience of which might take permanent residence within the core of the learner? Might these visceral experiences be an invitation to how they view the world. Then I thought about all the adult Montessori children that are contributing to the world in a profound way. Perhaps their Montessori experience is carried forward into how they respond to life.

I also recalled Montessori's chart demonstrating photosynthesis. It represents the activity in a leaf and the movement that is a natural system. Participating in a natural system with purposeful activity is really self-creating.

Self-creation

Autopoiesis

The theory of autopoiesis, developed by Francisco Varela and Humberto Maturana, expresses that the very nature of life is autonomy while simultaneously coupling to its environment. We self-replicate, we create within ourselves; but we cannot do that unless we are in an environment and coupled to that environment. That is the very definition of life. And it is happening every moment in a Montessori classroom. I find this quite extraordinary. Maria Montessori did not know about autopoiesis, but she knew about children and the prepared environment. And that's a gift we give to children.

Observation and Reflection

There are moments in each of our lives where we begin to question what we are doing, why we are here, and the very nature of life. When those moments arise, they are opportunities to discover the deep connection we have to life.

*When one observes without thought –
merging the observer with the observed –
one allows heart-wisdom insight
to emerge from the center of concentration.*

In my own personal experience, I have learned to pay attention to those moments, to viscerally connect with them. When immersed in the forest or close to the ocean, those natural settings enable me to see what is happening on my inner planes and I am able to ask nature to help me

find my way. And I receive answers. I have explored my own conditioning in trying to understand who I am and why I am here. For me, the contributions of Krishnamurti have been quite essential to my self-reflective process. That is why we include him in our graduate program of studies. He gives us an opportunity to see in a way that is quite profound.

"Intelligence is the essential capacity to perceive the what is; and to awaken this capacity in oneself and others, is education."

-Krishnamurti

"It is becoming more and more obvious and necessary that through a different kind of education a new human being comes into being."

-Krishnamurti

Another person that's worthy of exploring is Joseph Campbell and his notion of the Hero's Journey. This is cogent because in the Hero's Journey there are three stages for moving forward in the world. The first is when you know that something is unsettling in your current life and you need to find out more about yourself and what is missing. One says, "I am willing to trust the unknown." It is the stage of separation. Campbell calls the period that follows, initiation, where you are learning something new. In one epoch of my life the initiation phase was studying to become a Montessori teacher-guide. Before that I was an engineer working in industry.

Campbell identifies the third stage as "returning to tell your story" to share with others. It is what happens after you complete your training, or you complete your master's program. You have this whole body of information, experience and inner knowing that you begin to share with others. In Campbell's terms, you have followed your bliss to discover and become your new self. That is what it was for me to become a Montessori teacher-guide.

We are the recipients of an industrial worldview which creates tremendous challenges in navigating today's integrated complexities. School curricula are designed to isolate rather than integrate -- to put things in discreet boxes and test to see if learning is taking place in each box. If we are really focusing on the soul and spirit of the child, we have to go deep inside to release that potentiality in a different way.

Right Action, Love, Deconditioning and Transcendence

For me, trusting the unknown has always been a call to right-action. When I know I am following right action, my truth, and that I am motivated by love, all else falls in place. Maybe not

overnight, but in time. And while I am involved in those processes, I am also unpacking old stories. All of us carry old stories or hidden assumptions, even if we don't recognize it. However, if we want to evolve and create a way forward for a new human to arise each of us needs to explore the things that prevent us from living a new story. Thus, we need to explore the assumptions and stories that create problems in our lives. Transcending them is possible. The stories are actually the conditioning that we explore in order to see. Krishnamurti says, once you actually see it, you can transcend it. But until you see it you are living in an old story. There is no need to labor over the intensity of felt emotions; merely seeing is a doorway to freedom.

Personally, there was been a story that I have known about for more than 40 years. Every time I confronted it, I thought I was seeing it. Only recently I think I saw that story really for the first time. It was a very powerful experience.

Spiritual Traditions and Montessori

You ask about organized religion and the mystical traditions and I think that each denomination, each mystic is responding to a need to understand cosmos, to come to grips with why we are here and what contribution we can make. Right action. The search for truth is really a pathless land. That is the phrase that Krishnamurti used when he talked about the way forward — that each person on his/her own can find and discover this pathless land of right action and love. I think we embrace that journey when we are in harmony with the learners that work with us, providing an atmosphere for people to discover their own truth.

Love Is a Verb

You ask about love and I recall a series of lectures given during the Montessori teacher education courses I had at Bergamo, Italy in 1973. The presentations were titled the third level of the Timeline of Life. We share with children the story of the unconscious throughout time. That unconscious is love. So when you ask about love there is a way you can conceptualise the notion of love. We address it with children all along. But here, at the level of the 12-year-old we make the implicit, explicit.

Embracing love as the dynamic force that carries creation forward is an intimate way of expressing our relationship to life.

Love is a verb. Many of our nouns when used as a verb, provide movement-life. Mario Montessori expressed all of the human tendencies as nouns: exploration, order, imagination, perfection, etc. How different it is when you say exploring, ordering, imagining, perfecting. The thing-ness dissipates and the verb lives as ongoing process.

Humanity has created an environment of things, commodities. The material world is temporal; everything is going to change. What is here today will not be tomorrow. We are all in a process of change. Even what we consider inanimate is changing. When we experience life as a verb, at least for me, I do not get stuck in past or future. I am in the now.

*“There is a difference between the verb and the word, the name, or the noun.
The verb is of the active present, whereas the noun is always of the past and
therefore static...”*

*You may give vitality or movement to the noun but it is not the same as the verb
which is actively present...”*

J Krishnamurti

How Can We Teach This?

It isn't a matter of teaching; it is a matter of being this. When adults have ideas or share information or share knowledge in a training course or in our master's program it is up to us as the faculty to embrace and live into the questions with the student knowing that they have to find their own answers.

*Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart,
And try to love the questions themselves
Like locked rooms
Like books that are now written in a very foreign tongue.
Do not seek the answers, which cannot be given you
Because you would not be able to live them.
And the point is to live everything. Live the questions now.
Perhaps you will then, gradually, without noticing it,
Live along some distant day, into the answer.*

-R.M. Rilke

We are here to create a nurturing, loving, atmosphere for the learners' exploration, and each person has to live into the questions; we have to give learners the space to do that within the context of the studies that are going on. It is creating a space for precious dialogue, where we can explore questions rather than provide answers.

Revisiting Cosmic Education

With an intimate visceral connection to cosmic education we see the adults and children that we work with as continuing creation. It is really a spiritual vision. It is how we create an environment for the inner self to develop: for that inner being to be one with itself and the universe. So, cosmos and self become a dance of creation.

Written and Presented by Philip Snow Gang © 2016