
2004 Reflections

Educateurs sans Frontières: Looking inward... in order to Move outward

Just over forty Montessorians from Italy, Japan, USA, Australia, Ireland, Norway, the Philippines, Denmark, United Kingdom, Mexico, Canada, and France converged in Burgos, Spain 'to revisit the Montessori principles and practice from the perspective of society at large.' (Communications 2001/2-3) Burgos is a stop along the legendary medieval way of pilgrims walking the Camino de Santiago. The upper city is dominated by the Cathedral of Burgos symbolising the collaboration of artisans, theologians, builders in stone and wood with spires reaching to the sky, expressing the highest aspirations of civilisation. Our home was in the Residencia Universitaria San Agustín, and our seminar space in the adjoining Monasterio San Agustín, a rehabilitated medieval monastery where we attended class for three weeks, walking around the timeless monoliths scattered in the walled spaces to remind us that our thinking connected with the contemplation of centuries past.

I came to the Educateurs sans Frontières Assembly to refresh my outlook, to see what this mysterious reflection of AMI community wisdom might bring. I saw, before coming, a parallelism between the social dimensions suggested in the EsF literature and the emerging social self of the adolescent, where I have placed my work's emphasis in the last seven years.

What was the Educateurs sans Frontières? We, the Assembly of 2004, wanted concrete answers. A small delegation of already prepared Educateurs (1999) was there to assist us, and told us the EsF defied definition. They said we should not try to find a specific structure or meaning, but rather bring out the "vocation of Educateurs" in our own individual way. The EsF symbolised personal realisation of mission within our Montessori existence. The first-generation Educateurs had implied that the process should not be institutionalised. The EsF mystique was in its ability to suggest that a reality of worthwhile social endeavour, 'for any plane of development, at any time or any place,' would occur beyond Montessori's educational adventure in schools.

The implicit challenge to me was to look inward in order to move outward. The list of speakers and readings indicated that we would be taking a collective journey through the writings of Montessori which provide witness to the evolving human personality from conception through adolescence. Perhaps it was the realisation of the emerging, potential contribution of the child which enhances the adults' recognition of their own potential to give to the world and therefore be renewed. Although the matter seemed vaguely stated, in fact, the process seemed to cause some very palpable change in the Assembly. Here is how it worked.

The speakers were the catalysts of process; reading Montessori's works would be the process. Professor Bohm suggested that old-world values were lost and therefore could not be taught. A new order of values would need to be observed from the child's personal revelations of self, nature and society. Dr. Montanaro's animated depiction of birth as a parallel to the big bang placed an emphasis on the evolution of the individual as it recapitulates the evolution of life on earth approaching a higher level of awareness as the human being matures. Ita Williams' comprehensive discourse around moral development in the second plane touched a wide variety of considerations: moral sensitivity, inner growth, enthusiasm, the need for the adult to observe and nurture moral sensitivity, to allow social experiences to take place for the understanding of self-discipline, setting goals, work as a fundamental instinct, going out and practical life as setting up conditions for moral and social interplay. Once again what was said about children and their cumulative psychological characteristics seems to inform the maturity of the adult. There was a direct transfer to the participants.

The adolescents as social newborns finding their place in society was the next chapter of this three-week saga of the ascending planes of education and something quite new to many of the participants. For me

the arrangement of such utopian readings as the San Remo lectures or Education and Peace spoke to the adolescent approaching maturity, the adolescent becoming adult. The speeches after the third plane suggested service in the world: keeping the environment safe, keeping children out of child labour, working with Montessori concepts and the treatment of Asperger's syndrome, building and maintaining a school for a refugee camp or for the Maya community in Mexico. Maturity included the cosmic task of serving others while meeting one's own yearning to do a great work in the world.

Church bells ring in Burgos in different registers. And so was our diverse group quietly celebrating its varied strengths as it offered interpretation, contemplation and origami in relation to Montessori's eloquent passages about life and learning. And it is certain that the little community we formed was building a lasting connection around our pursuit of Montessori ideals. But ideals were amplified by further socialisation of the assembly with short forays onto the walkway by the river listening to the oompapa of a small band in the gazebo with elderly married couples dancing a street waltz. The city conferred its own mood of reverie amidst the medieval architecture, a landscape of a peaceable kingdom captured in a time warp.

This process was all about a community of Montessorians illuminated by the beauty, spiritual ambience and solidarity implicit in the surroundings. We were finding each other so different yet part of a Montessori circle that made us enunciate once more that Montessori education beyond the classroom was to be an integral realization of our work in the world. It was the valorisation by the Assembly itself created by this aware community now gifted with a renewed vocation that actually matched the reading of the Montessori writings about social coherence and deepening values. This connectedness between readings and experience was to leave a long-lasting residue.

A morning talk was set aside for one participant, Father Luhmer, a German Jesuit who has resided in Japan for over sixty years, to tell his account of the dropping of the bomb on Hiroshima, as part of Hiroshima Day. The slow deliberate narrative of his transportation of very sick humans out of the demolished town with stretchers, hand- or bicycle-carts was followed by a proclamation of the purpose of Educateurs sans Frontières. There in that contrast of ashes and rising phoenix, came for me the anticipated emancipation from boundaries based on a profound sense of the human condition as a whole, and the world's need to heal and embrace life once again and forever.

David Kahn
USA

Educateurs sans Frontières 2004: Musings

As time goes on, emotional impressions rise to the surface: the first, naturally, is the absolute soul food of Dr. Montessori's words with their timeless relevance, freshness, and wonderfully constructive nature.

Reading her work...

We speak so often of Dr. Montessori, her words, her inspiration, her ideas. Every day, we enter our classrooms eager to translate those ideas and understandings into daily reality. We explain over and over to curious parents, confused observers, and the people in our lives, the concepts behind our actions. We identify ourselves as "Montessorians". Yet how often, really, do we get the chance to sit and read, and discuss her work with other Montessorians? When do we ever pause to examine her vast vision for human society? How does that child in the corner pouring rice fit in? How do we fit in? What needs to be done?

For the average Montessorian such a chance is a sorely missed luxury. Thus it was with great joy and a sense of indulgence that I joined in the August 2004 gathering of Educateurs sans Frontières. I am now

back in the nitty gritty of every day but the magic of those three weeks has remained with me. Reading Dr. Montessori's work one cannot help but be humbled by the broad strokes of her genius as it encompasses all of humanity. And yet, once one reads a bit closer, it becomes clear that we each have an eminently vital role to play in shaping the reality of that vision.

At the gathering I stumbled anew across a striking paragraph from *Education and Peace* (Clio edition p 74) where she says: 'Discussion or meditation on the sufferings of the child will not help us; what we need is a new approach involving a new way of thought. The path then becomes clear and easy to follow. And just as there is not a single man or woman anywhere who has not been a child and who will not readily admit that every capacity he or she possesses was acquired in childhood, so society must be led to see that this is true of its powers as well. The future action of humanity cannot be unilateral. Nothing can be achieved in the world of the adult that is not first achieved in the world of the child.'

What tools we have for reaching out to the world...

Such simplicity, complexity and power in her words. I am struck by how spectacularly well-equipped Montessorians are to go out and constructively tackle the world. Our tool bags are full—not only with the knowledge of the laws of development, but with the ability to observe and simultaneously see both the whole and its pieces, and especially to see where, how and if action is necessary.

We have the ability to seize those fragile moments of opening when the child's (also read as society's) needs can be glimpsed and (hopefully) met. Such an incredibly respectful process, full of love. Difficult things can be done with joy and life. More importantly, they are doable rather than lofty sentiments that can never be implemented.

It counts...

In fact, I found the entire gathering to be centered around a question asked in a quintessentially Montessorian manner: 'If we have presented these concepts as an aid to life to the world for just about 100 years, why haven't we been clearly heard?'

Which can be answered by examining ourselves: 'Do we need to "re"present our lesson? What are we saying/doing/expressing to the world and amongst ourselves? What is heard by others? What do we not understand ourselves?' Just as one humbly reassesses one's approach to the child, reassess ourselves. A very common sense, natural and humble way to look at ourselves.

We need each other...

Another impression: The wonderful egalitarianism of our gathering. We each were able to share the experience of sitting in a lofty and beautiful Spanish monastery's meeting hall for wrestling with our thoughts, but we also all experienced the equality of a student mess hall's cafeteria line. A lesson in the importance of a prepared environment for any stage of development. Small study groups were a particularly rewarding experience. All were able to participate and add to the whole. Our speakers each had a different challenge to throw down. Collectively, their urgency and convictions were inspirational. I watched many Montessorians in our group find themselves deeply challenged by innovative insights and reach out to stretch themselves. One's struggles and small triumphs were shared and supported. Outside of "class," there were odd moments of loneliness. We were re-evaluating our life's work amongst new acquaintances. That changed by the third week as we realised the incredible riches of our tiny, temporary community. This warm comradeship was much valued.

We have unusual answers...

I'll leave the details to others to share the highlights of our gathering, but for me peeling back the layers of Dr. Montessori's understanding of the workings of the universe revealed some unusual links: Tracing the

child's moral formation through their ages could equally be the blueprint for the development of a society's values. Adolescence is such a perfectly natural time to imprint the responsibility and privilege of parenting by letting young people learn the process of how they came to be themselves. And so on.

Burgos...

Burgos had its own effect. Whenever we were taking ourselves too seriously, a visit to the Paleolithic finds and Roman art at the museum or a simple walk under the Santa Maria Arch with a glimpse of that wondrous Cathedral or a tale or two of the feats of Queen Isabel, put it all into perspective. The evening paseo, couple after couple conversing or simply walking with each other, families sitting with each other over drinks, even the Friday evenings with organised dancing in the streets, all reminded us of what was important.

The meaning of our work...

As an American, one of the best parts of our Assembly was the rare chance to feel a part of a much more global consciousness. To talk of "Man" and the human experience. The Universal Child. To sketch the impact such ideas have upon the most basic of situations. To feel so solidly how the parts come together to fit the whole. The deep ecology of playing one's own part in a much larger, all encompassing pattern of life.

I'm not sure why, but somehow that is the easiest aspect to lose - even amongst the most kind hearted and well meaning of Montessorians. The urgency of why we must do our work is deeply tied in with that consciousness. Without it, much of the meaning remains hidden and the hard work associated with sowing the seeds for later growth, and tossing the small stone into the pond to create a ripple, becomes overwhelming.

Emily Green
USA

Impressions on the Second Assembly of Educateurs sans Frontières

The second Assembly was eagerly awaited. Benefiting from the enthusiasm generated by the first Assembly, enrolment was at full capacity and some applicants had to be disappointed this time around. The three-week Assembly was held in Burgos, Spain. Accommodation was provided at the city's university campus San Agustin, whilst lectures and presentations were given in one of the halls of the adjacent Monasterio, graciously put at AML's disposal by the Provincial Government of Burgos.

The Assembly was hosted by Renilde Montessori, Silvia C. Dubovoy and Mary Hayes, who also moderated the sessions. Apart from the contributions by the keynote speakers, the programme was enriched by several presentations, both scheduled and unscheduled. The intensive programme provided for a wealth of opportunities for exploring and deepening understanding of Montessori's philosophy.

The programme also afforded the participants ample occasion for discussion and debate, in addition to strengthening the feeling of a shared mission in such a diverse world. But let the participants speak for themselves. A collage has been made from the many reactions received.

Our in-depth study and understanding of Dr. Maria Montessori's continuing relevance was inspirational to say the least. Living with colleagues, trainers, speakers and the most experienced Montessori people on the planet for three weeks (to include seeing each other at breakfast, lunch and dinner) brought everyone to a new level of camaraderie.

Visually speaking, I came away with the understanding to continue using the flame of Dr. Montessori's work in daily practice, as opposed to merely using the easier aspects of her philosophy, known as the smoke of her philosophy.

Marty Collins
USA

We gathered on the first morning in the large modern room at the Monasterio San Agustín not quite knowing what we were in for. The graduation ceremony three weeks later saw that same group excited by the possibilities that had been opened up by the speakers, the discussions and the friendships formed.

It was a great experience to revisit the writings of Dr. Montessori and see the extent of her understanding of the needs of the human being to age 24; to see the continuum, rather than to be focused on the particular three-year age range that we worked in.

Jenny Williams
Australia

My experience in Burgos was first-rate because I was given the opportunity and the privilege to meet so many generous people that care about humanity and its future. It was inspirational, uplifting and moving. This ensemble enriched my life.

Coral Ruiz
Mexico

The Educateurs sans Frontières Assembly of 2004 was an opportunity to explore possibilities for helping to improve life globally, while finding self-enrichment amongst comrades. Each week, the programme guided the group of participants through many creative processes. The coordinators participated candidly, gracefully presented topics for discussion, and provided an excellent array of speakers: there were many prospects to consider.

The importance of spreading awareness of issues such as child labour and world health was validated throughout the duration of the gathering, as we put effort into the analysis of the fundamental needs of humankind. The endeavours of sharing knowledge of Montessori principles, helping those in need, and working towards various types of reform were greeted by a group of people able to collaborate and solidify the strengths of the Montessori movement.

Meghan Ault
USA

I was fortunate to have this experience only a month after completing my Primary diploma course. It was enhanced by several sessions during which small groups of us discussed specific chapters from Dr. Montessori's writings. I noted how even the experienced directresses amongst us were impressed by how incredibly perceptive Dr. Montessori's words are and by the extent to which her observations are still valid in modern times. I also felt extremely fortunate to listen to the opinions of individuals who had spent

so many years working with children. In addition, our groups were made up of educators of children from each of the first three planes of development and so tales of relevant personal experiences were rich and varied.

It was a great treat to hear 'non-Montessorians' speak about topics including child labour, world peace and environmental issues. This tied in with the broader application of the Montessori philosophy.

Firstly were the especially poignant reports from people who already carry out work under the EsF umbrella, often involving children in remote regions of the world or in particularly harsh environments. Secondly were the informative lectures from people who are 'experts in their plane' - namely Silvana Montanaro, Ita Williams and David Kahn.

On a lighter note, I was delighted to meet such a wonderfully diverse group of people, all of whom were so supportive of one another. I feel this is my first step to becoming part of a worldwide network of educators, all working for a common cause.

Gayle Wood
United Kingdom

I was struck profoundly with Montessori's genius. Lectures given in 1937 on education for peace are so prevalent today. She said 'A great social mission that will ensure the child justice, harmony and love remains to be accomplished. And this great task must be the work of education, for this is the only way to build a new world and to bring peace.'

One could not possibly reflect on the second Assembly of Educateurs sans Frontières in Burgos without mentioning the remarkable individuals who took part. Whether we gathered in small groups in the monastery to discuss an assigned reading, or sat in the plaza watching the sun set behind the 16th century gothic cathedral, the conversation was always stimulating, inspiring and full of hope.

Jules Layman
USA

'Un momento magico' strikes me now as the best description of my experience at August's EsF Assembly in Spain. To meet, to be challenged by, to be enriched by a group of people from around the world. All of them searching for ways to be advocates for children in an increasingly complex modern world.

Ann McCracken
USA

Five years have passed since the first Assembly. And here we are again embarking on a new exposure to Renilde's call to action to 'reinvigorate the Montessori Movement', in particular to fulfil the aim of AMI's Article 4d: 'helping to create a climate of opinion and opportunities for the development of the potential of all young people so that humanity may work in harmony for a higher and more peaceful civilisation.'

The speakers inspired us with new ways of looking at the community and at the child. The delegates responded with introspection, humility and wit. Our journey in Spain ended in an exciting crescendo - an outpouring of ideas for the future, guidelines, creations, action.

Sally Connellan
Australia

Although having attended numerous AMI conferences since 1965, I was astounded by the powerful impact of the EsF experience. Not since training have I been moved so profoundly.

Brainstorming discussions brought forth a collective wisdom born of practical experience and observation. Nothing was off limits, nothing sacrosanct. Creative thinking filled both sides of a white board with idea after idea of how to more effectively transmit the truths of Montessori's vision to modern culture and thus to effect change. Projects, whether large or small, complex or simple, for one or many to implement - these were our challenges to ourselves.

What was EsF for me? A time to grow and learn, to be challenged intellectually, to think new thoughts and broaden viewpoints.

More than anything else, it was a spiritual retreat - a time to pause, to reflect on the past, to look to the future and what remains to be done.

Charlene Trochta
USA

EsF was truly a spiritual experience for me. EsF created more of an understanding that Montessori is not only an education but also a way of life.

Spending quality time with like-minded people was enlightening. The knowledge of the group and our guest speakers was captivating.

Kelly Webster
USA

The presenters and the context of the daily meetings provided invaluable information for our work with "others": those who care for children without yet having the opportunity to see the child from the same enlightening knowledge which we are so fortunate to have acquired. The participants also contributed a great deal as well, and I left Spain with a feeling of further encouragement and sounder knowledge for my own endeavours.

Monica Sullivan Smith
USA

It was a unique opportunity for me to join the EsF Assembly in Burgos. With the realisation that most children enjoy Montessori education in a fairly prosperous and privileged environment. The lectures by experts and group discussions reinforced the sense of the importance of keeping the candle originally kindled by Maria Montessori aflame. We have to redigest, reconfirm and reconsolidate, for the future of humanity.

Fumio Takane
Japan

We have since gone off to our different corners of our planet striving to keep the flame of love alive. This is the love for the child and humanity that will enable us to serve her so that she can keep her dignity at every stage of development she goes through or in whatever circumstance she may have been born into.

This is what EsF has sent us home with.

Judith Patria Gonzalez
Philippines