

PREFACE

THE OBSERVATION ARTIST

by Molly O'Shaughnessy

Molly O'Shaughnessy's article is the preface to this observation-themed journal because it not only explains the importance and approaches of observation but also exhorts every Montessori teacher to revitalize their practice of scientific observation in order to know a child's potential; that is, to authenticate the truth about children's work within a Montessori prepared environment. Never before in NAMTA's history has there been a consolidated journal about observation that addresses the topic across the planes of education while utilizing the same core principles for every level of Montessori: birth to three, early childhood, childhood, and adolescence. "Observation is the cornerstone of Montessori education," states O'Shaughnessy, and her passionate speech makes a definitive case for observation's critical role in supporting scientific pedagogy.

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Many years ago, the Montessori Center of Minnesota received a gift from the graduating class with a lovely image and words of wisdom from Dr. Montessori. Unfortunately we have not been able to find the source of the quote. This is what it said:

One simple understanding directed me toward the truth. The truth is, there is no child—regardless of the level of their intellect—that does not thirst for knowledge.

Because I was the first woman to graduate as a medical doctor from the University of Rome, it should be evident; I was no stranger to controversy. I was accustomed to the seemingly insurmountable obstacle—inspired to prove that rare is the insurmountable more than a figment of fear.

It was this inspiration that led me to the challenge of teaching those believed to be unteachable—the retarded children. It was the resounding success of this effort that convinced me there was a far less confining way to teach the “normal” children.

That the better way of teaching was, in fact, not to teach at all!

It was so clear—we were not imparting our wisdom with the current system. Rather, we were imposing our own limitations. With this revelation in mind, I opened the doors to *Casa dei Bambini* in the neighborhood that others called the slums. I called it paradise—for in paradise all things are possible.

My staff was schooled especially for my program. They were instructed to resist the urge to teach. They were to act as observers and to guide gently in a nearly undetectable fashion.

The success of my program was instant and obvious, but its time was, sadly, limited. The fascists found me intolerable and I was no supporter of theirs. So forced to cease my work or flee my home, I chose the latter and lived without regret.

My understanding that all children will scour their resources for understanding was the only guarantee I needed to know my system would not fail.

Everything we need to know to be successful in our work with children and in life for that matter is contained in these words and can be distilled to eight simple, yet profound statements:

1. We work in paradise—where all things are possible.
2. There is no child—regardless of their intellect—that does not thirst for knowledge.
3. All children will scour their resources for understanding.
4. Resist the urge to teach.
5. The better way to teach is, in fact, not to teach at all!
6. We must not impose our own limitations.
7. Act as observers and guide gently.
8. Rare is the insurmountable more than a figment of fear.

Observation is the cornerstone of the Montessori method. All of her principles were formulated based on observation. Observation is the basic supportive element in her philosophy. Observation gave her the key to understanding the child that she did not fully understand prior to her work in the first *Casa* in 1907. As a scientist and medical doctor, Montessori relied on the tools of observation to help diagnose illnesses. It was these same tools that helped her to discover the nature of the child.

To scientifically observe means to see or sense something through directed, careful, analytical attention. Conclusions and judgments can only follow repeated, pure observations and prudent testing of our interpretation of our observations. This is quite different from causal observation. Only through her collected scientific observations was Montessori able to interpret her findings and reach the revelations that lead her to provide an environment that met the needs of the developing child.

Through observation, she found the key to the educational dilemma of her time, and that key still fits today. Education was and,

to a certain degree, still is perceived as the passing on of information, so the emphasis is on curriculum. With the scientific method of education, the emphasis is on the process of development of children during different stages of maturation.

We, as educators, must learn from Dr. Montessori, the scientist. We must strive to master the art of scientific observation, as well as spiritual observation, having to do with our own self-awareness and the innate unfolding of life, and become Observation Artists. We must combine both.

Science is defined as the observation, identification, description, experimental investigation, and theoretical explanation of a natural phenomenon. Looking at this definition, we see observation at the top of the list. Observation is recognized as an important instrument in all the sciences. We cannot draw conclusions or experiment until we have learned to observe.

Growing toward mastery in self-observation requires the same components to obtaining mastery in any realm: focus, awareness, repetition, and “deliberate practice.” Knowing ourselves well, knowing our own assets and liabilities, knowing what moves us forward in a positive way, what gets us stuck and holds us back, will help us deepen our skills as observers of children.

Montessori made many discoveries through observation: that children construct themselves, that character cannot be formed by the adult, that special mentalities exist at different stages of life, that children love silence, the concept of the normalized child, that very young children have real powers of attention, and so forth. Her scientific approach allowed the “new child” to emerge, so that his true nature was revealed. By not allowing preconceived ideas to contradict what was manifesting itself before her eyes, the true meaning of education—the Latin, *educare*, to bring forth from within—was understood.

At the *Casa*, Montessori crafted the ideal conditions for observation. The environment was not set up to teach the children. The assistants were not trained. And within this natural, unconstrained

environment, Montessori's scientific training, her curiosity, open-mindedness, and intuitiveness helped her to see children through a new lens. The preservation, development, and continuation of the method depends on observation.

What is observation? To observe means to see or sense something through directed, careful, analytical attention. To come to realize or know. As Montessori explains, "Observation itself is an art and has to be exercised. It is not easy. We must free ourselves from so much prejudice especially with regard to the child. Observation does not judge, much less pre-judge" (in Joosten).

The Montessori method is not a teaching method, but an observation method. In Italian, observation means something very close to *witnessing*. The job of the adult is literally to witness the unfolding of children. Observing is different than seeing. When we talk about seeing, we just look at what is in front of us. At the same time that we are looking, we are making our own interpretation of what is taking place. This interpretation is not based in reality because everything is based on our own pre-conceived ideas.

The ability to observe requires acquiring the appropriate techniques. Montessori's mode of observation was that of a natural scientist. The natural scientist gathers data patiently and objectively, reflects on the information gathered, and arrives at a conclusion and takes appropriate steps. Judgment follows repeated, pure observations and prudent, ever renewed testing of our interpretation of our observations.

Observation is a skill and an art that involves training, which has its start in the first Montessori training, but the breadth and depth of this art must go well beyond that beginning. Like a microscope, without knowing what to look for, or what it means, observation is a useless tool.

Observation is a specialized, accurate, watching, perceiving, and seeing, perfected through repeated exercises. It is an attitude of mind that should become a way of life. It is an ongoing process. It requires discipline to gather facts, which can be interpreted to reach conclusions and guide actions. If I am able to observe, I will relate in a different way to what is in front of me and I will react in a different way.

It is particularly difficult to objectively observe human behavior. There are so many variables that can interfere with making appropriate judgments. If we can become aware of potential limiting factors, it will help us become better observers. The task of observation must be based on an interest in humanity, or love—a total commitment to each individual child. Love must be based on respect. It involves goodwill, benevolence, kindness, generosity, devotion, charity, and leniency in judging others.

I would like to share two framing models that help us to see that our work is an integrated whole with many individual components all affecting and supporting each other. The two models are very similar, except in one we are in the “help me” mode and in the other we are in the “happy mode.” Through these models, we will see that observation is the key to keeping us in the “happy” mode.

In the “help me” mode (figure 1), when confronted with a problem, we think, “Things aren’t working,” “I don’t know what to do,” “I’ve tried everything,” “I’m not sure this method really works.” In any given moment, we only know what we know, which is why we

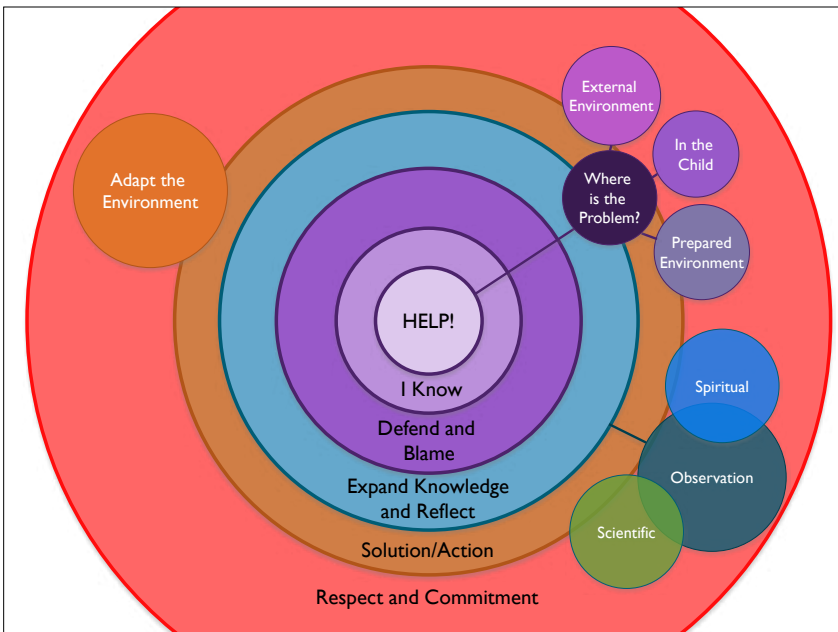


Figure 1. Framing the whole “help me” mode.

get stuck. This can be a scary or uncomfortable place to be, and our tendency is to defend and blame. When we don't know the answers, it's natural and easy to project them onto someone or something else. And if we have children who are behaving aggressively, it is easy to panic. So we ask ourselves, where is the problem? First, we tend to look to the child. It could be a cognitive developmental issue, or temperament, or an emotional issue, but this is not where we should start. Second, we consider the external environment, seeking to blame something in the home environment, extended family, or cultural influences. Finally, we look to the prepared environment, the domain that we can anchor ourselves in, and consider the physical and psychological environment as well as the guide and assistants. Next, we expand our knowledge and reflect, turning to the tools and skills built up in our training and experience. Observation, at this stage, is our major tool. Through spiritual and scientific observation, we can identify the problem and take action. Sometimes, we may need outside consultation, although this will generally not be the first step. No matter which domain the problem resides in, the solution will always require some form of adaptation of the environment.

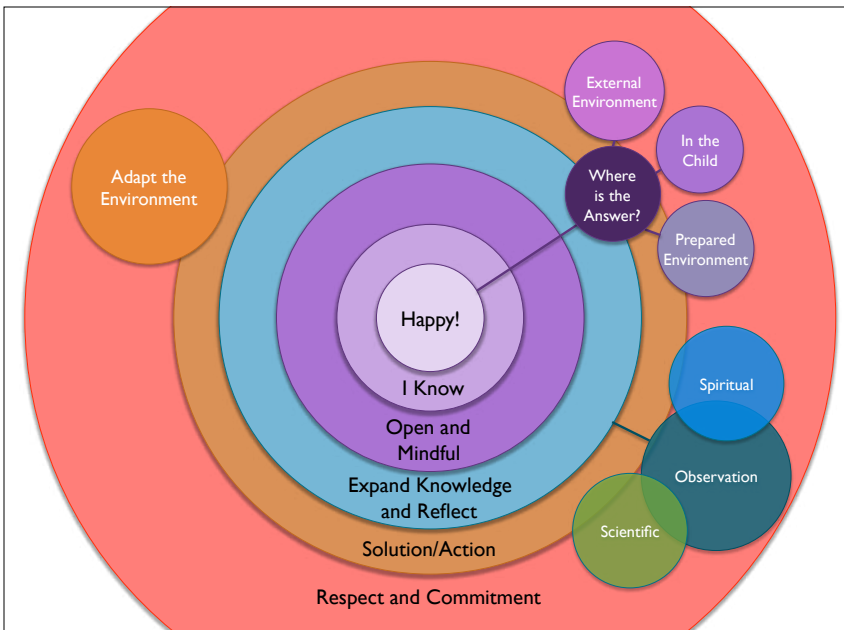


Figure 2. Framing the whole “happy” mode.

The second model is the “happy” model, and this is where we want to be (figure 2). Making a few modifications to the “help me” model allows us to become effective observers. Instead of defending and blaming, we become open, mindful, and respectful. We expand our knowledge and seek the best solutions. We ask ourselves, “Where’s the answer?” rather than “Where’s the problem?”

To reside in the “happy” model, we must become observation artists. In order to reach this goal, we must identify the elements that can get in the way of this, the limitations and constraints of observing human behavior.

Throughout her writings Montessori stated there are two major factors that determine the possibility for healthy development ultimately leading to human solidarity and healthy evolution of civilization: 1) constructing a suitable environment, congruent with life, and 2) bringing a new attitude toward children on the part of adults (*Education and Peace* 91). Both of these are related to the core of our work: protecting the creative process in the children and in ourselves.

Montessori also states that the first step in this process of development is an inward examination, a soul-searching process that requires extensive exploration of our own beliefs, prejudices, assumptions, and biases. You will recall from your own Montessori training that she refers to this as *the modification of the adult*, and that all else stems from this. This ongoing process is a critical component to becoming an observation artist, because objective self-observation is perhaps the most difficult endeavor not only with regards to our work with children, but in the realm of all human relationships. It requires great human virtue, courage, humility, and fortitude. Growing toward mastery in self-observation requires the same components to obtaining mastery in any realm: focus, awareness, repetition, and “deliberate practice.” Knowing ourselves well, knowing our own assets and liabilities, knowing what moves us forward in a positive way, what gets us stuck and holds us back, will help us deepen our skills as observers of children.

Looking back to the “Framing the Whole” chart, we see that scientific and spiritual observation go hand in hand, constantly supporting

and informing each other. To become real artists in observation, we need to nurture both domains consistently and continuously.

I remember Mr. Joosten’s provocative words from my own training in 1973. He said, “This is not merely a question of learning something. It is a question of achieving a revolution within ourselves and of our whole outlook, of our whole attitude, and of everything we are. The discovery and exploration of all we are without having been aware of it is one of the most exhilarating and fascinating experiences because we precisely discover unknown factors within ourselves.” I was twenty-two at the time, and to this day that moment in my own training has sustained and inspired me to continue my own self-examination, reflection, and growth.

SPIRITUAL OBSERVATION

Montessori realized that to be an observation artist, we must combine “spiritual” observation (figure 3) with “scientific” observation. We must first look inward before we can look outward. When



Figure 3. Spiritual observations.

we look inward, we begin to observe our own reality, prejudices, beliefs, biases, and assumptions. Recognizing these characteristics within ourselves, we become attentive, mindful, and focused.

Reality

Each of us operates from our own reality. Many factors contribute to what constitutes our reality. In the article, “Choose Your Reality and Create Your Future,” author Roger Ellerton explains “Each and everyone of us forms mental models as to what we believe is real and what is not. These models establish how things should or shouldn’t be done and what is possible or not possible for us.” These models help us make all kinds of decisions—about ourselves, about the world, about children, about our partners, and so forth.

Ellerton suggests models are formed early and are influenced by:

1) *Interpretation of our own experiences (Ellerton 4)*

We know how a child adapts to the world depends greatly on their experiences in the world. We know that children have a natural inclination, if unimpeded, toward normalization, and that if obstacles are put in the way along the path, healthy development can be hindered and deviations appear. We know that each child’s experiences will create the belief whether the world is a safe place, a frightening place, a rational place, etc.

In the book, *The Art of Living Consciously*, Nathaniel Branden says that children need the experience of a rational universe. He explains that by a rational universe we mean “an environment in which facts are treated as facts, truth is respected, question-asking is valued, not punished, and people do not permit themselves contradictions and do not assail others with conflicting messages...an environment in which the adults speak to a child’s mind, not to his or her fears—and in which a child’s desire to understand is honored and nurtured” (19). We work hard to make Montessori environments that present a “rational universe” to the child. We stress the importance of indirect presentations and how indeed they are even more powerful than a direct presentation. As Ralph Waldo Emerson said, “Your actions speak so loudly I cannot hear what you say.”

2) *What we are told by others—particularly those in authority (Ellerton 4)*

If words and actions are positive, fair, supportive, objective, and loving, we begin to have a pretty clear understanding of who we are, what our strengths are, to have confidence in our abilities, and become more willing to take risks, experiment with new ideas, etc. The mental model we form is “I am good. I am capable.”

However, if the words and actions are negative, incongruent, inconsistent, authoritative, demeaning, our interpretation of these actions and words can have devastating results even if the adults did not intend them to (figure 4). With these kinds of actions and words, our reality model may become “I am no good.”

Ellerton cites in his article that, “A study by researchers at Iowa State University found in a typical family with children aged 2 to 8 that the ratio of negative to positive comments said by parents to their children was 13:1. That is, for every positive comment, children heard 13 negative comments. If as a child, you lived in this type of environment, what mental model might you form about yourself, others and the world around you” (4).

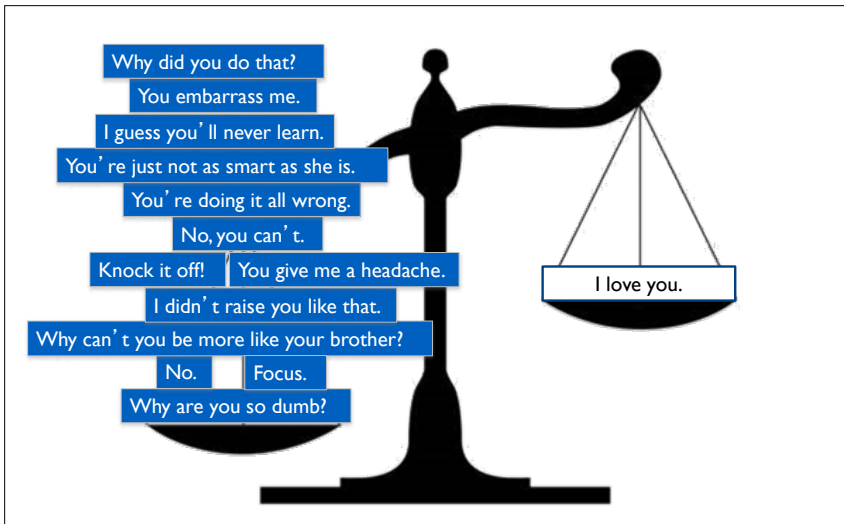


Figure 4. What we are told by others.

3) *Our reality is formed by what we tell ourselves (Ellerton 4)*

We are constantly talking to ourselves, about ourselves. A lot of internal verbal clutter goes on in our minds if we are not attentive to it. A lot of this happens at an unconscious level. For many of us, negative thoughts overshadow the positive and we focus on them—constantly beating ourselves up (figure 5). We punish ourselves with a lot of the should have, could have, I can't believe I did that, I never should have said that, she must think I'm an idiot, etc.

After giving a presentation or performance, one can have thirty positive responses and one negative one, and that is the one that receives *all* of the focus and attention. I have seen it with my adult students as well. I remember one student, who had teenaged children, got a B+ on a paper and all her life had been used to As. At dinner she was bemoaning this, saying she couldn't believe she got a B. Her daughter said, "Welcome to my world." In light of our work, it is interesting to see how difficult it is for some to not have grades affect them so deeply.

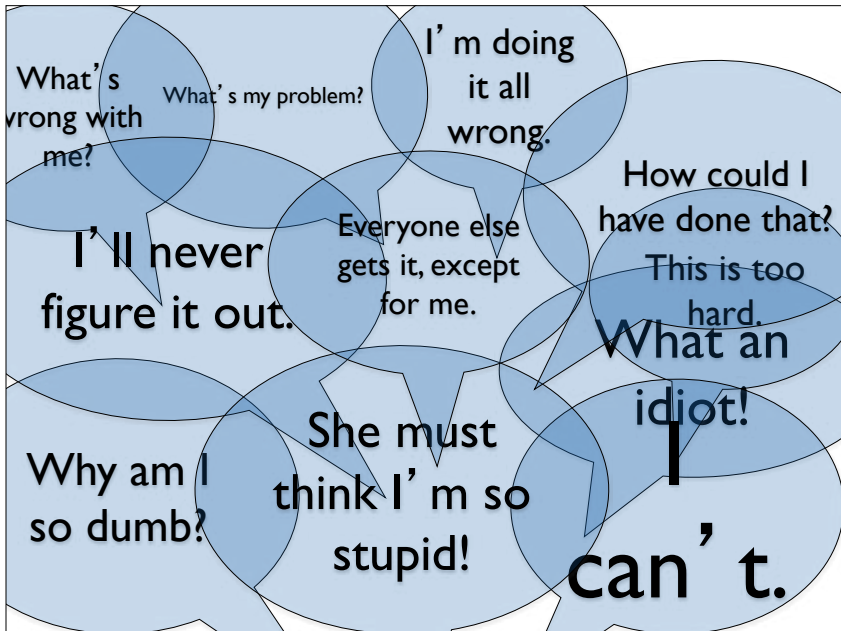


Figure 5. What we tell ourselves.

A revealing illustration of our need to value ourselves and our work based on grades is highlighted in the wonderful book, *The Art of Possibility*. One of the authors, Benjamin Zander, was the conductor of the Boston Philharmonic Orchestra as well as a professor. His students were instrumentalists and singers taking a two-semester exploration into the art of musical performance. After twenty-five years of teaching, he continued to come up against the same obstacle of the students' anxiety over the measurements and grades of their performances making them too reluctant to take risks with their playing. So at the beginning of class he told the students,

Each student in this class will get an A for the course. However, there is one requirement that you must fulfill to earn this grade. Sometime during the next 2 weeks, you must write me a letter dated next May which begins with the words, "Dear Mr. Zander, I got an A because...and in this letter you are to tell, in as much detail as you can, the story of what will have happened to you by next May that is in line with this extraordinary grade. (27)

He tells them they must write this letter placing themselves in the future and report on all the insights they acquired and milestones they attained. Everything must be written in the past tense. Not phrases such as "I hope" or "I intend." He told them he was especially interested in the person they will have become.

The letters were extraordinary:

Dear Mr. Zander,

I got an A because I had the courage to examine my fears and I realized that they have no place in my life. I changed from someone who was scared to make a mistake in case she was noticed to someone who knows that she has a contribution to make to other people, musically and personally...Thus all diffidence and lack of belief in myself are gone. So too is the belief that I only exist as a reflection in other people's eyes and the resulting desire to please everyone...I understand that trying and achieving are the same thing when you are your own master—and I am. I have found a desire to convey music to other people, which is stronger than the worries I had about myself. I have changed from desiring inconsequentiality and anonymity to accepting the joy that comes from knowing that my music changes the world. (30)

Even though we are all shaped by our history, it does not have to define who we are, what actions we take, and so on. We have the possibility of introspection, which Montessori tells us is necessary to work well with children.

Biases, Prejudices, Beliefs, Assumptions

Observer Bias

Observer bias happens when the observer's expectations influence their interpretation of the behaviors they observe, thus affecting their conclusions. Our own biases can cloud our judgments. We like to think that we don't have biases, that we treat each child fairly, and that we are not influenced by our own beliefs and thoughts about individual children.

Many situations may influence and prejudice our beliefs. For example, we may observe a child mistreating another child and feel upset by it, and unconsciously we may make judgments about it leading to certain behaviors on our part. We may choose to not present something when that child asks for a presentation, or we may withhold affection. We often unconsciously punish children for their misbehaviors.

Or we may have read about birth order and how it affects children's behavior and unnecessarily come to conclusions about a child based on your bias.

We may complain that children do not repeat activities or stay with something for more than a few minutes. It may lead us to the conclusion that children are different than they were a hundred years ago in Montessori's time.

Others have been influenced by this particular assumption. The belief that children have a short attention span is what dominates children's programming, resulting in very brief segments, which in turn contribute to a short attention span! It becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

If we begin to believe that children have changed, it begins to change our behavior toward them. We may present too many things to a child without a period for reflection and exploration; we may load the environment with too many activities; we may have lon-

ger and longer and more and more group gatherings in an effort to control the children.

Does this mean that the basic nature of children has changed? Not necessarily. While it is true that children today have different influences than the children of thirty years ago, and it may influence their behavior, we still see the same kinds of transformations that Montessori talked about when a child is truly engaged in purposeful work. We still see the same results when children are normalized.

In one study from 1974, psychoanalytic therapists were shown a videotape of a twenty-six-year-old man talking to a professor about his feelings and work experiences. Some of the therapists were told the young man was a patient, while others were told he was a job applicant. After seeing the videotape, the clinicians were asked for their observations. What kind of man was this young man? Although they saw the same clip, their reactions were not the same. Those who thought the man was a job applicant described him with such terms as “attractive,” “candid,” and “innovative.” Those who thought he was a patient described him as “uptight” and as a “defensive person, frightened of his own aggressive impulses” (*Research Methods in Psychology* 172).

Admitting that we have biases and are influenced by them is the first step toward objectivity. We can stop and ask ourselves, “How did I come to these conclusions?”

Interpretation of the data and erroneous conclusions

Uncritical acceptance of data can be dangerous and this frequently interferes with the ability to make wise decisions. It is very easy to fall victim to it in all human relationships, especially with children. Rumors and prejudiced descriptions of facts about children can lead to erroneous conclusions. Even if parents tell us things about their children, we should wait and see what we observe before acting on their observations and conclusions.

For example, a child you have been experiencing difficulty with is diagnosed as ADHD and suddenly, based on our beliefs about ADHD, we feel exonerated from the problem. We simply conclude that he is acting this way because he has ADHD. Our conclusion may be that a Montessori environment is not the proper place for

this child, without even questioning the validity of the diagnosis or looking for other ways to help the child.

Another example that we frequently see, one I fell into myself when I was working with children and with my own children at home: We enter a scene midstream, we have no idea what happened before we entered, but we make assumptions based on the little information we have.

Or we have a child who has been acting up and we know his parents are in the middle of a divorce. We say, or others say, "Oh, he is having problems because his parents are divorcing." This is an interpretation, a belief, not a fact.

We limit a person's potential when we start with a label—"She's bright," "He's clumsy," "She's dyslexic," etc. It also affects how we work with the child and makes objective observation difficult. Even the placement of words can change the meaning. Think about the difference between the two phrases "a difficult child" and "a child with difficulties." Language defines us and informs our interpretation.

Our actions are often based on our beliefs and interpretation. Someone tells you his aunt just died. We might ask, "How old was she?" or "Were you close?" Then we decide how we should react—how sad we should be.

Our conclusions may be correct, but the more repetition we see in our observations, the more valid the meaning. For example, if we have a liquid that looks like water, it is dangerous to jump to the conclusion that it is water. "It is a clear liquid" is an observation, but "it is water" is not. If we test the liquid we may find out it is water, or it may not be, it might be poison. Jumping to the conclusion that it is water could have dangerous consequences, if indeed it is poison. It can be difficult to separate conclusions, and facts. Dead giveaways are categorical words like "all" "every" "none" "always."

Are conclusions bad? No: It is vital in science, and in our environments, to draw conclusions. Our goal is to try to separate observations from conclusions. This is difficult, especially when we are dealing with human beings.

Cognitive phenomena cannot be directly observed

We never really know what is going on inside the mind. We can see outward manifestations, but it is difficult to know exactly what has led a child to behave in a certain way, to understand how he finally figured out how to put the binomial cube together. We know that processing information is complex and requires different amounts of time from child to child. This is the main reason all initial presentations with the sensorial materials are individual presentations, not small group.

To assume a child should be able to understand something after a certain number of repetitions is erroneous and can lead to false conclusions. So often we may hear, “He wasn’t ready for that presentation.” When asked how she came to that conclusion, the guide says, “He couldn’t do it.” But if a child, for example, builds the pink tower perfectly the first time you present it, most likely you missed the ideal time to present it.

Not all activity can be recorded

There are so many, many things that we do not observe throughout the day: actions, spoken words, choices, upsets, and so forth. Very often this is a positive thing, because it prevents us from interfering with the child’s own process. On the other hand, it does prevent us from having a full picture. Certainly when you take time to really observe your children, you realize how much you miss. Sometimes the smallest detail can make the biggest difference. A child may make a discovery about a piece of material and verbalize it, “All of these shapes are rectangles,” or a child may write a letter perfectly for the first time, and we may miss this explosion or discovery. In Montessori’s books, she would state these kinds of observations—“Maria wrote today for the first time,” etc.

Even with the help of assistants, it is impossible to record all that happens. That is why a good system of record keeping is critical. Of course it is not simply a matter of recording what the children do, we need to know how they do things, how often, what worked, what didn’t. When I first worked with children, I used squared paper with a name for each child. I would jot down what each of them did. But I soon realized that this was somewhat meaningless, and I

found myself coming to conclusions about the children's capabilities that were often incorrect.

Only short periods of time can be observed

When we consider the short amount of time we have with the children, we realize that we only receive a snapshot of each of their lives. If children come to us having had obstacles to their development, we may not know the cause. I use to go on home visits so I could learn a little about the child's life outside the *Casa*. This was always very helpful. Seeing the child's physical environment in the home gives us essential information about what the child may need. Ideally there should be an information form to be completed by the parents. Their observations also help us in making wise decisions. The important element is to use this information judiciously and not jump to conclusions.

Nowadays, at least in the United States, many teachers actually do spend very extended time with the children because both of their parents are working. In this case, it is we who should share our observations with the parents, to help them understand what their child is experiencing and how they can support the child at home.

Environmental influences altering behavior

Although we cannot jump to conclusions based on environmental influences, we know they do make an impact on the children's behavior. Even in the prepared environment when we make seemingly insignificant changes, it can affect the children's behavior. I have seen children become very upset when the position of objects has been changed, or when we read a book in a different way. So we can imagine how an illness, a divorce, a death, a fight with a friend, may affect behavior. As adults, we know for instance, how lack of sleep may alter our ability to reason, to be patient, and so forth.

We must be keenly aware of the limitations just outlined when we are observing children and making judgments based on our observations. The more cognizant we are of the pitfalls of observation, the easier it will be to remedy them.

All of these experiences shape our reality, which in turn shapes our beliefs, worldview, and paradigms, and this is where we oper-

ate from. We come to expect things to be a certain way, which in turn affects our decisions. Our expectations influence our thoughts and behavior.

In the book, *How We Decide*, the author, Jonah Lehrer, gives a number of examples of how expectations influence us. Here are two of the examples Lehrer shares:

- Researchers gave college students electric shocks while they were in an MRI machine. Half of the people were then supplied with fake pain-relieving cream—hand moisturizer. According to the MRI scans, this placebo effect depended entirely on the prefrontal cortex, the center of reflective, deliberate thought. Because they *expected* less pain, they experienced less pain (146).
- People tend to think that generic aspirin is less effective than brand name and high-priced aspirin (147).

“We don’t know how powerful our expectations are,” said the neuroeconomist who led the study (148).

We are also influenced by our “expectations” of children depending on what we have heard about them, our own assumptions. Consider the conversation in a staff room. One boy is moving up to elementary, and the primary guide, who struggled with the child for three years, makes an off-the-cuff statement: “Wait until you get him! He’s a real terror.” The child already will have strikes against him. Perhaps with a new environment, or a new teacher, or a new group of friends, he may become a totally different child. Most often it is better to go with what we objectively observe rather than from the various assumptions and expectations that may be influencing us.

Ellerton coaches us, “To overcome this conditioning, we need to become consciously aware of our mental models and explore the origins of our thoughts, beliefs, and values, that we assumed during our childhood” (4). Observation artists are constantly exploring possibilities that exist outside their current belief

systems. It may be comfortable to hold fast to our beliefs, but it closes off new possibilities or an opening to see it from a different perspective. And remember, “We work in paradise—where all things are possible.”

In *The Art of Possibility*, authors Rosamund Stone Zander and Benjamin Zander give a little test that helps to demonstrate what happens when we cannot think outside the box and we get stuck in old paradigms. The directions for their nine-dot puzzle (figure 6) are given as follows: “Join all nine dots with four straight lines, without taking the pen from the paper.” They explain:

The puzzle illustrates a universal phenomenon of the human mind, the necessity to sort data into categories in order to perceive it. Your brain instantly classifies the nine dots as a two-dimensional square . . . Nearly everyone hears: “connect the dots with four straight lines without taking pen from the paper, within the square formed by the outer dots.” And within that framework, there is no solution.

The frames our minds create define—and confine—what we perceive to be possible. Every problem, every dead end we find ourselves facing in life, only appears unsolvable inside a particular frame or point of view.

Enlarge the box, or create another frame around the data, and the problems vanish while new opportunities appear. (14)

One must ask oneself, they say, “What assumption am I making, that I’m not aware I’m making, that gives me what I see?” (15).

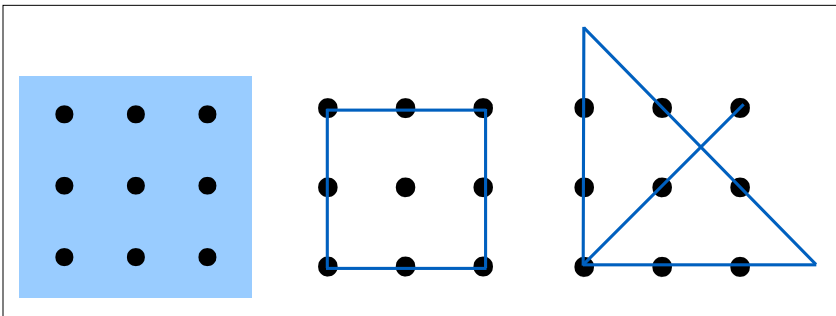


Figure 6. Nine-Dot Puzzle: center, incorrect, right, correct.

Attentive, Mindful, Focused

One of the core principles of Montessori education is that deep and sustained attention is the key to all learning in humans. In *The Child, Society and the World*, Montessori said that “Concentration is a part of life. It is not a consequence of a method of education” (12). She compares the complete state of deep concentration found in great thinkers to the intense concentration we witness in a child manually involved with an interesting and compelling task. She explains, “studying the phenomenon we see there is a close link between the manual work which is accomplished in common life and profound concentration of the spirit” (18).

We focus *so* much on helping children to be attentive and focused and not enough time developing this quality in ourselves. Mindful and focused attention is the key to artful observation. These qualities have also been attributed to genius in children as well as adults. Montessori had a brilliant understanding of attention, focus, and concentration as it relates to not only cognitive development, but also social, emotional, and spiritual development. She called it *normalization*.

How can we expect children to do this, if we are not models ourselves? If we think of attention as an important long-term goal, it is futile to try and “make” children become engaged or do what we think they should be doing.

The author of *Rapt: Attention and the Focused Life*, Winifred Gallagher, completed a study of the nature of experience—your life, who you are, what you think, feel, and do—and discovered: “What you love is the sum of what you focus on” (1). Or, as William James explained, “My experience is what I agree to attend to.”

Our Montessori environments are designed to help children become conscious of the elements within them. We isolate or highlight various aspects, such as dimension, texture, pitch, and so forth, enabling the children to give full attention to one aspect while the other aspects fade away for the moment. This helps the children to sharpen and deepen their perception and understanding of abstract concepts in a very detailed manner.

We make this possible for children in all of their work in the Children's House, but as observers we need to cultivate this tendency in ourselves as well. In surveying current literature, we note several authors focusing on the fact that we are losing our ability to attend to or interact in the world in a conscious and mindful way.

In the introduction to her book *Distracted: The Erosion of Attention and the Coming Dark Age*, Maggie Jackson states,

The premise of this book is simple. The way we live is eroding our capacity for deep, sustained, perceptive attention—the building block of intimacy, wisdom, and cultural progress. . . . [A]ttention defines us and is the bedrock of society. Attention “is the taking possession by the mind, in clear and vivid form, of one out of what seem several simultaneously possible objects or trains of thought,” wrote psychologist and philosopher William James in 1890. (13)

She argues that as a society, we are beginning to lose our capacity for deep attention and focus. We witness it in all aspects of life and social interactions. For example, she says, “One yearlong study found that workers not only switch tasks every 3 minutes during their workday but that nearly half the time they interrupt themselves. Think of email alone. People are so dazed that they have almost no time to reflect on the world around them, much less their future” (17).

In our Montessori environments we intentionally create opportunities for sustained attention and concentration enabling the children to form clear and thoughtful insights to what is revealed to them through extended exploration. Montessori defines sustained attention as a requisite for normalization of the human being also contributing to the development of character and will.

Aligned with Montessori's thinking on awareness and focus, Jackson states that “a baby's first job is to hone these skills.” A baby's task is to absorb all of the sensory impressions she experiences and begin to make sense of them—forming logical classifications that will inform an operational understanding of the world. Practicing awareness and attention helps both the child's cognitive and social-emotional development.

Jackson reports that “People who focus well report feeling less fear, frustration, and sadness day to day, partly because they can literally deploy their attention away from negatives in life” (23). Montessori repeatedly saw joy and calmness in the children during their long periods of concentration and attention.

Jackson adds, “Attention also tames our inner beast. Primates that receive training in attention become less aggressive. One of attention’s highest forms is ‘effortful control’ [Montessori calls it development of the will], which involves the ability to shift focus deliberately, engage in planning, and regulate one’s impulses” (23). These executive functioning skills develop organically in a Montessori environment as children are given the freedoms to plan and order their day, work uninterrupted for as long as they need, engage in many activities requiring control, and have a responsibility to the needs of the whole community.

Attention, focus, and mindfulness are our starting point for becoming observation artists. When we get in the “Help” mode, one of the first questions we can ask ourselves is, “Is there something I am not attending to?” Attention is the process of taking in, sorting and shaping, planning, and decision-making. It allows us to sense and respond to our environment.



Cornerstone Schools, St. Paul, Minnesota

Developmentally, the ability to attend and focus helps the child to understand and organize the world in his process of constructing himself and adapting to his time and place. The child's unique mentality, the absorbent mind, takes in all elements of the environment, assisting in the process of ordering impression. Gallagher expresses this benefit by stating that "Attention's selective nature confers tremendous benefits, chief of which is enabling you to comprehend what would otherwise be chaos. You could not take in the totality of your own experience, even for a moment, much less the whole world. . . . By helping you to focus on some things and filter out others, attention distills the universe into your universe" (9).

An additional benefit is what Gallagher calls an "experience beautifully described by the old-fashioned term "rapt"—completely absorbed, engrossed, fascinated, perhaps even carried away that underlies life's deepest pleasure (9–10). This is the joy we see in children as described by Montessori when allowed to act freely in prepared environments that offer purposeful and interesting activity.

What would rapt observation look like? What affect would it have on us? Rapt observation is a skill that needs to be cultivated and practiced. It must be based on interest and deep love for the potential within each individual child. Montessori's interest was sparked when she observed things that she did not suspect were possible in very young children. Her scientific mind wanted to understand what she saw before her so she continued to deeply observe children of all ages from all cultures around the world.

When I was asked to present at the AMI/USA Refresher Course in 2010, on the subject of observation, suddenly everything I saw or thought about was in the context of observation. When we have a specific task of focus, we become hyperaware of what we experience and observe in a very different way.

Mindfulness has its roots in Eastern philosophy and has been made popular in the West by Ellen Langer, author of *Mindfulness* (1989). The dictionary defines mindfulness as the practice of maintaining a nonjudgmental state of heightened or complete awareness of one's thoughts, emotions, or experiences on a moment-to-moment basis; and as such a state of awareness. Carrie McLaren, in her article,

“Mindless in America: Ellen Langer and the Social Psychology of Mindlessness,” defines mindfulness by way of its converse: “The opposite, mindlessness, is easiest to grasp: It’s the human tendency to operate on autopilot, whether by stereotyping; performing mechanically, by rote or simply not paying attention.”

In *Mindfulness*, Langer explains that we get “trapped in categories,” go on automatic, without questioning our beliefs, perspective and habits. Over the years, Langer has asked children and instructors in very different kinds of schools a simple but telling question: “What does it mean when a teacher asks students to pay attention, focus, concentrate on something? Invariable the answer is something like ‘To hold that thing still’” (*The Power of Mindful Learning* 38). In other words, most people think of attention as a kind of mental camera that you keep rigidly, narrowly focused on a particular subject or object. This realization led Langer to two important conclusions: When students have trouble paying attention, they’re doing what their teachers say they should do; the problem is that it’s the wrong instruction (38–39).

Our greatest task is to protect the creative process—both in ourselves and in the children. In order to do this, we must be diligent in helping children be mindful and attentive. Attention is a key component to creativity in all forms, from science to poetry to cooking.

In the book, *Hare Brain, Tortoise Mind*, Guy Claxton states, “The habit of attending closely and patiently to the evidence, even—sometimes especially—to tiny, insignificant-looking shreds of evidence, is characteristic of skilled practitioners of a variety of arts, crafts, and professions” (165). Observation artists notice the tiniest details that might inform their understanding of individual children and the community as a whole. With practice and discipline in the art, we can more readily intuit the best response in a given situation.

Claxton tells a wonderful story to illustrate this point, about an old boiler and the old man who came to fix it:

He wandered around among its convoluted pipe work, humming quietly to himself and occasionally putting his ear to a valve or a joint, and then pulled a hammer out of his tool bag and banged hard on one small obscure

corner. The boiler heaved a deep sigh and rumbled into life again. The old man sent a bill for 300 pounds which the manager thought excessive, so he sent it back with a request that it be itemized. When it came back, the old man had written:

For tapping with hammer: .50p

For knowing where to tap: 299.50p. (166–67)

Our observations help us know “where to tap.”

Self-Observation, Behavior, and Language

Keeping in mind all of the attributes that we have discussed opens up a new way of observing ourselves—how we conduct ourselves in and out of the environment, the language that we use with children, parents, colleagues, and so forth.

Our language and behavior can deeply influence the results of our observations. Let me share an example.

Montessori tells us that the child will reveal himself to us in an environment that has certain conditions present such as freedom to choose, freedom to repeat, and so forth. Think of it as a laboratory of sorts. If I say to a child, “Go find some work,” he may randomly pick something, even if it is not that interesting to him. The way he interacts with that material, which we will observe and take note of, may lead us to the wrong conclusion—and it may diminish the opportunity for the child to reveal what he is interested in. But if we were to say, “What do you want to work on today?” it communicates two things: 1) He has a real choice based on what might be interesting to him, and 2) it focuses on the fact that he will be working on something—an expectation in the environment. The difference is subtle, but important. And of course our delivery style or behavior also will communicate a lot to the child. How we ask the question is as important as what the question is. All of our behavior and language toward the child will influence how she constructs her own reality model of herself and the world.

As psychologist, Haim Ginott explains, “How parents and teachers talk tells a child how they feel about him. Their statements affect his self-esteem and self-worth. To a large extent, their lan-

guage determines his destiny” (15–16). All adults affect children’s self-constructs more than we realize, which is why Montessori said one of the most important things is a new attitude toward the child on the part of adults.

Neuro-linguistic programming practitioner Marc De Bruin outlines a way to break this negative mindset. Imagine a triangle (figure 7) and consider this passage from his article “Three Ways to Change Your Mind of the Better”:

In order to change your experience, you first need to change your thoughts. Simply THINK different thoughts, refocus your brain. Think more uplifting thoughts, catch yourself when you think negatively and your life will begin to change. You will speak different words and contemplate different actions.

For some people this is too hard. They would rather change their language, which also works. SPEAK different words; say things in a different way. If we constantly get the same undesirable response from a child, we must use different words.

The third option for change is behaving differently, which works better for some. DO things in another way, come up with new ways of behaving, and strike different poses and other forms of body language.

Changing even our body language can change our mood or perspective. Unless we start to think differently, we are destined to continue to create and repeat the same old reality every day.



Figure 7. Thought-Word-Action.

This can deeply influence our observations: We lose perspective and come to expect certain things from the children day in and day out. We come to conclusions without sufficient evidence; we go on automatic and make erroneous assumptions. Most of our thoughts and actions are habits and we go through the same motions each day, with little change in our outlook or behaviors. What would happen if we challenged these habits or customs? What might the world look like if we stepped outside of our comfort zone?

We have a choice about the thoughts we think. How many times in the past have we chosen to disregard our positive thoughts and focus on our negative thoughts? As Earl Nightingale said, “You become what you think about.”

Observation artists pay attention to what surrounds them. They are curious; they notice their thoughts and actions. It is useful to be aware of our thoughts and write them down for future reflection.

Observation artists listen well with the intention to understand. They tend to respond to children in predictable ways. Our patterns of language are so engrained in us.



Figure 8. Human qualities.

Human Qualities, Mentoring, and Self-Growth

The observation artist is characterized by a number of human qualities (figure 8).

Acknowledging limitations: We must be aware of our own limitations. It was Socrates who said, "I know that I don't know anything." We must not make assumptions. For example, because something is difficult for the adult, it will be difficult for the child. It is important to overcome and leave behind our prejudices about the child. We must start with a clean slate.

Objectivity: Objectivity is defined as, of, relating to, or being an object, phenomenon, or condition in the realm of sensible experience independent of individual thought and perceptible by all observers. To be objective means having reality independent of mind—not simply based on our interpretations and ideas. We have the tendency to fit our observations to our own conclusions. To be objective means not to get emotionally involved. This can be very difficult when children misbehave. This requires observing from an emotional distance. It also requires ridding ourselves of preconceived ideas about the child. This can be particularly difficult for parents because they are emotionally involved with their children. Even as guides, it is easy to slip into having favorite children versus those who frustrate or anger us.

Unobtrusiveness: This means we must be inconspicuous and not draw attention to ourselves. How do we feel when we know someone is watching us? It is so easy to find ourselves making comments to the children, such as how lovely their work is, or that they should try it this way, and so forth. We must cultivate the character of a scientist. The observation of living human beings is challenging because they can be affected by knowing that we are watching them. So we must not disturb the children in any way. The purpose of observation is to see what the children are doing, independent of our presence.

Immobility and alertness: Immobility and alertness requires tremendous control on the part of the observer. It demands the kind of silence and immobility that is required of the children during the silence activity. So often we want to intervene with the children's work.

I tell guides, as an experiment, to keep a bead counter with them and every time they have the impulse to interrupt, move a bead over.

It involves a physical and psychic preparation to have the ability to be quiet, still, calm and restrict the impulses that are bound to occur. We may think this is an easy task. It is not. Many times we will be tempted to show our admiration or annoyance. Conscious immobility is an exercise of the will. This is one of our most valuable exercises to prepare us to work with children.

While observing, consider how many times we would be tempted to intervene with the children or to step in to help. For example, a child tries to put his coat on himself. He struggles to zip the zipper and is trying very hard to succeed. One adult comes and zips the zipper for him. The child may or may not protest, but most likely lacks the confidence to try it next time. He has the feeling, *I am not competent*. Another adult, who has mastered the art of observation, may perceive the same situation differently. She may note that the child is not holding the clip of the zipper down enough to hold the pin on the other side of the zipper in its proper position to function. She will approach the child cautiously and help him to hold the clip down, allowing him to zip the zipper himself. The child succeeds and the reaction is quite different: *Look, I can do it myself*. This type of help serves independence, confidence, and happiness. The intention of both adults was to love and help the child. However, in the first case, the love became an obstacle.

In addition to inhibition and control, we must cultivate alertness. We must focus and keep our mind from wandering. We must stay in the present moment. Most of the time, our body is in one place, but our mind in another. Our mind needs to be free of thoughts because thoughts belong to past experiences. *We need to see each moment of life as new*. It is important to recognize that each situation is different, even though it may look the same. Heraclitus said, "If you take a bath in the same river, it will never be the same water."

Interest: Interest is the driving force. We must see each child as individual and unique. True interest will change how we view children, how we perceive them. We must develop a scientific passion for observation.

Exactness: Exactness is marked by thorough consideration or minute measurement of small factual details. What is perceived must be described accurately. Our language must be precise and exact. We use mathematic language whenever possible. All words are conclusions, so we must be careful and avoid labels at all costs. Try to avoid terms that are relative, or comparisons of what something is like or what it is not. Avoid adding notes later, as it may invalidate what was actually observed. Showing examples of work by curves and charts can be accurate and helpful.

Continuous and repetitive: Our observation needs to be continuous. To establish theoretical explanations, we must have repetitive data as the basis for assertions, proof, or validity of any given fact. Even though our albums guide us in our work, we must always be open to the child as our guide. Do not think a child “should” be doing something because he is four. Always let the child and our observations be our guide.

Modesty and humility: Humility is important in our work because if we assume that “we know” we close ourselves off to seeing new possibilities with the children. Sometimes this may become a challenge even for the most seasoned guides. Because they have so much experience, it may become easy to assume that they know everything about children and create a whole set of beliefs about them. This can result in getting into ruts and acting without really thinking. Being humble means that we can be open to seeing the child in a new light—always open to new possibilities.

In *Education and Peace*, Montessori said “When I am with children I do not think of myself as a scientist, a theoretician. When I am with children I am a nobody, and the greatest privilege I have when I approach them is being able to forget that I even exist, for this has enabled me to see things that one would miss if one were somebody—little things, simple but very precious truths” (101).

Perseverance: “Genius, that power which dazzles mortal eyes, is oft perseverance in disguise,” said writer Henry Austin. Perseverance requires us to have relentless faith in the importance of our work despite the obstacles we face. One must have a strong and developed will to keep disciplined and focused on what we know is valuable and worthy of our energy.

Grit: Some very focused individuals have lots of the stick-to-it-iveness epitomized by the Little Engine That Could. Grit involves motivation and perseverance in the pursuit of a goal despite setbacks. When one is gritty, it is possible to stay the course even in the most challenging situations. Grittiness requires absolute and undivided attention to what is in front of us. It does not allow us to get tired and forget about it. We continue and do not waver from our goal.

When Isaac Newton was asked how he managed to discover the physical laws of the universe, he answered, “By thinking about it day and night.” Montessori thought about the child day and night.

Patience: Meaningful observation requires time and patience. The entomologist Jean-Henri Fabre spent hundreds of hours observing one insect—sitting motionless—resulting in his extensive work on sensitive periods in insects. We cannot jump to conclusions without patiently waiting to see if something repeats itself.

We live in an impatient world. In *The Power of Patience*, M. J. Ryan asks us to consider that:

- Some McDonald’s are promising lunch in ninety seconds or it’s free.
- The average doctor visit now lasts eight minutes.
- Politicians currently take 8.2 seconds to answer a question, regardless of the complexity of the topic.
- A popular all-you-can-eat buffet in Tokyo charges by the minute—the faster you eat, the cheaper it is. (3)

Humor: Lots of research has demonstrated the healing power of laughter. One famous example comes from *Anatomy of an Illness* by Norman Cousins. Comedian-turned-psychologist Joe Guse summarizes:

His story began in 1964, when doctors found that the connective tissue in his spine was deteriorating, due to a condition called Ankylosing Spondylitis. [They] speculated that his chance of survival was approximately 1 in 500. Faced with the real prospect of his impending death, Cousins thought long and hard about what role, if any, he

could play in his own recovery, and eventually did three things utterly contrary to medical opinion.

First he began his own research on all of the various drugs he was on. He discovered that his condition was depleting his body of Vitamin C and, based primarily on Cousins' personal research, doctors agreed to take him off several of the drugs he was on and inject him with extremely large doses of [Vitamin C].

Secondly, Cousins made a decision to check himself out of the hospital and into a hotel room. . . . [In] his words, a hospital was "no place for a person who is seriously ill."

The third thing Cousins did was procure a movie projector and a large supply of funny films, including numerous *Candid Camera* tapes and old prints of Marx Brothers movies.

A major part of Cousins's regimen was spending a good deal of his day immersed in films that made him laugh. He found immediate positive changes. He slept better, his pain lessened, his entire physical presence improved. He eventually recovered.

All relationships thrive better when humor is used—in good times and bad. When my husband, Mike, and I were first married we used to argue over the "tidiness factor." He was much tidier than I was, although I was the Montessorian. Once during an argument, I stated, "I have come up to your standards far more than you have come down to mine!" It made him laugh so hard that it diffused the argument. My mom had a pillow made with that statement on it and thirty-seven years later I still have it as a reminder of the importance of humor in all relationships.

Rapport: Establishing rapport is the first critical ingredient in any relationship whether it is with a child, a parent, or a colleague. Good rapport allows us to enter into the world of someone else, helping that person to feel understood. It helps us to establish trust, respect, and safety, which are the key elements for a bond to be created. We build rapport by our tone of voice, the words we use and don't use, our body language, how we invite a child for a presentation, and how we listen to them. Once trust has been established, children freely enter into a relationship with us and have confidence that what we offer will benefit them.

Optimism: Charles Darwin wrote, "Pain is increased by attending to it." Children's misbehaviors are increased by attending to them.

Once, while presenting at a NAMTA conference with John Long, he told this wonderful story about optimism. He had a painting of a pony on the screen and he explained there were two boys in two separate rooms, each room filled with manure. When the adult entered the first room, the boy there was crying, saying it smelled and that he wanted to get out of there. When the adult entered the second room, the little boy was happily digging in the manure. When asked what he was doing, he responded, "All this manure, there must be a pony in here somewhere!"

Discipline: Discipline means nonjudging, it means developing our own self-discipline while observing in a rigorous manner. We must discipline ourselves to look beyond what we think is in front of us. There are common errors that we make when we are observing children. We must bear in mind that every action or behavior is an attempt to satisfy some need. Consistent behavior or patterns run through the child's actions. Do not be misled by surface behavior; it is helpful to look for causes.

Commitment: Commitment isn't as simple as being able to check off what we have accomplished toward our goal. It's a choice, an attitude. It is believing that what we are doing is important enough to stay the course. Surrounding oneself with others, who share the same goals, helps us to stay the course even in difficult times.

In the book, *Monday Morning Choices: 12 Powerful Ways to Go From Everyday to Extraordinary*, David Cottrell, relays the following story on the power of commitment:

In 1921, history was made at Kane Summit Hospital in Pennsylvania. Veteran surgeon Dr. Evan Kane performed an appendectomy using local anesthesia for the first time. He thought it was safer for a long time. Many of his colleagues did not believe his theories, but the surgeon finally found a candidate who was willing to test the theory while undergoing an appendectomy.

The patient was prepped and wheeled into surgery. The procedure went as planned and the patient complained

only of minor discomfort. Thanks to the brave volunteer, he demonstrated that local anesthesia was a viable alternative. Who was the volunteer? Dr. Kane himself. He was so committed to his belief that he was willing to become a patient in order to convince others to trust their doctor. (25)

Hope: Any vision, by its very nature, must begin with an image of hope. Hope comes in the face of no evidence. Hope is the force that impels the whole of life forward. It is easy to become consumed by all the negativity we see in the world. It bombards us every day of our lives. It is easy to fall into despair and hopelessness. We can become so overwhelmed that it causes a kind of paralysis within us. Fortunately, when confronted by such a powerful emotion as hope, the human spirit has the potential to evoke from within a positive reaction.

Many social movements were lead by, and for, people who experienced despair and oppression. And yet, they were inspired by hope. These people were driven by hope for a change, for a new beginning that would redress the causes of their despair. Hope is not simply wishful thinking or cockeyed optimism. Hope must be grounded in reality. An understanding of previous realities and their influences over the future inspires hope. It requires clarity of mind and a vivid vision of what is possible.

Faith: We never know when, how, or why we will need faith. When it comes, it often hits us hard and requires us to conjure up all the inner strength and resolve we have.

LA'NYIAH

Let us conclude with a story about a child and the observation artists around her.

La'Nyiah began attending Cornerstone Montessori School in St. Paul, Minnesota in June 2009, when she was three years old. She demonstrated a high level of independence from the beginning, giving exact instructions to her aunt regarding all of the things she needed to bring to the Children's House: blankets, slippers, extra clothing, etc. Her parents were divorced and at that time she lived with her mother and eleven-year-old brother in a hotel room

to bridge the time between apartments. Her dad had served some time in prison and was mostly out of the picture, though La’Nyiah loved him dearly. Her home life was very unstable with lots of people in and out, sleeping over and so forth. Her mom worked to support the family and at least three nights a week La’Nyiah was picked up by coworkers to go to her mom’s work place until 9:00 or 10:00 p.m. The relatives that often picked her up were not very affectionate or kind to her. Her relationship with her mom was also difficult. Under lots of stress, her mom was very controlling and easily upset. La’Nyiah became very anxious when she knew her mom was coming to pick her up. With increasing financial problems, the family dynamic grew tenser. La’Nyiah often entered school crying and upset. On those days it took her a long time to enter the room. It was rare that she was dropped off on time because her mom had to depend on others for rides.

During her early weeks in the Children’s House, she showed signs of concentration and joy: her tongue sticking out, absorbed in her practical life activities, and visiting with friends. But then she started running away, hiding from everyone. Her focus became shorter and she became increasingly aggressive towards peers. She would enter the room and tell them they were stupid and she became physically aggressive, slapping, hitting children with materials, pushing, pulling hair, and so on. She was also unsafe in her own work, cutting herself, her hair, or her clothes.

Every day felt like starting from scratch. The adults gave La’Nyiah lots of grace and courtesy and one-on-one time. She was eager to practice her newfound language and movements. They gave her loving attention in conjunction with consistent expectations. There continued to be some problems, but the community allowed her to be a four-year-old girl who was longing for successful relationships with her friends. Her clothes, including a training bra, her language, and body posture seemed to be those of a much older person, not of a four-year-old child.

As she continued to interact in the environment and with the other children, La’Nyiah became more loving towards everyone in the community. Her life continued to have its ups and downs, but there were many more ups. One day she told the guide she

wanted help writing a story that she wanted to tell with the movable alphabet.

This is her story:

Dear Montessori School

I love the Montessori school because I love all the Montessori teachers. They give all the children a hug and they are so nice and there are so many people here who love me. We love to work but sometimes forget so we get a reminder, that's what teachers do. Me and Amelia are friends for all time because we come here. We love to do work with our friends, and of course snack. Me and Amelia make sure we stay together because we want to stay at the Montessori school. I love Montessori school. This is what I've been telling you all along.

Love, Me [La'Nyiah]

Our environments are safe havens for all children, an oasis of peace. They allow children like La'Nyiah to create a new life story. They require us to be observation artists, fully present to the needs of the children at all times, creating environments that are the best for the smallest.

The more we understand the task and the art of observation, the more we regard it as a challenging and worthwhile endeavor. When observing living beings we begin to touch life in a direct way. As observers we must be constantly learning ourselves. We must never stop studying the child. Dr. Montessori did not and we must not.

I end with a quote from Montessori: "When she feels herself aflame with interest, 'seeing' the spiritual phenomena of the child, and experiences a serene joy and an insatiable eagerness in observing them, then she will know that she is 'initiated.' Then she will begin to become a teacher" (*Spontaneous Activity in Education* 140–41).

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