

SACRED SECOND

by Jennifer Rogers

Jennifer Rogers is emerging as a polished and prolific Montessori writer, and Sacred Second is a testimony to the pen. She explains the three-period lesson and the importance of the child doing the work of the second period that is enriched by experience and exploration. The article is included in this journal simply because practical life has a very short first period of presentation and third period of the demonstration of mastery, but the second period is the heart of doing a practical task, and that is the glorious interlude of independent work of the hand.

No matter how old a mother is, she watches her middle-aged children for signs of improvement. It could not be otherwise for she is impelled to know that the seeds of value sown in her have been winnowed. She never outgrows the burden of love, and to the end she carries the weight of hope for those she bore. (Maxwell 16)

Sit beside a grandma with a hot drink, time, and a few good questions. Ask her to talk about her grown children, what they were like at different ages, how they struggled, when they were frightened, confident, lost, successful. Ask her what she loves about one of her children and what drives her crazy. Remembering will bring her great joy, even when the memory is sad. When she talks about her child's character, the qualities that set him apart in her heart and mind, she will say something like, "He has always been that way. Even when he was a baby."

Ask a good teacher to talk about her students. Without the broad perspective earned over a grandma's lifetime, she will rely on her experience and intuition to reach similar conclusions. She'll say

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things like, “He never sat still in class, and he was never tired” or “She has such a positive attitude, I don’t think I’ve ever heard her complain.” About one child she will say, “I spent the whole year telling him to tie his shoes.” She’ll smile when she remembers the day he mastered the double-knot.

There is a dedication so strong and smart it sometimes looks like anger, a wise acceptance that some aspects of human personality are stubbornly resistant to change, and a willingness to endure long, second-period stretches of learning.

For parents, visions of a still-growing child are distorted by perspective and proximity. Parents hold fast to hopes and dreams established long before a child was born. A loved child’s shortcomings are sometimes forgotten or ignored, failures are jerry-rigged. Parents may

have concerns and regrets, but they like to talk about talents, intelligence, and associated goals. There are also certain things parents do not notice or talk about.

Asked to reflect, reconfigure, and strategize, parents prefer photos. Everybody is wide-awake, smiling, and color-coordinated. No headgear or warts or bad attitudes, no doors slamming, no rivalrous siblings. It’s impossible to tell who refuses to get out of bed in the morning, who is a smart aleck, who ran the family van into the pole at the fast food drive-through window, again. One resented child is surely smarter and faster than the others, but in the photo, beauty abides. Photos get framed because they prove everybody was happy and harmonious, for a moment. One family stood together and smiled, despite the odds.

For parents and teachers, the greatest challenges are not surprising or unique. They are mundane, repetitive, ambiguously related to the qualities that make a child wonderful. The son who has a refined appreciation for beauty and the natural world is also slovenly. The daughter who reads voraciously forgets her lunch in the back seat, at least once a week. Problems become so predictable, people who work with children lay awake at night, wondering what we are doing wrong.

“No doubt there are and always will be those who by nature and nurture prefer to implant morals,” Winnicott writes, “just as there are those who by nature and nurture prefer to wait, and perhaps to wait a long time, for natural developments.” His hilarious high-brow solution? “Nevertheless such matters can be discussed.” Winnicott reminds the parents and teachers for whom he writes that, “In these matters the answer is always that *there is more to be learned from love than from education*” (100).

Winnicott hints at one essential truth of good parenting and teaching. Even the most helpful, life-affirming discussions about children are not definitive. There is no dramatic conclusion, no point of arrival, no magical solution. There is just a dedication so strong and smart it sometimes looks like anger, a wise acceptance that some aspects of human personality are stubbornly resistant to change, and a willingness to endure long, second-period stretches of learning.

The child becoming incarnate is a spiritual embryo which needs its own special environment. Just as a physical embryo needs its mother’s womb in which to grow, so the spiritual embryo needs to be protected by an external environment that is warm with love and rich in nourishment, where everything is disposed to welcome, and nothing to harm it. (*The Secret of Childhood* 34)



Philosophers of education describe three periods of learning. Maria Montessori structured most of her curriculum, for every age she touched, around the notion that human beings learn in three periods. Montessori borrowed the three-period method from Edouard Seguin, expanding and elevating it to a broad new level, applying it in different forms to each plane of human development.

The first period is a simple, uncomplicated presentation of something new, a vocabulary word, property or perception, an abstract math concept or a period in the history of American folk music. The teacher limits her words and gestures, allures and seduces, striving to direct the child's attention and energy to that which is new.

Vocabulary cards for toddlers, young primary students, and emerging readers are, for first period reasons, simple and uncomplicated. The sets of nine to twelve cards depict an object in isolation. Each set teaches new words on a single theme, vegetables, for example, or butterflies. In the first period lesson, the teacher points to the card and says "monarch" or "cucumber." The simplicity of the card and the presentation enable the child to organize the contents of her mind. Later, the words are easily retrieved as the child begins her first independent reading.



“The second period,” Montessori writes in *The Discovery of the Child*, “is the most important of all and comprises the real lesson, the real assistance to the memory and the power of association” (157). Yet the second period has always been the place where teachers and children struggle. Children who are tired, over-stimulated, or just not familiar with the habits essential for learning would like the second period to be brief, or to involve some type of entertainment or perpetual motion. Many bright children do not like repeating, especially independently, definitely not without an audience or at least a good buddy nearby.

Parents who learn to love the second periods of a child’s life can, sometimes, dance and laugh and cry with an ease and total abandon not available to less-informed. They can holler, “pick up your socks” again, with delight, as if for the very first time.

Great teachers glide between children, encouraging and insisting. Real masters can sit in a corner of their classroom, quietly giving several children the impression they have her full, undivided attention. They motivate kids to repeat with simple imperative phrases like, “Wow! Do that again” or “Show me again how you do that.”

The third period is a type of test or, for older children, a performance. A toddler teacher seldom offers a third period, but she might notice a child’s third period demonstration of knowledge. A primary teacher might ask the child to name or describe a concept or property. If a sensorial material is in use, the teacher’s observation is sufficient and no conversation is necessary.

For Montessori, the third period is intended to augment the teacher’s working knowledge. It gives her essential feedback. The child’s activity, the information he offers, should indicate for the teacher when he needs support, a point of interest, more time for repetition, or a new lesson. In stark contrast to traditional methods of education, Montessori admonished her teachers to avoid correcting a young child who had not reached a third-period level of understanding. Why bother? If a child could demonstrate mastery, she said, he would.

A child's work, Montessori insisted, should not be interrupted. The child's self-directed activity, his second-period work with his own mind and hands was, for Montessori, sacred. The simplicity of the three-period format made it useful for teachers of every subject, at every phase of a child's learning. Montessori's first period is a new lesson, a presentation. The second period is the student's time of practice, rehearsal, and study. The third period of a Montessori three-period lesson is a verification of knowledge, a performance, a demonstration that the student has, through his independent efforts, achieved mastery. The three period lesson, "is always used in Montessori to prove that learning had taken place" (Lillard 129).

Love can be hard service, giving your all and it may be finding your all. It is sometimes a discipline enabling you to do the impossible. It may be your glimpse of transcendence. (Maxwell 67)

Three period lessons provide strength and structure for a child's learning. The three-period format can also define a human life in terms that are reassuring for parents. Parents who learn to love the second periods of a child's life can, sometimes, dance and laugh and cry with an ease and total abandon not available to less-informed. They discover variety in monotony. They can holler, "pick up your socks" again, with delight, as if for the very first time.

Accepting the tiresome repetitions of a child's second period learning may also lend parents a grandmotherly wisdom and patience. Persevering with a particular child and his unique second-period frustrations builds confidence in the child, the parent, and the relationship they share. Dedication motivates work and inspires loyalty.

The bad news for parents and teachers: Ours is a nation obsessed with third-period achievements. Testing is popular, definitive, easily marketed, sold, and reproduced to competitive consumers. The third period seems to be an urgent, worthy goal . . . except that it isn't. It is not possible to measure strength of character, kindness, compassion, resilience, humility, confidence, or grace. Certain types of intelligence can be measured and compared, but most cannot.



Many private schools sell their curriculum with a strong first-period pitch. First-period banter thrills young parents. If every day at school held the promise of something new and exciting, life would be easy. Learning would always be fun. Attention-spans would be long, because children would always be fascinated, intrigued, perched on the edge of their desks like baby birds waiting for worms. Leaving the nest presents a problem, though. So does searching for worms, as it requires on-the-job training, especially on hot, dry days.

The second period, the epoch of learning that occupies most of a good parent or teacher's time and attention can be a drag, boring, totally frustrating, and monotonous. Perseverance is an absolutely essential life-skill for parents, but the road is long and dusty, and our traveling companions question, whine, and complain. Even when parents feel relatively certain within themselves that they are heading the right direction, repetitive mistakes are disorienting. Hecklers, cynics, and critics, real and imagined, complicate every decision.



Most of human life is a second-period test of endurance. There is an awful lot of inherent repetition and fatigue for teachers and for parents. Explosive learning is magnificent, but rare. Dramatic changes in behavior are possible, an unforgettably small handful of times in a life.

Researcher Malcolm Gladwell writes in his book, *Outliers: The Story of Success*, that the average second period, for people who distinguish themselves in their field of choice, is very long, about 10,000 hours. A symphony-caliber cellist, for example, has practiced for at least 10,000 hours before her first audition. Without research to support the conclusion, it is nonetheless safe to assume that, helping a child grow up responsibly might involve at least that investment of a parent's time and energy. 10,000 hours is probably a low estimate, actually. That's about ninety minutes a day, for eighteen years, just enough time for one meal and a bath.

In the long second-period of his adolescence, before he led Princeton's basketball team to a national championship, then dribbled off the court as a Rhodes Scholar and a career in politics, Bill Bradley ran up and down hallways with rocks in his canvas Converse high-tops, building strength for a better jump-shot. The

story is inspiring in retrospect, but Mr. and Mrs. Bradley must have wondered about the future for a kid who ran up and down the hall with rocks in his shoes.

Ask a self-reflective adult to consider her life, think about the qualities she holds dear, talk about those things about herself she would like to change. She will usually, at some point in the conversation say, "I have always struggled with this." Passionate young men and women who have the courage to engage fully in living remember conversations with parents and teachers who both accepted and inspired. They have pluck, fierce determination, and hope. They find joy and laughter in the second period, not in the frantic dash to the finish line, but in the anticipation, the enduring belief that anything is possible for those bold enough to work for a dream.

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