

# THE ROAD HOME

by Molly O'Shaughnessy

*“Children have the potential to create a world we cannot imagine. This is our hope.” In choosing Montessori, O’Shaughnessy says that we are choosing the road less traveled. We are choosing education as an aid to life. We are choosing an approach that respects the innate and unique potential of each child and that calls upon us to serve the child. It is through observation that we realize how each child will be best served. Observation “is the heartbeat of everything we do” O’Shaughnessy tells us, and when we use it with love of that which we observe (the child), when we use it to better our understanding and to strengthen our practice, we are using it with the hope of a new humanity.*

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**Molly O’Shaughnessy** is an accomplished AMI trainer as well as a consultant and lecturer. She is a highly requested speaker at both national and international conferences. She has presented keynotes and workshops across the United States as well as in Canada, Australia, Mexico, China, and Europe. She earned her AMI primary diploma from the Montessori Center of Minnesota in 1976 and holds an M.Ed from Loyola University, Maryland. Since 1996 she has provided strategic leadership for the Montessori Center of Minnesota, serving as the director of training and president as well as community faculty for Metropolitan State University and adjunct faculty for St. Catherine’s University in St. Paul. Molly served on the board of AMI in Amsterdam and was a long-time member of the AMI Trainers Group. She is a member of the NAMTA (North American Montessori Teachers’ Association) board. She serves on the board of the MM75 fund, which provides financial assistance for future AMI Montessori teacher trainers. She was recently appointed to the Montessori Leaders Collaborative. She helped launch Montessori Partners Serving All Children, an initiative of the Montessori Center of Minnesota committed to providing high-quality Montessori for low-income and culturally rooted communities. This talk was presented at the NAMTA conference titled *Observation: The Key to Unlocking the Child’s Potential* in Golden, CO, November 5-8, 2015.

*The Road Not Taken*

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,  
And sorry I could not travel both  
And be one traveler, long I stood  
And looked down one as far as I could  
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,  
And having perhaps the better claim,  
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;  
Though as for that the passing there  
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay  
In leaves no step had trodden black.  
Oh, I kept the first for another day!  
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,  
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference. — Robert Frost

When we begin to practice mindful and scientific observation, we start on the path home. The road home brings us back to principles, vision, and practice. Just like the speaker in Frost's poem, we have taken the road less traveled, and it has made all the difference.

Basing our decisions and practice on observation—deep, sustained observation—is the road less traveled. Staying the course requires courage, practice, patience, and faith. These are the same qualities we want to nurture in children. Ours is a thinking method, with observation as the anchor.

David Foster Wallace understood the ethos of our work when he wrote, "Learning how to think really means learning how to exercise some control over how and what you think. It means being conscious and aware enough to choose what you pay attention to and to choose how you construct meaning from it" (in Enayati 27). And Montessori herself reminds us, "It is not always imperative to see big things, but it is of paramount importance to see the beginning of things. At their origins there are little glimmers that can

be recognized as soon as something new is developing" (*Education and Peace* 101).

In order to recognize these glimmers of new development, we must become observation artists, keenly attentive and focused on the smallest details. Mastering focus is a skill, which like any other skill takes discipline and repeated effort to develop.

In her excellent book, *Rapt: Attention and the Focused Life*, Winifred Gallagher, concludes, "Paying rapt attention is life at its best." She says, "Focused is how we want to feel. The evidence is all around us, from the calm yet alert faces of athletes, 'in the zone,' to mothers cradling their babies, tradesmen bent over their work, musicians playing their instruments" (afterword). In children we call it concentration—and indeed it is life at its best.

Observation artists move along parallel paths with the child, observing him, learning from him, being inspired by him. And they are pliable. When we become rigid in our thinking and behaviors, it shuts down possibility. We must be flexible in our disposition, yielding and open to being influenced by our observations. As Peter Senge writes in *The Fifth Discipline*, "To suspend one's assumptions means to hold them, as it were, hanging in front of you, constantly assessable to questioning and observation" (243).

According to Roger Ellerton, an expert in neuro-linguistic programming, "It is said that a person has over 60,000 thoughts every day. That's over forty thoughts a minute! Yet, of the 60,000 thoughts you have today, ninety percent of these are the same as the 60,000 thoughts you had yesterday and the day before, leaving little room for new thoughts. No wonder life can seem tedious at times. Unless you start to think differently, you are destined to create and repeat the same old reality every day." This can deeply influence our observations. We lose perspective, come to expect certain things from the children day in and day out. We reach conclusions without sufficient evidence, go on automatic, make assumptions, and so forth. We are influenced by what others say about the children.

At Montessori Center of Minnesota, we have a sign hanging outside the toddler community that states: "Every day is a new day."

Especially with very young children, life happens in moments—not in the past or in the future. In order for our observations to truly inform our practice, it must become a habit. But this is not easy.

Habit is defined as “The usual condition or state of a person, or thing, either natural or acquired, regarded as something had, possessed, and firmly retained” (Webster’s). A habit is something firmly retained. It can be as simple as brushing our teeth or as complex as being an effective listener or a flexible thinker. Once firmly retained, habits are difficult to change. As proverb tells us, “Bad habits are like a bed, easy to get into, but hard to get out of.”

The ability to cultivate genius is embedded in the ability to observe in a profound way during all periods of life, beginning from birth. Infants and young children are intense observers of everything and more acutely so when they are really interested in some aspect of the world.... Determining the profound interest of each child will be the core of our observations—the key to unlock what will engage each child.

In our trainings and beyond, we try to form new habits, new ways of being that were not familiar to us before. It starts with simple things, how we move, how we talk to children, nonintervention, and so forth. For each of us, the cultivation and practice of observation is a critical new habit.

Observation is a new habit that we need to develop and strengthen. A Chinese proverb provides a good metaphor for how it develops. It tells us, “Habits are cobwebs at first; cables at last.” Spiders build their webs by releasing threads of silk that are picked up by the wind and get caught by objects in the spider’s environment. Once one strand of silk is secure, the spider builds a frame of spokes for its web. Finally, it works from the outside in and lays concentric circles of silk across the spokes to stabilize the structure of the web.

With observation, we begin by becoming aware and focusing on different aspects of the environment, such as concentration, an individual child, group work, repetition, interest, choice, and so forth. The more targeted and repeated experiences we have, the

deeper our understanding becomes. As the footholds of observation begin to strengthen, the practice becomes easier and a natural part of our daily life with the children. It becomes an indispensable tool that we constantly rely on.

When observation does not become a habit, it can easily be abandoned, and we end up going down a different road—a road that is, unfortunately, not the road less traveled. As Leonardo da Vinci said, “Art is never finished, only abandoned.” We must not abandon this art form. It is the heartbeat of everything we do. And it is never finished. We continue to strengthen the web until it becomes a cable, strong and reliable. In the Montessori context, the strands of this web come from our understanding of human development, and as it strengthens, it in turn informs our decisions and our practice. We must always return to the vision to keep us on the road home.

#### CREATIVE IMPULSES



Dr. Montessori had a vision for the future: Her astute powers of observation allowed her to envision things that were not, but that she passionately believed could be. She knew, therefore, that our destiny lies beyond our vision, but she urgently pressed the point that it does not lie beyond our control. She consequently rallied and championed a process of learning that is attuned to the child’s inner drives, that promotes the beneficial interaction of the child and his surroundings, which leads to a deep understanding and appreciation of himself and his environment. How many people truly appreciate themselves? In my experience, many have been wounded because their creative process has not been protected, and their spirits have been crushed in one way or another. Above all else, protecting the creative process is the real essence of our work. This is where we have the greatest influence and responsibility. We can only do this well if we become observation artists, because each child’s process is unique.

Montessori believed, and it has been proven, that this process of deepening understanding and appreciation results in children who

are confident, competent, self-disciplined, brave, spiritually strong, and thus able to work cooperatively for the benefit of society. She believed that the development of such children would lead directly to the creation of a better world. We, who share her vision, believe that its realization is more vital today than ever before.

Montessori was a master observer and her genius allowed her to discover the soul of the child. As we get bogged down in the technical aspects of our work, it is easy to forget this most potent discovery. It is this soul—the complex unity of all human attributes—that is revealed under optimal conditions. Montessori’s discovery provided the possibility of healing a “diseased humanity,” raising the potential of regenerating the human spirit and reconstructing society.

Buckminster Fuller reminds us, “Maria Montessori was fortunately permitted to maintain, sustain, and cultivate her innate genius. Her genius invoked her awareness of the genius inherent in all children. Her intuition and initiative inspired her to discover ways of safeguarding this genius . . . But the way was not always easy. Hers was the difficult frontiers task of genius.” And while it will not always be easy for us, we must remember, “Rare is the insurmountable more than a figment of fear” (Montessori).

Each of us is born with untold potentialities, with enormous powers to create. This capacity is extraordinarily potent in childhood. The fulfillment of these potentialities supports the true function of the child, to preserve and continue the evolution of life on Earth. The harmony of nature depends on these duties being performed. Montessori understood this function of childhood and dedicated her life to the scientific investigation of the creative transformational powers within the child.

We must remember, too, that “There is no child—regardless of their intellect—that does not thirst for knowledge” and that “All children will scour their resources for understanding” (Montessori).

Montessori further reminds us:

The child has been the constructor of every one of us.  
Before we became an important adult, a respected person,  
a person who takes his part in society, we have been

another personality, a personality very mysterious, not considered in this world, not respected, a person that has no importance, no choice. Yet he is capable of something we cannot do—he is capable of constructing an immense world in a way we cannot even imagine of doing. (*Reconstruction in Education 2*)

Remember: “We must not impose our own limitations” (Montessori).

#### THE CHILD AS A SOURCE OF LOVE

In the last chapter of *The Absorbent Mind*, Montessori writes about the child as the source of love and says it is from “this love that comes the child’s power for unity” (253).



She continues:

The child is the only point on which there converges from everyone a feeling of gentleness and love. People’s souls soften and sweeten when one speaks of children; the whole of mankind shares in the deep emotions which they awaken . . . Whenever we touch the child, we touch love . . . In the vicinity of children mistrust melts away; we become sweet and kindly, because when we are gathered about them, we feel warmed by that flame of life which is there, where life originates. (253)



Human unity does not exist without love. Montessori, having lived through two world wars, gave great consideration to education for peace. She states that the power and force of love is so powerful and unifying that even in times of war we continue to talk about love and reconstruction. It is the ability to love that humanizes us. From this central virtue, all other virtues flow, and “this force,”

Montessori says, “that we call love is the greatest energy of the universe” (*The Absorbent Mind* 255).



Each child born is an adventure into a better life and represents an opportunity for change and creativity. The creative process in each individual has vast implications for the perpetuation of the cultural evolution of humankind. Each child born has a deep longing to understand what it means to be a human in this universe and what his or her contribution might be to the whole. If the tendency to create

and the creative process are not nurtured and protected, that obstruction may lead to malformation and improper adaptation of the human being—a shutting down of the most potent gift available to humans and a profoundly negative consequence on all of society worldwide.

Nurturing the creative process is the key to progress. The most outstanding accomplishments in civilization can be attributed to the creative mind. As Robert Fritz writes, “There is vastly more human energy being directed toward the building of our civilization than any other goal . . . Our general aspirations as a species are most naturally towards creating, constructing, inventing, forming, improving, structuring, and shaping that which we truly want” (255).

The ability to cultivate genius is embedded in the ability to observe in a profound way during all periods of life, beginning from birth. Infants and young children are intense observers of everything and more acutely so when they are really interested in some aspect of the world. The secret to inspiring children is to “find the hook.” What is it that passionately interests the child? What is so captivating that it commands the child’s undivided attention? What deeply touches the heart and mind of the child? The creative mind is spurred on and nourished by interest and passion. Determining the profound interest of each child will be the core of our observations—the key to unlock what will engage each child.

Finding the hook requires choice. The freedom to choose, based on interest, mobilizes the inner creative energies in the child and sustains interest and concentration. Choice allows the child to develop strategies towards a goal and empowers him to

be responsible for his own actions, not succumbing to feeling a victim of circumstances beyond his control. Freedom of choice has inherent responsibilities.

In the adult world, creative, scientific, and original perceivers manage to retain and cultivate their innate capacities. Such thinkers have a burning desire to understand the secrets of the universe and of humanity. They are on a quest to penetrate the unknown and use their discoveries to intelligently participate in the wholesome and ethical advancement of civilization. These are the kind of human beings who will transform the world. They leave these protected spaces not afraid to make mistakes; they are brave, willing to break free of established structures when necessary, with strong work habits and self-discipline, exhibiting a strong sense of justice and civility, and flexible and joyful in their thinking and attitudes.

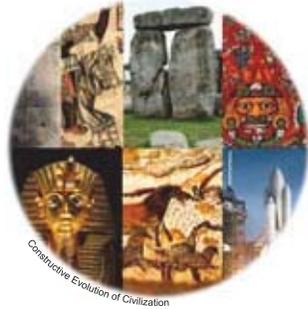
Eric Hoffer writes, "In times of change it is the learners who inherit the future. The learned usually find themselves equipped to deal with a world that no longer exists."

Learning should be a creative process, not a rote process. Learning requires analyzing, classifying, looking for patterns. It is the seed of the scientific and artistic mind. Good thinking is observational (we must help our children also learn the art of observation), analytical, and experimental.

It has been calculated that "Human knowledge in our culture is expanding at the rate of 100 percent every 5 years. In some fields a 100 percent gain in new knowledge every 11 months is not unusual" (Nelson and Glenn). We must be learners, not "learned" to thrive in this new world. And yet, we tend to stay on the surface of things. We want answers instantly. We value explanation over observation.

By protecting the child's creative process, we allow him to follow the natural path of development leading to the normalization of the individual and the development of a character capable of transforming the world.





It is the child, not the adult, who serves as the link from one generation to the next. The child's ability to adapt to whatever he finds in the environment ensures and preserves the continuation of language, customs, invention, and culture of all societies. The child has the capacity to adapt to whatever level of civilization is present when he enters the world, and to expand on it.

Most people do not immediately think of the constructive evolution of civilization as a primary goal of education, much less of the child as the most potent vehicle toward that end. Yet children embody the fullest dimensions of hope.

Children have the potential to create a world we cannot imagine. This is our hope. As Lionel Blain states in "Two Philosophies Centered on Hope," "For the man without hope, time is closed; the future a vacancy, a place of pure repetition. Hope, on the other hand, allows a man to pierce through to a real future, to something new" (94). Children are our hope for a new

humanity. Montessori saw the fate of the future within the child and proclaimed that an intelligent help must be given to protect this most creative period of life. And this help must begin with observation—pure and constant—scientific and spiritual.



In following Montessori, we took the road less traveled, and that has made all the difference for the children.

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