

COMMUNITY, FREEDOM, AND DISCIPLINE IN A CARING MONTESSORI ENVIRONMENT

by John McNamara

John McNamara's historically rich descriptions of his adolescent community life in one school where he taught the same children from grade one to grade eight sends a warm message of the merge of elementary and middle-school personalities as they are beginning to understand the wonder of growing up. Their letters and speeches remember the impact of their Montessori community as they look at their own knowledge and humanity. His students speak simple truths about how their school made them comfortable with themselves, their classmates, and their work in the past and present and for the future.

Years ago, one of my students was having first communion or confirmation (I don't remember), but it happened to be at the feast day of St. Francis of Assisi, and the priest said, "Preach the Gospel at all times. When necessary, use words." Since then, we've brought that up in class; in a sense, that's what we do. We preach Montessori at all times, and, if necessary, we use words.

If I've learned anything from my students, it's that caring relationships form the foundation of all lasting learning. Our emotions affect how and what we learn. Students need an environment that frees their minds, their souls, and their bodies from those limitations that can hamper them and hold them back. There is no substitution for this kind of community. This is best expressed by a Ruffing graduate's address to the graduating class.

However, graduating from Ruffing is different. It is not simply an indication of our age, but rather a benchmark for

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how far we have come as a community. Tonight, twenty-five individuals will be sent in different directions, armed with the reassurance that they are prepared for what lies ahead. In many ways, saying goodbye to this place is a harder transition than leaving high school or college because regardless of where you go after Ruffing, you will never find a place as close-knit. Both the graduates and their families have grown accustomed to the relationships that they have formed with both the school and each other. Tonight, we celebrate these relationships and show gratitude for what they have added to our lives.

My family's relationship with Ruffing is a story told and retold by countless Ruffing families throughout the years. When my brother receives his diploma in a few minutes, it will mark the end of our fifteen-year commitment to this amazing school. To outsiders, this probably seems like a long time, but those of us inside the Ruffing circle recognize just how many families have sent multiple children through these halls.... This presence of family sets the groundwork for the overwhelming sense of community that permeates every aspect of the school. Students, parents, and teachers alike are united in a profound sense of connection to each other and to Montessori education.

I'm going to use comments from my students to try and cover community, freedom, and discipline in a caring classroom. The com-



ments either come from the essays they wrote for class, their graduation speeches, letters they've written to me, or, in some instances, essays they wrote for their applications to college.

I had a student write an essay for class that in part said, "Aristotle wrote: 'The beginning of knowledge begins in wonder.'" She wrote that for her, the wonder and amazement came the first time she built the pink tower correctly, the wonder and anticipation she felt after her first book. That she hopes she will never lose the tingling feeling she gets over her sense of wonder, amazement, and anticipation. Another student, last year in his graduation speech said, "You live and you learn. At any rate you live. I want to do more than just live. I want to spend my life learning, questioning and searching for answers to whatever interests me...."

The ideas expressed in these thoughts have really guided me, and I think this creative imagination, which is so much of the elementary, is still an integral part of the adolescent.

I'm a big one for having quotes posted in the classroom. Below are three quotes that we use.

Maria Montessori wrote in *From Childhood to Adolescence*:

Imagination does not become great until Man, given the courage and strength, uses it to create. If this does not occur, the imagination addresses itself only to a spirit wandering in emptiness. (37)

Mario Montessori wrote in *The Human Tendencies*:

Did Man, seeing a bird flapping its wings and flying from one tree to another, go up the tree, flap his arms, and break his neck? No, what he did was to use his imagination, not fantastically, but creatively so as to bring out from the nonexistence, something that could exist and might be a practical advantage to him. (20)

Camillo Grazzini wrote,

Creative imagination enables all of us, adults and children, to produce or create something new, something which has never existed before, out of pre-existing elements, which are

identified by Maria Montessori as the alphabet of any aspect of reality. This creation may ultimately take a physical form, or it may simply be a sentence never heard before or it may be a discovery of a theorem or a law of science. (144)

Our class motto is “If you can’t be right, be wrong.” We want a fearless approach to learning. Education today has a tendency to encourage risk avoidance as opposed to risk-taking. We want adolescents to be in the position where they can learn from their mistakes and not be afraid to make them. A number of students have built on this idea. Here is an excerpt from a Ruffing student’s valedictory address from high school.

Today I ask you to summon your brain cells together for a challenge that I am about to give you. As you face your future I challenge you to go against what you have probably been hearing all along and be wrong. Now for the explanation: I’ll never forget the poster pinned in my middle school classroom. It read, If you can’t be right, be wrong. I remember reading it every day, thinking to myself, who wants to be wrong? But as I found out through my experiences in the past four years, this quote is very true, and tonight I’m going to tell you how and why this applies to the future. There is so much emphasis in school on getting things right the first time, but I discovered that sometimes the best lessons are learned when they are preceded by a few mistakes. It’s logical that after eliminating wrong answers, you get closer to the right one.

One student wrote in an essay for college:

If you can’t be right, be wrong. A very wise man once told me this. (This is probably why I am reading this.) Likewise he told me this was perhaps one of the greatest truths he discovered throughout his life’s endeavors....At Ruffing Montessori, I learned that if a task was not worth giving my best effort to initially, then it was not worth doing at all. This left a deep impression in my mind that is often “the road less traveled for others.”

Another student wrote in an essay:

One of his favorite sayings was, “If you can’t be right, be wrong.” From this I learned that simply having the answer never helps, rather, one must understand how that answer

was reached. Although frustrating at first, correcting my mistakes helped me to comprehend the true importance and value of understanding, because when one understands, that is when one truly learns.

Over the years with this motto, we have also developed, and I'm sure you have all heard the expression "Anything worth doing, is worth doing well." Well, we've kind of changed that motto in our class, so that it's "Anything worth doing, is worth doing poorly." You know, whether you're a student, a teacher, an adult, it would be easy to go through life if we were perfect, if we knew everything we were going to do was going to turn out correctly, but that's not the case. So I think that we have to focus on what needs to be done, and what we can do or what we want to do and not be overly sidetracked on how we are doing. That's how we get lost. We all know, at least we should all know, what it means to be imperfect. In fact, many of them have changed the class motto to "If you can't be right, be Mac." Students in graduation speeches express this very well.

This attitude toward determination and will is not something you are born with, it is something you acquire over time and Ruffing helped me achieve this task. I have learned many things at Ruffing, like how to graph exponential functions, or the causes of the Revolutionary War. But it isn't these things that make a student succeed in life. It isn't the knowledge you gain in class or how well you can solve a system of equations, it is the ability to learn and motivate yourself to be the best you can be. And I feel that this is one important key factor that Ruffing has given to me in life. Hundreds of students have graduated from Ruffing Montessori and Ruffing has tried to accomplish that goal in every single one of them, no matter how different we are.

Why do I try? I try because my work isn't the responsibility of my parents or teachers; it is my responsibility. I do it for my own benefit...At Ruffing you can truly feel accomplished because you know you are learning because you want to.

Because we are capable of laughter, we are able to see ourselves in perspective to others and to unattainable ideals, and at the same time we develop compassion for others by learning to laugh at ourselves.

Another real aspect of adolescence is that it is an age of silliness, and they need to be silly to have fun. One student said in her eighth grade graduation speech:

During my time at Ruffing, I have enjoyed the freedom to experiment with innovative ideas such as emptying a big puddle of water on the baseball field with a bucket. I like being able to do fun things with my friends during school hours like rollerblading and having water fights. Our wild ideas never stopped coming because our creativity was never harnessed. I remember so many good times. I realize that I will no longer have to explain to my friends all about this special school. No more water fights, rollerblading, dancing on tables to the Beatles, playing in the mud, or various other ways of celebrating in ways so unique to Ruffing.

Here are excerpts from a letter written to me by a student in medical school:

Imagine just how much school pride existed in each of the students. But that was the beauty of Ruffing, everybody having a good time and somehow learning subconsciously. I remember *Ruff Notes* and the pictures you took with the editors standing in a mock jail line-up with our phone numbers as our inmate numbers. It is extremely difficult to describe to others how exactly you taught us when we never had tests and had lectures at your whim. Somehow I ended up taking more academically, socially and emotionally from Ruffing than in all my years of higher education combined.

This student was a sophomore in high school when he wrote me this letter:

You taught us that life wasn't all work, that having fun is okay, too. In fact, it was encouraged. Life with you wasn't anything serious and you made even the serious moments funny.... I remember the talk you gave me when I wanted to quit baseball; that's when I really started believing in myself, and you made stuff like that happen without even us noticing it. I had so much fun during middle school, that when I came to high school I completely overlooked how much I had learned. I just never realized how much I actually learned until I went to high school. I think that's part of the Ruffing mystique. You only realize what has

actually happened to you after you leave, but that's why Ruffing itself was so enjoyable. No expectations, nothing to compare it to, we were learning something new all the time, and having fun along the way.

Laughter is our safety valve. Because we are capable of laughter, we are able to see ourselves in perspective to others and to unattainable ideals, and at the same time we develop compassion for others by learning to laugh at ourselves. We learn to understand our frailties and the shortcomings in others. I think when you're working with adolescents, or anybody, the sparkle in the eye, the wink, the giggle, the deep-throated laugh, are essential. Such spontaneous gestures can do more to break down barriers than long dissertations about friendship.

Another important idea at the adolescent level is the idea of abstraction. Even with adolescents, we must provide concrete materials and manipulative tasks. Many students cannot master ideas without them. We must continue to acknowledge the superiority of learning actively by means of several senses as opposed to learning by the means of just one. The ability to think in abstract terms, form generalizations, and conceptualize does not develop quickly, but rather over a great period of time. We must continue to provide opportunities to feel, touch, smell, and live, as well as read, write, calculate, and listen. The students themselves, through their own work, arrive at the conclusion. In the same way that students in the lower elementary discover for themselves the formula for *pi*, so do young adolescents discover the quadratic formula. Whether it be math, language, biology, or whatever, we do not first give the rule or formula. The rules or formulas are points of arrival, not points of departure.

Last week, while doing mental math with my students, I asked them how they would multiply 7×24 in their heads. A few quickly replied saying they would do $7 \times 20 + 7 \times 4$, and then add $140 + 28$. This is the mental algorithm that I expected. and how I do it. However, I got a variety of other approaches. One student said that he would do 7×25 and then subtract 7. Another said that he would multiply 42×4 . Exercises like this invariably lead to discussions about the meaning of abstraction and how my students, having gone through a Montessori math program are reaching a higher

level of abstraction than I am capable of and use examples such as mentally multiplying 29×29 . They point out that I do $20 \times 20 + 20 \times 9 + 9 \times 20 + 9 \times 9$ then add $400 + 180 + 180 + 81$ because, even though I am doing the operation mentally I am still visualizing the geometric representation. They, the students, on the other hand, have reached a higher level and do the operation mentally as $(30-1)^2$, that is, they do $30 \times 30 - 30 \times 1 - 30 \times 1 + 1$. They no longer need to visualize the geometric representation.

We can never forget that the Montessori materials are materials of development not teaching aids; that is, the materials are not designed to help the teacher make a particular point but rather are designed so that students can develop themselves through their own work. We must always remember that learning is the students' work not ours. We must remember that we cannot really teach students by rote even with the help of teaching aids. All we can do is put students in positions to understand something they were not able to before; that is, by giving them the opportunity to work through for themselves the materials of development at their own pace. We must allow students to follow their natural tendencies remembering that each student is an individual.

A number of years ago, students gave me a plaque that said, "Those that can, do. Those that can't, teach. Those that can't teach, teach Montessori," and I feel that this illustrates the above very well.

Love, security, and relationships are more of the essential ingredients. A student wrote in her graduation speech: "I owe a lot to my friends who I could always count on. I never had to be anybody but myself when I was with them. I just hope I was as much a part of their life as they were mine. Each was special too in her own way and I think there's a little part of them in me."

In their graduation speeches, students always make strong heartfelt comments about relationships and how important and how necessary their relationships are with each other and with their teachers. Relationships are the common bond and thread running through all these speeches. If adolescents can share with us their fears, their aspirations, and their problems, they will be fine. If they know we will go the extra mile for them, they go the

extra mile for us. If they're encouraged to express their opinions in class without fear of criticism, ridicule, or retribution, they will be successful. Students, a number of years ago, wrote a description of our class environment: "The adolescent environment is an environment where we can experience community, affirmation, love, and support, a safe and enlightening place where we can test, discover, experience, share, and celebrate."

Movement is very important at the adolescent level. In a lot of regular schools, there is a tendency to think of physical movement or exercise as something we do in order to keep our bodies functioning well, but our human tendencies are with us in every stage of development, and it is a mistake to think of movement by itself as something apart from the higher functions. In a Montessori environment movement is connected with all parts of learning. A student wrote to me when she was in high school, "Thank you for recess. I know this has a little bit to do with your own need to get out and run around, but thanks. Thank you for not listening to whoever decided that once adolescents reach middle school, they've gotten enough fresh air until they retire."

One final point I want to make, which, again, is one of our class mottoes: "Less is more." This idea has become obvious to me over the years. It is more important to cover a few areas in depth than many areas superficially: One important idea mastered, one novel



It is more important to cover a few areas in depth than many areas superficially: One important idea mastered, one novel well-read and internalized is always worth more than rushing through many.

well-read and internalized is always worth more than rushing through many. Middle school students, having come through a Montessori elementary program, become very frustrated if they are not able or not allowed to do their best.

If students are bogged down with a lot of assignments, how are they going to do their best? Not only will they feel frustrated, but they will tend to rush through their work, begin to dislike it, and possibly work carelessly. When finished, instead of satisfaction at a job well done, instead of pride in one's best, the students will breathe a sigh of relief at finally finishing the task. To me what governs and what keeps students moving and what energizes students is the sense of satisfaction they receive after a job well done, not a sigh of relief after finally finishing a task.

I will conclude by saying that in talking to students over the years, they comment most about the environment. They're accepted and acceptable with who they are. They're safe; whether it's physically, emotionally, or intellectually, they feel safe. They feel that not only do they care about others but others care for them. They feel that they're listened to, and for some of them, it's the first time in their life. They feel they have something to contribute, that they make a difference. I have students who if I don't say good morning to them or make some smart remark when they come in in the morning will come up to me and say, "Are you in a bad mood? Are you not feeling well?" because I didn't see them come in or didn't comment. They have to feel that they make a difference and they bring a unique and valuable perspective to the place. Every student has to feel that by their being in the environment, they make the environment special for everyone else. They have to feel connected through common goals, mutual activities, and mutual tasks. They have to have a purpose. They need to see the significance of what they are doing, and they have to have time to reflect on what they're doing and what effect it has in that it's going to make a difference. They have to feel power. They make the choices, the contributions

that contribute to their success. They know what quality looks like and it's not a teacher telling them or giving them a grade, and they know how to create quality work. They need dependable support and that's my role as dependable support for their journey. And challenge, they need challenge. The work has to stretch them.

I think the above is best expressed by excerpts from two graduation speeches.

The first time I was on this podium giving a graduation speech was at the end of primary. I remember that I had to leave in the middle of my speech because I had to go to the bathroom and I never got to finish it. One of the most important lessons that Montessori taught me was to finish what you start, so I should probably finish my speech [from the end of primary]. "My favorite book is *Sylvester and the Magic Pebble*. Things that make me happy are going on vacation. On my birthday I like to play games. My favorite Montessori activity is the farm. In the beginning of the year I couldn't read but now I can." As you can see I have changed in the past eleven years. I have gone from building pink towers to building self-confidence.

How would my life be different if I didn't attend Ruffing Montessori? Between all of the laughs I would have missed out on, the people I've gotten to know as my second family, and how much I've grown academically as well as a person...what I now know is that if I had never attended Ruffing, I would have never truly gotten to be myself.

When this student said the above it reminded me of the Rabbi Zusya story: The early Hassidic sage Rabbi Zusya once said, "When I reach the next world, God will not ask me, 'Why were you not Moses?' Instead, he will ask me, 'Why were you not Zusya?' " Why were you not the person you were meant to be? Community, freedom, and discipline in a caring Montessori environment allows every person to become the person he or she is meant to be.

Not only do the children come to know themselves, they also develop a real understanding of Montessori and what it means to them. I think this is best shown by an essay an eighth grader wrote as she was approaching graduation from Ruffing.

I guess that unless you experience the atmosphere you can't understand what it's like to go to school here. Ruffing isn't just a place of learning; it's a place of living. Laughter is always ringing in the rooms.

I think that when a child is given to Ruffing, he or she is like a living lump of modeling clay, and the Ruffing teachers are the master artists. In primary class, my feet and legs were carefully molded to give me a strong foundation on which I was to make my first steps. I learned to read, write, and be a little individual who didn't need help buttoning my coat or pouring water into a glass. In lower elementary my hands were formed and I was on my way to exploring the world of knowledge which was so new and exciting to me. In upper elementary I learned to use my heart to build long lasting friendships and above all, I learned to love learning. My sculpture grew to contain all the vital organs needed to function (the organs being different areas of intellect) and a heart to feel with. I really learned how to think in upper elementary. Finally, I came to middle school. I finally was using my head the right way because I didn't just learn to think, I learned to understand. To comprehend. To care enough to know what I was doing and why. Mac put the finishing touches on my sculpture: my head.

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