

Archive for September, 2009

September 29th, 2009

What I wish I knew before I started Part 2

You don't have to treat them all alike.

One of the first whole sentences children utter is, "It's not fair!" Justice and equality seem to be a dominating factor starting in childhood. How many of us as children, swore that when we had children we would not treat them like this. (Whatever "this" was.) So we seem to be born with a developed sense that life isn't fair – and it should be.

And now that we are in a situation as teachers we come face to face with a stubborn reality – life isn't fair. Our Utopian ideals make us struggle with our sense of fairness and justice and in trying to make fairness and justice our goal we often only make the situation worse. Ironically, we often try to be more just than God.

Scripture counsels us about justice and respect and so we scratch our heads and wonder if that means we should treat everyone the same. In reality, we don't treat everyone alike. Our relationships with our mother and father are different than with other adults. We treat our siblings, family and friends differently than we do strangers. And when we are married our spouse and children receive love and consideration that is not given to others. Is this unfair?

In childhood everything is easy, simple, black and white. And now you are an adult faced with a classroom of different personalities, different needs and different abilities. What do you do? You meet the child's needs. And his greatest need is not that of fairness but of focus. It's been said that the real opposite of love is not hate but indifference. And the opposite of indifference is focus and concern. Ironically, in our own quest for fairness we do want everyone else treated equally but we want to be treated specially. If you say to your class, "You did a good job." It's nice but bland (equality for everyone). However, if you look Johnny in the eyes and say, "Johnny, you did a good job!" it makes all the difference in the world.

At conferences I ask teachers, "How many of you have a favorite student in the classroom?" Everybody nervously looks around unsure if the truthful answer will bring them a rebuke because they are "supposed" to treat everybody the same. Yes, we all have favorites – often a student who is just like us (and occasionally one who is totally different.) Our challenge is not to deny the reality of our favoritism but to acknowledge that we need to make sure that that favoritism does not negatively impact the other children – like Joseph and his coat of many colors. (A mother was asked if she had a favorite among her four children. "Yes, I do – but it changes from day to day.)

In our quest for fairness and equality it is shocking to realize that God isn't fair. Oh yes, He's just and good and compassionate and tender and loving – but fairness is not a primary concern to God. If God were fair everyone would be smart and beautiful, rich and talented, good and wise (and blond.) But look at your classroom – a veritable panorama of hair and eyes and teeth, talents, gifts, abilities, hopes and fears, with family histories to make you proud or cry. What is not present is equality. What is not called for is treating them all alike.

God puts you there to look into their eyes, into their hearts and to focus on what God has called each of them to be so that you might exercise your gifts to help them realize their gifts. I used to tell my school parents that in order to treat them all alike I had to treat them all differently. And that is how our Heavenly Father treats us – differently. We are called according to the gifts He has given us. We will not all be singers but we can learn to appreciate singing. We will not all be writers but we can learn to appreciate language. And there is math and science and history and so much more to explore with the passion that God has placed in each of us. Each of us is given a different measure – like the servant in the parable who was given five talents and another two and the last servant one. The parable is not about what you were given but what you did with what you were given.

You have some bright kids in school and it's not "fair" to let them give you less than they are capable of. The bright kids need to be

challenged to go higher and farther. You have others that will struggle who need your encouragement to succeed as much as the bright kids need the challenge. Have you ever been bored in school or frustrated? That's because everyone needed to be treated the same. No, they don't. What they need is the same respect, the same appropriate challenges, the same appropriate focus and the same opportunity to become what God has called each of them to be without the burden of having to be like everybody else because they are being treated like everybody else. You have the opportunity to free them to soar and to celebrate the unique creation and personality that God has created specifically in each child. They are all different and they need to be treated differently – if you want to be fair!

September 29th, 2009

What I Wish I Knew Before I Started Part I

Freedom has to be earned – respect doesn't!

At a recent conference we asked the question, "What did you wish you knew before you started teaching?" Interestingly, the answers are a reflection, not only of experience, but of maturity. It is not only knowing what to do – but why – and significantly when.

Freedom has to be earned – respect doesn't. What attracts many of us to Montessori is the freedom the child experiences in his learning. It is a wonder to behold as a child actively searches and discovers. As beginning teachers we are sure there must be a magic formula (or magic dust) to make the learning happen. It surely must be the "magic" of the freedom in the classroom – the lack of restraints and compulsion. But when I, as a new teacher, tried to spread that "freedom dust" around all I got was chaos and confusion. I was sure that it was the freedom of the classroom that gave rise to the great learning (and contentment and happiness) that was happening there.

Experience taught me (like many other beginners) that freedom isn't magical. It has to be earned and trained and practiced. Freedom is a long term process and you cannot rush it until the child is ready to handle it. Earning freedom is like preparing for a marathon. It starts with a step, a walk, a run and longer

runs until you have trained yourself for the race.

Freedom's real value is when you know how to use it wisely. Our society confuses freedom with independence. To many freedom means no constraints. However, independence means the ability to be self-governing. Real freedom has to be built on a base of independence. And that is what you are doing in Montessori, creating an environment where the child is learning to govern and guide himself. Traditional education provides few opportunities for gaining independence and exercising freedom.

The challenge of freedom (and exercising it) is that it is messy. It is not the "ordered" existence of everyone doing the same thing at the same time and coming out with similar results. It is the messy process of making mistakes, correcting those mistakes, hopefully, not making the same mistakes again but invariably doing so and failing our way to success. Our challenge is not to disrespect the process or the learner in the process. We have to be careful in life (in and out of the classroom) that we don't look down on people who are struggling to overcome, to master and to achieve. Obviously, we can do everything better and quicker than our students but unless we give them the time they need they will never come to independence and real freedom.

We live in a world that hasn't changed much since Jesus' day. The disciples didn't think that Jesus should be bothered by "mere" children. Children are weak, noisy, distractible etc and they should just do what they are told. Jesus saw them differently because He looked with eyes that saw where they came from and with eyes that saw where they were going. He gave great respect to the child and "unless you become like the child" you can't even enter the Kingdom of heaven.

Respect does not have to be earned. It is the hallmark of our relationship with the child (and each other.) And even the childish abuse of freedom is not a reason to stop the progress of learning how to use the freedom wisely. Just as God forgives us of our sins and starts our slate over so He requires us to "re-present" to our children, with patience and respect, the opportunities of learning freedom