Varela's Three Gestures of Becoming Aware

Utilizing Francisco Varela's Work to Inform the Montessori Practicioner

Prepared by Prairie Boulmier-Darden, M.Ed., Endicott College, The Institute of Educational Studies, Beverly, Massachustet

Francisco Varela

Francisco Varela (1946-2001) was a biologist, neuroscientist, philosopher and researcher. Varela is perhaps most known for developing the concept of "autopoiesis" regarding "reflexive feedback mechanisms in living systems"(1) along with fellow Chilean scientist Humberto Maturana.

Francisco Varela, Paris, 2001

A Tibetan Buddhist, Varela taught cognitive science and epistemology at ˜Ecole Polytechnique in France and neuroscience at the University of Paris. He was very interested in the relationship between physical embodiment, or phenomenon, and experience, designing a research methodology coined "neurophenomenology" in which researchers examine their own experience using scientifically verifiable methods (2).

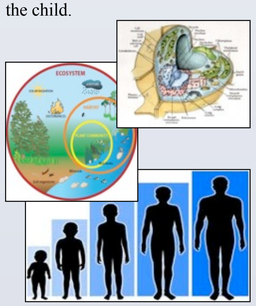
Varela spoke about "Three Gestures" of becoming aware in a 2001 interview with C.O. Scharmer of the Journal of Consciousness. The three gestures as they relate to Montessori practice are the topic of this poster, and present a beginning view of the processes Varela described (3).

Background

Autopoiesis

Brazilian physician and psychotherapist Humberto Mariotti described autopoiesis in the following way: "Poiesis is a Greek term that means production. Autopoiesis means autoproduction. This word appeared for the first time in the international literature in 1974, in an article published by Varela, Maturana, and Uribe, in which living beings are seen as systems that produce themselves in a ceaseless way. Thus, it can be said that an autopoietic system is at the same time the producer and the product"(4).

Examples of autopoeitic living systems can include the cell, an ecosystem, the planet Earth, and the child.



> "It is the child who makes the man, and no man exists who was not made by the child he once was."-Maria Montessori (5)

Cognition

Physicist and systems thinker Fritjof Capra described cognition in his book "The Web of Life" as the very process of life in autopoeitic systems. The author wrote:

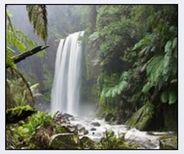
Cognition, then, is not a representation of an independently existing world, but rather a continual bringing forth of a world through the process of living. The interactions of a living system with its environment are cognitive interactions, and the process of living itself is a process of cognition. In the words of Maturana and Varela, "To live is to know" (6).

> "To understand life is to understand ourselves, and that is the beginning and the end of education"-J. Krishnamurti (7).

The Three Gestures

1. Suspension

The act of removing oneself from the habitual thought stream or pattern of behavior and taking a break. On suspension, Varela commented, "This is where Buddhism has explored so thoroughly...you move one level above your habitual engagement and see from an aerial perspective" (3).



2. Redirection

"Suspension will lead to very early emerging events, contents, patterns, gestures, whatever. Then you can actually redirect your attention to them. That's where the new is. So the suspension creates a space, the new comes up, and then you can redirect. Redirection is a specific gesture" (3).

3. Letting Go

"Unlike our habitual paying attention, exploring experience requires what we call here letting go. It has to be a light touch...the letting go here is crucial, because it's only when you don't hold on to the redirection that you can again go back to suspension. And this process...goes through and through and through. It doesn't necessarily go anywhere, you just keep doing it" (3).

Implications for Montessori Practitioners

Because of the indifference she perceived that adults have towards children, Dr. Montessori wrote extensively about the inner preparation of the teacher in what she referred to as a "spiritual transformation" as a means of remedying the situation so that the true nature of the child might be revealed. In The Secret of Childhood, she wrote, "We insist on the fact that a teacher must prepare herself so that he can tear out her most deeply rooted defects, those in fact which impede her relations with children" p. 149 (8).

The Secret of Childhood

"We hide our defects under the guise of noble and impelling duties, just as in time of war offensive weapons are described as means of protecting peace. And the weaker the resistance is to our defects, the easier it is to organize our pretexts" p.149 (8).

"Teachers, and in general all those concerned with the education of youth, should free themselves from this combination of errors that undermines their position. They should strive to rid themselves of their basic defects composed of pride and anger, seeing it in its true light. Anger is the principle defect, but it is cloaked by pride, which lends it a certain dignity that can even demand respect" p. 151 (8).

> Perhaps Varela's Three Gestures of Becoming Aware can aid in the inner preparation or spiritual transformation of the Montessorian.

Research: Leaf Cabinet Matching

TIES students were asked to give a lesson pertaining to their specific area of study and videotape the lesson. After taping our lesson, we viewed the videos twice-one from the first person perspective and then from the point of view of the students, or third person perspective, with the goal of gaining insight into experience.

Searching for the Right Moment

The lesson I recorded was "Leaf Cabinet Matching" as I was exploring learning in living systems. Students were familiar with 3-part botany cards in Arabic, French, and English. We pulled weeds, trimmed roses, cleaned garden beds, harvested mshimsha fruits, and visited the Algerian botanical garden, Jardin D'essai. However, I was very skeptical that the students would be interested in this lesson, and struggled to give it-I wanted it to be as spontaneous as possible.

An Inner Struggle to "tear out" Defect: Anger

My classroom, like many, had a few boys who regularly chose to disrupt. On this day, I decided to keep two of these boys inside while the others went out. We got into a triangular configuration in close proximity so that I could aid them in completing the work they had chosen. Neither of the boys was pleased. As I watched, I considered how grumpy I felt and how often that feeling seemed to occur. Looking back, I identify that feeling as fear, disguised as anger, which Dr. Montessori wrote was the "principle" defect.

I had been struggling with my limits of patience and kindness for some time, starting a new classroom had exacerbated the difficulty. In short, I I had the desire to transform, but felt stuck. Actually, I had become so concerned with the lack of internal progress being made, that I was considering whether or not I should be a Montessori teacher at all. I was deeply troubled by this. I determined that it would be helpful to see myself on video with two unhappy boys, to observe myself in all my grumpiness, before considering what changes I might be able to make. I did not know when the Leaf Matching exercise would materialize, if it would.

An Unexpected Lesson

I set up the camera and put it on the shelf in clear view of the two boys and myself. I began to go back and forth between the boys-offering assistance and redirection in a very firm way. As I did this, I noticed the leaf cabinet between the two boys. I began to pull out the drawers and place them on a nearby empty shelf. Just as I was finishing this, a child from class came skipping in and handed me a leaf!

It was a roundish leaf. Astonished, I took the leaf and held it next to the leaf shapes that were right next to me. I was looking for a match. The student found the leaf shape he thought matched the best and we placed it there.

Experiencing Spontaneous Activity

I asked the boy if he would go look for a different leaf that we could match. He soon returned with a few interesting leaves. Within minutes a dozen or so students surrounded me, all with leaves in their hands and all looking for a leaf shape that matched. By the end of recess, the whole class was in the room and there was a large pile of leaves by each shape. Some of the children found leaves that were almost exact matches to the leaf shape, size, and color! The two boys I had placed at tables had quickly finished their work so that they could go searching for leaves as well. I had almost completely forgotten about them! I was dumbfounded.

Reflecting on the Three Gestures

1. Suspension

Reflecting back on my experience, I wrote in my thesis that I was observing "a feeling of irritation and frustration about a difficult situation"(9). Now I believe that "anger" is a better description of the habitual pattern of thought I was engaged in. On the outside, I was trying hard to conceal my agitation, but inwardly I was struggling. This habitual stream seemed to be "suspended" as the child holding a leaf appeared in the classroom.

2. Redirection

Varela had said,"…suspension will lead to very early emerging events, contents, patterns, gestures, whatever. Then you can actually redirect your attention to them. That's where the new is. So the suspension creates a space, the new comes up, and then you can redirect.Redirection is a specific gesture". (3)

Perhaps it was the act of physically seeing a child carrying a leaf that was the catalyst for suspension that naturally led to redirection. As Varela suggested, the touch seemed very light to me.

3. Letting Go

Varela said,

"Life is constantly in this process of re-accommodation and therefore this kind of cycle is at the very core of what life is all about" (3). My attention and presence shifted from working with two resistant boys to organizing leaves, there was a reorganization in my mind and body. The flow of work happening spontaneously just seemed to have taken over and the worries and anxiety that I had been feeling melted away. I believe this is what Varela described as "letting go".

> Perhaps Varela's Three Gestures of Becoming Aware is a tool that Montessori practitioners can use for self-inquiry experience.

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