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# WISE TEACHER, NEW SPIRIT

*Self and Community Care for the Montessori Practitioner*



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education that transforms lives

***The school must be invigorated by a new spirit, animated by a wise teacher, wiser than any other human being because he knows and respects the laws of education.***

**—Maria Montessori,**
***Citizen of the World*, p. 98**



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# Introduction

Imagine your ideal Montessori classroom.

Chances are, it's calm. Chances are, it's peaceful. The children are joyful. The work is purposeful. Maybe you can hear laughing. Maybe you can imagine the sun shining through the windows.

Imagine yourself in that ideal Montessori classroom. How do you feel?

Are you calm? Are you peaceful? Are you joyful? Are you doing purposeful work?

For many of us, despite the ease we hope to inspire in our classrooms, this Montessori thing is hard. Despite the calm we were promised, we find ourselves all too often overwhelmed. Montessori asks us to be scientists, engaged in the precise observation of each child we serve, attentive to the careful assessment in real time of their motivations, their development, their social experiences, their challenges, and their fears. Montessori asks us to be servants, preparing learning environments designed for those children, spaces that are responsive to innumerable needs, spaces that evolve and adjust as the children themselves grow and change. And Montessori asks us to be saints, to model the peacefulness, the contemplative nature of curious learner and collaborative companion, to manage all the demands from parents, from children, from other teachers and administrators, and to do so with grace, with joy, with ease.

It's hard work.

The same aspirations for calm, peaceful, joyful classrooms that brought us to Montessori can sometimes seem unattainable when we're faced with the practical responsibilities of the day-to-day. Montessori's writings offer little guidance on how to navigate challenging parent demands. Her lectures don't address how to maintain our balance as classroom teachers in the middle of a pandemic. It's hard to maintain the hope in our Montessori hearts when the weight on our Montessori shoulders is so great.

It's hard work. It's hard, and, all too often, lonely work.

We spend endless hours observing children, reflecting on what we've observed, preparing materials, offering lessons, talking to parents, organizing, cutting, cleaning, measuring, color-coding, consulting with other teachers, returning to our manuals, in an effort to best support the children. Most of the time, we do it all alone or in the company of only one or two other adults.  If we can turn some of that seemingly endless effort we offer to the children to caring for ourselves, we may find the rest of the work a little easier. If we can turn some of that seemingly endless effort to caring for each other, we may find the rest of the work a little less lonely.

Because, in truth, the work we are called to do, even when it's hard work, nonetheless calls us to joy. In our classrooms, we use the language of *purpose* and *work* interchangeably. The child's work is engaging. The child's work is fulfilling. The child's work sustains. Montessori tells us, "An interesting piece of work, freely chosen, which has the virtue of inducing concentration rather than fatigue, adds to the child's energies and mental capacities, and leads him to self-mastery."  Here, we will use the language of *work* in the same way: not to describe that which we *have* to do so that we can get back to doing what we *want* to do, but to describe that which we must do because, that which we are called to do, that which is sustaining, fulfilling, and joyful for our lives as adults. And just as the child will contemplate their purposeful work, in this book you will find reflections and prompts for your own contemplation: for your mind, your body, and your spirit, in community and independently, at work and at rest.

These reflections are written to help you to do two things: to strengthen your shared communities and to nourish your tender heart. There is no one path to follow. Instead, you'll find twelve places from which to start, twelve places to make your own: from your mind to your heart to your hands, thoughts for work and thoughts for rest, sometimes together and sometimes alone. Map your own journey. You are not alone.



[1] Maria Montessori, *The Absorbent Mind* (Laren, Netherlands: Montessori-Pierson Publishing Company, 2019), 209.

# Admiratio: The Work, the Mind, the Self

*Wonder is a cause of pleasure insofar as there is annexed the hope of attaining understanding of that which one wants to know.... For desire is especially aroused by the awareness of ignorance, and consequently a man takes the greatest pleasure in those things which he discovers for himself or learns from the ground up.*
*—Thomas Aquinas* [2]



Consider the role of fantasy and imagination in the Montessori classroom, that complicated nuance that causes so much confusion and criticism. Ours are classrooms lacking in fantasy play. We don't offer the children toy kitchens and molded plastic turkey legs so they can pretend to cook. There are no murals of furry monsters or action heroes on our walls. The books on our shelves are filled with photographs of the oceans, of constellations in the sky, of the microscopic differences between snowflakes. We present the world to the child as we know the world to be, and when we don't yet know, we say, "We don't know yet know."

We believe the real world is full of wonder. We believe the more we know about reality, the more curious we will be. We know that the child, new to this wonder-full world, is comforted when they increase their understanding of it. We know that the child, seeking reliable answers to endless answers, is assured when our responses fit with the understanding they are developing. We honor that curiosity, not by filling in the holes with fictions, but by serving as companion to it. In our classrooms, we welcome the unanswerable questions.

But, ah, in our lives as adults? How often do we seek the "right" answer to our questions? What is the best way to respond to a child who doesn't choose work? What is the best way to address a child who isn't reading at the same level as their peers? What is the best way to show this lesson or that one? To advocate with a family new to Montessori? To meet the needs of a neurodivergent child? To manage conflicts with colleagues? To finish Montessori certification requirements?

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[2] Thomas Aquinas. (n.d.). *Summa Theologiae.* Retrieved May 2, 2022, from https://www.newadvent.org/summa/

We presume that children are still learning, that their curiosity is useful as they learn independence. Likewise, we presume that adulthood, and especially the adulthood of those of us who call ourselves "teacher," should hold fewer questions. It is as though we believe the purpose of growing older is to have fewer questions, to have found the right answers. The search for right answers presumes there is a right answer to every question. The threat of right answers is that, once we think we've found them, we stop looking. If wonder is an "annexed hope," then the absence of wonder is an empty annex. No wonder our minds are so tired. No wonder; our minds are so tired.

When our minds are tired, we might be tempted to "turn them off," to engage in mindless activity. Our minds are not fueled by inactivity, but by wonder, by the opportunity to learn something new, something at which we do not need to demonstrate expertise. When the children are developing a new skill, we don't chide them for the mistakes that accompany learning. We know that their motivation to learn is intrinsic. Instead of rewarding them with external praise or punishing them when they struggle, we are their mirrors and companions.

By seeking out experiences that evoke our wonder as adults, we arouse an "awareness of ignorance," a reminder that this world remains full of mystery, a resilience to the cultural pressures to get it right all the time. Have you ever caught yourself with your mouth open, in awe of a remarkable sunset, or leaning in to see watch a skilled athlete make a great play? Have you been so filled with emotion that you forgot to think about how you might look to an observer? When we experience awe, we don't stop to think whether we're doing it right. Wonder comes without judgment. Likewise, when we seek to learn new things without chiding ourselves for the mistakes we will likely make, we fuel our own curiosity. Our self-judging comes from that sense that there are *right* answers, from the mistaken belief that the world is less wonder-full, less mysterious, less vast, less unknowable, simply because we have lived in it to adulthood. We fill our days seeking the right answers to practical questions. We can fuel our minds by asking the impractical ones: Which came first, the chicken or the egg? Is the Earth alive? What's the difference, cognitively, between a dream and a memory? Why do some people get sleepy when they're hungry and other people get cranky? Why can't you tickle yourself?

Curiosity is self-care for our intellect. And like other forms of self-care, the more we practice it, the more quickly we can connect to its benefits.



# Stretching the Temple: Reflection, the Mind and the Self

*The Divine Energy is listening to us when we speak to other people, but also when we are still and silent and able to accept solitude as a blessing. And when we achieve that harmony, we receive more than we asked for.*
*—Paulo Coelho* [3]

It's easy to be overwhelmed by the busyness of our everyday demands—preparing classroom environments, designing new materials, maintaining those materials, observing children, documenting those observations, developing parent communications, offering lessons, addressing administrative tasks. They swamp us, filling up every last minute of our time at school, distracting our thoughts when we're not at school.

But, sometimes, we welcome that busyness, that chaos and flooding. Sometimes we invite it. Uncomfortable in stillness, we find more additions to our checklists. We take on additional responsibilities or attend to the ones we already have for longer than we need to. We fill up our minds with busyness so that we are not left in solitude with our thoughts. We avoid the reflection that might come if we were to make time for contemplation.

Caring for our minds includes allowing time for reflection. Imagine a pool of water, reflecting your face against the blue sky. Imagine what happens to your reflection when you drop a pebble in the water. In the same way, our minds need time to reflect. Reflection is not emptiness or distraction. We don't see ourselves better when we angle the mirror away from our faces. Instead, we need to choose intentional times to think about our thinking. Which of the choices that we make each day are tacit repetitions of choices we were taught to make? In other words, when you engage in the classroom, do you enact the lessons you learned in your Montessori teacher education in order, as you were taught, without specific consideration to the immediate context of your classroom? Or do you choose your teaching strategies based on the specific observations you've made about the particular children you serve right now? Simply asking that question can help to elevate your thinking, challenging you to wonder why you make the choices you do. When a parent raises an unexpected concern, do you answer immediately and jump to solving the problem, or do you take the time to consider the details you have, gather others, and reflect on those complexities before you develop a plan to move forward? The former allows for the fastest response, but the latter allows for deep reflection, for a demonstration of respect to the parents and children, and a humility to acknowledge that our first instincts may not always be the best way forward.

That's not always comfortable. That's not always comforting.

Reflecting on that discomfort is its own self-care.



[3] Coelho, P., Ṣayfī Ranā, & [Sayflī Khalīl], *Makhṭūṭah wujidat fī ʻakrā.* (Beirut, Lebanon: Sharikat al-Maṭbūʻāt lil-Tawzīʻ wa-al-Nashr, 2013), 32.

When we allow our minds to struggle, we offer ourselves the same respect we offer to the child learning to tie their own shoe. In both cases, the child's shoe is tied, but when we rush through it, we suggest that we don't trust the child, that we believe it's too hard, that we value the tying more than the child's own sense of self. We may get more accomplished in the short term, but in the long run, we have become an obstacle to the child's development. Likewise, when we rush our own thinking, when we avoid the time to reflect on why we're doing what we're doing, we may "look busy," but we erode our calm, we erode our peace of mind. It may not be easy at first, but if we speed through it, if we trade the struggle for the fastest answer, we trample the brush instead of clearing the path. It may be that, at the end of that reflection, we decide on the same action that we would have chosen instinctually, just like the child's shoe is tied whether or not they tie it themselves. But we know, in Montessori practice, process matters more than product. In the process of reflecting, in contemplating our thinking, we allow space both for the innovation promised by new ideas and the confidence in our existing ones.

We need to make time to reflect on our thinking—intentional, protected time—even when that reflection doesn't look busy, even when we're afraid we're not being productive enough. The word *contemplate* finds its root in the Latin word for "temple," in a word that, itself, is rooted in the Greek word for "stretching," like the string that might be stretched to measure the sacred area around an altar. In contemplation about our thinking, we both measure and stretch the sacred in our own minds.



# Embers in the Hearth: The Work, the Mind and the Community

*If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other.*
*—Mother Teresa* [4]

Many of us spend most of our professional lives in the company of only one or two other adults. Maybe we have a co-teacher. Maybe we have an assistant or support staff to help carry the work of the classroom. Maybe we're entirely by ourselves, the only adult in a space that is neither designed for us nor dependent upon us. Maybe we grab a minute with a child's parent or caregiver during morning drop-off or at the end of the day. Maybe we share a lunch hour with a teacher from another classroom. But the hardest work of the day, the time when we are presenting or preparing or observing the classroom, we spend focused on the children, helping them to construct a community from which we could fade away without even being noticed.

There is real, if often unspoken, mental exhaustion that comes with the intellectual generosity demanded by teaching in a Montessori classroom. We risk burning out, relying on our own intellectual fuel to feed our own intellectual fire until we are empty. We risk running on autopilot, letting those intellectual fires become like eternal flames, drawing only enough fuel to sustain a little flicker but never giving off heat. Our intellectual fires rely on heat and air to persist. The heat comes from the core question of the prepared environment: how do I best design this space to serve the children who are here today? The air comes from our community, from challenging and defending our thinking against and along other teachers who are asking the same questions about their classrooms.

Yes—from *challenging* and *defending*. Our work in caring for intellectual communities is to help lift up each other's thinking, to strengthen and refine the practice of our peers by giving them an audience, by serving as critical friends. That is not to say that we should look for problems to pick on each other, but that neither should we shy away from the questioning. We need cheerleaders, sure, to remind us that we're capable of doing hard things. But we need those affirmations to be grounded in a real understanding of what we're trying to do and why it's hard for us. That requires our willingness to invite focused conversations in which, with humility and openness, we accept feedback on our teaching choices. It requires an investment in building the expertise of our peers so they can offer challenging feedback. And it requires a community of trust to acknowledge that asking for, offering, and receiving critique demands vulnerability and care.

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[4] Mother Teresa, "*Mother Teresa Reflects on Working Toward Peace,*" Markkula Center for Applied Ethics at Santa Clara University. (n.d.) Retrieved May 3, 2022, from https://www.scu.edu/mcae/architects-of-peace/Teresa/essay.html



When we struggle in our classrooms, we need the care of colleagues who can help us to endure that struggle, not the diversion of colleagues who offer platitudes or empty affirmations. As Montessorians, we know the child who asks for help is saying, “Help me to do this myself.” Likewise, as Montessori teachers, we know that the teacher who asks for help is saying, “Help me to do this myself.” The conversations that offer the most promising intellectual care avoid telling other teachers how to fix their classroom struggles. Instead, authentic intellectual care comes when I acknowledge that you are capable, when I recognize that the environment you prepare for your classrooms is as distinct from mine as the children in your community are from the ones in mine, when I ask you questions that help you to come to the solutions that are best for your setting, rather than proposing solutions in an intellectual vacuum.

When we offer each other a compassionate, critical community, we are offering oxygen to our intellectual fires. When we feel, individually, in our own classrooms, that our intellectual work is valued and strengthened by our colleagues, we are both better prepared to address the challenges in our classrooms and better practiced in supporting other teachers as they address the challenges in theirs. Our intellectual exhaustion increases without fuel to our fires, just as our fears of sharing our struggles with each other increases when we wait until we are overwhelmed by them before we ask for help. Asking regular questions of our peers and asking regularly for help for ourselves (and helping each other to ask regularly for help as well) helps to build a community of intellectual care. Healthy intellectual fires are better warmed by old embers, burning all the time, than by dramatic blazes that consume our attention. We need to practice offering each other the warmth of critical friendship in the small issues so that the trust is already established when bigger problems arise.... and they will arise. We cannot expect perfect classrooms as long as our classrooms are populated by imperfect humans. But we can create intellectually safe communities by acknowledging—thoughtfully, compassionately, and critically—those imperfections. Not because any one of us is perfect, but because our imperfections are lighter to carry when we share them with each other, and our communities warmer when we are all sitting around the same fire.



# The Noble Practice of Cleaning Shelves: Reflection, the Mind, and the Community

*Friendship arises out of mere Companionship when two or more of the companions discover that they have in common some insight or interest or even taste which the others do not share and which, till that moment, each believed to be his own unique treasure (or burden). The typical expression of opening Friendship would be something like, "What? You too? I thought I was the only one."*
*—C.S. Lewis* [5]

We are each a part of a community, even on the days when we may feel disconnected from it. We share classroom communities, faculty communities, communities of school advocates, of regional Montessorians, of national or international Montessorians. In each of those, we have some interest or insight or taste that we thought was our unique treasure or unique burden. When we take the time to be curious about each other, we discover those commonalities and we create the space for friendship to emerge from "mere Companionship."

Easier said than done. Our intellectual exhaustion often leaves us with little energy to offer even companionship, needless to say friendship, to each other. We have so much to do, and so few hours, so many responsibilities, and so few hands to help, that we place the nurturing of friendships and community at the bottom of our (ever-expanding) lists of things to do.

When we prioritize our to-do lists over our need for belonging, we find those lists harder to complete and the absence of others harder to bear. We think we're being responsible, but sometimes what feels like selflessness is ultimately an obstacle to creating the communities we hope to create. Sometimes what feels like selflessness leaves us only more alone.

Think about this : you are choosing between getting a cup of coffee with a colleague or cleaning your classroom. Knowing which is the more urgent need, you clean your classroom and reschedule the time with your peer. You choose the mindless work at the expense of the intellectual care that comes with companionship. It's a practical choice in the short term, but one that comes with long-term loss.



[5] Wayne Martindale and Jerry Root, Eds. In *The Quotable Lewis*. (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2005), 235.

Here's the good news: our to-do lists and our need for community are not mutually exclusive, not if we value them and protect them with intention. Maybe you can't sacrifice the time you need to organize your classroom, but what's to say you have to do it alone while your colleague down the hall is also alone? We create community by allowing time for practical companionship—time when I can clean my classroom with your help and, while we're together, we can both talk about the struggles in my teaching, time when I am helping to cut paper while you are sharpening pencils and we are both talking about the challenges in your classroom. We create community when we create time for the eurekas, the "What? You too? I thought I was the only ones."

When we care for each other's practical needs, we make space to care for each other's intellectual needs as well. It takes far more vulnerability to ask for help with a challenge I am having in my teaching than it is to ask for help with cleaning trays or dusting shelves. But if I know you are a person who will help me to dust my shelves, and you know I am a person who will help you clean your trays, we have begun to build the interreliance we need to trust each other with the more personal intimacies of our teaching. When we create time to rely on each other for the practical demands of classroom life, we allow time for intellectual companionship as well. We create our own society by cohesion as adults, modeling for children that, just as they learn from each other, just as they teach each other, just as they are responsible to each other and for each other, so are we, as adults, a part of interreliant cohesive communities.

*We sipped coffee. It was still awful, but there was something wonderful about sitting together and sipping even the bitterest of beverages. You cannot wait for an untroubled world to have an untroubled moment.*
*—Lemony Snicket* [6]

In Montessori classrooms, we respect the differences in development, in academic and intellectual accomplishment, in physical growth and social growth, by allowing for communities in which each child is both learner and teacher, in which individual strengths are as well-known as individual challenges. We model in these spaces the continuum of growth along which we believe each child will travel. When we isolate ourselves in our own classrooms, separating ourselves from other adults in the name of efficiency, we separate ourselves too from that same continuum of growth. Our intellectual community grows when we allow for meaningful conversation. The pedestrian demand to clean shelves is made noble when we use it as a conduit to intellectual community. The burdens of the day to day are made less burdensome when we use them as a backdrop to the companionship, to the friendship, for which we hunger.

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[6] Lemony Snicket. *Shouldn't You Be in School?* (New York: Little, Brown & Co., 2014), 9.

# Embodying Care: The Work, the Hands, and the Self

*The child gives us a beautiful lesson—that in order to form and maintain our intelligence, we must use our hands.*
—Maria Montessori [7]

There are some common qualities we can see when we observe a child absorbed in purposeful work. The child attends to the materials. They are absorbed in the activity before them. Their movements are intentional. Their affect is peaceful. There is a notable joy—sometimes ebullient, sometimes calm. We are reminded of the Peripatetic axiom: *Nihil est in intellectu quod non sit prius in sensu* [8] — "there is nothing in the intellect that wasn't first in the senses." We believe, when we see a child engaged in this way, that we are seeing them in their unburdened whole, that their peaceful, joyful concentration reflects the natural state of childhood absent the obstacles adults throw in their way. And so, we offer them real tools to explore, meaningful tasks, and purposeful work.

There are endless ways in which the experiences of adults are different than those of children, but here is one in which we are precisely the same: we too seek purposeful work. Our attention is captured when we are engaged in meaningful tasks. We too are absorbed. We are peaceful. We are joyful, sometimes ebulliently so, sometimes calmly so. We are fed by those experiences, and no more so than when they begin in our senses. When we want to offer care to our bodies, we need to begin with our senses. We need to begin with our hands.

Self-care for your body is more than just proper diet and regular exercise (although those certainly matter!). Holistic corporeal care is about more than the interchange of our digestive systems. When we watch the development of a human from an infant to a toddler to a child, we see the refinement of their coordination move from their tummies to their limbs to their fingers. We know the most distinct physical skills are in the fine-motor control of their fingers, the nuanced balancing of their toes, the subtle changes in the movements of their tongues that precede complex pronunciation. When we engage in self-care for our bodies, we, too, should start with what goes in our mouths and what happens in our stomachs, but we need also to offer intentional care to our fine muscles. Our resilience (literally, a "returning to the start") may come by changing diet and exercise, but our normalization as adults comes through the full-body coordination of purposeful work.

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[7] Maria Montessori, *The 1946 London Lectures* (Laren, Netherlands: Montessori-Pierson Publishing Company, 2018), 153.

[8] Thomas Aquinas. (n.d.). [51886] *De Veritate*, q. 2 a. 3 arg. 19. Thomas de Aquino, quaestiones disputatae de veritate, Q. 2–4. Retrieved May 4, 2022, from http://www.corpusthomisticum.org/qdv02.html

What is your purposeful work? What are the *tangible* (literally, "touchable") activities that bring you peace, calm, joy? Is it artistry of the hands, like knitting or cross-stitching, woodworking or watercolors? Is it working in the soil—gardening, weeding, caring for new seeds, and harvesting the fruits of your labor? Is it walking barefoot on sand, feeling the new stimulation of warmth, of water and crystal against a part of your body typically cushioned from impact? Is it the full extension of your physical form through yoga or swimming or dance? Take caution of the lists that instruct you on the "Top 10 Ways to Care for your Body" or offer you "5-Minute Self-Care Ideas." Just like the children may be drawn to purposeful work that holds no purpose to us, our own purposeful activity will be most profound when it comes from our own bodies, when it satisfies our own physical selves, even if it makes no sense at all to another adult.

This drive to purposeful activity is intrinsic and essential, just as is the need to *incorporate* it (literally, to "form into a body") throughout our day. We can model holistic corporeal care by making intentional time for it in the classroom, visible to the children, in observable, *concrete* (literally, "to grow together") experiences. Pour water when your body needs calm. Explore the Sensorial materials when your body needs peace. Practice factors on the pegboard when your body needs joy. Whatever the work is that evokes your curiosity, that allows you to coordinate the muscles of your hands, your feet, your tongue, in intentional ways—begin there. After the children leave, make intentional time to care for your body by allowing your body to care for their environment. Self-care isn't passive; our bodies hunger for meaningful activity. There are endless tasks to attend to as we prepare our environments, but those tasks are made noble when we enact them as a demonstration of care. When we choose to engage in the movements of our bodies in intentional ways, when we offer our bodies the attention of our intellect, we are enacting corporeal care. You can scrub tables mindfully. You can sweep the floor mindfully. You can cut more paper or sharpen pencils, run a laminator, or handprint labels mindfully. These are the "have-tos" of the Montessori classroom, and just as they help us to prepare the environment for the children, they are *conduits* (literally, "to bring together") for the care of our minds, hands, and spirits. When we *integrate* (literally, "to make whole") our bodies' need for purposeful work, both when we are alone and when we are with the children, we make ourselves whole again.



# What's It Like to Be You? Reflection, the Hands, and the Self

*I may not have gone where I intended to go, but I think I have ended up where I needed to be.*
—Douglas Adams [9]

Our culture values busyness, even when that busyness gets in the way of all the other things we value. Even when we think about self-care, it can become one more thing to do on top of all the other things to do, another way to disappoint ourselves when we haven't made the time to do it. Think about how you feel when a parent or peer asks you for advice, how quickly you can move into the position of helper, as though their questions benefit from more kindness than the unanswered ones you hold in your own heart. We offer more compassion, and we offer it more easily, to other people than we do for ourselves.

Our first efforts at caring for our bodies, then, may be in reflecting on what our bodies actually need. What is it really like to be you? Can you imagine, in this moment, the points in space at which your body ends and other matter begins? Can you feel your toes against your shoes? Can you feel the weight of your body in your seat? Can you trace the line where the temperature of your skin meets the temperature of the air around you? Can you focus on the parts of your internal body you can sense, your heart beating, your throat receiving breath, the small muscles of your eyes shifting to adjust focus?



As teachers, how our culture values busyness is often evidenced by our physical impact on the world around us. Are the classroom shelves orderly? Is the cubby area welcoming? Have we gathered our observation notes into well-organized spaces? Have we swept up the dust behind the shelves? These physical impacts demonstrate our influence, but that influence may be greater if we begin with how we feel in the unobservable interiors of our own bodies. Taking a moment, even if it is just a moment, to notice our own bodies, to ask ourselves consciously, "What is it like to be me?" is its own form of self-care. Because how can we care for ourselves if we don't begin by acknowledging ourselves? Contemplating how it feels to be in our bodies reminds us that we are singular in these bodies. As much as we share, in our external physical spaces, in our noble goals for community development or intellectual growth, as much as we can walk with others toward a shared horizon, we move within bodies that are distinctly, singularly, uniquely ours.

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[9] Douglas Adams. *The Long Dark Tea-Time of the Soul* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1988), 2.

Imagine that: of all the people in all the classrooms in all of the schools in all of the world in all of time, there has only ever been one you.

Notice that. Notice your body. Touch the palm of your own hand. Can you see your eyelashes? Can you feel the bones of your pelvis? Is your tongue resting on your teeth? Are your toes close together or spread apart? What is it like to be you? Each of these sensations, each of these effects that was first in the senses, will become a part of our thinking, of how we perceive each other and of how much compassion we offer to each other. Each of these sensations helps to remind us that we are singular and that, in that singularity, we are just like every other person we ever have or ever will meet. And when we struggle against the things outside of our bodies—the perspectives of our peers, the demands of parents, the children whose secrets we are yet to discover, or the road construction that delays our commute home—we struggle from the singular place of our own senses. We struggle from the singular perspective of our own bodies. Noticing that may not influence those perspectives or open the secrets or clear up the construction, but it will nonetheless serve as a moment of self-care. When we attend to our bodies, we care for our bodies. Just as there is nothing in our minds that was not first in our senses, the attention of our minds (*attention* literally means "the stretching toward") and our thoughts back to our bodies closes the circle of care. Moment by moment, heartbeat by heartbeat, we care for ourselves by first noticing ourselves. We prepare ourselves by first noticing ourselves. When we jump over this attending, when we operate on autopilot, when we disembody our consciousness, we may more quickly check off the boxes on our checklists, but we do so carelessly. Integrating these small moments of self-care, starting with the intentional noticing of our bodies, closes the circle. It helps to make us whole.



# New Mistakes and Small Service:
# The Work, the Hands, and the Community

*Make New Mistakes. Make glorious, amazing mistakes. Make mistakes nobody's ever made before. Don't freeze, don't stop, don't worry that it isn't good enough, or it isn't perfect, whatever it is: art, or love, or work or family or life. Whatever it is you're scared of doing, Do it. Make your mistakes, next year and forever.*
—Neil Gaiman [10]

Children offer service to each other all the time, sharing trays of freshly cut vegetables or placing gracious arrangements of flowers on worktables, zipping and tying for each other, helping to sweep up a big spill or offering an extra set of hands to put away materials at the end of the day. When a child has a need, it takes only a word for another child to step in to help. These acts of service reflect an awareness that each child is a part of a community, and an intrinsic motivation to contribute to that community in meaningful ways. When children offer concrete service to each other, they remind themselves of their own agency.

The same is true for communities of adults. When we offer each other service, it is not because we don't believe the other person is capable of handling a task on their own, but because we are a part of a cohesive society. When we offer each other service, we enact a social contract in which we collectively work toward our shared benefit. For the children, the assurance that their community will support them when they need help offers more than just belonging. It allows children to take more chances in their own learning. Learning requires vulnerability, a willingness to give up what I understand or believe about an idea in order to incorporate a new one in its place. The same is true for communities of adults. The assurance that our communities will support us when we need help offers us more than just belonging. It allows us to take more chances in our own learning, to refine and hone our craft as teachers, to increase our professional capacity, and to do all of these things in ways that uncover innovative practices to serve the children in our care.



[10] Neil Gaiman, "My New Year Wish," *Neil Gaiman's Journal*, December 30, 2011. Retrieved May 4, 2022, from https://journal.neilgaiman.com/2011/12/my-new-year-wish.html

When we offer each other service, we create communities in which we feel safe to make new mistakes, ask new questions, and uncover new truths. We invigorate our practice by disrupting the rote performance of our classroom schedules. We come to see our own teaching as its own experiment and, in the doing, offer ourselves and each other more forgiveness when things go awry.

The joyful making of new mistakes is its own kind of community care. When we are open to mistake-making, we break down the carefully constructed illusions of professional expertise that keep us separated from each other. We teach each other whether we are safe to make mistakes with by the small, everyday ways in which we have each other's backs. When you wash the coffee cups in the teachers' space, or stay a few minutes later than you might have otherwise to help finish wiping down the shelves, when you make an extra set of language cards to share or cut an extra stack of paper for the metal insets, you remind your colleagues that you share a community that expands beyond your classroom door.

There are the big days, when big needs are met, service days when the whole faculty comes together to scrub down the outdoor spaces or plant a new garden, in-service time when you collectively tackle the tomfoolery that used to be called your storage room. Those days are important, to be sure. They're exuberant service events and they create equally exuberant shared memories. But they are like holidays to the daily climate of our schools if they are not complemented by the small ways in which, every day, we lend a hand. In the classroom, when the children notice a need and meet it, it is not at the expense of the work they were previously doing. They return to their own work when the collective need is satisfied, and they are no less productive for the interruption. In our adult communities, remaining alert to the small actions we can take for each other costs us nothing but a change in mindset. If we want our communities of adults to be places in which we feel safe to take chances, in which we feel belonging with our peers, in which we feel like our contributions matter, we need to offer that same service to each other. We'll return to our own work as soon as the need is met, and we'll each benefit from the community we have helped to construct in the service.

# Marbles of Polished Stone:
# Reflection, the Hands, and the Community

*Most people are on the world, not in it—have no conscious sympathy or relationship to anything about them—undiffused, separate, and rigidly alone like marbles of polished stone, touching but separate.*
—John Muir [11]

We touch so many things over the course of the day. It changes the nature of our hands, the sensitivity of our fingers. Our hands are tools for opening, for writing, for carrying, for feeding, for cleaning, sipping, mopping. Busy, busy hands. When we show deference or reverence, we close our hands together, as though to say, "Look. I value you enough that I am sheathing my most powerful tools."

We need to use our hands to support each other's work, to be sure. We use our hands to help each other clean up the classrooms or deliver freshly sliced oranges, to unload supplies with a peer or prepare materials for the children. These are utilities, useful expressions of community that help, literally, to share the weight of the work.

We need also to use our hands to support each other's spirits—not just to care for each other's physical spaces, but to care for each other's hearts.

In some communities, there's a practice of holding hands during particular prayers. It's intended to show community, to demonstrate unity during the reverence of a gathering. Some people find it joyful. Some are uncomfortable holding a stranger's hand, even in a shared expression of faith, so much so that they'll be distracted from the prayer by the mandated touch. Not all touch, even when it is designed to connect us, affirms those connections. Some touch does just the opposite.

Human touch reflects an intimacy of relationship. It shouldn't be forced, even in quiet ways. Human touch, even when it's intended as a gift, can be a burden to the one who receives it if that touch feels unsafe or unwelcome.



[11] John Muir, and Linnie Marsh Wolfe, Ed. *John of the Mountains: The Unpublished Journals of John Muir* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press/Reprint Services Corp., 1991), 438.

With a respectful eye to consent and welcome, we might still consider the ways in which touch strengthens our communities and sustains our purposeful connection to each other. In our classrooms, the intentional movement of our hands helps to draw children's attention to particular processes or qualities of the work. We spend hours practicing exactly how to use our hands within those lessons. We should be intentional about all the ways in which we use our hands outside of those lessons. When we touch a child, what does that touch convey? Do we ask the child's consent even for touch which is intended to be loving? Do we rely on the strength of our hands to settle a child at group time or redirect a child who is moving carelessly through the environment? Do we model an awareness of the power of our hands with children, or do we only discuss the impact of hands when we are chiding children for not using them gently?

In our adult communities, we should be equally intentional with the use of our hands. Are we using our hands for service? For affection? For consolation? For comfort? For companionship? Are we using our hands purely as practical tools, disconnected from the work of our hearts and minds, or do we appreciate that intentional touch, and especially intentional human touch, carries more strength than the mere physics of our muscles? Do we take the time to offer gratitude for our hands, or do we focus only on how they've aged?

When we choose intentional human touch, we open the potential for connection and care through our bodies. When that touch is welcome, even a small bit of it holds great potential. Think about how it feels to have a dear friend hold your hand when you're sad, or the comfort and ease of a caregiver's fingers resting on the back of your hand. Think about the intimacy of a close friend stroking your hair or the nurture you feel when you offer that to others. We know infants need human touch. We know the comfort it offers, and the connection it reflects, when young children seek or offer touch. The same power exists for us as adults. Especially in spaces that rely so heavily on our minds and intellects, making intentional space for warm, responsive touch can humanize our work. We cannot see the inner workings of each other's minds, but we can experience the concrete touch of each other's hands. Our bodies need care. When we break down the physical boundaries of our bodies, we allow openings in the intellectual and emotional walls we have built around ourselves. Likewise, when break break down our intellectual and emotional walls, we are more comfortable lowering our physical boundaries. When we choose to offer and receive human touch within our communities, we offer integrated care to each other, linking our intentions and our intellect, our spirits and our will, to our bodies. We affirm that we are in the same world, not merely on it, connected, mutually reliant, and not alone.



# The Beautiful World: The Work, the Spirit, and the Self

*...whatever your labors and aspirations, in the noisy confusion of life keep peace with your soul. With all its sham, drudgery, and broken dreams, it is still a beautiful world.*
—Max Ehrmann [12]

With all its sham, drudgery, and broken dreams... goodness, doesn't this speak to our hearts, on our hardest days as Montessori teachers, when the beautiful classrooms we were promised in training seem like wild circuses and smell vaguely of vomit? When our aspirations to be the gentle, smiling teachers that Montessori writes about in her century-old lectures are smothered by the exhaustion of toddlers who bite or elementary children who challenge every boundary or adolescents who roll their eyes or parents who engage us with hostility or co-teachers who describe different paths than the ones we want to take? We have come to Montessori as an extraordinary leap of faith, an out-of-the-ordinary leap of faith, a revolution-against-the-ordinary leap of faith, to do work that is harder than we imagined it would be, that asks more of us than we realized it would ask, and that promises a world we have never seen.

It is still a beautiful world.

We have been called to work without a model. We have been called to follow the children as they construct a world we ourselves have never seen. Consider that: everything in our practice is based on the promise of a future for children that we, as adults, have never experienced. Of course, this is hard. We are writing a great story in a language we don't fluently speak. Some days will feel like poetry, but we will just as often struggle to be understood.

It is still a beautiful world.



12 Max Ehrmann, Desiderata: *A Poem for a Way of Life* (New York City: Crown, 1995).

Our work with the children does not ask us to be perfect. It does not ask us to be eloquent in a language we are only just learning ourselves. We are not master artists for the children to emulate. We are called to bear witness to the work of the child. We are called to protect them from interruption to their purposeful work. We are called to protect them from the obstruction of our agendas.

The sham, the drudgery—those are our agendas. The expectation that the children need to be (reading more, doing more advanced math, busier, more productive, more accomplished) reflects a sense that they are not already who they should be, that the children are our work to fix. When we struggle with the divide between what we thought this work was going to be and what the children actually need from us today, we must put aside our outside agendas and look to the children. The children do not need us to fix them. The children need us to, as Montessori said, "observe them with a serene joy," to give them "life and an environment to absorb," to "see the greatness of the child's achievements rather than the small and dry leaves of his errors (errors we have caused.)" [13]

When the environments we serve reflect different priorities than the aspirations that brought us to Montessori, the distance between them can seem like an impassable gap. But we dug that hole ourselves. It's a hole created from judgment, from external expectations, from adult-centered policies. It's the distance between the demands that were put on us in our own experiences as children and learners, and the revolutionary horizon we promised to protect for the children in our care. Closing that gap in our own lives may be the hardest work we do. Putting aside the messages we received, about what matters in school and how we should assess our own capacity and measure our worth, requires us to speak to ourselves in a new language. Serving our own spirits, as we nurture and navigate the unmapped path of each child, means we need to offer ourselves the same grace we have promised to the children. We need to temper the expectations of accomplishment and productivity we hold for ourselves and temper them for the children. We need to affirm the *serene joy* in simply observing the children, to see the greatness of what they are accomplishing as they build themselves into new humans, separate from our checklists and our agendas.

There will be days (and there will be many of them) when the beautiful classrooms we were promised in training seem like wild circuses and smell vaguely of vomit, when our aspirations to be the gentle, smiling teachers that Montessori writes about in her century-old lectures are smothered by the exhaustion of toddlers who bite or elementary children who challenge every boundary or adolescents who roll their eyes or parents who engage us with hostility or co-teachers who describe different paths than the ones we want to take. When those days come, we need to speak to ourselves with a new voice, the voice we hope to offer the children, a voice that bears witness to the powerful and mysterious process of becoming when we know not yet what the child will become, in a language of companionship instead of judgment, a grammar of love.

It is still a beautiful world.

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[13] Maria Montessori, *The 1946 London Lectures* (Laren, Netherlands: Montessori-Pierson Publishing Company, 2018), 26–47.

# The Marble and the Plaster: Reflection, the Spirit, and the Self

*The secret of genius is to carry the spirit of the child into old age, which means never losing your enthusiasm.*
—Aldous Huxley [14]

What have you loved today? What has evoked your curiosity? What has evoked your wonder? What has inspired your joy?

Or, better question, what brought you to Montessori to begin with? What made you choose a way of teaching that would ask of you such humility, that would demand your persistent intellectual attention, that would set as a goal the construction of a new society?

What excited you about this work, before you knew how hard it would be?

It is hard work, isn't it? Our goals are so ambitious, and the demands equally great. We want to be the peaceful, serene teacher that Montessori describes in her writings—but Montessori doesn't describe her bad days. These idyllic classrooms she details came about without concerns for the fire inspector's unanticipated visit or descriptions of how to respond when a child turns the Knobbed Cylinders into a reenactment of a fight scene from their favorite superhero movie.

We come to Montessori enthusiastic to be a part of these peaceful classrooms, enthusiastic about the eureka moments when a child discovers a new idea, enthusiastic to observe the natural development of children in a space that protects that development from adult agendas. We come to Montessori enthusiastic to be a part of the revolution, to help to construct the new society. Maybe we are not as enthusiastic about conflicts with other teachers. Maybe we are not as excited about conversations with disappointed parents. Maybe we are not as excited about having to work through lunch on a day when staffing is low.

Our spirits are fed in each moment, not only the ones we judge as good. Our spirits are fed by love, by curiosity, by wonder. Our spirits are fed by joy. Not by the child's careful balancing of the tiniest cube of the Pink Tower, but because of the joy we feel in observing that moment. Not by the children's peacock walk down the entire length of the Thousand Chain, but because of the love we feel for those children. We hope to protect children's natural development, a development that includes unbridled curiosity and persistent wonder. Why, then, do we shackle our curiosity with work plans and checklists? Why do we behave as though we can only be joyful if the classroom is quiet?

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[14] Aldous Huxley, quoted in *And I Quote: The Definitive Collection of Quotes, Sayings, and Jokes for the Contemporary Speechmaker*, Ashton Applewhite, Tripp Evans, and Andrew Frothingham (New York City: St. Martin's Press, 2003), 126.

Our resilience as Montessorians asks us, every day, to return to the start. That's what resilient means, after all: to leap back to the place from which we began. Our resilience asks that we affirm, every day, what it was that originally excited us about this work. Our spirits hunger for the love, the curiosity, the wonder, the joy we felt when we first discovered the Montessori classroom. We want to feel again, every day, the way we felt the first time we finished the Trinomial Cube in our teacher education program. We want to feel that serene wonder we felt when we first noticed how beautiful a stream of water looks when we pour it from one jug to another.

If we cultivate curiosity in each new challenge in the classroom, we may soon find those challenges become opportunities for joy. When we judge the development of a child as (good, bad, advanced, delayed, enough, not enough), we limit who we believe they can become; we steal from ourselves the wonder of observing their becoming. Think of the design of the classroom: we use neutral tones for the shelves, the walls, the rugs, so that the child's attention will be drawn to the materials we hope will satisfy their spirit. Likewise, the logistical administration of our classrooms, the small behavioral struggles, the signup forms and parent reports—they should be neutrals in the background of our attention. The day-to-day demands of the classroom may be the necessary structures on which the children's experiences hang, but they should not take our attention away from offering sacred witness to the children themselves. We love the child, fully, for who they are in this moment, without agenda or assessment, as though we are admiring a great work of art in a gallery. The walls are necessary structures upon which the masterpiece is displayed, but no one walks away from a marble statue by Michelangelo and remembers the plaster behind it.

So, again, what have you loved today? What has evoked your curiosity? What has evoked your wonder? What has inspired your joy? When we offer intentional attention to the parts of this experience that inspired our enthusiasm to begin with, when we return our attention to our starting points as Montessorians, we feed our hungry spirits. We sustain ourselves when we choose where to look, when we affirm our aspirations, when we pay less attention to the small daily stones against which we might stub a toe or two and, instead, gaze at the child who is yet to come.

# Forgiveness and Love: The Work, the Spirit, and the Community

*Forgiveness is the name of love practiced among people who love poorly. The hard truth is that all people love poorly. We need to forgive and be forgiven every day, every hour increasingly. That is the great work of love among the fellowship of the weak that is the human family.*
—Henri Nouwen [15]

The great work of love.

We observe the child to notice when they discover their great work, that purposeful activity that absorbs their attention and settles their spirits. We sometimes describe our calling to Montessori as a great work of its own, to advocate for this new society in service to the child. We talk about the greatest success of the teacher and the great lessons of the classroom.

But what of the great work of love? To forgive and be forgiven every day.

Our Montessori teacher education programs set such high expectations for us. Our mentors try to guide and form us into an elevated model of teaching that resists all the self-centered lessons we've learned about school. We assess ourselves against (possibly unattainable) measures. And with good cause. We have not accepted the call to Montessori because we were looking for a more efficient way to teach children to read or a more prestigious path to get children into college. We have accepted the call to Montessori because we believe that there is a new society to come, if we follow the laws of education and infuse the school with a new spirit. And so, we hold ourselves to a high and noble standard, to be that wise teacher we were called to be.

We are rarely called to easy work.

We have set such high expectations for ourselves, for each other, and for Montessori. Many days, maybe most of the days, we will not meet them. If we are paying attention, we will disappoint ourselves and we will be disappointed in each other.

We need to pay attention, to protect our horizon as Montessorians from the daily risk of erosion into just another curriculum. And we need to forgive ourselves for how far away we still are from that horizon. We need to forgive each other. When we can acknowledge the things we would have done differently as Montessorians, when we can forgive each other for the ways in which the weight of each of our inadequacies is shared amongst the whole of us, we make space for a more honest engagement as teachers and parents. We model for the children the full range of human imperfection and the assurance that they, too, will be greatly, if imperfectly, loved.

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[15] Henri Nouwen, "Forgiveness," *Henri Nouwen Society*. (n.d.). Retrieved May 6, 2022, from https://henrinouwen.org/meditations/forgiveness/

*The hard truth is that all people love poorly*. Even when we are committed to Montessori, even when we name ourselves among the true believers, when we have our elevator speeches ready to go and when we can convince strangers sitting beside us at the bus stop that they should look into Montessori school for their children—even when we have this down, Montessori practice is a work of great love, and the hard truth is that all people love poorly.

If we are to offer each other compassionate care, as teachers or administrators or parents who are walking together toward that horizon as Montessorians, we must start from a place of generous forgiveness. We must first be honest with ourselves (even if we choose not to dwell on this mucky categorizing with each other) about all the ways in which we have disappointed, and have been disappointed by, each other. We must first be honest with ourselves (even if we might find it too coarse to name each instance individually) of all the ways in which our own experiences and narratives and sadnesses as adults have slithered into our practice in the classroom.

And then we need to forgive.

Every day. Every hour. Increasingly.

When we forgive ourselves and forgive each other for all the ways in which we are not yet who we want to be, we trade our clenched fists for hands on each other's backs. When we forgive ourselves and forgive each other for all the ways in which we are not yet who we want to be, we remove the blinders of pride and self-protection from our eyes. We can see more clearly the horizon toward which we hope to travel. From this place of forgiveness, we offer each other affirming love, a safe place from which to dare to commit more fully to follow the child, a confidence of belonging through which this Montessori thing may feel less lonely. We care for each other's spirits by first releasing the ways in which we have cared imperfectly. We create more perfect community by first offering forgiveness.

This work is too hard, and that horizon too far away, to do it alone. This work is too important, and the promise of the child too great, to lower our expectations. The path ahead of us is too long to spend any more time looking backwards. What do you need to forgive yourself for today? Who do you need to offer the same forgiveness to? Start there, and move forward. We have work to do together.





# If This Isn’t Nice… : Reflection, the Spirit, and the Community

*And I urge you to please notice when you are happy, and exclaim or murmur or think at some point, “If this isn’t nice, I don’t know what is.”*
—Kurt Vonnegut [16]

No year will be without its challenges—some years more than others. There will be political upheavals. There will be pandemics. There will be economic downturns on a national scale.

No day will be without its challenges—some days more than others. There will be staffing issues, changes in local regulations, snow days, bathroom floods, days when there’s more traffic on the way to school, holidays, and full moons.

We need to care for ourselves and for each other, on every single one of those days.

Every one of them.

There will be challenges every day. We need to address those challenges, to be sure. We have to pay attention to the backed-up toilets and downed tree limbs on the playground. We have to respond to calls from frustrated parents and changes to accreditation or licensing rules. And we have to help children to make sense of all of the changes in their lives.

We need to care for ourselves and for each other, on every single one of those days.

Every one of them.

There will be days when those obstacles threaten to swamp our connection to all the things we love about this work. Remember what you love about this work—the sound of children laughing (even if they’re hiding under the table at the time), the wonder on a toddler’s face as they discover they can make bubbles in a bowl of water and soap (even as the water splashes over the rim of the bowl and slops onto the counter), the leadership a group of middle schoolers shows when they plant a garden (or the ways in which adolescents defy all the stereotypes when they’re in environments that affirm their contributions). The same parents who sometimes challenge us to earn their trust are the ones who we cry with when we watch their children graduate. The same co-teachers who want to present lessons in ways we never would are the only other adults with whom we share the gentle moments of the classroom. When other adults come to us, on their hardest days, we need to help remind them of the parts of this work they love. When we go to other adults on our hardest days, we need to ask them to remind us, too.

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[16] Kurt Vonnegut, “*If This Isn’t Nice, I Don’t Know What Is,*” Case Western Reserve University, filmed 2004, video of lecture, 3:29, Retrieved May 6, 2022, from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sn6ru7FaQns



It's the same message we offer to the children: I cannot protect you from challenging days, but I can be with you on those days. You will have troubles, but you won't have to face them alone. We are so good at the gentle supports to children, at helping them to persist through new challenges, and supporting them to notice how far they've come. We offer observations that affirm their feelings. "You look angry. Sometimes we feel angry." "I can see you're sad. Would you like me to stay with you until you're feeling better?" We offer language that mirrors for children their own worth, that acknowledges their implicit value and reminds them that they have the capacity to do hard things.

What a gift, to offer the same to each other, as teachers, parents, and advocates for the child, to say: I cannot protect you from challenging days, but I can be with you on those days. You will have troubles, but you won't have to face them alone. Caring for each other in community asks us to think beyond what is hard about the work to remind each other that we have the capacity to do hard things.

There is so much work to do, but in the midst of those challenges, there are children laughing, and moments of wonder, as young people find their voices and influence their communities. There is so much work to do, but we are doing this work in community. We are doing this work in the companionship of other teachers, parents, and advocates, who believe in Montessori and believe the work is worth doing. Even when we disagree on the small stuff—the presentation for a particular lesson or whether children need to master each material before they can move forward, even when our training backgrounds are different or the choice of words we'd use in a parent newsletter is different—we are on the same team. We have chosen Montessori for the noble, aspirational society we believe we are turning toward. We have chosen Montessori out of a distinct reverence for the promise embodied in each child we serve.

We have so much more in common than we have challenges to overcome. Fewer than 1 percent of 1 percent of all the teachers in the world are Montessorians. We have chosen a difficult path toward an unseeable future, and, remarkably, have discovered so many others walking in the same direction. Let's face those challenges together by first celebrating the extraordinary occasion of our reunion.

If this isn't nice, I don't know what is.



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