

Montessori and Steiner: A Pattern of Reverse Symmetries

By Dee Joy Coulter, Ed.D.

Montessori and Waldorf: I have cherished both movements for years. It has been a delicate business, straddling the fence with these two dear friends. Each has kindly granted me an exemption, agreeing to overlook that I was also befriending the other in my spare time. For a long time I held each movement in separate compartments in my heart and my head, considering the paradox of how they could both be so sound, so “right” and so different. Then, one day I was attending a lecture on education at Naropa University, a Buddhist inspired college in Boulder that is my third dear friend and where I love most to teach. Dr. Jeremy Hayward commented that the Buddhists regard wisdom (basic goodness) and skillful means (right action) as the two wings of the dove. All of the Eastern parallels tumbled through my mind then -- the feminine and masculine principles, the yin and the yang, and the way each contains the other in seed form.

In that state of mind I thought again about my paradox: How could it be that Montessori and Steiner made sense, not as mere halves of what could be a good system if only put together, but as wholes themselves? Suddenly I saw these two inspired leaders and their movements as a pattern of reverse symmetries.

Rudolf Steiner began his spiritual activities with the Theosophical Society, eventually breaking away to form his own movement, which he called anthroposophy. But the connections he had made as head of the German Theosophical Society gave him the publishing foundation on which to further his own teachings later. Whereas Steiner’s affiliation with theosophy occurred early in his life, Maria Montessori’s happened late in hers. She was visiting in India when World War II broke out and prevented her from returning to Italy. She was interned in Adyar, India, for 6 years and forced to slow her busy life to the tempo of that Indian city -- which just happened to house the international headquarters of the Theosophical Society. Montessori was inspired to write her most overtly spiritual books during those years and the books were then published by Adyar Press, the international Theosophical Publishing House.

It was also this war experience that drew Montessori to press for peace education above all else. War played a vital role in drawing forth Steiner’s vision, too, although it was the aftermath of World War I in his case. Steiner was asked by Emil Molt, owner of the Waldorf Astoria cigarette factory, to devise an approach to education that could serve both the children of the workers and the management, and work toward reuniting a culture torn by war and class differences.

War brought about Steiner’s initial invitation to participate in the formalization of an educational philosophy, and it brought to Montessori a deeper spiritualization of work already underway. Her work in education had begun with children in the Italian ghettos, children who would have been destined to find no niches in society without her dramatic interventions.

There are other reverse symmetries, as well. Steiner, a male in a masculine country at the end of a very masculine act of war, was asked to instill the feminine principle of honoring the basic goodness and inner wisdom of the child by reintroducing the arts and reawakening the heart forces. In contrast, Montessori, a female in a feminine country already infused with the arts, offered disenfranchised children the masculine service of enculturation, apprising them of opportunities and building up skillful means in them so they could take their place in society. While Steiner worked to rekindle the imaginations of overly hardened children, Montessori worked to diminish the excessive imaginative life of children who used that realm as escape

from a reality they couldn't grasp. She strove to "normalize" them, to bring their practical activities and their imaginations into proper balance.

Symmetries in Curriculum

Many curricular elements of the two approaches have the same reasonable oppositions, as well. Montessori would first introduce the manifested forms of the greatest mathematicians to the children -- Platonic solids, Pythagorean geometric forms -- and later introduce biographies and the ideas behind the forms. Steiner would ask his teachers to introduce the wonder of sacred number principles, the biographies of the mathematicians, and the spiritual quests of their day before introducing the forms. Waldorf education reintroduces the questions so that the child can personally generate the spiritual quests that led to the answers, and then shows them what the culture has developed. Montessori education invites the child to reverence the answers first, the wonders of human cultural deeds, and then to progress to the seed elements of the finest of our manifested works.

Montessori would have the children discover geographical spaces and their spatial relationships early, to see how geography reveals our cultural interconnectedness. It is not uncommon for Montessori children in the early grades to raise money to preserve Brazilian rain forests, for example. Steiner, on the other hand, would start with the local environment and gradually work outward in spiral to reach astronomy by grade 12, but he would reverse the spiral for history. In history, the child would begin with fairy tales, legends, and myths, then work on through Biblical and ancient recorded history to current events in grade 12. Steiner would pace this historical journey to match the unfolding consciousness of the developing child. The Golden Age of Greece, for example, would be addressed during Grade 5, when children are their most sensitive about fairness, and newly able to become a democratic society themselves.

Montessori teachers [interviewed in a prior issue of the journal] spoke more of materials, environment, structure, building, play exercise, concepts, specificity, order, and practicality. These words are used to describe our formed world, and to construct our world. Waldorf teachers [interviewed in that same journal issue] spoke of delicate processes, essence, aspects, rhythm, feeling elements, context, imagination, and beauty. These words are used to describe our inner life and the artistic nuances of the world as it is. However, each movement is more than a polarity, for each holds the other at its core. Montessori offers the enculturating gesture with the ultimate hope that children so nourished will then go forth able to bring about peace in the world. This is a very feminine goal, calling for inner transformations. Steiner proposed his inner approach with the ultimate hope that the children so nourished would then go forth in freedom to contribute to the further development of the culture. In recent history, this has been largely a masculine activity.

Both of these paths are brilliant, full of compassion, and honoring of the child. And each path has the same obligation that faces every individual in these times. We can no longer afford, nor accept, a gender-based constraint on our ways of service; we must work to bring ourselves into balance in life. Both of these paths are at their best when their practitioners strive to explore the seed qualities within their movement. Montessori spoke eloquently of the spiritual embryo of the child and the spiritual preparation of the teacher. Those teachers would do well to study her later works and include within the clear forms a bit more of the mystery that Maria Montessori also says is important. Conversely, Steiner sought teachers who had rich practical life experiences, to model for children ways to be in the world. Those teachers would do well to step out into the world more often -- to see what other schools are doing, what children in other settings are like,

how faculties elsewhere work with conflict, and how today's outer science could and would support their spiritual insights.

These actions would be so nourishing for the teachers themselves. When I am with Waldorf teachers, I witness their feeling of isolation and inner exhaustion. For them, a sense of context in the world would be a good tonic. When I am with Montessori teachers, I witness their feeling of overwhelmed compassion for the chaotic conditions of the world. For them, a sense of inner spiritual renewal would be an equally good tonic. One thing is clear. The children need them both. Each brings a high level of love and caring and a path through childhood vitally needed by children today.

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