

The Path of Spirituality: Reflections from a Montessorian and a Physicist

CHRISTINE M. A. LAPIERRE
CHRISTOPH SIMON
University of Calgary

Abstract: Spirituality has been explored in various fields of study for several decades. This article examines how spirituality relates to the Montessori philosophy. Various aspects of the Montessori philosophy discussed include Montessori teacher training, the spiritual preparation of the teacher, the inner teacher, and teacher strengths and weaknesses. The authors also examined how adult learning informs spirituality and the Montessori philosophy. Additionally, several kinds of love were discussed in light of these facets. Reflections of a physicist and a Montessorian on these concepts are presented in each section.

Résumé: La spiritualité est explorée dans divers domaines d'étude depuis plusieurs décennies. Cet article examine comment la spiritualité se rapporte à la philosophie Montessori. Divers aspects de la philosophie Montessori discutés incluent la formation des enseignants Montessori, la préparation spirituelle de l'enseignant, l'enseignant intérieur, et les forces et les faiblesses de l'enseignant. Les auteurs ont également examiné comment l'apprentissage des adultes informe la spiritualité et la philosophie Montessori. En outre, plusieurs types d'amour ont été discutés à la lumière de ces aspects. Des réflexions d'un physicien et d'un Montessorien sur ces concepts sont présentées dans chaque section.

It is a unique occurrence for a physicist to reflect with a Montessorian about spirituality and the Montessori philosophy. As Christoph, the physicist, and I, the Montessorian who has worked in the Montessori field, collaborated together on a project that involved the Montessori philosophy, we delved into what that philosophy implied for young children. At the same time, I shared with Christoph my interest in spirituality and adult learning, my

Journal of Educational Thought
Vol. 53, No. 3, 2020, 257-268.

field of specialization. As it is rare for a physicist to engage in these subject matters, so is it unusual to ponder adult learning and the Montessori philosophy. We examined these topics and their implications. The purpose of this article then is to illuminate the reader about these themes, in a way that is useful for educators of students of all ages. First, in order to set the foundation for our reflections about spirituality and the Montessori philosophy, we will investigate these subjects together.

The Montessori Philosophy and Spirituality

Maria Montessori, one of the world's greatest educators, included the concept of spirituality in her educational work over a hundred years ago. She believed that children have a spirit and that this spiritual aspect of themselves interacts with them in whatever they do.

Montessori developed and used educational materials with young children and after a few months the children were joyful, self-disciplined and peaceful. They spontaneously began to write and read. Maria Montessori and her teacher were filled with disbelief at what they were witnessing. However, it was genuine that these dramatic changes took place in the prepared environment that the children were in. Montessori's fame spread far and wide and many dignitaries and famous people came to observe the children in Montessori's school. They enquired about what she had done for the children to change so much. What is of interest is that Montessori stated that the children in her school were transformed because she had taken away the obstacles to their spiritual development. She believed that she had brought out those spiritual qualities that were already inside the children, qualities such as love, kindness, truth, honesty, and joy. Soon, others wanted to open up a school like hers, and Montessori commenced training teachers. Montessori schools were opened in many countries by those who had taken their training with Montessori.

I, Christoph, am a father with twins in a Montessori elementary school. My wife and I made that choice after Christine described to me what a Montessori classroom offers children in their development, and we had a chance to visit a Montessori school. Many elements of the Montessori philosophy resonated with me, both as a parent and as a physicist.

I, Christine, am enthused about the work of Maria Montessori. I became acquainted with the Montessori philosophy when my son was young. I was so inspired, that I decided to become a Montessori teacher for children in early childhood. Over the course of many

years, I came to understand more the depth of the work that Maria Montessori left us to follow, for the betterment of children. Having worked in the Montessori classroom, I experienced firsthand the transformation that the children go through in their development. I am in awe every time I enter a Montessori classroom. Montessori's belief in spirituality and the child is a theme that I have incorporated in my work.

Now we turn our attention to the Montessori philosophy and an important idea that invigorates the discussion of this philosophy: the inner teacher.

The Montessori Philosophy and The Inner Teacher

An important pillar of the spiritual nature of the principles of Montessori was Montessori's concept of the inner teacher. Montessori affirmed that every child is born with an inner teacher. This inner teacher becomes known in adulthood as the higher self or voice of conscience. The inner teacher guides the children in walking, talking, writing, and all other skills, as they grow and develop. It was the guidance of this inner teacher that Montessori observed when she was with the children in Montessori schools. However, she (Montessori, 1989) cautioned adults that they could negatively impact the work of the inner teacher:

Hence a prejudice has found its way into the adult—the notion the life of the child can be changed or improved only through teaching. This prejudice impedes the understanding of the fact that the child constructs himself, that he has a teacher within himself and that this inner teacher also follows a programme and a technique of education, and that we adults by acknowledging this unknown teacher may enjoy the privilege and good fortune of becoming its assistants and faithful servants by helping it with our co-operation (p. 46)

Christoph. Both as a parent and as a physicist, I can relate very well to the concept of the inner teacher. I see how it acts and grows in my own children. In particular, curiosity (or the love of learning) is a central driving force both for child development and for scientific research.

I, Christine, became familiar with Montessori's concept of the inner teacher after hearing a presentation about it some years ago. Realizing that I also had an inner teacher inside of me, I began to practice being connected to and listening to my inner teacher as I worked with children. When I supported this connection in the children, there was more peace in the classroom. Montessori's idea of every child born with an inner teacher that guides them in their growth and development is an important one for me. It helped me to understand, as an adult, what that voice of conscience was in my heart. It also assisted me in comprehending what, as part of my inner life, played a role in making decisions that were in consideration of my highest good and the good of others.

Montessori Philosophy and Teacher Training

Montessori took a holistic approach to training teachers. That is, she appealed not only to the cognitive, emotional and physical aspects of the teachers; she also introduced subject matter that transformed the students' spirit. Montessori referred to this learning as the spiritual preparation of the teacher. Here is an example of how moved her students were after a training course in England:

At the conclusion of our course under you, Dr. Montessori, we wish to offer you our heartfelt gratitude for the new hope, the new confidence you have inspired in us, that the teacher's work is not only the noblest that man can do, but that it can be achieved with a success measured not only in the true progress and happiness of the children, but of ourselves also. (Standing, 1984, p. 76).

It would appear that the changes in the students occurred deep in their consciousness and that the courses set in motion a spiritual renewal within them. After conducting teacher training in countries around the globe, Montessori indicated to one group of students:

...you, young and old, of all nations, races, religions-some of you still seeking a place in the world, others already with honoured names-you all sit, side by side, together and without surprise. We have come together in this way because we have touched a point which is common to all cultures, nations, societies, religions - The Child (Standing, 1984, p. 78).

I, Christoph, believe that is also true for science up to a point. Science is quite universally accepted, though there are some that doubt.

I, Christine, underwent a similar spiritual transformation, as mentioned above, when I took my Montessori training. My instructor was a person who had met Montessori and built a school modeled after those of Montessori. My Montessori teacher training included the spirit of Montessori. I was changed by what I learned, and I came to respect children in deeper ways. I realized that they could teach me how I could teach them.

A vital component of the preparation of the teacher included the understanding of how a teacher's weaknesses could adversely impact the teacher-child relationship. Montessori (1972) underlined the importance of doing away with two main flaws: anger and pride. In considering anger, Montessori specified that it can be placed on a continuum that starts with irritation and goes all the way to tyranny. The antidote of anger is patience. When teachers cultivate patience, they also increase their self-knowledge. That is, they become more aware of their thoughts and feelings and bodily reactions, such as tension, rapid beating of the heart, and shallow breathing that accompany a rising of anger. These are clues that the teachers need to rely on self-calming strategies for the sake of keeping the peace in the classroom.

Christoph. Patience is a key quality for my life as a parent, but also for my work. Research projects take a lot of time to complete (two years or more is not unusual). In addition to that most students need some time to become effective researchers. This means that patience is an essential quality for research supervisors like myself.

I, Christine, have been practicing patience for some time, after learning about how anger negatively affects children. This practice has extended to other parts of my life, where I feel a greater sense of peace. I have also learned that it is a continual process: it continues throughout a lifetime. I have become more aware of my bodily reactions to challenging situations, and endeavour to keep the calm. Therefore, I eagerly began to search for strategies that I could follow to control my anger, in all of its guises.

A second weakness that Maria Montessori cautioned teachers about is pride in its negative meaning (Montessori, 1972). Its opposite is humility. Pride would be manifested when the teachers contend that they are responsible for all that the children are doing, such as their learning, their positive behavior, and their mastery of the environment. Another form of pride would be the teachers thinking that they have authority over the children, negating the

role that the inner teacher plays in the children. Montessori underscored, "True spirituality realizes that even to help can be a source of pride" (Montessori, 1995, p. 280). There are times when the teachers must know that it would not be helpful to intervene when the children are concentrating on what they are doing.

I, Christoph, was very interested to learn about Montessori's thoughts on the negative aspects of pride. I feel that in my profession there is a bit too much focus on individual accomplishments and on competition. Some of this may be unavoidable because it is very difficult to obtain academic positions. But I nevertheless advise my students to concentrate on their internal motivations, and on what helps them find meaning and purpose in their work, rather than on external rewards. I think the academic community could maybe learn from Montessori's thoughts about pride to not place such a strong emphasis on honors, prizes and awards.

I, Christine, have come face to face with my pride as I was teaching children. Originally, I thought that I could take the credit for a child's good behavior and learning. I then understood that it is the child and the child's inner teacher that deserve the credit. I was only there to support the child's development. I also placed a lot of effort into being in a state of humility throughout the day. As a teacher, I realized that it was more important to keep the peace in the classroom, than it was to try to be right all the time. Because of this new stance, the children became more peaceful themselves, and together, with the other teacher in the classroom, we built a kind, loving community.

Montessori also spoke a lot about peace: peace with the child, peace in the classroom and peace in the world. She contended that peace would only come with a change in education. In fact, she was nominated three times for the Nobel Peace Prize, in 1949, 1950, and 1951.

Christoph. Again, this is a key concept both in my life as a parent and as a supervisor. The parent part is fairly obvious. But a lot of our research is done in teams as well. Conflicts are unavoidable in this context, e.g. about how responsibilities as well as credit for collective accomplishments are to be divided. Being able to resolve such conflicts in a compassionate and constructive manner is a key skill for any supervisor.

I, Christine, since becoming a Montessori teacher, have attempted to find peace in the classroom and in every aspect of life. When I am at peace, I know that I am connected to my inner teacher. Then, I try to bring that sense of peace to my family, friends

and colleagues. Over time I have become a more peaceful adult and I know that it is mainly through my practice as a Montessori teacher.

A final aspect of the Montessori philosophy and the child is the concept that is well-developed by Montessori: that the child represents love. She stated that when adults are around a child, they become very gentle and loving. She went even further and said that the child possesses the power to bring about unity in the world. When adults are with a child, they forget their differences, their vain competition, and their prejudices. Instead, they want the best for the child, and are willing to give up preconceived notions so that the child can reach the highest potential.

Christoph. As a parent I can certainly relate to that.

I, Christine, am awed by the ability of the child to transform my feelings into love. I am very caring around a child and am aware that the child wants to share love with me. Therefore, I have been developing the capacity of my heart to love more, because of what I have learned about love and the child.

Adult Learning and the Montessori Philosophy

Spirituality is a concept that has been explored in many fields of study over the last few decades. For the purpose of this article, the field chosen is adult learning, since it is the background of the Montessorian, Christine. Adult learning informs our understanding of spirituality and the Montessori philosophy. First, many scholars in this area have thought profoundly about the subject of spirituality as a way of deepening the understanding of the self. For example, Tisdell (2003, 2008) defined spirituality, in part, as the cultivation of a relationship between the self and a higher power. English (2012) and Groen (2012) maintaining the same idea also included other aspects. They espoused that one progresses along a continuum of wholeness and feels an interconnectedness with all people, nature and the universe. Additionally, meaning-making and a sense of purpose were also considered components of spirituality. All of these aspects of spirituality are present in the Montessori philosophy (Montessori, 1995).

Christoph. Let me begin with spirituality. I think it would be fair to say that I became a physicist for spiritual reasons. In particular, science and physics really support and strengthen the idea that everything in the universe is interconnected. Everything is made out of the same basic subatomic particles. The same laws of nature apply to everything here on Earth, and everywhere in the universe. All living things on Earth have evolved from the same

primordial life forms, and they depend on each other in many ways. All these facts are at least very consistent with the idea that we should care about other human beings, and also about other species, and try to live in peace with them.

The scientific understanding of evolution suggests that there may not be an external purpose to our existence other than reproduction, but I think that this does not have to prevent us from finding internal purpose and meaning in our own lives. For example, I derive meaning both from my work as a scientist, where I strive to gain a deeper understanding of nature and to pass this understanding on to the next generations, and from going through life together with my family and friends. The idea of a higher power does not resonate with me personally, but it is interesting to note that the early scientists in the Middle Ages were encouraged by the idea that there might be a creator who would have created the universe in a way that could be understood. So this form of spirituality seems to have been helpful for science to get started.

I, Christine, having pursued my studies in the field of adult learning, I discovered that this field, with a well-defined approach to spirituality, assisted me in comprehending Montessori's allusions to spirituality. At the beginning of this section, there were a number of comments about the definition of spirituality in adult learning. Maria Montessori in her writings and lectures gave examples that led me to believe that she would agree with them. I, too, maintain that spirituality consists of a number of elements, such as a connection with a higher power, having meaning and purpose, following a path to wholeness, and feeling interconnected with all of life. Moreover, as part of their continual spiritual development, I concur that teachers, and adults in general, need to cultivate key spiritual qualities that would support them in developing positive relationships with children. Some of these are love, compassion, kindness and truth. Davalos (2016) also included in his elaboration of spirituality the concept of spiritual qualities that leads to the development of the whole person. For meaning and purpose, I maintain that I am on earth to provide a contribution to the world, and that everyone has a unique mission or purpose in life. I also believe that I am connected to all people, nature and the universe.

Love in Education

John Miller (2018) is an educator, who recently wrote a book about Love and Compassion in education. He illuminates us about how love is present in all parts of education; a contention also made by Montessori. He provided a fascinating description of several kinds

of love of which some will be mentioned here, because they support what Montessori said about love and the child. First, Miller maintained that the most important aspect of love is self-love. He asserted that we need to be our best friend, and that we can only love others once we love ourselves. For some people, this may be challenging, however, being loving and kind to oneself will come with practice.

Christoph. Compassion and self-compassion, or self-love as Miller states, play important roles in the practice of mindfulness, which I find very helpful in my own life. Mindfulness means becoming aware of how your mind works. This includes learning to distinguish between your thoughts and reality. For example, many of us have a tendency to always assume the worst possible outcome. This may make evolutionary sense because it keeps us safe, but it can also make us very anxious and unhappy. When one learns to recognize these patterns in one's mind, one can get a bit of distance from them more easily. This applies even to very powerful emotions like the fear of death. Mindfulness also makes it easier to deal with conflicts, by becoming aware of one's own emotional reactions and gaining a bit of distance from them, as well as by practicing compassion for others and for oneself. It is difficult to be nice to other people while being hard on oneself.

I, Christine, am becoming more and more aware of when I am sending love to myself, as I work, as I talk and as I think. It is a good reminder for me to be in a state of love to share with others.

Another kind of love is impartial love and examples are compassion, lovingkindness and empathy. When we are connected to another person, we can feel compassion for them. You can then place yourself in their shoes and feel what they are feeling. Lovingkindness may be a quality that is new to some people. It refers to the act of extending wishes of well-being to oneself and others.

I, Christoph, can relate to many of the forms of love described by Miller, even if I might not personally have used the term love in all of these contexts. For example, collaboration is very important in scientific research, and I completely agree that it is essential for everyone's contribution to be appreciated and respected in such collaborations. Curiosity plays a central role in my life and work, as I already mentioned above. I also fully agree on the importance of both compassion and self-compassion.

Christine. I use the word love a lot in my work and in my life. I have also developed the habit of using compassion for others, instead of feeling sorry for them. I agree with John Miller in his

characterizations of love. I can apply them to my family, my classroom, and to the world that I am in. Keeping my attention on love in my heart as I go throughout the day helps me to stay centered and in harmony. It was really beneficial to learn about the different kinds of love. I can see ways in which I can apply each one described above.

Another kind of love is the love of learning. This is important for children and adults alike. When children learn to love to learn as young children under the age of six, they will have a higher chance of continuing to cultivate this love as they progress through school and into their lives as adults. They will realize that it is important to make a positive contribution to the world.

Christoph. I think the history of humanity can also be viewed as a process of becoming more self-aware. We have now reached a state where we are capable of collectively asking ourselves questions such as 'Do we really have to keep destroying our environment?', or 'Do we have to keep having wars?'. When we understand the patterns of thinking and behavior that lead to these outcomes, it becomes a bit easier to avoid them going forward. I think this is borne out by reality at least to some extent. Of course, we still have a long way to go, and success is not guaranteed. I completely agree that peace is the foundation for almost everything else that is worthwhile. The more we can achieve peace within our own minds and those of our children, the more we will have it in our families and communities as well.

Christine. I consider myself a lifelong learner and it is a passion that I bring to my family, friends and work. The Montessori philosophy thrives on the concept that the child is a natural learner, and what the child most wants to do is to learn about everything in the environment.

Conclusion

In sum, we contemplated the path of spirituality through the lens of the Montessori philosophy, as perceived by a Montessorian in the field of adult learning and by a physicist, in academic research. We discussed the Montessori philosophy from a variety of avenues and included our thinking about each aspect, such as the inner teacher and Montessori teacher training. We realized that as a physicist and as a Montessorian, we had much in common about how we viewed spirituality and how it applied to our professional and personal lives. Reflecting on anger and pride, we could see that their antidotes could have a positive influence on our environments.

Exploring the concepts of love and compassion, we considered on how important they are to creating a better world where we are.

REFERENCES

Davalos, J. F. (2016). A Study of Academic Leaders in Two Large Alberta Universities (Unpublished doctoral thesis). University of Calgary, Calgary, AB. doi: 10.11575/PRISM/25041 <http://hdl.handle.net/11023/3474> doctoral thesis

English, L. (2012). For whose purposes? Examining the spirituality agenda in adult education. In J. Groen, D. Coholic, & J. R. Graham (Eds.)

Groen, J. (2012). Kindred spirits? Challenges and opportunities for the faculties of education and social work in the emerging teaching focus on spirituality. In J. Groen, D. Coholic, & J.R. Graham (Eds.), *Spirituality in social work and education* (pp. 77-94). Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfred Laurier University Press.

Miller, J. P. (2018). Love and compassion. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.

Montessori, M. (1972). *The secret of childhood*. New York: Fandom House Publishing Group.

Montessori, M. (1989). *The formation of man*. Oxford, England: The Clio Press.

Montessori, M. (1995). *The absorbent mind*. New York, NY: Holt Paperbacks.

Standing, E. M. (1984). *Maria Montessori her life and work*. New York: New American Library.

Tisdell, E. J. (2003). Exploring spirituality and culture in adult and higher education. San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons Inc.

Tisdell, E. J. (2008). Spirituality and adult learning. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*. 119, 27-36.

Address for Correspondence
Christine M. A. Lapierre
Email: clapierr@ucalgary.ca

