

THE REVELATION OF THE CHILD

Ardyn Masterman

Ardyn Masterman was born in 1953, the fourth child of Sibyl and Leslie Charles (Bob). Both parents were from pioneering families and interested in social activism. Ardyn's love for children led her to pursue the teaching profession. She gained her teaching diploma and taught in rural NSW. Ardyn's interest in Montessori's ideas began with the raising of her children, along with her dissatisfaction with mainstream teaching methods. In 1986 she completed her AMI Montessori training with Elizabeth Hall in Sydney and subsequently taught for the Canberra Montessori Society. Her father became interested in Montessori's work which led to the formation of an idea; to make Montessori education accessible to indigenous children. Since his death in 1991 Ardyn has been working to bring this dream to fruition. A pilot classroom has been running successfully for four years within a public school in Cairns. Ardyn's enthusiasm and commitment has inspired government agencies, corporations and the Indigenous and Montessori communities to work together to bring Montessori education to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

Recently I received a catalogue of publications by the Krishnamurti Foundation Trust. The title of one of the taped conversations was "Goodness Only Flowers in Freedom". I haven't read the publication but the title suggested to me a truth of humanity that the child revealed to Maria Montessori. Her work has been described by the explorer Robert Peary as "the discovery of the human soul". It was this discovery of the inherent goodness of the child, as much as her materials which made her work significant and revelatory at the time.

A first visit to a Montessori class can be a pleasant shock... "How can these little children be so self contained, calm and self directed...why aren't they fighting?" Montessori coined the term normalization for the process which occurs in an atmosphere of freedom, because that is what she discovered; that children normally are kind to each other and eager to learn. She discovered that given true freedom with responsibility and the opportunity to work with something that brings success and of their own choosing, the child showed positive personality characteristics not normally associated with childhood. Negative characteristics like possessiveness, tantrums, withdrawal and anger were self-protective deviant development from the norm, characteristics resulting from misunderstanding by the adult. These were observed to fall away once the child was treated with respect and consideration for their needs of self-construction. The two estranged sections of society, the child and the adult were brought together in a new light of understanding, acknowledging the child's unique type of absorbent mind and their relentless task of self-development. The adult was given insight into their work, which the children engaged in with great dignity and maturity.

Spontaneous acts of goodwill arise in the atmosphere of freedom and, only when we step back and allow that they do and can happen. This is precisely what can be said about indigenous peoples, that whatever needs to happen is allowed to happen. This, from my observations, is in terms of allowing strong feelings to be expressed and work their way out. Sorry business is about allowing for the process of pain, they understand that we are emotional beings and that we need to be compassionate with ourselves and each other.

Indigenous children show us a view of childhood that is unrepressed. They are open, active and emotionally expressive, as their world is filled with constant parental and group affection. Unlike isolated nuclear families, within indigenous society childhood is not a wounding experience (unless there has been alcohol induced damage). Instead of anger at a child's anger, the frustration of the child is validated. The adult in a sense pours water over the intense emotion, the child feels that someone understands her, she feels allowed and empowered to find her own way and know that it is OK to be an emotional being. Traditionally Aboriginal parents would find other ways to release their frustration or rage with a disobedient child, by thrashing "in spirit", like thrashing the ground

with a branch on the child's footprints, without ever touching the child (Lawlor, p.169). It is considered a great personal defeat for an adult to lose patience and hit a child.

In the Montessori Dancing Brolgas environment we see these children's spontaneous friendliness, unbounded enthusiasm and spiritual vitality; their souls are less insecure as they have not been repressed by what should be, from a limited (often stressed) adult input. Indigenous children have been nourished by extensive relatedness and the consequent secure sense of place in their world and the greater freedom generally present in their upbringing. When there has been parental substance abuse and inevitable emotional damage, the timid, angry or withdrawn child blossoms eventually, as they begin to trust and sense the sanctuary of respect and goodwill that pervades in the atmosphere of freedom. They respond positively to a program designed for control of error in the material itself, they are free from correction by adults, allowed to learn and correct their own mistakes. The children work with their hands and are respected for the sensitivity they have for their own academic and emotional needs; they become confident to master their own environment, rather than feeling an insignificant pawn in an adult world.

The child revives the importance of the power of free choice, which Montessori termed as the highest mental process (The Absorbent Mind p 265). When the child chooses from her internal guide something conducive to life, growth and perfection, rather than passing restlessly from one activity to another, responding to the multitude of superficial sensations, she inspires focus by her presence. It is a choice from the call of her spirit and the birth of the delicate phenomenon of concentration. Without having had this practice, or being given the space and time to develop it, the adult remains the child who was not validated and searches out distractions and sensation constantly, without finding or heeding their core inner guide.

Maturity arrives when a person chooses a task and follows it through to completion. This the child endeavours to do if the task is suited and self chosen. To be able to choose intelligently, to plan the day usefully, to concentrate and create, to be responsible for completing valuable projects through making our own decisions, to withstand pressure from others and not be a slave to our senses, are valuable lessons for many an adult.

The child shows us their quest for independence and concentration through their practice of repetition, which she begins at birth. There are so many distractions to becoming the inherent good person we are from birth. Unlike the nature of animal instincts, the child has to acquire discernment and is directed by a spiritual sensitivity, by her inner hormone or élan vital; Montessori referred to a divine urge or vital force for growth which stimulates the child to perform actions with intense interest, repetitively (which to the adult may seem futile) until "suddenly a fresh function appears." (The Absorbent Mind p. 101) This results in an empowered self-determined individual, a rarity in the adult, as society shuns or fears individuality.

Independence and individuality are borne from concentration in the child. After a period of intense concentration the child is born anew, fresh for new discoveries, full of happiness and love for others and their world. It is a lesson for us all, the need to retire in solitude for periodic seclusion; to reach deep concentration of meditation is to detach from the world for social and spiritual renewal. The child is showing us how to be in touch with our natural state, the deep well of joy for life within, accepting what is. Hurried lifestyles are not conducive to psychic or planetary health and wellbeing.

The child is showing us the power of awareness; being sentient beings they are conscious in their positive choices and sustained concentration. As this child grows she will remain responsible and become conscious and aware of the kind of thoughts the mind is producing, becoming aware of her inner (primary) reality. It follows then that as adults they will become more responsible for what goes on inside. Humanity may then be less likely to continue the violence and insanity that has been perpetuated in the 20th Century (death of well over 100 million fellow human beings as well

as all the mental, physical daily violence - Tolle p. 66) and become more respectful of each other and the planet.

As with the child, there is sanity beneath the madness of individual's deviant behaviour. True acceptance, surrender and sustained attention at meaningful tasks can transmute negative feelings together with the realization of the thoughts that are making one sick.

As the child fearlessly goes fully at whatever they attempt, an adult can also be fully conscious and accepting of the present situation, with no inner conflict, no inner resistance and no negativity. Staying in the past or projecting into the future is resisting the present and means we are split, causing stress or mental instability. Children show us how to move with and enjoy the flow of energy of the present moment totally. Moving, dancing, running or working, they show us how to die to the past continuously, accepting that life is already whole, complete and perfect, just as it is.

If we can really see the child before us, we see that as they are constantly learning to be empowered, they are spontaneously being kind to themselves, doing what feels best. As adults, we too can learn to be kind to ourselves by being aware enough to be able to check in periodically, to see how one is actually feeling within. The only person one can rely on 100%, is oneself, one's own inner child. The child's inner guide is the adult's inner child. If we're kind to our selves we are responding to our need to overcome the insecurities of the human condition. The consequence is that the practicalities and life in general becomes smoother, less melodramatic, leaving the individual free and unhindered to find their purpose, reach their unique divine human potential of goodness and wisdom, and help to make the world a better place for all.

Being present in Dancing Brolgas is like being part of a large vibrant family, when everyone is active, busy doing their own thing, they are feeling successful about learning and growing. The children are comfortable and secure enough to be relaxed about the process of growth and transformation, for this is where children are at, and the adult (who has largely forgotten how) is reminded of this natural process. They are renewing us, as well as themselves. We grow in understanding of ourselves along with the children as they grow and mature with their dignity intact. We are able to learn from them the joy and love possible in learning through their depth of concentration. We see the power of repetition to create success. We are reminded of the importance of discovering and knowing our strengths and weaknesses and the creativity that transpires when we are following our interests so that our heart sings. We see the uniqueness of each child, each with his or her unique potential and divine cosmic plan. When given the freedom, pace and time to reveal our plan, we can effortlessly and happily adapt to, nourish and contribute the best of ourselves for the greater good in our environment, community and culture.

Ardyn Masterman, Cairns 2004

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