

Your Child is Not You

By P. Donohue Shortridge

Remember when you first realized how different you were from your parents? Somewhere around 13 years old or so you began to question who were these strangers, your parents, and you certainly became increasingly more embarrassed by them.

Now that you are a parent yourself, it may shock you to consider that this phenomenon will happen to you. One day, not long from now, your child will inform you just how lame you are. You dress like a dork, your hair is so not cool, you hold all the wrong political values and you certainly cannot begin to understand his dress, friends, music or lingo.

As a parent of a young child, you probably can't imagine that this child who now clings to your leg will one day grow up and away from you. He will, but not yet. Now he looks to you for everything from material

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sustenance to emotional cues to physical safety to role modeling. He came from you and thus is bonded to you, worships you and depends on you. For you as parents, it is a heady experience to have one person in the world who loves you above all else and for whom you would lay down your life. Indeed, you have invested so much already, even in the few short years you have been parents.

Parenting advice, often contradictory about how to do everything, abounds. The investment is huge, the stakes are high and failure is not an option. You worry that you are hovering, worry that you are not doing enough, worry that you may have already ruined your child, and you certainly worry how you will pay for it all. And for many of you, peer pressure to have great children is as intense as life in high school not to appear clueless and come up short. You need an edge, a leg up in the competitive field of uber parenting.

For many parents, enrolling their child in a Montessori school is part of that social whirl; my child will have the best and Montessori is the best. It certainly is not

part of the mainstream; it's expensive and somewhat mysterious. You let slip the name Montessori at work, at church and at social engagements. It's code for the best. You drop your child off at Montessori school in the morning and head off into the adult world knowing your child is getting the best education possible. We're doing it right, you think. And ironically, you are. Montessori is ideal because paradoxically, while it is alternative, it is at the same time, normal. Not typical, not usual, not mainstream. Normal.

Now take a breath and consider this: Your child is getting the best education because he is getting what is normal. Normal in that he is being seen for who he is, honored as a person unto himself and is being provided with an individually tailored education. Think about it. Really.

Think about your school days. Were you:

- seen for who you really were?
- honored as an individual?
- did your school create a curriculum just for you?

No, no and no. You got typical, not normal.

So congratulations, your child has it made at school. Montessori works in so many ways. It's developmentally appropriate, it stimulates his mind, honors the individual child as the learner, it models authentic community, fosters generosity, empathy and benevolence, trains the

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mind, is academically advanced and instills in your child a life long love affair with learning. The result is that your child will adapt to his culture rather than conform to it. He will adjust to whatever the world throws at him because he will be comfortable in his own skin.

All true, unless . . .

Yes, there is a "but" there. That but is you, his parents. No matter the exceptional education Montessori offers, you are still the foremost imprinter on his life. Indeed,

back to your parents; aren't they still with you? Even now, you can feel them, hear them, see them. Their wisdom yet rings in your ears, and their mistakes still break your heart.

Inevitably, you will do the same with your children. You will be wise and foolish, you will save their life and you will break their heart. And they will serve up to you the lessons of your life.

So, here's the punch line.

No, wait, I have to tell you a story first. Our story. My husband and I are at the end of our child's childhood. She's married now and pushing 30. We got the big lesson when she moved away from home and into her college and grad school years. Well, actually, she was

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teaching us all along, but we were too busy parenting her to pay attention. Till later. We had hubris, we had pride; we were guilty of benevolent arrogance. Our sin? We assumed she'd turn out just like us. We didn't actually consciously think it, we just assumed it. It never occurred to us that she wouldn't. Really. So, we were actually shocked when it turned out that she didn't love what we loved and instead became someone so different from us. You see, we loved literature, politics and history. Every night at dinner, we would dissect the issues of the day, pose hypothetical ethical scenarios to our daughter, make a passionate case for our philosophical position and parse the meaning of the Constitution. She gamely entered into the fray, seemingly as riveted by politics as we were; we just knew we were completing her education. Trivial Pursuit was our board game of choice and one Thanksgiving my husband even ran the table on the entire rest of the extended family. And then one day, we awoke rudely. At some dinner we were foaming over some historical rant having to do with the Spanish Inquisition and the subject turned to Martin Luther. Our college educated, almost adult daughter was pensive, then meekly wondered if Luther wasn't that guy who put that note on the door. It was then that we knew she lived in a different country than did we.

Indeed, she did. One of her own making, one in which she followed her own dream, a dream we never dreamed for her, nor even considered, nor planned for her, nor encouraged her to specifically pursue. We know nothing about medicine, no one in our family before her did either. But there she was, rattling off all the names of the bones in the hand and patiently explaining to us for the millionth time, the difference between a viral and bacterial infection.

Her own person, indeed, standing before us. Becoming her own person is our lesson. It came as a surprise to us, no, actually a shock that she is not us. She is of us, a part of us resides within her, but she is her own person. Would that we understood that from the beginning. We wonder now if we didn't give her enough breathing space to come more easily into her own.

Note to hypothetical self in next life: talk less, listen more; steer less, model more.

She survived us, thank goodness. We are so proud and happy she has found her own life, has become a thriving adult in her own right.

So the moral of the story is this: The Montessori way encompasses territory vaster than an alternative school. It is an alternative way of life. The big surprise is that it's more alternative for you, as parents, than it is for your children. Montessori education follows the developmental laws of your child's nature, so the Montessori approach is easy for him. But you have the harder job; to become an alternative parent. Your job is to embrace the reality that you don't get a say in how your child turns out. You guide, mentor and love your children, but you don't own them. They are not a mini-you. To come to really know that is a delight and a relief. Your reward for embracing that alternative role is that you get to witness the unfolding of a most unique individual, who loves you mightily.

So, ratchet it back a few notches, and instead of telling your child how it is going to be, ask him what board game he wants to play.

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