

FOREST BLUFF SCHOOL

COMMENTS ABOUT FOREST BLUFF BY A YOUNG GRADUATE

One of the images that most clearly sticks in my head of my early years at Montessori is the bucket-on-the-string experiment. I remember peeking around the door-frame of my Junior Level One class and watching the "Older Children." They had taken a small tin pail filled with water, and tied a thin rope to the handle. And now, to my astonishment, they picked up the rope, and started swinging the bucket in the air, in huge, sweeping circles. As I was about to run and tell on them for doing such a terrible thing, I noticed something even more amazing -- something which challenged my new-found perception that there was no such thing as magic: The water was staying in that bucket. A few years later, I tried the same experiment myself, and learned that the only magic there had been was something called centrifugal force; gravity had not been defied, but merely obeyed. The magic was in the nature of the water.

Standing by when I learned how to perform this "magic" myself was the teacher -- she had gathered a group of us for a Presentation -- an event for which we all held the greatest respect. It was now, we knew, that we would be able to understand what the Big Kids already knew about the world, and such amazing things as flying buckets of water.

These Presentations were, indeed, just that -- the world was being presented to us, as was our place in that world. On my first day of school, when I was five, the teacher announced that everything in the classroom had a name. She challenged us to find an object that did not; we couldn't. We then began to learn the names of things outside the classroom -- the types of trees on the lawn, and the types of leaves on them -- the parts of an apple -- the parts of a lizard -- the states in the country -- the countries of the world. We learned also our responsibility to and role in that world. We saw the tiny silhouette representing mankind at the end of the long sheet representing time. We learned that this was us. We saw that the potted plants and the groundhogs in the cage in the corner needed us as caretakers. We learned that we were that, also. We saw that there were pictures to be painted and plays to be written and worms to be dissected -- and so we became artists and writers and scientists.

Since the world had been presented to us, we, in turn, presented ourselves to the world. In Montessori I was allowed to delve into venues of creativity, to explore interest, however fleeting, and to develop passions. And, amazingly, my teachers were as receptive to my presentations as I had been to theirs. They sat patiently through long skits and even longer reports; they listened intently as we raised our hands to tell stories, even when

they knew they weren't true.

We were encouraged wholeheartedly to create and experiment and explore; I found myself with more freedom in the fourth grade than I would in my senior year of high school

I figured out early on, as most of us did, that the Montessori teachers had handed us their unconditional trust. We were free to do what we chose, from picking what we would work on to moving freely around the classroom. I can't imagine how different my education would have been had I been denied the basic rights to talk and move around -- had I, like my friends at other schools, viewed my teachers as wardens, rather than friends.

In a world where "Give 'em an inch and they'll take a mile" seems to be the golden rule, this trust is refreshing. The Montessori teachers gave us a mile, and because they respected us enough to do so, we respected them enough to run that mile as hard as we could. This momentum carried me through high school, as well. The respect with which I had been instilled remained, as self respect, and therefore pushed myself to excel -- to exceed the goals which had been set for me.

One of the first presentations we received in science was about the natures of solids, liquids, and gasses. While solids stay constant and gasses are without form, we were told, liquids flow freely, expanding and moving to fit the shape of their container. Children are liquid. They shape themselves to fit the form of the container into which they are placed. Where they are free to go, they go; what they are free to do, they do. And when they are accorded this freedom, they feel no need to push its boundaries.

Children thrive on trust. When allowed to walk to town, they do just that; when allowed to paint a picture, they do just that; when allowed to work for hours mastering intransitive verbs, they do just that -- and gladly. I am forever indebted to my teachers for their amazing "presentation" of absolute trust to a young child.

They had enough faith to swing the bucket, because they knew that it was in the very nature of the water to remain right there.