

THE ESSENTIAL IS INVISIBLE TO THE EYE: THE EVOLUTION OF THE PARENT OBSERVER

by Mary Caroline Parker

PART II

The question of how schools can help parents experience joy in observing their children led to a quest to identify experiences that can contribute to the awakening of consciousness. Workshops, surveys, discussion, and interviews yielded data that led to some unexpected conclusions about sources of personal transformation.

*It is only with the heart that one can see rightly;
what is essential is invisible to the eye.*

—The Little Prince, *Antoine de Saint-Exupery*

FOUR SURPRISING DISCOVERIES

My research over the course of a year's work with parents had generated a small mountain of notes, surveys, videos, audiotapes,

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transcripts, and charts. Even with all the time I had spent reviewing the material, coding, and graphing, I knew I was only just beginning to mine the data. For every topic raised or realization recorded, there were just as many more still waiting in my notes and transcripts. For purposes of this article, I decided to choose just four areas of insight to describe in detail, hoping that my choices might be representative of the depth of meaning I had found in the work.

1. It's Not About the Teacher

The first discovery was something that popped out of my pages of coloured bar graphs. Apparently I had proved a negative, and no one could have been more surprised than I was!

According to my notes and graphs, the teachers I had interviewed were quite confident that they themselves were an important influence on parents' ability to observe their children. They mentioned "relationship with teacher" as a catalyst for change 21 times. In fact, they went on for pages and pages about it. And they mentioned "discussion with teacher" no fewer than 50 times, making this factor the most important, or at least the most talked about.

The parents, on the other hand, seemed to have a different perspective on the importance of the teacher. In their interviews they identified "parent education" most often as a significant influence for change. They ranked "practice" in observation second. Next came "discussion with other parents," and next having a "model/mentor." "Discussion with teacher" came in a miserable fifth in importance, tied with "reading." Even when converted to percentages, the data showed that the parents assigned only one-third as much importance to "discussion with teacher" as the teachers did. But what really surprised me was that only one parent had even mentioned "relationship with teacher" at all, and that was in response to a direct question from me using the word "relationship."

The parents did mention talking with teachers, usually in the context of parent conferences, and they also mentioned watching teachers as models when they observed in their children's classrooms. But apparently neither "talking" nor "watching" makes a "relationship." Clearly, the parents saw their contacts with teachers in quite

a different light than the teachers did. Here are some examples of what the teachers thought about their role:

A huge factor was a personal relationship between parents and guide, and then when I was no longer the guide, I was the school director. [...] You could plot the progress in terms of their relationship with the guide. (Teacher Interview)

Well, we have the luxury, of course, of having the child for three years under most circumstances, so we could see a growth, not only in the children, but also in the parent. [...] Maybe it was because I knew the parent better and they were more willing to open up or ask more questions, that it appeared to be a growth on their part. [...] Not only do you form the relationship with the child, but with the parents as well. (Teacher Interview)

There has to be this relationship that is healthy, open, honest, and clear. And that is where the trust comes from. That is where the understanding comes from. (Teacher Interview)

I went back over all the parent data just to make sure I hadn't missed some reference to the importance of a "relationship with the teacher." Except for that one brief mention, it just wasn't there. The closest I could come were a few comments about the effect of having a parent educator or teacher trainee come into their homes repeatedly over periods of months or years, but even then, the parents never used the word "relationship." Rather, they described these repeated contacts in terms of having a "model" or "mentor."

One parent who was especially interested in observation said,

I'm trying to think if I've ever had any conversations with the guide about observing [my child] I didn't know her last name for four months. It's like, "OK, her name is Sandra," but that's all I know. (Parent Interview)

The same parent later wrote a moving tribute to her child's teacher, in which she described how grateful she was to have the teacher as an adviser, recalling a moment when the teacher had gently used humour and sensitivity to make an important point about parenting. Yet she expressed surprise when I commented on

her “relationship” with the teacher. She didn’t consider that she had a “relationship” with the teacher, she said. She had probably spent only a few hours at most with that teacher the entire time her child had been at the school.

So what exactly is going on? Could all these teachers be wrong? Are we forming meaningful relationships with parents that serve as positive influences for change, or are we fooling ourselves?

I would like to think that it was something in the way I collected and interpreted the data, and that may well be the case, given the qualitative nature of my research. Or maybe the difference was that the teachers I interviewed were looking back over 30 or 40 years of experience, reflecting on relationships with parents who had multiple children in a school over a lengthy period, while the parents I interviewed had been at my school for only a few years. Maybe these particular parents just hadn’t had enough time to form relationships yet.



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One possible explanation that suggested itself was this: We know that teachers develop deep and intimate relationships with the children they guide. Perhaps they can't help but project their feelings about those relationships onto their contacts with parents, assuming a relationship that in fact does not exist. Most parents are likely to be engrossed in their own busy lives, unaware of the depth of the teacher-child relationship. They may appreciate the teacher's work, but other than that, they may not really give it much thought one way or the other. Although some children spend more waking hours of every day with their teachers than they do with their parents, meaningful communication between teacher and parent is often reserved for occasional formal parent conferences. And this is not likely to be perceived by parents as a relationship.

I finally had to settle for telling myself that it is probably just a matter of semantics, something like "You say tomatoyto, I say tomatoyto". You say "modelling" or "parent conference," I say "relationship." But then, "tomayto" or "tomahto," it shouldn't really matter. Contact between teachers and parents will continue to be significant for the change process, and even essential in many cases. After all, the availability over time of multiple opportunities for experience, practice, and discussion about observation was cited by all the parents in their reflections on how change happens, and for most parents these opportunities are provided at school by teachers and administrators.

2. Jumping Off the Cliff of Control

There's a part of the parents' experience that reminds me of a cartoon I saw a long time ago. A guru leads his blindfolded disciple to the edge of a cliff, and tells him that the time has come to gain enlightenment by demonstrating his faith and courage. He must jump off into the unknown. In the next two frames, the disciple sweats and squirms, he sticks out a toe, and then pulls it back. In the end, he backs away from the edge of the cliff. He decides to trade enlightenment for safety. In the final frame, the cartoonist moves back to give us a longer view of the scene, and we see that the cliff is not really a cliff at all. It's only a step, no higher than the distance from the curb to the street.

That is exactly what the parents realized when they made a leap of faith and gave up the need to direct and correct their children's every action. Here is what they had to say about what they experienced when they let go of the need to control.

Yes! I have learned that I do not need to always interfere with Rebecca when things are not how I would want them to be. Beautiful magic happens. (Parent Survey)

It is so much fun to see her develop (finding things out; making her own decisions) from a standpoint of an observing parent. The interfering parent can't have that experience. (Parent Survey)

Belinda: Doesn't it make it easier? I mean the more of this stuff you can let go, the more of this stuff that you worry about, controlling, whatever. Like, [gruffly] "You're on that swing! You've been on that swing long enough! You get off that swing and let little Jimmy get on the swing! Aaaaarrgh!" [Laughter] The more you do that, it really, it makes your time not as good with your kid. The more you can let it go, let it go and let them

Katherine: Enjoy them being a person.

Belinda: I think it might have been that way, maybe back in the early 1900s when people were living on farms and out in the prairie. I'm sure they weren't trying to micro-manage their children. I'm sure they were just out there doing whatever and learning. Of course, they cared. But now, we try to control everything in our environment. Everything can be changed, down to a remote control for your television. Everything can be changed so quickly. You can't do that with humans. We try to control everything in our lives and therefore we try to do it to a human that has a brain. That will drive you nuts, it really will. You get so frustrated. (Discussion Group)

Mary Caroline: Did your participation in the workshop have any influence on your relationship with your child?

Alicia: Yes. Because when I insist on my way and haven't really observed, "OK, what's her purpose in doing that?" it causes a power struggle, it causes friction. But then I

said, "OK, it's not necessary to have that," so we just follow the flow, just observe, just learn, and then it makes things more pleasant at home.

Mary Caroline: So you've found that if you insist on having your way, that sometimes leads to a power struggle?

Alicia: Yes, and she's upset, and I'm upset. But if I just respect and watch her, and try to understand and observe, "OK, what does she want?" So it's not like because I'm the mom, I can just do whatever I want. Her personality is also like she knows what *she* wants. Her teacher, Penny, also says that. Penny would always say, "Even if I ask her to come and paint but she's still working on buckling or something, she will say "No, later," so she will finish first what she wants. And I like that. I like that she knows what she wants.

Mary Caroline: Did your participation in the workshop cause you to look at your child in a different way?

Alicia: Look at my child in a different way? Maybe more respect my child, respect my child. (Parent Interview)

Mary Caroline: It sounds like you're relaxing control and giving your child a lot of respect. You feel like you got something out of it, too.

Sam: Oh, yes. Less stress [...], because I'm not uptight about trying to make certain he is doing this, this, this and that by a certain time, and not being afraid, "Oh, he doesn't know how to do such-and-such in this way. He doesn't know how to put that puzzle together. Oh, what's going to happen to my child?" It doesn't matter. If he doesn't know how, he'll eventually learn, and when he learns it, he will know how to do it on his own. It's his, and it's not something that's given to him.

Mary Caroline: In addition to less stress on you, has this new way of being with your children brought you any more happiness or appreciation of them as individuals?

Sam: It's given me a lot more appreciation for them as being individuals. Because Jimmy and Scott, they are totally different. Scott is outgoing; Jimmy is reserved. And how they approach things is totally different. And it gives me

a greater appreciation for who they are and allowing them to become young men to the fullest extent, instead of being a carbon copy of Angela and me. I don't want that. I want them to be individuals. And I believe that will give them the opportunity to go further, because they are not trying to conform to something. Instead, they are blazing trails, they are inventing new things. And that's what today's society needs. (Parent Interview)

Mary Caroline: You talked about more respect, less stress, more appreciation for your child as an individual, more respect for creativity and opportunities for creativity. [...] How did those changes take place?

Sam: Well, for me, it had to be a release of control, of feeling that I am solely responsible for making certain that my two boys have a good education and they must learn this way, this way, and this way. It had to be a sense of allowing *them* to be essentially in control of the direction that they are going. I had to give it to *them*. [...] It has to be a trust in them [...], and then a desire to have what's best for them. [...] And it's still a process. Because there are other things I realize I have to let go of in relationship to Jimmy and Scott's development. I have to let them do things in their own time and not try to push them. (Parent Interview)

As one of the teachers I interviewed remarked, "We all as humans tend to be very comfortable with things that we've relied on in the past, and we feel a little threatened if that's about to change." (Teacher Interview)

The change these parents were making was not a small one. It was a fundamental change in the allocation of responsibility within the parent-child relationship. I was amazed at the courage the parents showed in stepping back and letting go of feeling that they had to be responsible for their children's every experience.

There's no doubt that it's scary to jump blindfolded off the cliff of control into what? It might be chaos or disaster! But the parents who did it discovered that, like the cliff in the cartoon, it was not really much of a cliff at all. They told me themselves that in exchange for their leap they had received happiness, less stress,

more respect for their children, and a greater appreciation of their children as individuals.

And it's not only the parent who benefits. It may be that the greatest benefit of all is the one received by the child—the opportunity to be responsible for his own choices. When parents relinquish their need for control, they give children space to develop the sense of responsibility that can make all the difference in their lives as adults. As one of the teachers described it, this is about taking responsibility for your actions.

When you get to be an adolescent, it is so dangerous out there. And if you have never taken responsibility for your actions, then it's always someone else's fault if you drank too much, or you took that drug, or you drove that car too fast. And if from the very beginning the child connects his action with the consequence and takes responsibility, what a gift that is into adulthood. You know adults who don't take that responsibility. It's always someone else's fault. (Teacher Interview)

3. The Butterfly Power of Personal Change

There's an old saying that the flutter of a butterfly's wings can cause a hurricane on the other side of the world. Modern chaos theory has proved the truth of that ancient wisdom by demonstrating that tiny influences in a nonlinear system produce major differences that ultimately transform the entire system. Because everything is connected to everything else in our human community, the subtle influence that each of us exerts just by being who we are can have far-reaching effects. (Briggs and Peat, pp. 31-51)

I always felt certain that the experience of being in the moment with their children and seeing them with new eyes would bring

Perhaps the most important finding I made is that true parent education is about empowering parents to see themselves first in order to be free to see the child. And in this work, there is no difference between the parent educator and the parent. We are all on the same journey, moving together toward the goal of becoming joyous observers.

joy and fulfillment to parents. But I didn't realize the extent to which this new way of seeing would create a ripple effect. It was spreading into the totality of their lives with their children and beyond, affecting not only their own families, but also their friends and their friends' children.

[The workshop] has helped me be even more conscious in my daily living. (Parent Survey)

Oh it's much more enjoyable if you don't have this power struggle. It's much more enjoyable to be with him [...]. It's changed a lot for me, and it's changed a lot in our relationship. (Parent Interview)

I have a girlfriend, just saw her at the gym, and she's like, "I don't like taking my daughter here because I don't think they spend enough time with her." And I said, "Well, she is spending time with other kids. She doesn't need an adult hanging over her back telling her what to do every step of the way. That makes her insecure, that makes her feel that she can't do it." I mean, you can apply that to anybody. (Parent Interview)

Mary Caroline: What would be a good way to share the happiness and joy of observing so that other people could learn to have the same experience?

Alicia: Just tell them my own experience, how much you appreciate your child more. Because also, in our culture we tend to correct; like when we see something we correct right away. Because of course you want your child to be perfect, and "No, you shouldn't, this is how it is, you should be respectful." But if we observe and watch, then they just learn. It's in them. So I just meet with my friends to share with them. "You know what, if we back off and just watch them, you will see how good they are. You appreciate your child more."

Mary Caroline: Did they follow your advice?

Alicia: Yes, yes. Some were like, "You're right, we're not struggling, yeah." And I said, "Isn't that amazing," and then they'd be like, "Yeah, I mean why do I always have to struggle?" And I said "Isn't that amazing?" And they agree. (Parent Interview)

Even I felt the butterfly power of the parents' transformation. Their newfound enjoyment of their children and their happiness in that discovery affected me, too, as they described the changes that were coming into their lives. If I had to pick just one gift that I myself received from the observation research, I think it would be the way I felt when parents told me that they felt more secure, more relaxed, and more confident about raising their children.

Talking about what I've learned from the class, it actually really has made me more secure with what and how I'm raising my child. To let him be. To change my expectations. I see at the park women are like, "Oh, my child's not playing with those other kids," or "She's biting her nails," or "They're pulling their hair, Oh!" They're freaking out about those things. It's like, kind of sit back and let the child be. If they're biting their nails, take the file and show them, give them a lesson on how to take care of their nails. All that is related to what I've learned. Just by learning how to observe them. (Discussion Group)

I feel like a better parent. I feel more grounded in what I feel is right for him, and a lot of that has come through observing him. [...] Having a baby is easy now. [...] It's just relaxed me as a parent. I trust him more, and I just feel more grounded in being able to figure out what he needs. And so it makes parenting *very* gratifying, relaxing, and easy, and I have a four-month-old baby! [...] I just pay attention to him, not smother him with attention, but just watch him. He'll show me what he needs. (Parent Interview)

It wasn't unusual for a parent to become emotional during an interview and shed a tear or two, but listening to these parents I felt so moved that tears came to my eyes. I could not have dreamed of a better outcome, a greater reward for my year's work, than to have someone to tell me, "This has made me a better mother. I feel more sure of myself as a parent."

4. Ready or Not, Here I Come!

We're all familiar with the concept of parent readiness, the idea that some parents are ready to learn and grow, while others simply are not willing or able to make any changes. Along with telling me stories about parents whose eyes had been opened, several teachers

also talked about the other side of the coin, the parents who are not ever going to get it, no matter what you do.

What I'm trying to do is help them to a point where they can see the child in a totally new way. And that involves getting out of your current mindset, getting out of your dilemmas, and getting out of your expectations. So we're talking about spiritual growth here, spiritual growth on the part of the parents. Some are willing and ready, and some are not [...] there yet, and some are not at all interested. [...] In my experience, there are some people who are willing and able to observe, and others to whom that makes no sense at all. (Teacher Interview)

Some people are receptive to ideas and suggestions and are asking me for advice. "What should I do about this?" and "How should I do that?" And other parents don't want any new information. They're really not receptive to doing anything differently or making any changes. (Teacher Interview)

It seems to me that how parents come, how they are to begin with, is pretty much the way they stay. I think it's *very* hard to break through some preconceived ideas. For example, some parents are *very* accepting, and it seems like they stay that way. Parents that struggle with their child or are critical with their children, it seems like it's very hard to overcome that. They seem to stay the way they are. (Teacher Interview)

None of the teachers felt that there was no point in working with parents at all, or that schools should stop offering workshops and other opportunities just because some parents are not ready to learn or change. But I did sense a certain feeling that we are mainly preaching to the choir, along with a bit of sadness that there are some parents who will never be capable of developing a better relationship with their children.

There are some parents that aren't going to be good observers of their child, and we can be very patient and try our hardest with them and it's not going to work. [...] I'm not saying just give up hope. There are parents who are very difficult, we know that. And for those parents, they probably won't make the same inroads in terms of observing their child in a different way, and that's part of life, isn't it? (Teacher Interview)



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The parents I interviewed also seemed to feel that their own openness to new ideas had been an important element in their evolution as observers.

I think I've always been open to more of a spiritual path, or curious about how to get deeper into life. (Parent Interview)

I really want our relationship to be the utmost, the best it can be, the most respectful and fulfilling that we can have. And I really want to build on making it better. [...] I always want to learn, and there's no book on parenting that tells you everything that you need to know. Every day I would love to learn something, and I know Montessori is one of the richest environments where I can learn. I learn something every day. (Parent Interview)

But there was something in the very last interview I conducted, something a teacher said, that made me rethink what I thought I knew about parent readiness.

Mary Caroline: You talked about putting that vibration out there in all of these different ways. But isn't there also an element of, you know, a lot of people come to the very

same conference or the very same workshop and somebody gets something out of it and somebody doesn't?

Amy: How many people come to the workshop? One hundred? Thirty? They will all get something different. Each of them will come out with something different. Never the same.

Mary Caroline: I was thinking that maybe it's a matter of the person's willingness or interest or availability to learn something new, and you're saying, "No, everybody will learn something."

Amy: Everyone will have an opportunity to respond. Now there will be people there who will be open to that idea, and people to whom that idea has no appeal right now. Well, maybe you plant a seed and maybe later it has an appeal, maybe it never will. But you can just write it down that everybody is going to get something different out of whatever it is that is happening. We used to laugh about this all the time with [our teacher trainer] Nan. We would all be sitting around listening to her [...] and afterwards everyone would have heard something different, because our consciousness is attuned to just certain things. We can only take in so much. [...] And there has to be time. [...] It takes time. Look how long it's taking us, and we're still working on it. It takes time. (Teacher Interview)

Amy's comments made me step back, way back, and take a longer view. Maybe it does not matter whether parents are ready or not—everyone will get something. It may be just a seed, thrown down on hard ground, but the seed will stay there, as long as it takes. We ourselves may never see that change happen for some parents. As Amy said, "It takes time. Look how long it's taking us, and we're still working on it."

I took another look at my data collection process. It was the parents who were most excited about what they experienced in the "Art of Observation" workshop who had accepted my invitation to come to the discussion group. And then, naturally, for the interviews I had chosen the parents I felt would most enjoy talking about themselves and their children. I wanted to talk about change, so I chose the parents I could see for myself had changed the most. Was it any wonder they all acknowledged their own willingness to change as having played a key role in the process?

I remembered a brief comment one of the teachers had made about parents' observations, "In some cases they noticed things, like a kindness to a sibling or something like that, that they wouldn't have been aware of" (Teacher Interview).

So maybe I should look for smaller changes, the little things. All those parents who had not come to the discussion group, who had not been interviewed—what did *they* have to say about what they got out of the single workshop they had attended?

I went back to the parents' initial survey responses, and this time I sifted with a finer sieve. I found a wealth of simple comments I had not focused on before.

I saw how Veronica helps in the classroom with the younger students. I am very proud of her. (Survey Response)

[The workshop made me think about] how important [it] is to wait for the child to solve his/her problems. (Survey Response)

To look at him as more of a person and not a project. (Survey Response)

It helped me understand that he can do things for himself that I always helped him do before. (Survey Response)

It made me think about asking him what he did today at school. (Survey Response, translated from Spanish)

I'm going to talk to my children more. (Survey Response, translated from Spanish)

A few weeks later, the mother who had said she was going to talk to her children more made a rare visit to the school. A single parent who does not speak English, she had taken the day off from work to observe in her three-year-old daughter's classroom.

When I saw her, I waved her into my office and asked if she had enjoyed her observation. What had she seen? Her answer touched my heart. "I saw Samantha help another child. I didn't know she could do that. I always help her with everything. I never thought she could help someone else. Next time I will let her do something for herself."

A small thing to see; a small change to make. Amy was right. When it came to the observation workshop, everyone may have had a different experience, but everyone had an experience. Seeds had been planted, and eventually they would grow. Maybe I would never find out about it, but that would be all right. Nothing had been lost. It didn't mean the parents had not been ready. It only meant that they would take what they could from what had been offered, and save the rest for another day.

The Essential Is Invisible to the Eye

I had wanted to find out for myself, "What strategies can empower parents to experience satisfaction, appreciation, and joy in observing their children?" After my year of experimentation and research, the first question would have to be, "Did it happen? Did they experience joy with their children?" Yes, they did. I know they did, because they told me so.

I love being a parent. (Survey Response)

Beautiful magic happens. (Survey Response)

I think we're all kind of talking as if this has changed some of our lives-and it has. (Discussion Group)

This is like a passion for me. [...] I agree that it is a joy and I feel very lucky that my eyes were opened, and that I've been able to enjoy him and my other two children in this way. (Parent Interview)

One answer, and a true one, would be that it happened because we created a variety of opportunities for growth and change. A workshop on observation, invitations to observe at school, a chance to get together and talk about observation, articles and books to read, opportunities to talk with teachers and to watch skilled observers modelling their craft. In the same way that the Montessori guide prepares a classroom environment to meet the developmental needs of the child and then puts the child in touch with the material, we prepared at our school a rich environment for parents with experiences that had something to offer to everyone. Then we did our best to put them in contact with those experiences.

After that, it was their choice and their work. Just as the child constructs himself through purposeful work in the prepared environment, every parent had to transform himself into a joyous observer through his own work. Sometimes it was work on a conscious level:

Katherine: You would have to put your experiences into some kind of internal order and exercise, you know, practise it and exercise that and remember it, and remember what you learned and apply it in each application, you know, at every chance you get. Of course, I'm maybe not going to apply it and remember all of it every time I'm talking to her, but to strive to do that every time.

Mary Caroline: It's work.

Katherine: Yes. (Parent Interview)

Sometimes it seemed effortless:

... it just doesn't have to be that hard. I changed because life just doesn't have to be that hard. [...] It's really easier if you kind of let things progress naturally than if you force them. [...] It's definitely the path of least resistance. [...] It seemed logical to me. (Parent Interview)

Sometimes it was a gradual process:

Well, it's been kind of an evolution [...] I think my own ability to observe kind of evolved. (Parent Interview)

It's been just a growing in my parenting that began when my first child was born. (Parent Interview)

Sometimes it happened in the twinkling of an eye:

I had an attitude shift. (Discussion Group)

I took the observation class and that really opened my eyes. (Parent Interview)

I totally changed my way of thinking from the first time I went [to the workshop]. (Parent Interview)

As for the mechanics of how change happened, that part of the answer is still a mystery. And perhaps it must remain so. In

our classrooms we don't know exactly how, exactly when, all the preparation, concentration, repetition, and work come together at precisely the right moment and a child explodes into reading; she sees with new eyes. But we don't have to know. We trust in the child, in the unfolding of the inner self, and it happens.

So why should change be different for an adult? We prepare the environment; we offer the lessons; we encourage repetition and exploration; we protect the work. We trust in the adult, in the unfolding of the inner self.

And change does happen.

You have to remember that the inner self of a child will out. Inner life has unfolded on this planet ever since man has been here. It does not need the Montessori classroom. It *will* unfold regardless. Montessori's insight was, "Can we help it unfold? Can we cease being an obstacle? Can we let the inner man be in charge from the beginning in a new way?" He is in charge whether we let him, but if we can cooperate with that, will it change everything? Yes, eventually. Don't you think? (Teacher Interview)

This is no less true for a parent than for a child. The joy of a parent in observing her child is already there. It is a part of her inner self, and we can safely trust that it *will* unfold.

In his small masterpiece *The Little Prince*, Antoine de Saint-Exupery paints a delicate picture of the inner life. He tells the story of how a grown-up learned about what is essential through observing a child who came from a star.

In the story the little prince reflects on a single rose he has nurtured. He learns from his mentor, a friendly fox, that it is his love and protection that has transformed his rose into something different from all the other roses in the world. Addressing an entire bed of roses, the little prince declares:

You are beautiful, but you are empty ... One could not die for you. To be sure, an ordinary passer-by would think that my rose looked just like you—the rose that belongs to me. But in herself alone she is more important than all the hundreds of you other roses: because it is she that I

have watered; because it is she that I have put under the glass globe: because it is she that I have sheltered behind the screen; because it is for her that I have killed the caterpillars (except the two or three that we saved to become butterflies); because it is she that I have listened to, when she grumbled, or boasted, or even sometimes when she said nothing. Because she is my rose. (p. 70)

This is how we can be so sure that the joy of observation is already there, waiting within the parent. It's because of the nature of the invisible relationship between the parent and the child, because of that inner certainty of love and protection that is the very essence of the relationship. That is what the fox told the little prince: "And now here is my secret, a very simple secret: it is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye." (p. 70)

Several teachers talked about transformation of consciousness, but Kathleen said it best:

Just some unexpected thing that happens and it touches something inside them, and all of a sudden they get it, or they wake up. You know, it's kind of like an awakening. And what is an awakening but just waking up to something that you didn't see before? It was always there, but all of a sudden, the veil is pulled back a little bit from your eyes and you see a little more. So if you see more clearly, you feel good about what you see. And I think it's because of the love that they have for their children, and maybe the love that they have for themselves. And when they see that, it awakens something in them, something deep, something profound that they hadn't felt before. So there's always that possibility. (Teacher Interview)

CONCLUSION

Of all the many stories I heard in a year of listening, there was one that in just a few sentences seemed to sum up everything I learned about observation. In the discussion group, Sharon was talking about her observation in her five-year-old daughter's classroom the day before.

Last night at dinner we were talking [...] and I said, "The first five minutes of my observation today, I did with my ears and not my eyes." She said, "How can you see with

your ears?" [...] I told my daughter last night that the next five minutes I spent visual—I observed yesterday, also visually, and then with my feelings. She goes, "You can also see with your heart." (Discussion Group)

Yes, the essential is invisible to the eye. But that doesn't mean we can't see it. Even the youngest child knows instinctively that what the fox told the little prince is true—you can also see with your heart. In fact, as my friend Amy said when I told her the story, "That's probably the only real way to observe."

EPILOGUE

Montessori's writings contain many references to the quality of mindful presence that gives rise to joy in observing children. She tells us that to attain this state nothing less than a change in consciousness is required a "transformation," an "initiation," a spiritual experience.

When [the teacher] feels herself aflame with interest, "seeing" the spiritual phenomena of the child, and experiences a serene joy and an insatiable eagerness in observing them, then she will know that she is "initiated." (*The Advanced Montessori Method, Volume 1*, pp.109-110)

What is the greatest sign of success for a teacher thus transformed? [...] The teacher [...] feels the value of her work, and of what she has accomplished, in the form of a satisfied spiritual life [...] (*The Absorbent Mind*, pp. 283-84)

Because of her understanding that confronting one's own prejudices is necessary before one can observe clearly, the process of reflection and self-analysis that can lead to personal transformation is an important part of Montessori teacher training today.

We insist on the fact that a teacher must prepare himself interiorly by systematically studying himself so that he can tear out his most deeply rooted defects, those in fact which impede his relations with children. In order to discover these subconscious failings, we have need of a special kind of instruction. (*The Secret of Childhood*, p. 149)



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The “special kind of instruction” offered in our training, combined with practice, helps teachers appreciate the great psychological value of true observation. Its importance to the life of the child cannot be overestimated. As a Montessori-trained psychoanalyst has noted, observation at this level permits a child to become what he innately and uniquely is.

By being observed somehow the psyche knows that it is being seen. To be seen is to feel that the observer knows who one is. Observation is not a passive way of looking or of simply recording activities and actions—it is an active participation. To observe is to be with someone. [...] (What is important for anyone is to be seen as one truly is. It is the only thing that really matters.) To observe is to be an active, though not intrusive, participant in someone’s self-development. (Short, pp. 11-12)

By the same token, being with a child in this way is equally important and affirming to the psyche of the adult. Who among us would not want to be “afame with interest,” to experience “serene joy” and “a satisfied spiritual life?”

Collaborative work with parents showed me that parents, like teachers, can and do experience the inner changes Montessori described as an awakening of human consciousness. My research suggested a multitude of findings, including the four described in this article.

It's not about the teacher

Parents and teachers see the importance of their “relationship” in different lights, with many parents attributing little or no importance to interaction with a teacher as an influence on developing observation skills.

Jumping off the cliff of control

Parents who relax the degree of control they exercise over their children have been richly rewarded with increased respect, less stress, and more pleasure in the parent-child relationship.

The butterfly power of personal change

The change in consciousness that accompanies enhanced ability to observe has a ripple effect that pervades all aspects of family life and affects relationships with friends and relatives.

Ready or not, here I come!

Given the opportunity to be exposed to new ideas about observation, all parents learn something. Each person takes what he or she can at the moment, and leaves the rest for another day.

Officially, my research project lasted a year, from my first tentative experiment with the observation workshop until my last parent interview. But in fact, the research is still continuing. Even now, every time I talk with a parent about observation, new ideas emerge and new insights take shape.

I have no doubt that for every finding derived from my research, there are many more topics still to be explored, many connections and discoveries still waiting to be made. I invite you to join in this

adventure by undertaking your own qualitative research. The opportunities are close at hand, and the possibilities are infinite.

In working with parents in your community, you may find ways to help them develop richer relationships with their children and a more joyful experience of parenthood. You may learn some things about their perspectives on observation that will surprise you. And you may discover, as I did, something that can't be measured by codes or graphs, something about the power of inner change—not just in parents, but in yourself.

As I look back on my year of structuring contacts with groups and individuals, communicating, listening, and gathering data, I realize now that I was not merely a “researcher” recording changes in other people. I was a participant in the process. The parents grew, changed, and evolved from the workshop, the discussion group, the interviews—from every contact with me and with each other—and so did I.

Perhaps the most important finding I made is that true parent education is about empowering parents to see themselves first in order to be free to see the child. And in this work, there is no difference between the parent educator and the parent. We are all on the same journey, moving together toward the goal of becoming joyous observers.

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