

THE MONTESSORI ADOLESCENT AND THE PEDAGOGY OF JOURNEY

by Larry Schaefer

Another historic Montessori essay puts into writing a landmark activity in the middle school world: the school Odyssey trip. This type of trip challenges the group's ability to cooperate around daily living and is combined with the "testimony of the spade" that is so much a part of the archaeology discipline of physical work and study at Crow Canyon. This succinct and carefully structured sampling of Larry Schaefer's 2012 trip conveys his annual excursion in its full theoretical framework along with adolescent expression about their community dimensions that evolve in this remarkable setting.

"It was the greatest adventure of my life," exclaimed a junior high student to me when we returned to school from a week's stay at Crow Canyon in Colorado, the capstone of a fifteen day Odyssey trip. I think the student was using the word *adventure* in a very broad sense, as an experience that totally engaged his body, mind and soul. If you want to see the most turned-on, the most positively challenged, the most co-operative, easy to be with, and noble adolescents, take them on the first day of school on an Odyssey trip to Crow Canyon, Colorado or Williamsburg, Virginia.

Larry Schaefer received an AMI diploma from Bergamo, Italy, studying under Eleanora Honneger and Camillo Grazzini; he holds an MA and PhD in history from Fordham University and an MA in education from Fairfield University. In 1964, Larry and his wife, Pat, founded The Montessori School, now in Wilton, CT, for their four children. In 1976, they founded Lake Country School in Minneapolis, MN, and in 1982 Larry created a Montessori adolescent program at Lake Country, a program that continues to serve as a model for other urban adolescent programs. Larry created the blueprint to obtain a grant from the Gates Foundation, establishing the Great River School, a charter junior and senior high school founded in St. Paul, MN in 2004. Although now retired, Larry remains committed to Montessori's vision of education for peace, social justice, and the realization of human potential.

The Odyssey trip was created at Lake Country School in Minneapolis for its Montessori adolescent program. The first Odyssey went east in September 1983 through Canada to New York City; the second went west in 1984 to Crow Canyon Archeological Center in Southwest Colorado; and the third went east in 1985 to Williamsburg, Virginia. Last September's trip was the school's twenty-ninth.

The Odyssey is a traveling, learning, and adventure trip *required* of all junior high students. It leaves early in the morning on the first day of school, the day after Labor Day. The full-time core staff plan the trip and accompany the students. The students, a little over fifty, are seventh and eighth grade age. There are some ninth graders.

THE CROW CANYON ARCHAEOLOGICAL CENTER

On September 11, 2011, a very large red and yellow touring bus pulled to the curb in front of the lodge at the Crow Canyon Center, just outside Cortez in Colorado. Directly in front of the bus and stretching as far as one could see south and west was Mesa Verde. Behind the lodge loomed Ute Mountain, and looking east across the canyon stretched the San Juan Mountains. A fifteen passenger van pulled up behind the bus. On the bus were fifty-two teenagers and four staff members from Lake Country School. In the van were three



more staff and one alumnus. On the bus there was a subdued, yet intense, sense of anticipation and excitement among the students.

Finally, we had arrived after six long travel days, 1600 miles, visits to Pipestone National Monument, and three National Parks—Badlands, Wind Cave in South Dakota, and Black Canyon of the Gunnison in Colorado, and five camping nights. It was Lake Country School’s thirteenth study visit to Crow Canyon, a famous learning center that is highly respected among the students, alumni, and families of the school. Eleven of the students had siblings who had gone on earlier Odysseys to the center, one student whose father had gone on the first trip, and three students whose grandmother was a staff member on that Odyssey. The archaeological experience at Crow Canyon has been part of our adolescent program for over twenty-seven years, and no student entering our junior high wants to miss it. It has become a valued tradition.

[The Odyssey] is the proper metaphor for these young people who have a heightened sense of adventure, a desire to explore new places, to meet new people, and to explore the unknown.... Childhood has been left behind, and they are taller, stronger, and more experienced. They are not as timid, they don’t feel as vulnerable, and they sense the possibilities of life.

Why the Odyssey Trip and the Crow Canyon Experience Has Become so Central to Our Adolescent Montessori Program

These are two central and overarching guiding principles of our adolescent program. The first is *to build community*, the second is *to embrace challenge*. The Odyssey trip was created specifically so every member of the community (students and teachers) would confront head on these two principles in the most dramatic and dynamic way possible by living and learning together for fifteen days on a great journey of discovery where there are no other distractions. During the prep days for the trip, the staff makes it clear that on this trip there are only adults, no children, and only leaders, no followers. This is said in a mildly blunt way and is meant to startle and sober these young teenagers. The fact is that they are maturing and becoming young adults, and the expectation should be that they will act more

grown-up and adult, and their teachers should expect them to do so. It is also a fact that adults cannot take the adolescent anywhere without their cooperation and support. But adults can go with them on an Odyssey if they are also leaders and shoulder the responsibilities and work with their teachers. The success of this kind of trip depends on everyone: Everyone has to be a leader.

As complements to these principles are these five preeminent developmental characteristics of early adolescents. For Montessori, learning is anchored in developmental psychology.

- First, early adolescence is a *social age*, an age of camaraderie, teammates, allies, close friends, companions, and partners.
- Second, it is *the age of puberty*, the age of sexually maturing into a young woman or young man.
- Third, it is *an intensely humanistic age*, an age that must face for the first time what it means to be an adult human, what it means to be a man, what it means to be a woman.
- Fourth, it is *an age of high spirits and nervous energy*, an age for adventure, an age for a journey with peers.
- Fifth, it is *a critical thinking age*, an age to disagree, to criticize, object, argue, discuss and debate.

The Odyssey journey and the activities at Crow Canyon are perfect complements that facilitate the interplay of these five young adolescent characteristics. The staff and students at Lake Country School sign a contract where they pledge to build a civil community (marked by civility), to be open to everyone (not form cliques), and to embrace challenge (hard work).

In 1939 in her famous Erdkinder essay, where she lays out her ideas on the education of adolescents, Maria Montessori wrote these comments:

Teachers must have the greatest respect for the young personality, realizing that in the soul of the adolescent,

great values are hidden and that in the minds of these boys and girls there lives all our hope of future progress...The intimate vocation of MAN is the secret of the adolescent. If social progress is (to be) realized... then these children, as they grow up, will become more highly developed than their teachers. (*From Childhood to Adolescence* 119)

The *intimate vocation* (or calling) of humans is to create their humanity, their humanness, and their common humanity in the everyday happenings and mishaps of life. Humans have built up their culture over thousands of years: our ordinary, common selves, our better selves, and our most noble selves. This is the great human journey, and the junior high Odyssey is a microcosm of this grand journey.

The Odyssey trip fits the developmental needs of this age very well and aligns with Montessori's idea of the secret of adolescence. It is the proper metaphor for these young people who have a heightened sense of adventure, a desire to explore new places, to meet new people, and to explore the unknown. There is a need to do difficult things. Childhood has been left behind, and they are taller, stronger, and more experienced. They feel more mature and full of the growing power of the young adult. They need to be independent, to go



farther from home on their own. They are not as timid, they don't feel as vulnerable, and they sense the possibilities of life.

The Odyssey trip is also one of the best vehicles for fostering camaraderie. Each night they have different tent mates and they must sit on the bus with a different person each day. They study together in the mornings, and in the afternoon they can relax. They help each other. They are members of either the red family or the blue family. These families are subdivided into cooking crews and clean-up crews. They have important responsibilities and how they carry them out affects their friends and others. Working with other people and traveling with others gives them a chance to experience their neighbors under new and different circumstances. They discover things about others and so make new friends and build relationships. They are asked to help with difficult things, and they need to support each other. As a result, a strong sense of group identity and solidarity develops. They have worked and played together under unique circumstances, and a close bond develops. When the students return to school, they bring back a positive climate of learning that helps to energize their collective work. A wonderful community spirit grows.



Every day is different; nothing is routine. There is always a new place, a change of scenery, weather change. Nothing is boring. There is a great deal of wonder and spontaneity. Like the children in a Montessori Children's House, the adolescent is wide-eyed and excited about what's happening, and they want to touch, explore, and discover. The trip focuses on learning, not teaching, and the learning environment is all around them and combines physical (hands on) social, emotional, and academic learning. Their whole personalities become engaged and challenged. An inner engine is turned on that will power their learning for the year.

A Magical Place for Our Montessori Students

There are at least five major reasons why Crow Canyon is magical to our students. First, after six days of travel, Crow Canyon is a rest stop, a change of pace, a beautiful oasis, and a time for the students to slow down and focus on just two things: 1) on the science of archaeology and the ancient Pueblo people (Anasazi); and 2) on themselves and their community – playing, learning, and living together in an exceptionally unique and special place.

Second, there is an unusual quality to southeast Colorado that is intensified at the Crow Canyon Center. It is the intersection and mutuality *of place*: the physical geography, the canyons, the mesas, the gullies and streams, the flora and fauna, the mountains, and the arid climate. And it is the intersection *of time*: present time and past time, the time sequence of the Paleolithic and Archaic peoples with the Basketmaker and Puebloan cultures to the time that culture disappeared and to the historical developments of the present. Digging at an ancient site and uncovering artifacts one thousand years old or older celebrates and magnifies that amazing intersection and mutuality. It is not a common experience and rarely happens outside the context of an archaeological center or dig.

Third, the Crow Canyon Center is a first-rate archaeology school. The lodge facilities are excellent and comfortable, the kitchen and the food preparation are outstanding, the service is warm and friendly, and the view from the porch from dawn to dusk is thrilling. The center's archaeological laboratories are also excellent and well-equipped, and the teaching staff prepares the students well for the dig experience. But most important, the staff inspires the students, and they welcome

questions. Beyond the laboratories, there are outdoor Anasazi Life Way experiences that include how to start a fire, throw a spear with an atlatl, grind corn with mortar and pestle, live in a Kiva, and others. While there is outstanding teaching, the learning is at root experience based. The students work with their hands, sort, record, manipulate, compare, analyze, ask questions, touch, that is, do what they have come to believe is real learning, the Montessori way, being free and active in a prepared environment.

Fourth, Lake Country students also meet some very gifted and noted archaeologists. Some who stand out are Ricky Lightfoot, Bruce Bradley, Mark Varien, and others. These people are outstanding role models for the young adolescent.

Fifth, there has grown through the years a respect between the Crow Canyon staff and the Lake Country Montessori students. These students come to Crow Canyon well-prepared, excited, and eager to learn. The students are open-minded with a challenge-me attitude but are also co-operative and deeply respectful of the staff, the facilities, and the learning environment. Also the Montessori staff follows the program and are also involved in the activities. It makes working with the Montessori students easier.

Student Comments on their Crow Canyon and Odyssey Experience

“Learning about belonging to a community was not easy for me. I am more a renegade at heart and the idea of ‘belonging’ sort of offended me. As the days progressed, I discovered the value of that communion. A helping hand to someone who was tired or someone to help me. It was different than I thought it would be...I still think of myself as more of a loner, but I’ve learned that I can belong to a community without losing my identity or individuality.”
(Bryan, age 12)

“The Anasazi culture made me feel small, even though they were a few thousand and we’re 225 million. It was one of the neatest places I’ve ever been to in my life.” (Zac, age 12)

“Probably my favorite part of the trip was the story one of the counselors told us on the last night. It was about how the Indian tribes came to be...When that story was



read, I had lots of friends, people I knew and liked. But a little earlier, I didn't know anyone. It's funny how, if you open yourself up, you enter a new world. The world of another person." (Mischa, age 12)

"My absolute greatest moment of the fall trip was digging near Mesa Verde. It was so exciting, I felt like my partner and I were archaeologists on a special dig, rather than two girls on a school trip.... I'm sure everyone was tempted to take a little artifact home, but, no, leave it for others to study. Besides, it would be such a waste if you took the last piece of a 700-year-old pot. Well, I'll probably never find a lost city, but I'll always remember the fall when I went to Mesa Verde and helped the archeologists." (Amber, age 13)

"We drove 350 miles to our last destination, Crow Canyon. I didn't think it was going to be that much fun to study about archaeology and go to museums. But guess what? It was a lot of fun digging, even though I personally didn't find anything... We got to see someone make an arrowhead; it was amazing what he did. He knew exactly what was going to happen when he hit the rock. We also learned how to throw a spear with an atlatl, which makes your arm longer and makes you throw the spear a lot more

powerfully than without it. We also learned to grind corn, and start fires with a firebow." (Ben, age 12)

"On our way back from Crow Canyon we tented out in Iowa. That night I felt like Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz watching the wind blow hard and crazy....This trip was one experience I will never forget." (Alicia, age 13)

"The trip turned out to be the best experience that I have ever been involved in because of the incredible group that I was with....As I get older I will always remember this great bunch of people." (Tasha, age 13)

"I must say that this is going to be a good year. Thanks to the people who made this trip possible. I wouldn't know or have as many friends as I do now if it weren't for the trip." (Annie, age 12)

As I walk
Up the steps
To enter the bus
I feel small
Though I am
Taller than some.
As I walk
Down the steps
To exit the bus
I feel stronger
Though I still
Lift the same.
As I talk
To the rest
Of them in the bus
I feel tall
Again, though I am
Still smaller than some.
As I talk
To the rest
Of them off the bus
I feel new now
Though I still
Look the same. (Jenna, age 12)

The Pedagogy of Journey Outcomes

At the evening meeting the day the students arrived at Crow Canyon, an older student observed, "Now we have come together as

a junior high." She didn't have to use the word *community*. Everyone understood what she meant. It was the sixth day of the Odyssey: six days of living together. The distinction between new students and returning students no longer existed. A new group had become one and had bonded. The Odyssey was working. The hesitation, uncertainty, and feelings of uneasiness had disappeared and were replaced by feelings of belonging, making friends, and a cooperative eagerness. This transformation would be polished and made smooth over four magical days learning about archaeology (going on a dig) and the ancestral Pueblo people, and all while working and playing in the geographical wonderland of the southwest Canyonlands.

When our school left Crow Canyon for a tour of Mesa Verde, four more camping nights, and the drive back to Minnesota, it was a very different group. They had now become somewhat like a winning sports team, a well-trained marching band, or a confident theater group. There was now an esprit de corps and a little swagger. *Esprit* means a liveliness of mind and spirit. They had together built the groundwork, the positive and supportive attitudes that promote a mystique or climate, for learning. There is an additional quality that follows along with esprit de corps. There is the elevation of the moral sense. They respectfully did the work of digging, discovered the artifacts of the ancient and little-known culture, and developed a clearer sense of the right behavior that characterizes good manners and civility. It is at the root of what is best in humanity; it defines the idea of nobility. Here are the noble adolescents; brought out by the pedagogy of journey.

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