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Reconstructing the world | A tribute to Barbara Isaacs | Montessori book exclusive
Outdoor learning in a Covid world | Reflecting on global displacement
Voice of the teacher in Toronto | Montessori entrepreneur Karen Partridge





Butterfly effect

Racism must be addressed so that children can flourish, transform, grow
and spread their wings in the world, says Koren Clark

“The concept of liberty which should inspire teaching is ... universal: it is the liberation of a life repressed by an infinite number of obstacles which oppose its harmonious development, both psychic and spiritual”

(Montessori, 2007: 11)

I am writing this article during the global Covid-19 pandemic, as I retreat in my home and worry that those in the outside world harbour a life-threatening virus. I'm reflecting on a phenomenon that took the world by storm earlier this year: the sight of millions of people rising up to stand against racism and state-sponsored violence against black people. This moment, and the intersection of the virus and racism, has raised potent questions for me as a black Montessorian. To what extent is racism like the virus? Can I be an asymptomatic carrier of racism? And perhaps most importantly, how does Montessorian philosophy help me heal myself and my society?

Introspection is key to guide preparation in Montessori education, and it is the pathway I chose to work through these questions. We must attend to our social and emotional hygiene: with the virus, we wash our hands; with racism we must examine our values and inner workings. This is a precursor to the social justice work we are called to do. As Montessorians, we should use introspection and deliberate planning to help liberate the child and facilitate his/her journey of self discovery.

In the process of introspection, I found that I was carrying internalised racial oppression (IRO) that spread toxins to others. This was apparent in the limitations I was placing on my teenage son. In an effort to protect him from the fate of many black boys like him, I told him not to jog in integrated neighborhoods and to show his face, rather than wear a hoodie. Recognising the racist toxins in those statements, I endeavoured to heal myself and my son. I wanted him to feel good about himself and strong in his body. I encouraged him to tap into the stories of black men throughout the diaspora who felt empowered. I helped him get in touch with his father's art and to use his artistic imagination to create a better world.

If I, who spends much of my life helping others to overcome racism, was carrying such a virus, I wondered how many people carry the virus without noticing it. I also wondered how many folks carried the virus of internalised racial superiority, and who might be silently fuelling our current race wars as super-spreaders, creating obstacles against the liberation of others.



HUMAN TRANSFORMATION

The liberation of a life is the purest expression of our humanity and often best exemplified in the young. Montessorians have the privilege of watching this transformation as the young grow into the full expression of their innate essence. This is akin to witnessing a newly formed butterfly emerge from its chrysalis. It expects no repression and no obstacles to its expression. It spreads its wings and flies to fulfil its natural course. In human transformation, many obstacles knock the life force out of the psychic and spiritual development of individuals, and in the process diminish our collective humanity. And in the natural world, many caterpillars never emerge from their chrysalises; many wings are shattered and traumatised before they are able to spread.

Humanity is in danger, not just from viruses and racism, but from climate change and massive inequality. We are witnessing the suppression of the young, who are supposed to flourish, transform, grow and spread their wings in the world they have inherited from us adults, but can't because their wings are weighed down by social and political trauma. Many adults want to simply give the child an aggressive inoculation against the perils

A child fully expressing their innate essence is akin to a newly formed butterfly emerging from its chrysalis

of society and the toxins it carries. However, our job as Montessorians has never been one of attempting to shield the young from the world, but of ushering in the development of new beings into a world that they will shape in the reclamation of humanity.

As educators, we cannot defend the psychic and spiritual development of a child without defending and raising humanity. It takes a child with a liberated spirit to autonomously solve problems on the shelves in their classrooms and in the social conditions of their world. It takes a certain level of liberation to be able to self-actualise in a way that heals us and empowers us to move with purpose, and to attend to our collective cosmic tasks.

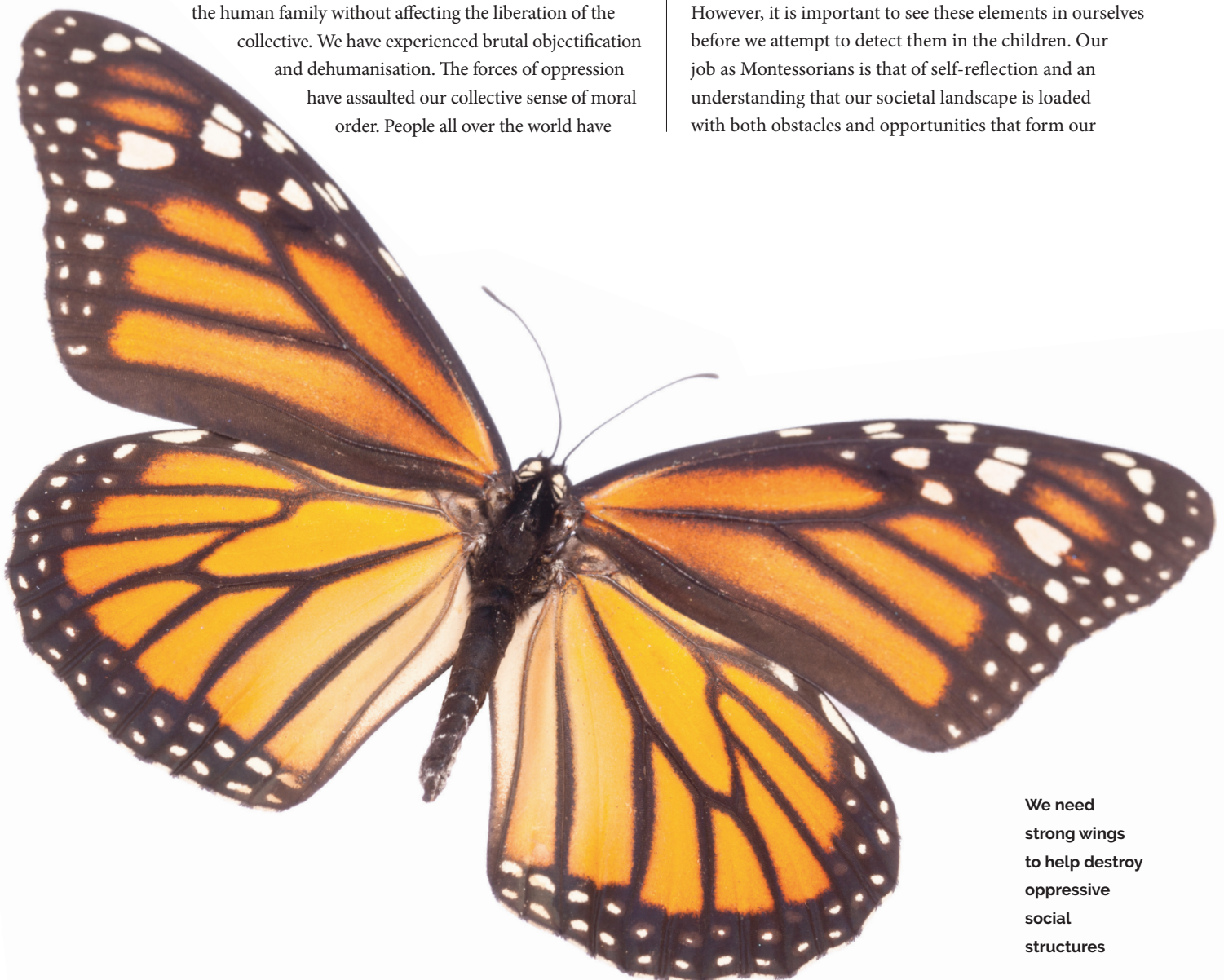
Addressing these tasks is needed on the current world stage, where our black brothers and sisters have been dismissed, disregarded and treated as if we don't matter; as if we have no purpose, and can somehow be uprooted from the human family without affecting the liberation of the collective. We have experienced brutal objectification and dehumanisation. The forces of oppression have assaulted our collective sense of moral order. People all over the world have

come together for the redemption of humanity through the defence of our targeted black sisters and brothers. Montessorians should lead the way.

Montessori says, "Either education contributes to a movement of universal liberation by showing the way to defend and raise humanity or it becomes like one of those organs which have shrivelled up by not being used during the evolution of the organism" (Montessori, 1955: 14).

People around the world who are standing up and protesting to defend humanity against racialised societal toxins resonate with our calling as Montessorians. They stand against individual attacks on our collective psyche, our spirit and our morality. This is the stand we take to protect the integrity and liberty of the child.

The self-reflection that Montessori requires of us might be difficult because internalised racial oppression and superiority are hard to spot and often asymptomatic. However, it is important to see these elements in ourselves before we attempt to detect them in the children. Our job as Montessorians is that of self-reflection and an understanding that our societal landscape is loaded with both obstacles and opportunities that form our



**We need
strong wings
to help destroy
oppressive
social
structures**

When we validate and affirm the richness of the diversity around us, we create the conditions for healing

personhood. We need to understand not only the root causes and functions of oppressive forces that shape our reality, but also where mountains of power and privilege dominate our landscape. Then we can see the personal effects of internalised racial superiority, or internalised racial oppression emanating from this landscape.

As Montessori says, “An ordinary teacher cannot be transformed into a Montessori teacher, but must be created anew, having rid herself of pedagogical prejudices. The first step is self-preparation of the imagination, for the Montessori teacher has to visualize a child who is not yet there” (Montessori, 1946: 67).

Montessorians’ self-reflection work is essential to the development of the children who are still creating themselves, and who hold the promise of being fully liberated. Bell Hooks says, “the classroom is the location of possibilities” (Hooks, 1994: 207). Once Montessori guides can get rid of their prejudices and imagine children who are free enough to reach their full potential, they will soon recognise that they need to create an environment that upholds the sanctity of this possibility. This is important, because frequently true liberty is most often aspirational. Aspirations are cultural wealth that motivate and steer both the guide and the children to that healing place, away from the mark of racial trauma that has been left on the world and towards fulfilling our universal needs.

WINDOWS AND MIRRORS

We meet these needs through the use of windows and mirrors in our curriculum design. When we reflect on who we are as educators, it is much easier to know when to hold up a mirror that allows the children to see their individuality reflected in our global narrative, and when to open a window that allows them to see those who exist outside of their dominant narrative. A balance of windows and mirrors gives us equal doses of humanism and individualism, thereby creating spaces for empathy and liberty to reign supreme in our learning environments. It takes a fine-tuned eye and conscious intention to attend to these universal needs and to break through our own barriers, prejudices and social conditioning to white supremacy. We must also recognise the social capital held by many culturally diverse children.

As Montessorians, we are so accustomed to manipulating and changing the content (material) to fit the needs of children, that oftentimes we forget to

change our purpose to fit the needs of the culturally diverse children we serve. Montessori says, “The needs of mankind are universal. Our means of meeting them create the richness and diversity of the planet. The Montessori child should come to relish the texture of that diversity” (Montessori, n.d.).

Racial trauma occurs not only when children see their people massacred, but also when we don’t relish that diversity. It occurs when our children fear alienation, persecution and hate; when they face those who disregard and disrespect their language; when they have to work double time to be acknowledged; when they are policed and censored for being who they are and for expressing themselves; when they are exhausted by the effort it takes to be seen and acknowledged; and ultimately when they are expending all of their energy in trying to prove, defend, and define their humanity.

When we validate and affirm the richness of the diversity around us, we create the conditions for healing. We can shift the culture of our classroom and align our environments. We align not only with responsive books and materials, but also with a new way of listening and responding. We create space for cultural expression. It is then that we will find our interactions with parents and children alike will be fulfilling and healing.

Montessori has a wonderful way of centring the commonality and the individuality in all of us, thus centring our humanity. We can only recognise that a threat to the liberation of one of us is a threat to the liberation of all of us when we have been introspective enough to heal ourselves. It is then that we become more empathetic and see ourselves in each other; then that we realise the truth in the Zulu term “ubuntu”, which translates as, “I am because we are”. Together we can be the newly formed butterfly with intricate and strong wings, prepared to help destroy oppressive social structures on our path towards our long-awaited liberation. ■

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