

INTERVIEW WITH HILLA PATELL ON THE HISTORY OF THE OBSERVATION

by Molly O'Shaughnessy and Hilla Patell

In this interview conducted at the NAMTA conference, Observation: The Key to Unlocking the Child's Potential, Molly O'Shaughnessy discusses the history of observation with Hilla Patell. Patell shares stories of the people who were instrumental in creating a culture of observation as an ongoing discipline to be practiced. She goes on to talk about some of the keys to understanding and practicing observation, including the child's concentration, the need to rid ourselves of preconceptions, and how to look for obstacles that impede a child's development. She tells us that as observers we must stay in the present and have "faith in the human spirit."

Molly O'Shaughnessy is the president and director of primary training at the Montessori Center of Minnesota. She earned her AMI primary diploma from Montessori Center in 1976 and holds an M.Ed from Loyola University, Maryland. Since 1996 she has provided strategic leadership for the Montessori Center of Minnesota, serving as the director of training and executive director as well as community faculty for Metropolitan State University and adjunct faculty for St. Catherine's University in St. Paul. Molly serves on the boards of MM75 and NAMTA and was a long-time member of the AMI Trainers Group.

Hilla Patell is a board member and Montessori pedagogue at the Maria Montessori Institute. Mrs. Patell is an AMI examiner and has traveled extensively conducting oral examinations at AMI affiliated training centers on all four continents where AMI is active. The holder of an AMI 3-6 diploma and the AMI primary trainers certificate, Mrs. Patell joined the training staff of the Maria Montessori Training Organization in London in 1962 and co-directed the course with Muriel Dwyer and later accepted the appointment as director of training, which she held until 1989. She has been a board member of the World Education Fellowship and the International Women's Council. This talk was presented at the NAMTA conference titled *Observation: The Key to Unlocking the Child's Potential* in Golden, CO, November 5-8, 2015.

MOLLY. Good morning. It truly is great to be up here on the stage with you and to talk about this important topic. We have had the privilege of talking about observation a lot together, and I have learned so much from you from those experiences. Now I have some questions, and I know [the audience] will be interested in hearing your comments.

HILLA. Before you ask those questions, can I say what a pleasure it has been for me to work with Molly. She is one of the few people who have taken this whole idea extremely seriously. I am grateful to you for having done so.

MOLLY. Thank you. You have done extensive work on observation. It would be interesting to know what caused you to have such a deep interest in this very important topic.

HILLA. In all her writings, Maria Montessori mentions observation in every book. Recently the 1913 lectures have been published, and I was most interested to see that in the very first chapter of that book she mentions observation as being a key to her work. In the 1946 lectures, she mentions observation again and again. This thread can be seen in all her writings and in all her work. Sometimes we need to go through all the books that are now being published on her work and through all her lectures that she has given over the years. That really is what inspired me.

MOLLY. We often talk about observation as the cornerstone of Montessori. What does that mean to you?

HILLA. Well, the cornerstone is a foundation, isn't it? The foundation is something that is fundamental, so that is how I see observation. Can I just expand on that?

MOLLY. Yes, please.

HILLA. In the early days, we kept very good records of the work we did with the children. We kept a note of all the presentations we gave, whether they were successful or not. This is how we followed up. We noted the group activities that we held and how the child was developing socially. Yet somehow we were not getting the response that Montessori was talking about: concentra-



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tion. In those days, the early days (the 1960s), getting support was very easy. AMI was an international organization and there were courses in different countries, but it was still a small organization. We were able to pick up the phone and call Mr. Montessori [Mario] when we wanted some information and some advice. We called Mr. Montessori and said to him, "We are doing everything that we can, but somehow we are not seeing what she mentions about concentration. Is it because the children have changed? Are we in a different society now?" His response was very patient and he said, "Well, really human nature hasn't changed has it, in about 40 million years. Perhaps that is not the reason." He asked us to contact Mrs. Joosten, Rosie Joosten, who was a first generation Montessorian and had worked with Dr. Montessori. In her very patient and kind way she said, "Go read chapter 3 in *Spontaneous Activity in Education* [*The Advanced Montessori Method, Volume 1*]." So we went and read chapter 3 in *Spontaneous Activity in Education* and found that there was a lot of information there and we tried to follow it. That reading gave us this idea of observation being the cornerstone for Montessori work.

MOLLY. Did reading that chapter inspire you to develop the post-diploma course that you helped design and implement? I think you are the only ones who offer that course. When I came to London, I was very fascinated to see the interest of delving into observation. It was performed in a very systematic way, following children for a year or more. Tell us a little about how that got started.

HILLA. That got started with what we were doing in school. We began to see that by putting into practice what Montessori says in chapter 3, it was possible to see children becoming deeply involved. We were following the child. We were not focusing as much on the age of the child. We were not saying, He is four years old now it is time for us to give this presentation. I was on the training team, so we also introduced it to the students and found that there was a great interest amongst the students. It sounds as if it was a specific course that people had to pay for, but that was not so. We just offered the possibility for students to come and share with us what they were doing. They came once a week if the schools permitted them that time on a Friday afternoon, for about two hours. Our aim was to link theory and practice, not to tell them what to do, but to link the theory with the practice. We would take a theory topic and talk about it. We also spent time showing them how to chart the information, which is what you showed yesterday Molly.

MOLLY. Yes, we have a good start and will learn more today.

HILLA. You saw how simple it is. Now in this digital age, it is even simpler. When I did the course, Muriel Dwyer was our director of training, and she was very busy. She was running two courses in the north of England. She was running the course in London and she was also doing pioneering work in Africa. She was not around all that much to give us the theory lectures. Those then were taken over by Mr. and Mrs. Claremont, and we got much of her theory from them. The practical presentations were given by first-generation Montessorians, people who actually worked with Maria Montessori. Believe me, the presentations were not as detailed as they are given today. We had to work at it. We were given the aims and more or less figured out what we had to do with the child. What was very good was their enthusiasm, their belief in the child, and that was key. However, Mr. Claremont often said, "If you give the material

at the right time, you will get the right result.” But what is the right time? How do you judge the right time? You cannot go by age because every child is an individual. Did we have to make sure that all of the practical life had been done before daring to do anything with language or math? No, that was not working. We found that doing simple charts, which Montessori referred to as *work curves*, was very effective. We introduced it during the observation component of the course. At the end of the course, the students who were interested and who were going to stay in the UK could come join us. We had an ongoing dialogue with our own directors and anyone else who wanted to come.

MOLLY. This idea of work curves was very interesting to me when I was in London. I could see the value of being able to look at the work curves and talk about the patterns and what they showed. We saw some really interesting things that I found to be very helpful and fascinating.

HILLA. It is truly because you are really then following the child. It is not the adult who is calling the shots. Going on from there, more and more people seemed to get interested and we continued. That is how the course was established, and it is still going.

MOLLY. That is great. I know you already mentioned a few mentors. Can you talk a little bit more about the people that have been mentors in your life and how they influenced you?

HILLA. Well, obviously Mr. Montessori to begin with. Certainly Mr. and Mrs. Claremont, who had not only a really deep understanding but also a deep humility in many ways, particularly in the way they gave the information. The original center that they established was more or less down the street from where our center is today. I think we walked by that building, and that building still stands. There were the teachers, the first generation teachers, and it was their enthusiasm, their belief in the work, that was key. The children that I worked with, I must give credit to. They also were my mentors and there are some great stories about those children. Certainly Muriel’s work in Ethiopia was a great incentive for us as we saw what could be done. Of course all of our many, many Montessorians who came to visit us were inspirational in their own

unique ways. Margaret Stephenson had an impact certainly on me. Camillo Grazzini was a friend and colleague with whom we had many discussions and many more. Rosie Joosten most certainly because she settles on the path.

MOLLY. I wish I had known her, but I knew her son, A. M. Joosten. He was the director of training for my course in 1973. Some people say that it is difficult to be a good observer, and this was expressed in the discussions we had yesterday. Some said that they started it, but it sometimes was abandoned for a while. Why do you think it is difficult, or do you think it is difficult? Perhaps it is not really? Can it be difficult to be observers in the way that we are talking about; that is, in a way that really helps our practice and in knowing when to present, as you said.

HILLA. It isn't difficult, but it is a work that we have to do for ourselves. I think that is what we forget. It is an ongoing discipline. That ongoing discipline is the belief in the work that we are doing and not giving it up. Montessori called it a *silent discipline*. We undertake it for ourselves and it needs commitment. We can do observation in many different ways. The technique that we are talking about this morning is simple and direct. Sometimes it is misunderstood because some directresses think that a type of deep observation must be done to make the work curves for every single child in the class every day. That is not possible, it is just absolutely not possible. I think Molly will show some techniques of record keeping for every single child to be done every day but in a brief and concise manner. When viewed once every three or four weeks, it becomes a real fundamental way of looking at the child. You see a whole week of activity clearly, simply, and without thinking about the personality. It is the interpretation of what you see that is important. Again, as you saw yesterday, if you have a little way of putting down the information in a shortened form, it does not take very long. What you gain from that is what the child is showing you. What the child is showing you is where his or her interest lies at that moment. How you interpret that is fundamental. Again you have another three or four weeks to follow through with that. It is not just keeping a log or record of what you saw the child do or keeping a check on what the child is going to be interested in. You must follow through. There are so many things in our environment. If you have a child

who's interested in shapes, for instance, look at all the things that we have in our environment for shapes. We have two-dimensional shapes, we have three-dimensional shapes, we have regular shapes, and we have irregular shapes. If you go through the material that is in the environment, you will find many of these activities that might capture the child's interest. Some will, some won't; then you can ask yourself, why? What is the prior preparation that must be done in advance? If the prior preparation was done, then you have more success. It shows the child was more interested and shows you where they would like to go next.

MOLLY. That is great insight. Thank you. We talk a lot about concentration. We know it is the key, but sometimes we do not know what it really looks like. How can we differentiate between busy work, some engagement and concentration, and deep concentration? Deep concentration seems to be the real key to what we are interested in. Please talk a bit about that since the idea is so critical to everything that we do.

HILLA. When Montessori describes observation, she says the real reason is not for us just to know what the child is doing, but for us to understand the subtle and delicate process of the development in place within the child. I like those words *subtle and delicate*. Then of course the preparation of the environment is fundamental if we are to observe that. Montessori draws attention in her writings that the inner life of the child is always present but is not easily perceived. Frequently it is over shadowed by the obstacles the child meets in the environment. These obstacles often lead to negative behavior. We frequently see inconsistent behavior. Faced with such negative responses, the adults rarely ask themselves whether the child's inner life is being violated in some way. We know the children have an absorbent mind. We know that the children have sensitive periods. Now if for some reason the environment is not sympathetic to that, then we get negative behavior. We should ask ourselves whether there could be

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some other cause apart from what seems to be superficially obvious so we can determine what is at the root of the problem. Once we can tell that and follow the child, we do begin to see concentration. I think the other point is limiting the material; there can be too many activities, too much choice that is irrelevant choice. When there is nothing constructive the child loses interest. When you see a child getting involved in something, Montessori says to protect that child. A day will come when a child will become involved in an activity but a friend might interrupt the work by wanting to participate in it, and at that moment we might need to involve the friend in something else that is interesting so as not to interrupt the flow of concentration.

MOLLY. You said *follow the child*. I think that sometimes that term is misunderstood by people. What is your idea of what she meant by *follow the child*?

HILLA. Precisely what I have been saying: We need to prepare the environment. Make sure that we understand where the children are coming from. Then give them the materials that are relevant for their development.



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MOLLY. It does not mean just let them go on their way and we will follow them around.

HILLA. Absolutely not. Muriel tells a funny story about that. When she was working in Africa, she used this term and realized the directress had taken it literally. Following the child really involves understanding the nature of human life and doing what is necessary.

MOLLY. Observation calls for a removal of prejudice to see the truth of the child. How do we remove prejudices to get an honest, fresh, observation that really renews the spirit of Montessori as we know it?

HILLA. One thing I believe you said yesterday was about preconceived opinions or bias: We judge a situation before actually understanding it. If we are really to be honest, all of us have some form of bias. We carry preconceived ideas that we have grown up with from our culture, our country, our family life. We are not free from prejudice, but in Montessori's writing she conveys to us that observation should be a continuous part of our work. She says it is an approach that enables us to follow the life of the child. So in that sense, there are a few things that we can do. When we are with the child, we cannot let what has happened in the past color what is happening now. If you have a child who is biting, screaming, throwing things, try to be in the present rather than putting a label on the child. You know, he is uncontrollable, he comes from a poor family, and there is no control. We have many notations of what might not be right, but at that moment just be in the present. You are dealing with a child who is distressed. If you look at it from that point of view, you will not prejudge the child.

MOLLY. That is not always so easy to do.

HILLA. Not easy to do at all. We used to tell a lovely story, if I would be allowed to tell the story. There was a little boy in his class who continuously took it upon himself to scream and cry and try to get his own way. If he did not get his own way, he simply took a chair and threw it at the person who was coming his way at that

moment. He was a thrower of chairs in his environment. A visitor came to the class one day. The director said he became aware of the child having picked up a chair. Now this was a difficult decision for the director since he did not know what the boy was going to do and he wondered if he should take the chair away from the child. He decided he would stand in between the child's trajectory and the visitor. He would be the one to catch the flying chair and not the visitor. However, the child was walking across to offer the chair to the visitor. This director never forgot that lesson, and I am sure everyone in this environment has had that experience as well. It was the turning point for that child, and we never know when those moments will happen.

MOLLY. That is why we must stay in the present.

HILLA. We must stay in the present and have a belief and faith in the human spirit.

MOLLY. We always talk about concentration as being connected to normalization and normality, and that is a really important thing to understand. Can you talk a little bit about it?

HILLA. I will give the example of a river that is flowing beautifully, serenely, quietly, peacefully. There are a couple of rocks that come in the way and the river flows easily over the rocks. But if there is a continuous sort of interference with the flow of the river, if it suddenly meets a landslide or some other kind of interruption in its flow, then the flow is going to be diverted. That is what we encounter in the children when the environment does not support the child and does not support development. We see deviations and know that something is not right in the life of that individual. So we see children responding to the obstacles that they face in the environment. Our job therefore is to try and remove those obstacles. Natural forces—the intelligence, the will, and the possibility of acting—all positively come together to aid us in bringing the child back to the normal path of development. Don't let the parents get fearful of this word or other professionals for that matter. The normality is the normality that nature has provided for us, but if we meet obstacles constantly, surely we will see deviations occurring at all levels of development.

MOLLY. What would you say about a child for whom perhaps the obstacles were not really removed in the first plane of development, and then they move on to the second plane of development? How can we help in that situation?

HILLA. I don't think that we should give up on any human being. I am sure we can help human beings at all levels of their development. I know that Mario Montessori, Jr. had worked with people in prison using Montessori principles. He said he often got good results. These were adults in prison whose life could be transformed if they were given the right opportunity. He was a psychologist so he knew what he was doing. I once heard Mario Montessori say, "When you see normalization in the second plane of development it is more dramatic than when you see it in the first plane of development." I never got the opportunity to ask him to clarify that statement. So many of us think that if the child is not normalized by the age of six, we have lost him forever. Nobody is lost forever.

MOLLY. That is really interesting. What advice can you give to practitioners and guides, really anyone working with children at any age, to deepen their abilities of being keen and deep observers. It does seem to be the road back.



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HILLA. It is the road back. Keep on keeping on and don't give up. We need to have faith and believe in the principles Montessori has passed on to us. Sometimes we get a little too caught up in the details: where to put the box, do I put the lid under the box or beside the box or near the box. There is no question of using your common sense. Common sense is the key. I just want to give two examples of concentration and children really being involved. I went into a class to observe one day. The whole class was in turmoil. There were children running around everywhere. There was water there, everything was a mess. There was one little girl who was washing her hands and was looking somewhere into space totally oblivious of what was going on around her. On second occasion, this was in one of our schools, a little boy who enjoyed his food very much was called for lunch. He turned to our director and said, "Don't want lunch today." He was not finished counting the chain. What would have happened had we insisted he go to lunch? What would that do to that deep desire to accomplish something. Now this is something we work on in the periphery. The child is being led towards the center if we have given the right opportunity. He did not have his lunch until he had finished counting the thousand chain. We have to really train ourselves and have a belief that what we are



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doing is of value, is necessary, and it's something that we have to do for ourselves. Only we can train ourselves, so keep on keeping on. Spend the time. It is not just making those little work curves, but spend the time to sit with your colleagues and to see what the child is showing you.

MOLLY. It really does help to have colleagues to discuss and reflect on our observations. It is not an easy thing to do alone.

HILLA. We should not do it alone.

MOLLY. Some people are isolated: They are in one room or in classrooms that are in small towns. It is easy to kind of lose that faith or perspective. Now it is easier to reach out with all the ways that we can, but it is still difficult. Is there other advice or any other thoughts on observation, or anything else for that matter, because observation is only one area of expertise that you have.

HILLA. The other advice is to please listen to Molly very carefully, especially today's session. Also, what she had to say yesterday will really be helpful. If we could set up perhaps a little group of people who can meet from time to time and bring some of their work and discuss some of that work, that would be useful to help the idea to grow. It is all there in Montessori's books; we do not have to go anywhere.

MOLLY. Thank you so much.

HILLA. Molly, it has been a pleasure.

