

Book Review: Educating For Right Action and Love: Extending and Expanding the Montessori Vision, by Philip Snow Gang

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Abstract

The intersections of education, cosmology, and spirituality are delicately unfolded in this personal biography. Phil identifies forces – both positive and negative, tumultuous and tiny, intentional and accidental, within his own life that have led to the questioning, that has spawned the adventure that results in this book.

Keywords: Book Review, Montessori, Memoir

Philip Snow Gang

From a fish who doesn't fit in – to a peach tree that is treasured and bears fruit

The intersections of education, cosmology, and spirituality are delicately unfolded in this personal biography. This unfolding is told through the review of decades of one man's life. In his new book, "Educating For Right Action and Love: Extending and Expanding the Montessori Vision", Philip Snow Gang reflects on his own life, and his own emerging world view. We witness the workings of the mind of a man, who simultaneously accepts the world, and wrestles with meaning- the guiding question below reverberates throughout:

What are the contexts and processes in education that might liberate teachers and learners so that they become catalysts for a new human – one whose integral relationship with Gaia is bound by right-action and love?

Phil loves basketball, he loves laughing, he loves Marsha, Montessori, and Ruth. Phil loves his family, fun, facts about the formation of the universe, and finding meaning. Phil loves trees. This is a love story. He has a story to tell.

Phil invites the reader to sit beside him on a powerful, personal, humbling, and at times intimate journey. Reading his book is comparable to going on a trip in a horse and cart, with Phil, as the driver, pointing out items of interest along the way. We hear Phil's personal voice very clearly through the development of ideas - indeed, to know Phil is to know the word "Gobsmacked!"

The driver is ready, and your seat is right alongside the narrator. He welcomes you to this tour of his memoirs and meanderings, his professional contributions to the world of education, and his integration of spiritual meaning in a cosmological framework.

As we prepare, and as we leave the safety of the known, there are preparatory reminders before a journey. Bring compassion, love and forgiveness, embrace the unknown, allow imagination, humour, and wonder to excite you; you may begin to notice your own and the universe's deepest secrets surrounding you.

So, now to begin.

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Hold onto your hats, it is going to be a bumpy ride. There are definitely some ruts and potholes hidden among these well-travelled roads. Phil's worldview is comforting and confronting. This book is delicate and dramatic. Settle down now for a rather wonderful ride. (Did I mention life changing?)

Amongst other things, Phil is the founder of TIES, which is an online master's programme in Montessori Integrative Learning, and Integrative Learning. Phil is also thinking about eco-cosmology, and right action. This book traces the question that resolves his own reflections with new understandings of how to educate children and adults, how to understand the human relationship to the universe, and how to create meaning out of our existence.

Phil includes references to his European descendants and then through descriptions of yesteryear he posits the early years of his life in New York. He recalls early local, regional, and global influences; including international peace movements, wars, and assassinations – they help to set the scene for a life of peace-seeking. Phil, from his perspective as an octogenarian, shares his life's wisdom in this adventure through self-reflection and self-realisation, against a backdrop of the unfolding and loving development of cosmological ideas.

Love is a theme strongly represented throughout the text. Through the book, we meet many people. Friends, family members, colleagues, influencers, and idols from Phil's life. Along the journey, we are soon introduced to some of the guides in Phil's life; we come to know them through Phil as friends - Ruth, Maria and Marsha. These three powerful women are also forces that inject love, wonder, and passion as his supporters.

Ruth Gloria was live-in help to Phil's family and provided physical, emotional, and spiritual support to the young Philip. She continues to influence Phil through his memories. She provides a strong charismatic and infinitely practical approach to life, through love, and laughter. Ruth recognises the potential within Phil from which he draws strength, his fruit of the peach tree.

Maria Montessori, whose son, grandson, and great granddaughter became Phil's personal friends, and who was a powerful and international force in the liberation and development of integrated education for children, contributed ideas surrounding cosmic education as well as offered spiritual connectedness to the lives of children. She provides a framework for exploration and expansion beyond the formal world of education.

And Marsha. Without whom this book, this struggle, and this emergence may never have occurred, identified by Phil as a physical partner and a soul mate. Marsha was a co-educator, and a fellow Montessorian. Their paths crossed many times before they created their partnership. She provides a relationship with a deep sense of wonder, respect, and love.

With anecdotes of childhood, romance, professional calling, family dynamics, and recurring motifs of peaches and fish, the story starts off. There is love for the natural world, love for the ideas of peace and freedom, and there is the engineers love of understanding how things work.

We witness as Phil grows through various stages of life: the early school years and secondary school. Phil's life is drawn as a series of events that either pull him toward or away from his own life's purpose and meaning. Quoting a school peer, Paul Simon, in the song "Kodachrome", which describes dissatisfaction with standard education, we learn that some experiences, especially school and early life, were not always easy or positive for Phil. For one who grew to love education, there was a rocky start. There were times when Phil describes himself as a "fish out of water".

Moving through struggles with meeting expectations of parents and extended family, while growing up, and later, when being an engineering student, to the collapse of the father's business. We hear each detail, told in the sense of meaning making.

The story moves to his period of work in a military production company, and the ensuing cognitive dissonance with that work, and peace movements. Phil has already been on a journey before arriving at understanding Montessori. Beyond that, there are further groupings and expansions, perpetually pulsing rhythms in his life blood of change.

The warm and generous narration style, the love of story, comforts the passengers into a sense of confidence in the road ahead. However, all was not smooth sailing, from family disputes, self-doubt, and lingering wonderings, Phil identifies forces – both positive and negative, tumultuous and tiny, intentional and accidental, within his own life that have led to the questioning, that has spawned the adventure that results in this book.

The book is about an adventure, yes, but it is also a story of coming home. Circles, coming round, and moving round.

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Within the book, one revisits ideas often. Notions are welcomed, processed, rejected – only to be re-welcomed again further on. The journey takes us away from home, but travels in circles. So many times we meet Ruth, Maria, and Marsha, the guides along the way. And as we travel further into the recesses of the history of time, trilobites and stella-genesis, we become absorbed in the sheer size of the story. At the same time, we are drawn into the smallest details of Phil's life – snippets of remembered conversations, reflections of memories found and left in brooches, the gift of an exchange of ideas. The power of story.

The story, the anecdote, the universe, the life - all as one.

The more we move away, the closer to home we get!

And the pulse of love beats on.

Phil traces his role in the establishment of the Global Alliance for Transformative Education, the development of Integrative Learning, and exploration of Eco-Cosmology, and his impact through his worldwide contribution to education and peace. Phil also re-imagines secondary education in Montessori, under the guidance of Mario Montessori (Snr, and Jnr). Phil's love now incorporates a global educational reform movement.

Every now and then, as Phil tells his story, (you can almost hear his chuckle throughout!) he points out something, and we peer through the windows of our carriage and we see something grand, something true, something universal, something personal. We realise the intimacy of this journey of one person – leading to a deeper understanding of self, is itself an invitation to explore the wonders of the universe, alongside the quiet humbleness of being.

Again, our narrator asks the question, *“What liberates teachers and learners to be who they have been created to be? How do we engage children so that right-action and love are natural by-products of being alive?”*

My advice to readers is not to look for answers but to embrace the questions that will emerge in themselves through the reading of the book.

Phil asks with a sense of finality (future cause, fantappie)- why did I end up here? In the unravelling's of his eight decades on Earth, Phil traces back through his life the threads that have led him to being an influential voice in integrative learning, and a pioneer in both on-line learning communities and Montessori adult learning. The personal story of his own life, and spiritual awakening is woven into

the threads of the book, alongside revelations in science and education.

The book carries endorsement and reflections from friends, which are warm and appreciative. His impact is heartfelt and deep. He is well loved. His 80th birthday celebrations are testament.

Phil asks why? Why me? This book is his answer.

Phil explores his own life challenges, and perhaps prompts readers to ask the same questions of themselves.

Acknowledgements

Steven Arnold is a colleague of Phil's on the TIES Master's programme and knew Marsha and Phil from their time in New Zealand. He is a Montessori educator, and school Principal.

References

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