

# Montana Academy

September 7, 2009

## Success or Failure-What is at stake?

In August I wrote to you in anticipation of our mid month graduation exercises. Dr. Malinak was in charge of the ceremony and he proclaimed his astonishment at the progress that students make while on campus and the transformations that take place before our eyes when our students grow up. He had made his customary visit to the Dollar store and bought foam hammers as gifts for each graduate, demonstrating to them the need to knock themselves on the head periodically when they made a mistake and to exclaim "what was I thinking?" to remember their time at Montana Academy and to get back to work again. As is our tradition there were several speeches both by parents joyful in reclaiming a child who was felt to be lost and by students who wanted to take stock of the distance that they had come, the struggles involved and to acknowledge the support of both the community and their parents.

Amongst our many summer visitors have been a good many alumni who have returned on road trips with their friends to revisit Montana and Montana Academy. These visits bring us great pleasure because they represent the persistence of attachment. These graduates, some recent and some long gone, bring stories of their own transitions to home or college and news of a network of alumni friends with whom they have kept in touch. They are our successes and proof of the work that we do.

Montana Academy has, like other therapeutic schools, been besieged in the weeks leading up to graduation and also in the weeks after it by visiting parents who are anxiously searching the country for the setting in which a failing son or daughter might best begin to thrive and grow. Some debacle has generally punctuated the steady downward slide of 6 months to 24 months duration. Sometimes the Police have been involved, sometimes the school has expelled the student or simply asked them not to return, the final report card has been a dismal failure or the child has simply stopped going to school, refused to get out of bed or turned days into nights playing video games. There have been car wrecks and suicide attempts, drug busts and petty theft. Anguished parents have spent sleepless nights staring at the ceiling worrying about how to prop up these failing children and projecting bleak images of a ruined life. Crisis demands action and pushes parents to take the final step of hiring an escort and airlifting a flailing child to safety in the woods. Change is on its way.

Wilderness programs have become skilled at allowing angry and despairing teenagers to howl at the moon until they are ready to sit with their own emotions and begin to want to get help for themselves. When they are ready to engage the guide and the group is there to help with the journey into self-understanding, accountability and reconnection. The transformation begins in the woods. It can be seen in the fresh faces and open smiles in the pictures that parents bring on the next stage of their journey to visit schools. Both parents and students have begun to believe that change is possible and that the future can be bright after all. They have had a taste of success and hope has once

again taken root in their hearts. Perhaps this pain will become a thing of the past and their child will now move forward and resume a normal developmental trajectory.

Wise parents know that stable change cannot sustain itself without a new consistent environment with steady structure and support. They commit to the search for a setting which will promote ongoing internal growth in self-awareness, empathy, adherence to rules and the ability to make mature relationships and plans for the future.

What if this process fails? And it may. By the time that a student arrives at graduation we have lived with them for 12-24 months and know how they think and whether or not they have grown up. We hope to have done more than to keep them safe. We do our best to get both the light and dark cards on the table and not to gloss over the struggles that will show up in the months and years after graduation. We generally know those who may return to using drugs, those who are likely to struggle in school or those who will either collapse back into their families or distance themselves from them.

Recently we had bad news from several alumni families. One mother wrote to us about her daughter's wretched life with her boyfriend, also a former student. This young couple had just been turned out of his parent's basement where they had been living because the parents could no longer tolerate the drug deals, thefts and squalor of their lives. These young adults had not been able to maintain steady employment or to find a decent place to live for more than a few weeks at a time. They had no transportation, were using drugs routinely and had been robbed twice at gun point. Last week another anguished father called to say that he had received a 3.00 a.m. call from an emergency room in another state where his daughter had almost died of a heroin overdose just before she was due to start her junior year of college. A third mother reported that her son lived for two weeks in a raunchy hotel with crack dealers and single moms running away from their boyfriends. This son went to court on her 50<sup>th</sup> birthday for a misdemeanor for alcohol possession. Other stories are less dramatically painful but reflect a continued failure to take hold. Parents worry about their young adult son's repeated inability to finish courses at a junior college, a serious tendency to procrastinate which might unseat an otherwise promising college career, a re-emergence of entitlement and failure to buckle down and get a summer job.

Parents, too, must begin to learn when to intervene and when to let go. While it may make sense to bring out the cavalry and effect a major rescue for a failing 16 year old who needs to sit safely in the woods until he can stop pouting and get on with the tasks of everyday life and learn to take care of himself. It does not make sense to keep supporting a 22 year old son who has failed 3 semesters of college. Nor does it make sense to keep a drug dealer in the basement or pay for college when a daughter is using heroin. The hardest lesson that parents learn is to let go and let life begin to take over the process of teaching. This doesn't mean that parents should stop caring or hoping for the best, or supporting reasonable plans. They need to know that they have done their part, that they have dealt with their own internal demons to the best of their abilities, that they have been open and responsive to their child's needs and have provided the best opportunities that they can for growth and made realistic plans for the future and then they need to stop cushioning their child against the inevitable struggles ahead, let go and wish them well.

Montana Academy prides itself on selecting students who are likely to be successful in our milieu as well as parents who will both stay the course and work on themselves as

well as their relationship with their child. We believe that all children are influenced by the attitudes of parents in regard to most things in life and, in treatment, towards their own psychological work. If you are ready to begin this important work for yourselves I suggest that you consider reading “Parenting from the Inside Out” by Daniel Siegel and Mary Hartzell. This will provide a guide for you to work alongside your child towards a better understanding of how your own early experiences may have affected your parenting and how such understanding can also improve it.

Now that your teenager is safe it is time to take the opportunity to take stock of one’s own part in the unfolding family drama, to “own your own” as Dr. Malinak likes to say. We will be teaching parents about both recognition and limit setting at the October parent workshops and preparing you to take advantage of this time of growth and healing in the hope that you and your children will be our success stories and not our failures.

A warm welcome to all our new families and to those of you providing ongoing support here to your children.

Rosemary McKinnon