

*Philip Snow Gang is a trained Montessori Educator and school leader. In the early 90's he served on the faculty at the California Institute of Integral Studies. In 1990, Phil became the Executive Director of The Global Alliance for Transforming Education (GATE.) In many ways the pioneering members of GATE including Ron Miller, Ed Clark, David Purpel, David Marshak, Jack Miller and others, defined the vocabulary and articulated the core beliefs and pedagogical foundations for the emerging field of Holistic Education. In particular, the document: "Education 2000: A Holistic Perspective" identified the ten key concepts that laid the bedrock for this field. Phil went on to travel around the world for GATE speaking about these ten principles. Inevitably he would be asked, "where can a teacher go to learn how to educate children in this way?" This led him to create TIES (The Institute for Educational Studies), a fully online graduate program in Integrative Learning and Montessori Integrative Learning, which he has sustained as the program's Director for over twenty years.*

*Phil Gang recently returned to the United States and has settled in Portland, OR after many years living in New Zealand. HEI's Paul Freedman sat down with Phil to reflect on his decades of work in this field as well as to explore his more recent insights:*

**Paul - How did you find your way into holistic education?**

**Phil -** I worked as a manufacturing engineer during the 1960's when things began to awaken me concerning social justice. There was a lot going on during the latter part of that decade with regards to civil rights and antiwar sentiment. This touched me profoundly and I began exploring deeper meaning by reading philosophy. In 1973 I was working in the military aircraft industry and my children were enrolled in a Montessori school. Their school experience really had an impact on me. The content and process were seamlessly woven together. Teachers were not imposing a curriculum; children were making choices in a prepared environment. I remember thinking "I wonder what would have happened if I had been exposed to this kind of education." I had very close relationships with the teachers and didn't find it strange that the three teachers on the elementary staff were all men. I remember thinking, this is something men can do – it's alternative!

And then there was a moment in July 1973 when the rest of my life changes in an instant. I remember it as if it happened yesterday. I casually said to one of the teachers that someday I might like to be a teacher. The reply: "Why not now?" Six weeks later my whole family was in Bergamo, Italy where I became certified in the Montessori elementary approach to teaching. Going to the source in Italy was a mystical experience. I might as well have been on another planet. Communication was in the dark ages. This was way before the Internet and making a phone call to the US was a half-day proposition.

**Paul - What was happening in the 1980's that coalesced to birth the field of holistic education? What are some of the important thinkers, philosophies and wisdom traditions**

that have contributed to holistic educational theory and practice?

Well, for me, my interest in science never waned. In the late 70s and early 80s I recall embracing Fritjof Capra's *Tao of Physics* (1975), David Bohm's, *Wholeness and the Implicate Order* (1980) and Jacob Bronowski's, *Ascent of Man* (1973). Of course, central to my emerging leadership in holistic education, were the core ideas contained in Maria Montessori's cosmic education where one begins by telling the story of our *13.8 billion year history* to children; and where there is an appreciation for each entity having a salient "cosmic" task to contribute to evolution's ongoing journey. Later I would learn how this was congruent with Thomas Berry's notion of "great work."

Other individuals that shaped my 1980's mindset included Teilhard de Chardin, Gregory Bateson, George Leonard, Rollo May, Martin Buber, George Leonard, Alvin Toffler, Alan Watts, Robert Muller, William Irwin Thompson and Mario Montessori, son of Maria Montessori. Mario befriended me and through his written personal communication, I learned about the spiritual roots of the Montessori vision. An interesting side note about Thompson that I only discovered recently, is that his son, Evan, collaborated with Chilean biologist Francesco Varela. Varela co-authored the theory of autopoiesis, made a significant contribution to neurophenomenology. Both of these concepts are central themes in the TIES program in Integrative Learning.

By the end of the 80s I was exploring ways to communicate Montessori ideas in generic terms. I met Ron Miller at an Association for Humanistic Psychology conference in Curry Massachusetts. As I recall, he later visited my school in Atlanta and invited me to write an article for the first issue of *Holistic Education Magazine*.

The Association for Humanistic Psychology (AHP) as well as the Association for Humanistic Education (AHE) were yet another voice for holism, as was Stewart Brand's *Whole Earth Catalog*. AHP sponsored a series of citizen diplomacy journeys to the Soviet Union. In 1987 I found myself speaking about holistic education to the Soviet Academy of Pedagogical Sciences. During the same period I learned about the Soviet geochemist, Vladimir Vernadsky, a contemporary of Teilhard de Chardin, who articulated the notion of noosphere, a sphere of consciousness. This paved the way for people like Lynn Margulis and Jim Lovelock (authors of *Gaia Theory*) to view the Earth as an integrated whole living system.

I also met Assistant Secretary General of the United Nations, Robert Muller, and invited him to speak at a 1985 conference on Peace and Education. I was struck by his "World Core Curriculum" insight, as it was congruent with holistic education and Montessori's cosmic vision. Muller had no background in education and his ideas flowed from his UN experience - knowing that holism was the first order for a new worldview.

That was my experience, but of course, any one of us who had any kind of role at this time, undoubtedly has a tree that's different... and the same.

**Paul** - Was there anything culturally happening at that time that played an important role

in this emerging holistic consciousness?

**Phil** - The Cold War was at its peak. I started taking part in exchanges with Soviet schools so the notion that the world was limited was beginning to melt -that even our enemies weren't our enemies. I think a paradigm shift that also touched me profoundly was when the Berlin Wall came down in 1989 in November. I was speaking at a conference and one of the other keynote presenters came to the podium and said, "I don't know how we can continue with business as normal when the Berlin wall is coming down as I speak." It still gives me goosebumps.

**Paul** - Right, and all these assumptions and iconic images – a literal wall. If that can fall, what other walls might fall?

**Phil** - Exactly. That's beautiful. Well said. It really sunk in to me how important that was. And another part of that was. Another part of my story is that I really was quite insulated until the mid to late 80's because I was so centered on the Montessori world.

**Paul** - It also strikes me that you're in the Reagan era, and "A Nation at Risk" is published in the early 80's. And in terms of the educational milieu, that to me is a real moment of the beginning of the turning of the standardization screws and a fear based need for increased competition throughout educational systems.

**Phil** - Yes, there's no doubt Reagan's election had a profound effect on me as well as on the world. My wife was running a school in Colorado in close proximity to the Solar Institute Research Center. Reagan was elected and the very next day, the Research Center was closed and the school lost a large number of students whose parents had been Center employees. Marsha moved to New Zealand in 1982. When we got together in the early 90's she was shifting back and forth between the US and New Zealand. Eventually I moved to Christchurch full time. So indirectly Reagan led me to leave this country.

**Paul** - So the Chicago Conference, out of which the Chicago statement emerged, and later, "Education 2000: A Holistic Perspective" now occupies a place of mythology within a part of the holistic educational community. I wonder if you could say more about it. Was there any sense that this was a key moment, or turning point?

**Phil** - Not at all to me. A year before the event I was inspired by the idea of creating, not just another conference, but a coming together of like minds for a common purpose. I talked to Ron (Miller) and he didn't think the timing was right. And then it was Ed Clark, I believe, who called Ron and during their conversation said it would be nice to talk to other holistic educators. Ron called me back and said, "You know that conference we were speaking about? I think the time is now." So we gathered the people. Ron and I created a steering committee of eight including Joy Turner, Ed Clark, Nina Meyerhof, Lynn Stoddard, and David Lehman. We wrote a letter inviting only eighty people, I don't know why.

**Paul** - I imagine when it got to the point of writing a document, then it gets really hard to

have consensus.

**Phil** - The Chicago Statement that we wrote, that was generic enough not to be too difficult for group acceptance. We decided to send it around the world. I thought it was brilliant of Robert Muller to suggest we do that. Because it got the movement going.

**Paul** - Yes, I imagine it helps immensely to have something concrete that people can see and get behind.

Describe the Chicago Conference and the writing of "*Education 2000*"

**Phil** - In the late 80's I gave a presentation at the Costa Rican conference on "seeking the true meaning of peace." Robert Muller introduced me to Thomas Berry and I subsequently visited with him at his home in Riverdale, New York. He was inspiring to be around and I was inspired to get more involved in the global level. I had some taste of this having presented in Europe and South American as well as Australia and New Zealand.

The Chicago Conference was a turning point. Eighty people seeking to articulate a "common vision for holistic education." It had its bumpy moments, falling into argument and debate rather than dialogue, but at the end of the day, it all served a bigger purpose. I laugh now when I recall that original steering committee first came together in North Georgia at the Center for New Beginnings.

The following year we met in Colorado and adopted the name, GATE, and set out to publish *Education 2000: A Holistic Perspective*, which has been translated into Italian, Spanish, Swedish, Japanese, French and Portuguese. A grant was provided and I was named executive director. During the next three years I had the opportunity to advocate for this vision in the USA, South America, Europe, Japan and Oceania, Inevitably someone would ask the question: Where can I study the ideas in *Education 2000* and learn how to teach those contexts.

Ultimately, my GATE experience gave birth to the TIES Integrative Learning Master of Education degree. I took those contexts and, based on my work with children and adults, developed coherent processes to allow those contexts to be "owned" by our students

**Paul** - What is the relevance of holistic education to inner city families living in poverty, for example? Is it an irrelevant and egotistical "first world" luxury to think about the full unfoldment of the human spirit etc etc? Why do the holistic ed conferences I attend have so few people of color? If we are relevant, why are we not taken more seriously by a broader swath of society?

**Phil** - Paradigm shifts in thinking and behavior do not occur at the center and move out. Edges are the places where creativity emerges. In nature I tend to think about the function of an estuary; and in biological evolution I think about what happened to our animal ancestors when geological conditions shifted and they found themselves in a new

environment where they had to “make a decision” to adapt or to become extinct. We have to build new models in teaching and learning that will make their way towards the center. Just as these models seem to be taking place, a new wave of creative innovation will be occurring at the edges.

I can point to the beginnings of Montessori where she worked with poverty children in the slums of Rome. It moved out from there to be “education for the wealthy” and seems to have remained there for a long time – that is, until the last 20 years or so when charter and public Montessori schools have broken through that wall.

As for relevance, I remember thinking as an engineer that the way to see revolutionary changes in education was to change the context so that people would be aware of the whole instead of consuming the details. Awareness of the whole, I thought, might correct our notions about war as well as ecological balance that dominated my landscape in the late 60s and early 70s. I was only partially right. There also needs to be a confluence between the overarching contexts and the process. Teachers teach who they are, so this has strong implication for teacher education.

**Paul - Can you elaborate?**

**Phil -** Yes, and this is went off sides with the Montessori culture. Because, the way they prepare teachers is primarily based on theory-philosophy, content and practice with exercises. However, it is not carried out in a way that upholds the values that you want the teacher to uphold with children. My belief is that both have to be congruent. There are a lot of organizations that operate like that – “Do as I say, not as I do.” This approach to teacher education we developed in the TIES M.Ed. programs over the last twenty years: exposing to an expanded worldview. The process we use opens people up to own what they’re learning. We’re not there to give answers. We’re there to ask the right questions. And questions are asked to find the essence of it and give the students the tools to find their own answers. Which is what you want to do when you’re teaching with children. So how many adults learn like that?

**Paul -** What about Montessori? It seems like in many places it has become a methodology that has connotations with academic excellence and early learning and high achievement. That seems to be some distance from Maria Montessori’s concept of Cosmic Education? What should we know about her original vision? Could it be reclaimed? What happened? And Waldorf as well.

**Phil –** That is a great question.

Well, part of the problem is how subtleties in behavior have been carried forward. Maria Montessori was not very tolerant with adult learners studying with her. They were inspired, of course, but they had little latitude to think creatively or ask questions. I know this directly from people who knew her. And I have received a collection of stunning letters from the Montessori family that have not been seen. In one of them Mario alludes to “one day I hope that the Montessori movement will be as big as

Swedenborg (Emmanuel) movement. He is not very well known these days, but was a great mystic, and a famous architect from the eighteenth century — quite esoteric and a challenge to read.

During the 1930's Montessori created a loose grouping in England called the Vahib where people would come together and talk about cosmic ideas. In the letters, as in some of her books, she really addresses the soul of the child... the evolution of the spirit. Some of the people, who learned at her foot, captured that essence. And these new trainers followed in her footsteps, strong on inspiration, but sharing the learning process in a very pedantic way.

You know it's much easier to hold onto the concrete. We go out and buy stuff. And see what we've got. Right? So I think that's what's happened to Montessori. They've got the materials, but many have lost the process. I wouldn't do without the materials, they allow for children to self teach. However, if you take a piece of material and ask the teacher in training "what was going on in Montessori's mind that evoked this?" Then the student begins to think for herself about how Montessori thought, instead of thinking "this is it" and I can't think out of the box. However, in spite of people not knowing how to do it the way she might have done it, it still "works" because it's not autocratic. There's still, for the most part, freedom of choice.

The school that I have been close to for twenty years and where I saw *it* could really happen is in Christchurch, New Zealand. It was founded by my wife and her colleague Pauline Matsis. It is a beautiful hybrid of Montessori and Krishnamurti.

**Paul** - Would you talk a little about nature? Why is it critical to embed education in nature?

**Phil** - (Pause) Well I think that if... (pause) it can make you cry if you think about it... (pause) If you think about our long trail from living in nature to...this. And you think about population growth and ecological destruction... When I walk through the nearby forest and I think, this place might not be here if humans continue on their current path. If all the forests disappear, so will humans and the rest of life. And maybe that's what's going to happen anyway. Then some time in the distant future the Earth will regenerate and humans of a different kind might come to the fore.

However, I still believe there's an innate goodness that can be achieved on this planet by people understanding their systemic web with all life and responding with right action and love.

When one is embedded in nature the interrelationships are right in front of you. We don't normally see that integration in every day life. This building is just a superimposed technology. For me it's the forest is essential because of my relationship with the trees. Others love Oceanside, mountains or even a garden.

In Vermont, when I moved there in '93 children were still outside. But nowadays,



younger and younger children view their world through a screen. Six hours a day on devices.

**Paul** - Stories, the power of myth. What is the role of stories in terms of it's place in holistic education?

**Phil** - (Pause) Montessori was a great storyteller. The issue within Montessori communities is that some say she created "x" number of stories (Great Lessons, as they are called.) and those are *the* only "great" stories they're going to tell. And the words that have been written for these stories are now concrete. She actually wrote one story – The Story of Creation, which she called the "God without hands." Her instructions to the teacher were clear: write your own.

That wasn't true in our school in New Zealand. We told stories to children all the time. To introduce something new, you have to tell a story. Because children love stories. Adults love stories too. I find that when I share my story with people, even i briefly, it gives them an opportunity to share their story and then community develops. And so our TIES students begin their studies by telling their personal story contextualized by events in their life that have contained an "invisible thread" connection to time and place. This is shared throughout the program and so students evolve a community... a learning community.

I recently spoke with a community organizer in Portland. She explained that it is nearly impossible to get people together to talk about the potential earthquake situation. Instead, they've begun to talk about resilient communities and how to create them, because in a disaster situation, that's what you need. So community is at the core. Why? Because understanding and being in community are the results of shared stories.

**Paul** - Yes, and stories have a three-dimensionality and a texture that allows people to tap into their emotional being. It evokes empathy, compassion and as you say, understanding.

**Phil** - Yes, that's it. That's beautiful.

**Paul** - You seem to use ancient indigenous traditions and in particular storytelling traditions as a model. In thinking about the 80's-90's articulation of holistic education, is there synergy with a much more ancient wisdom tradition? Are there points of tension or dissonance between holistic education and first people's pedagogies?

**Phil** - I include pieces from First People and those wisdom traditions because they touch my heart and they underscore what I am seeing myself, what I am seeking. A year ago I was invited to meet a friend who said, "I want you to come for tea and I will introduce you to my mentor," This woman is in her 80's. She lives in Toronto and I'm in Portland. I said, "who's your mentor?" and she said, "His name is White Eagle." So of course I traveled across the continent to meet White Eagle for tea. It was an intense experience. I was

touched by his seeing. His presence. And his acceptance, more than acceptance, his welcoming me to doing what I was doing – because I gave a talk there as well about spiritual roots. And he said some things to me that were personal. Really amazing. I was sitting with that, and I am walking daily through the forests at Tryon Creek Park, here in Portland, and one day I stop and talked to the people in the office and ask what literature they had about the park; they handed me a pamphlet by Ed Edmo who's quoted in my film, To Educate Eco-Sapiens, and who's a First Nations storyteller. And I thought, this is perfect to share, because this tradition of telling stories is critical and if you go back even before First Nations people, the only way education was passed on was through story — the oral tradition. And we've lost it. Now we have textbooks.

The native tradition just keeps crossing my path. When we formed GATE, there was a man that joined us who was part of the Navajo tradition. He asked us to make a circle for ceremony. He said some very wise things. He pointed to me, saying, “Phil is the Gatekeeper.”

I have not lived in community with native people. I knew some Maori in New Zealand and I felt kinship with their story and the way they see things. It's always been congruent with the way I see things. So that's why I include their stories. Because their story is our story... Is the Universe story.

**Paul - Do you want to say anything about TIES? What is your vision for this program? What have you created there?**

**Phil -** When I was traveling around for GATE and talking about these ten principles, again and again people would ask, “well, where can I get an education like that?” So that's what birthed our graduate programs in holistic and integrative learning. At first we called it holistic. Most people had assumptions about holistic both positive and negative. I was looking for a descriptive word that was not common place and for which there had not been a long build up of assumptions. I chose ‘integrative’ because it was not in every day use. Now it's all over the place. That is quite amazing.

We started this program and have evolved it in such a way that the students and faculty-facilitators all participate in the learning community. And there are some specific markers throughout the program that contextualize the process, knowing the systems that run our planet Earth and the systems that are embedded throughout the universe, are the two major contexts. Going back to my original idea in the 70's that if people knew the context... Now the challenge was to develop processes to offer that context in a way that supports individuals needs and their story.

For 20 years people have asked us to tell them about our program. And didn't have the words. I really didn't. “I'd say, you really have to talk to the students. Because they're the ones who are in it.” So it occurred to me to start capturing student's excerpts, either from their papers, or on-line dialogues or in their evaluation of the program. We did that from 2008 until 2012 and finally started to collate these. Then I actually began to kind of



quiver when I reflected on these observations because it was so profound. Their words were so much more poignant than what I could ever dream of. It's all going to be put into a "living journal." This journal explains what the program is in ways that I couldn't. How it has changed people's lives and how they're living into the ideas that were presented. Even the notion of questioning... people say "that is so important to me in going forward." And just a world view that gives them a feeling that they can make a change on this planet. What more can you want. Because these are all teachers. They work with children. What more could you want?

**Paul – Phil, thank you so much for spending this time with me and for your willingness to share your thoughts and reflections with the HEI and its readership. In closing, what do you feel is one key question that we should be asking as holistic educators?**

There is one question that is very important to who I am and what I do, and it is this: "What contexts and processes in education 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?"