



Drive to Montessori

An Interview with Daniel Pink

By Dane L. Peters

In the winter of 2008, several colleagues recommended that I read Daniel Pink's book *A Whole New Mind*. Then on February 28, 2008, at Radio City Music Hall, I heard Pink speak to 6,500 attendees at the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS) Annual Conference. The next day, I wrote this post on my blog:

Daniel Pink's talk was elegant—that is the word Sir Ken used Thursday, right, to describe something well written? Not having heard of Pink (why am I admitting that here?), I will most assuredly be buying his book, A Whole New Mind.

Not only did I buy the book and devour it, I was inspired to write the article "930" about him and his work for the September 2009 *AMS Newsletter*. (You can navigate to it on the AMS website www.amshq.org/publications.htm.)

Cut to March of 2009. Marie Conti, AMS senior director of school accreditation and member programs, asked Montessori educator Ann Epstein and me to help find keynote speakers for the AMS 2010 Annual Conference in Boston in March. We all agreed that it would be great to invite Daniel Pink, based on his success at the 2008 NAIS

Annual Conference, the rave reviews of *A Whole New Mind*, and our feeling that the book itself would resonate with the Montessori community. Marie Conti secured his place as the closing speaker for the conference. We were excited, yet unaware that he would subsequently publish his third book, *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*—which would become a blockbuster best seller in the months before the Boston conference.

On March 28, 2010, before Pink spoke to 2,000 Montessori conference attendees at the closing session of the annual conference, I had the opportunity to talk with him about his work, his new book, and his thoughts on Montessori education.

Peters: One of the things I want to do in this interview is to make a connection between Montessori and the work you did for *Drive*.

Pink: Ah, you don't have to break a sweat to do that.

Peters: Often, when I read non-fiction books like yours, I write a capital "M" in the margin when passages sync with Montessori teachings. For instance, here is a quote from *Drive* (pg. 73) that got a capital "M": "Human beings have an innate inner drive to be

autonomous, self-determined, and connected to one another. And when that drive is liberated, people achieve more and richer lives."

Pink: Well, I think that that is a perfect link. . . . Believe me, I am not a Montessori scholar at all, but I know that at the heart of [the method] is self-direction and letting kids follow their own curiosity, not dictating things, not bribing them or threatening them, but allowing self-direction as the pathway to understanding and excellence. Seems like that gets a giant "M" in the margin.

Peters: Where did you make the link to Montessori? In other words, how did you get your Montessori information?

Pink: Actually, I heard from a number of Montessori educators in response to my earlier book, *A Whole New Mind*, that talks about right-brain abilities and left-brain abilities. You didn't have to do a lot of due diligence; the connection was so obvious. Maria Montessori figured this out a long time ago. I read some of this in her various works. She uses self-directed learning in this basket of ideas, and it is at the heart of an approach to motivation that the science shows is both more humane and more effective.

Peters: How did you make the leap from *A Whole New Mind* to *Drive*?

Pink: *It was a few things. Most of it was just listening to readers and hearing their questions. People asked me: If you're right about this move from logical, linear spreadsheet abilities to artistic, empathic right-brain abilities, how do we get people to do this? How do we create organizations that allow these abilities to flourish? How do we motivate people? I actually didn't really have a clue. I knew there was a body of information about human motivation, I started looking at it, and, there was a trove of research that most people weren't aware of, and, it said some things that challenged orthodoxies.*

If you start with the premise that human beings are passive and inert—basically anti-Montessori—and that they are not going to do anything unless you threaten them or dangle a carrot in front of them, that's going to take you down one path; and if that is your starting premise, it is going to limit what you can actually do. If you start on an alternate premise, basically the Montessori premise, that puts you on an entirely different path. Maria Montessori figured this out over 100 years ago.

Peters: I was fascinated by your connection to Dr. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. I had the opportunity to introduce him at an earlier AMS Annual Conference. How did you make that connection with him?

Pink: *I had actually read *Flow* years ago and recommended it in my first book, *Free Agent Nation*, and referred to it in *The Adventures of Johnny Bunko*, where Csikszentmihalyi appears as a bobblehead doll. I talk about *Flow* there. I always admired his work. That concept of flow—I think when we look back 75 years from now, we'll look back on it as being one of the most important concepts in the field of psychology and human development. . . . It is connected so well to mastery. I wanted to hear it from him rather than reading his book. His own personal story was quite remarkable and in sync with his ideas. He's an amazing guy.*

Peters: Much of your work is anchored in educational roots. When you mention Gardner, Dweck, Kohn, Deci, Amabile, and Seligman, were you hoping teachers and educators would pick up on the tenets of Motivation 3.0 and use it in their research and their classrooms?

Pink: *I was interested in what worked and where scholars and researchers were spot on and challenged some of the conventional wisdom, not because it was conventional but because it was wrong. I guess I recognized it had applications for schools, but I write mostly about business. I didn't specifically go after writing about schools.*

Peters: One of my favorite sections of *Drive* is when you write about the “encyclopedic showdown” between Microsoft and Wikipedia: how to build an encyclopedia without paying customers? America is steeped—or certainly was—in a carrot-and-stick, make-profit Motivation 2.0 approach. Is it realistic to think we can get organizations to adopt a “for-benefit/for-purpose” (organizations that are both

“economically self-sustaining and animated by public purpose”) approach and assume a more altruistic purpose in their work and mission? Talk a bit about another aspect or example where you saw the for-purpose idea.

Pink: *I don't have any epiphanies of any kind. I saw a lot of instances of people and institutions pushing against existing categories. We have either these for-profit or not-for-profit, implying that the categories were inadequate to house what they wanted to do, for what people wanted to do. That's really interesting. That's when things really start to change. And I saw so many instances of that from a business model like Tom's Shoes, which I write about, where you give shoes away every time you sell a pair of shoes. It's not a charity, it's not a business trying to reduce its profit. It is extraordinary that a business is out there that does not have profit maximization at its top goal. Seven state legislatures changed the law to accommodate this for-benefit/for-purpose notion. This is a sign that there is something pushing behind this. A good example of this is Open Source, where people around the world are getting together, who don't know each*



*Daniel Pink and Dane Peters discussing *Drive**

other, to collaborate on technically sophisticated stuff. They're doing it for free; they give away the product. If I presented this concept 20 years ago, people would have thought that I was insane.

One of the things I track in my books is this widespread search for meaning and significance, and it is one of the most meaningful things going on in the industrialized world.

Peters: What I want to do is bring this idea back to Montessori, where that third element in your Motivation 3.0 operating system is purpose. You define purpose as the yearning. In Montessori there is a peace curriculum. One of the reasons Maria Montessori was shunned from prewar United States in 1913 was her belief in peace. Talk a little bit about this purpose part, this giving back to society, and how it becomes one of the three nuggets of Motivation 3.0.

Pink: *One of the things I track in my books is this widespread search for meaning and significance, and it is one of the most meaningful things going on in the industrialized world. So many people have been liberated from survival—the need to feed themselves, clothe themselves—that in positive psychology there is a kind of topping out on material things—acquiring additional money, another large-screen television, a bigger car. They confer very little in additional units of satisfaction. One of the things that does confer a lasting rise in subjective well-being is close personal relations, doing something you love, and being connected to something larger than yourself. What is of interest to me is how people express that in their work. People want more in their work beyond profit.*

Peters: I know this purpose piece will resonate with the 2,000 people you are about to talk to at this conference.

Pink: *I think that teaching in general is a purpose-driven profession. It is not a profession to make a lot of money. So why do people do it? It is a sense of purpose, to leave a legacy, it matters, it represents an expression of who they are. You have a yearning to leave an imprint on the world. For some reason, we cordon it off from our work—this enterprise of our lives where we spend at least half of our waking hours working. If we knock down those barriers, people would be happier and do better work. As a left-brain guy, it is the right, moral thing to do; it is illogical to not do this.*

Peters: Over 100 years ago, Dr. Montessori used materials like the pink tower (Sorry for the pun!), graduated knobless cylinders, polynomial cubes, and map puzzles to help children understand concepts much like Deci, Harlow, and Dunker used puzzles in their research to “understand intrinsic rewards.” Have you come across other examples of how to provide intrinsic rewards in motivating people?

Pink: *That's interesting. Actually, I had not made the connection between Montessori puzzles and the use of the puzzles in those experiments. If you think about the nature of a puzzle of any kind, it has certain elements to it; there's self-direction, so I don't solve it the same way or the same pace that you do; you get feedback pretty quickly—the tower falls down or it stands up—essential in achieving any kind of mastery. Puzzles confer a flow experience in part because they are self-directing challenges. It is matched to the task. You are lost in the moment. Puzzles have those qualities: absorbing, engaging, motivating in their way.*

It's funny you should mention puzzles. PBS NewsHour did a piece on motivation and Open Source, and the correspondent asked an Open Source participant, “Why do you do Open Source for no money?” His response was, “Why do people do crossword puzzles?” Here it is Sunday morning, and chances are if we walk through the hotel lobby, there's going to be someone doing a crossword puzzle. Why are they doing that? It's not getting them

a mate. It's not satisfying a biological drive. They aren't making money off of it. Why are they doing it? They're doing it because it is interesting, they are doing it because it is absorbing, they are doing it because it is a flow experience. The more what we do in our work and in our schools resembles those kinds of qualities, the more people will learn, and the more you won't have to rely on these carrots and sticks to get people to move. Think about the crossword puzzle this weekend. No one is saying, “Fred, if you don't do that crossword puzzle, I am going to fine you,” or “Fred, if you do that crossword puzzle, I'm going to give you ten bucks.” And, obviously, we know from the research that if you were to do those things, it would undermine Fred's interest in doing the task.

Peters: Maybe that is part of the left brain in us that has to analyze something?

Pink: *It's both sides, but you can't solve any kind of complicated puzzle only using your left brain. Think about the pink tower. Your left brain would only look at it in increments, about how the pieces fit together. Your right brain looks at it holistically. You have to use both sides of your brain. With any kind of crossword puzzle you're always toggling between left and right brain. There are plays on words; there's humor; there's usually a theme. So it is not simply saying, “What is the French word for ‘house’?” and you write down ‘maison.’ That's very left brain. Figuring out the totality of things. Figuring out what the puns are. Figuring out what the jokes are. That's very right brain.*

After the interview, Pink and I made our way to the ballroom, where he would speak. In spite of the fact that we were pressed for time, he stopped to sign a book for a teacher who said that she would not be able to stay for the scheduled book signing. Knowing full well that he would be taking the chance that other fans would expect the same, he nonetheless signed with pleasure.

Later, his talk received a standing

ovation. The good feeling he left was palpable. Others, I know, felt the same way. Here are two of many comments expressed on the AMS Heads of Schools List Server over the 3 days following his presentation:

Wrapping up with Daniel Pink and Drive on Sunday was outstanding. Another must-read along with his other works. A great one for staff and middle school students and above, The Adventures of Johnny Bunko: The Last Career Guide You'll Ever Need, is a cleverly disguised guide to life in the form of a graphic novel. Yes, manga [Japanese comic format]. It's the only graphic novel I've read, so I don't know how true to

the genre it is, but it was enjoyable and a fast, easy read. I read it between sessions and got started on Drive. What I realized was that Montessori is what motivates us! What it does for our children and students, the community, the world. We have purpose!

Daniel Pink and Stephanie Pace Marshall were both inspirational. Doesn't it always amaze you that Maria had so many things right! I have included my notes—they are raw but hopefully will direct you to the books. I have read Pink's books and often give the manga comic Adventures of Johnny Bunko as a graduation gift.

For those of us who were able to attend, we were all left in the pink, knowing that an eloquent, mainstream author appreciated our Montessori approach to education and life.

DANE L. PETERS was appointed head of Brooklyn Heights Montessori School in 2002. He is a member of the AMS Board of Directors and a trustee of the New York State Association of Independent Schools (NYSAIS) Board. Visit his blog at www.blogger.daneseblog.com or contact him at dpeters@bhmsny.org.