

Excerpted from THE COMMON VISION: PARENTING AND EDUCATING FOR WHOLENESS BY DAVID MARSHAK Cc. 2015. All rights reserved.

A TALK WITH MURSHIDA VERA CORDA

I sit with Murshida¹ Vera Justin Corda in her living room and listen as she speaks of her life and her work. She grew up first in the foothills of the Sierra Nevadas in California, later in the San Francisco area. In her childhood she once corresponded with Hazrat Inayat Khan and also heard him speak. When her family traveled through Italy, she met Maria Montessori.

Mrs. Corda first worked with children in the Canon Kip Nursery when she was 10 years old. She was only 16 when she graduated from college. She was initiated into the Sufi Order by her longtime friend and teacher, Murshid¹ Sam Lewis, and has pursued her spiritual discipline and her study of Sufism for nearly fifty years. She also studied with Dr. Arnold Gesell and incorporated his work and that of other developmental psychologists into what has become her extension of Inayat Khan's vision of human becoming.

Murshida Vera worked first as an artist and designer of books and clothes, later as a teacher of exceptional children. In the late 1960s she founded and directed the San Francisco Seed Center, the first organized school of the Sufi movement in the United States. A few years later she did the same for the Marin Seed Center, which operated until 1982. She was described to me by members of the Sufi community in Boston as the foremost educator in the Sufi movement in this country, probably in the world.

Mrs. Corda lives in a small town in the Salinas Valley in central California. She is in her early seventies now, about 5 feet 3 inches tall, a woman clear of voice and mind. When she speaks, her face, already more youthful looking than her chronological age, seems even younger. Her animation lightens her, her vibrancy expressed most clearly in the openness of her eyes and smile. As I sit across the living room from her, I can feel her

energy and the strength of her feeling. And I am warmed and supported by them, although I have met her for the first time only half an hour ago.

"I was born in 1913," she tells me. "When I was twenty-two I met Murshid Sam Lewis at the San Francisco Sufi Order headquarters on Sutter Street, where I was invited by the then secretary of the Order, Hazel Armstrong." Sam Lewis, a student of Inayat Khan, was one of the most prominent American Sufi teachers for four decades. While he was well known in the Sufi community for many years, he emerged into a wider recognition only toward the end of his life in the late 1960s when he became a major figure in the San Francisco counter-culture. "I had met Hazel on the Federal Arts Projects, where I was an illustrator. Her office was across the hall from mine, and we became immediate and close friends, though she was many years older than I.

"When I came into the Sufi Order that day, I had no idea that I was going to be initiated. But she said, 'Sam is in.' He was then a colleague within the Order. She said, 'Sam is in the next room.' She opened the door from the office, and he was standing at the altar with his back to me. As he turned around and met my eyes, it was an immediate recognition, and we, he embraced me. Hazel said, 'Sam, this is Vera. Vera, this is Sam.' He turned me around to the altar and initiated me. Didn't ask me if I wanted to be a Sufi or anything. Just initiated me, that was it. From that day, for thirty years following, ah, we were the closest of companions. When I married, my first husband was also a very close disciple of Murshid Sam's.

"Murshid Sam's idea of education began with me, in Fairfax, California, the large Sufi grounds and house where the so-called rock still exists on Hillside Drive today—a very sacred spot, ah, that Niajin Senzaki and Hazrat Inayat Khan both said when they stood on it was the most magnetic spot they had stood upon in America. So that is where, on every weekend, the Sufis came and brought their children with them. Some program had to be organized for those children so that the parents could do their Sufi work. And Murshid Sam and I did the work with the children involved in that.

"I had had great illness in my childhood and had not really completed those developmental levels. So at twenty two I was with kids who were of all ages from three through twelve. And I relived those levels, in hiking and horseback riding and exploring

nature, and just walking and talking with Murshid Sam, and singing *The Pirates of Penzance*, which he loved—Relived again those developmental levels which I was totally lacking because of the health problem in that part of my life. So this is where I first came in touch with how the Sufi message was put to work in everyday living with children. And at that time, I didn't evaluate it for what it was.

"When Murshid Sam passed away, I was living in the Salinas Valley. I had lived a celibate life for sixteen years after the death of my husband. My children were then out and on their own in totally different areas of California. At about eleven o'clock at night, I finished my (Sufi) readings and was sitting in bed reading. And I decided my eyes were tired, so I turned off the lights. And, as I turned off the light, a sound of power came, as the sound is on the wires sometimes, the telephone wires. Or when a flock of birds is claiming a territory—the power sound—it comes out of them as a group, and it just—I immediately thought, is that a power line that's doing that? Or a flock of birds? And that was the first thought in my mind as I sat up in bed. It was still, the room was dark. And then at the foot of my bed, Murshid Sam appeared in the form of Shiva, all arms and legs dancing. He came in molecules of light through the wall, facing my bed, and manifested very clearly. And then he stopped dancing and looked right into my eyes with the same intense look that he gave me in real life. And he said to me, 'Guide my children, guard my children, protect my children.' And he repeated that three times, and then the pattern broke up again into little lights that disappeared through the wall.

"I just sat there and turned on the light. And I was just absolutely stunned, having never had such an experience in my life. I got out of bed, got my telephone book, and called Mentor Garden, Murshid Sam's home in San Francisco. I had the name of Walid Ali, whom I did not know personally, as being one of the heads of the Sufi society that Murshid Sam had formed. I called him, and I said, 'Please excuse me for calling you at this late hour, but I have had an experience I cannot explain.' And he said, 'Say no more. Murshid Sam passed away, fell down the stairs and passed away.'"

"He had come through to give me that message. I take that very seriously in my life now, because I'm not the kind of person that receives this sort of stuff every day. It was an extraordinary

event in my life, and I put it down, the dates and times and what was said. Then I went into seclusion. I went up to the Pinnacles and into the caves beyond the Pinnacles, where I stayed by myself. Took a leave of absence from my teaching in school. Went up there into seclusion to adjust to his passing and his guidance.

“After a time I came down to make contact with his children, the flower children of the Haight Ashbury in San Francisco whom he had taken off the streets into his home, had fed, had gotten off dope, and had given them the message that they were getting through drugs plus far more in depth. And so many personal realizations that did not come from taking drugs.

“So that is how my work began. These young women, all of them had babies that were very young, maybe fifteen, eighteen months of age, and some under that. And they were all burned out from childcare. They were really having it very hard financially and physically and certainly spiritually. They asked me, ‘What shall we do?’ And I said, ‘Well, you’ve got to get together and get some kind of a little nursery school going, which I’ll train you in so you can devote some time to that. But you’ll also have days that you will be free of child care in the house, when you can go out and dance or do art or just be in nature. Time to rejuvenate yourselves and be away from that terrible drag that it is in the first two years when you have no help, no parents or no one to relieve you of childcare.’

“So that’s how it began. We rented a store in the old Mission district (in San Francisco) that had katty-corner from it a small, a very small park. And there the first Seed Center began. Pir Vilayat’s (the youngest son of Inayat Khan who became a teacher and leader in the Sufi Order in the 1960s) oldest son, now called Michael Serafil, was one of the children in that. All of the children of the members of the Sufi society were in that little Seed Center. So we probably had sixteen to begin with, then maybe twenty-six.

“Then we had to grow. But there was no place to grow, no play yard for one thing. So I taught the children right there. ‘Walking on the line’ and the work we did with movement they just learned on the marks on the sidewalk. We took them out, held their hands, and taught them to walk the line, how to balance, and how to get the fulcrum of their body straight.

“So then we developed into the larger school and then developed again, so that the Seed Center in San Francisco grew three different times. In the second school that we had, people were

coming who wanted to know: how do you do the things you do? How do you put this to work? Can you teach it to us? And so the first training began there, and those people started other schools or worked within schools where they brought that teaching."

I ask Mrs. Corda about the Seed Center that she had started and directed in San Francisco, and she describes its structure for me. "We followed the teachings of Hazrat Inayat Khan about energy. We balanced activity with rest and relaxation. And that went on all day.

"When there was play, it was chiefly free play, except there were always two teachers on that playground or yard, wherever we were. One watched one direction, and one the other. The children had freedom within a controlled environment. That, of course, is the crux of the whole Sufi education system: to control the environment. Set up an environment that is controlled, and allow total freedom of the child within that environment.

"That's how it differs from Montessori schools. Montessori had learning tasks that were given to the child one after the other, in order. We do not do that, because our Seed Centers are made up of open learning centers. They were open space, like warehouse space or an auditorium that you started with and then built your centers around that. So there was an open circle where children would all come together, regardless of their developmental or age level. They'd all come to that circle of attunement in the morning. But beyond that, they went into their groups, into their own centers.

"During those thirteen years that I worked in the Seed Centers, there were children who had been kicked out of three schools, and not allowed in the public school system anymore. I didn't know you could do this by law, but they managed to get them out, they were too much trouble. Those children, we took in. And our method is to test before we begin with the child. There's nothing too original about our testing. Some of it you'd say is Gesell. Some of it was taken from methods that worked for me in the public school classroom, working with exceptional children. We tested the children to find out where they are. When we found out that a child by developmental placement could enter at a totally different level than his age would suggest, we then placed the child at that level.

"Every learning center was set up at three levels. The very beginning one was always tactile. And then developing into the sec-

ond level, and then finally into the third level, where there were papers and matching and more intellectual things that children could choose. But everything was set out at the child's level, so they could walk in and wait on themselves. They were taught, the only things they were taught were how to set up your work area and how to clean it up. And we expected every child to put down their newsprint, use their little foam containers and the cups when they needed water. All of that set-up was put at their level, so they could walk along, pick it up, and set it up. They were taught that, and they were also monitored to get them to clean it up. That was not hard, because the children were always monitors. As soon as possible, they took over the organization of their own areas of work, their own classrooms, set up and clean up."

Mrs. Corda pauses, and I ask her, "In your working with children, what is your sense of who they are as beings?"

"I refer to the different parts as bodies," she replies. "I don't think that's exactly Hazrat Inayat Khan's way of saying it. First there's the physical body that one must be aware of. If the child has a certain build or a handicap, it's obvious. It's visual, and you pick it up right away. You have a picture, an impress on your mind of the physical quality of that child. That doesn't take very much insight. Anybody can see that. In fact, it's sad that they do, because they peg the child on that physical body alone.

"Next is the mental body. There are children who are alert, tuned in, are looking at everything in their surroundings the first day they come in. And then there are children who are emotionally still very much connected to the psychic umbilical cord of the mother. And they cannot part from the mother. The first two weeks in the Center are traumatic for them. And mothers who hang around make it worse. You finally have to say, 'You must go. We can handle this alone better than in your presence, where the child is going to cling.' So there's an emotional body, too, along with the physical and mental.

"Our first lesson at the Seed Center is to hang up your own clothes at your own cubby. And you have a photograph at that cubby, so if you don't know your name, you know your picture. And that is your job, not Momma's. It's very hard to stop mothers from doing that. 'No, this is your child's cubby. You do not take it off and hang it up for him. He does it by himself.' Self-reliance, right from the beginning."

"At what age does this take place?" I ask.

“Well, when they’re coming to the Center, we say, ‘When they are potty-trained.’ In America this usually means around two and a half years old. But when we had our infancy center, we had children from six months up—When they were on their feet and running around, doors were always open. The child might be only 18 months, on his feet and interested in what’s going on in the pre-school. He could walk through and observe the centers where the children would be sitting four to a table, with one guide, when the table work began. He came in, he was always offered a chair. There was always an extra chair there. He sat down and observed. When he could be timed, the timer was set. There was a timer in every learning center. When the child was sitting for five minutes—and that was consistent, he’d come in for three days and sit for five minutes—then he was invited to participate. He was ready, not by any testing but by his own demonstration that he was ready to learn in a small group. If you just came in to see what was going on and walked out, that was fine, too. So long as he didn’t disturb learning materials, he could observe as much as he wanted to.

“We decided upon the four at a table because, physically the size of our tables in the first place and because we felt that we never wanted to make uneven numbers. Children pair up very soon, they make partners. And if you have five, there’s always the spoke in the wheel that doesn’t have anybody to meet with. We always tried to keep it to even numbers, two or four or six.

“From the time they started in the infancy center with their first projects—always with the hands, tactile—the child was encouraged as soon as he had basic forms in mind, as soon as he could make a ball out of his playdough or his clay. Roll it himself and make a whole bunch of them, and pat it down into a patty-cake. Then every day was a project. The projects were not something new each day, as it is in most nursery schools and kindergartens, but the child was given the opportunity of reinforcing until the concept became his own.

“I would say that geometry is probably the first thing we teach. Because we teach, first of all, making a ball and how to make all the basic forms. Out of those balls of clay—after those are all mastered—they learn to make the worm, or the column, and the sphere and the ovoid, or the egg. They’ll say it’s an egg, because that’s what they associate it with. When they’ve learned how to make the cones and have got within their concepts those

basic geometric forms, they can build anything. They can build animal, vegetable, man. And they've got freedom to create, and do create out of those basic forms.

"Now, let me get back to the bodies. How we educate physical bodies. Begin with the physical body, and place the child by what he is able to do. Now, we have physical, we have mental, and we have emotional bodies. There are children who can't take that many hours of other children a day. And we always had day care, so that the child who could not take that much organization or just body contact, physical body contact, would not be forced to make it for those long hours without falling to pieces.

"I feel that most aggression with young children in pre-school is because of body contact. The physical body is one thing, but for the emotional body—the electromagnetic field of some children's bodies is very strong. When they're placed too close to another child, there's aggression. They don't want that contact. It's energetic, and the child picks it up very easily. So we taught them to put their arms out so that the hands touched the breast, so that the elbows were straight out. If those elbows were touching, then they would move apart, so they were in their own space. Never another child involved in that space. . . . I don't know where you'd place that because it affects the emotional body very strongly. It's the electromagnetic field of the body which is disturbed by another field that enters it.

"Now, let me talk about the spiritual body. That is the training of the child in the goal, the ideal and the goal. And a recognition of the divinity within. The early introduction to concentration, contemplation, and meditation. At the Seed Centers, we had children of gypsy background and of Negro [sic] background who could go into—I guess you would call it—the beginning of samadhi in their first sittings. And I would have to bring them out of it, they would go so deep. But we don't find that much in Western cultures. A child can be taught to sit and contemplate on a flower, on a piece of colored paper. In our system we use the complementary colors. Hazrat Inayat Khan taught fruits and flowers as first contemplations, so we used that with children.

"But again, it is not a new project every day. We have charts in every Center that are just graphs and have a child's name on it, or a group's name on it. Whoever the guide or teacher or aide may be, all they're asked is to make a cross-line on that each day. If you have playdough or clay or cut paper or block building, there is a

mark made. We found that it took fourteen to twenty-one consistent reinforcements before the child would have the concept. And that concept lasted. Because we had our children through sixth grade, they didn't lose it once it had been done. Whereas you see in public education and through all the companies that put out literature today—I found that there were never more than three reinforcements of any concept. And it is true that we have brilliant children who get it in three repetitions, but the great mass of American children do not. It takes fourteen to twenty-one. We've never known anyone who didn't get it in twenty-one reinforcements. If it were consistent. Not worked on a strand where if you don't get it this year, you're going to get it next year or the year after. And then you have this mass of humanity—dropouts in the fifth grade. No self-image, no success."

"The higher mind of man and the depth of his heart are one," Murshida Vera explains. "They are connected, they are not separate. You might say that every child comes with that realization. Every child knows that his feelings definitely affect that which he sees and that which he thinks. But by the time we get through with them in the first two and a half years, we have veiled that totally.

"A certain amount of that is self-protection, because the environments we expose them to demand self-protection. So the more the child puts up this protection, the more separated heart and mind become, until finally—he can have a good mental body, and he can have a good heart, but the heart is well hidden. And the desire to protect himself has brought in aggression. Fears, the fears grow into aggression, because there is never an aggression which does not have as its basis a fear in the child. And that fear makes him aggressive. It all goes back to self-protection.

"It's the spiritual training that opens the heart of the child, that teaches the ideal. Every day we introduce the child to prophets. We follow the holidays of the great religions of the world. At the Marin Seed Center, we tried to bring in for a day, a whole day, an outstanding spiritual teacher in his field—a rabbi, a lama, and others—who would come in and give the children the flavor of devotion to God through that particular religion.

"I remember we had one particular lama come who spoke very few words in English. He set up his altar in our Allah Circle space, which was a large alcove facing a window, where all the

symbols of the great religions were painted upon that window. And he set up his own altar and shared his Tibetan Buddhist practices. Our little ones—we always had vases of flowers on tables throughout the Center. The children brought them and the parents, and I brought them. And the children went over and picked, each took a flower out of the vase without any tutoring whatsoever and marched up to the lama and gave him a flower. He said through the translator that he had never visited any Buddhist temples in the Western world where the children were as devotional and as recognizing of Buddhist tenets as ours. And our children were not taught Buddhist tenets. They were taught the unity of all religious ideals.

“We taught each religion in its time. When we had the High Holy Days of Judaism, the children were going through that period, every day they were having snacks and dances and songs and music, as well as the devotions. Ah, of course, we use Moses. The baby Moses, the child Moses were most inspiring to them. But any child who wanted to tell his story or his recognition of another prophet—we were always wide open to that. It’s amazing how many young children, whose parents said they had never learned it at home, had that feeling, had that connection with a prophet that the family had taught them nothing about it. In fact, most of the families were not teaching religion in the home at all. But the children came with that devotion. And they found their connections to a prophet or saint.

“So, we feel that this kind of experience develops the heart very strongly. To have recognition of a master, a prophet, a saint that is close to your heart, that you recognize and feel connected with, this puts great power behind the child’s concentrations and prayers.

“Understanding each child’s path was also very important for us. Not every child would be turned on by the Sukkoth (the Jewish celebration of the harvest), but many would. Setting up the Sukkah (a specially constructed hut in which the celebration of Sukkoth takes place), and putting the fruits and flowers in there, and sitting in the little house were very thrilling for pre-school children. They really loved it and would find a time to sit in it. As at Christmas time when the same little framework was converted into a manger. Many of the children would go in there in their free time and sit there. They’d take the baby Jesus doll out of the manger and sit and hold it for awhile.

“To make devotion possible, available, and to cross the lines of different religions is not easy to do. But this brings the depth, this encourages the purity of the soul of the child, of the spiritual body. This teaches devotion that comes from the heart of a ritual instead of from a memorization that has to be done. Not that we didn’t memorize. For every month, the religion of that month had a simple sacred phrase that every child memorized. But it had to be, as in the Sufi viewpoint, a universal message, not one that indoctrinated the child into a ritual religious form.”

Mrs. Corda inhales deeply and looks away from me, out through the window to the shining of the late morning sun. “Let me tell you more about how the school was run. If a child was powerful, in physical build or in his mental body, we put him to work as a leader. If a child was reticent, was shy about doing anything in the group, we put him at the end of the line and made him a sergeant. In our schools, children line up children. Children lead children, not teachers or aides doing it for them. We work a lot with bells, so there are a lot of bells that are used for line-up time. The child who is the leader of the group rings the bell, and the sergeant sees that everybody is lined up. Until the sergeant gives the word, the sign to the leader, the line doesn’t move.

“You don’t come into the classroom yelling, jumping, screaming. You come into there in order, with your trip together. You know where you’re going when you come in to an organized program. In the play yard, you are free to scream, yell, do whatever you want to do. But not when you come into the building. Then you have it together.

“Now the entire school had to be kept together by the people who are in that environment. And the little people all have tasks which they choose and like. They go to them without being assigned. . . . The time for organizing the materials in the learning centers is not a last-minute thing in the Seed Center. The children are definitely responsible for them, and time is given for clean-up. It’s understood that it’s important to do housekeeping and leave our centers in order. The children are not assigned to it. They go to it by themselves. Nor is there one person made responsible. No, it’s the group’s responsibility. If you use the center, then at the end of the day you get it in order for the next morning. And very little has to be done about this by teachers and aides, when you start off with that training from day one and follow it through.”

“Let the child go as far as he wants to go. You can help him go along. And even show him the next step he’s aiming for. But beyond introducing him to the next step, the child unfolds at his own rate and his own desire. We don’t pressure the child to learn. We have an open environment.

“In the Seed Center, we had squares painted on the floor, the whole length of the building, starting always with the concept ‘zero,’ like a hopscotch. So the children can hop on it and, as they’re hopping, count. Their first idea of number was done in that manner. But they won’t come to that until they’re ready. Nobody is forcing them to. When they’re interested in numbers, they’ll start counting. When the child was ready to do that, he’d come to it.”

“What about Hazrat Inayat Khan’s belief that children should not go to school until they are at least 7 years old?” I ask Mrs. Corda.

“That might have been right for England in 1910,” she replies. “It might even have been right for America then. But in our time— It’s a different time. Children need to go to school because of how our society is. And we make the school feel like a family. The child comes to feel that it really is another family for him. You can’t just say that at 7 years, the child is ready. That’s like the rules we have in public education, and you know the problems in that, especially for the little boy who was born close to the cut-off date and who is competing with girls who were born much earlier in the year. The boy is a year behind anyhow, and there’s no way you’re going to push him without making him lose self-image. It’s undoing the very thing you’re trying to do.

“At the same time you cannot hold back a child who’s ready. The child who is ready will find a way, as I found a way to read out of a want-ad section when no books or teaching were given to me. Children find a way. They learn when they are ready to learn.”

“So the educator’s role is to help that finding of a way, to nurture it?”

“Recognize it,” she replies forcefully. “The educator’s way is to recognize the bodies that are developing within that child and to provide the open environment for the child’s exploration and discovery of his own world. Let him explore where he is. If we don’t get in his way, he’ll stay on it until he has fully explored it, and it is a part of his being. And then he’ll go on to the next step.”

