

A Description of an Asocial Lesson

Maria - by Richard Brooks

Maria sits in a chair with a tray surrounding her, perched high on a table. There are two long wooden blocks on the tray in front of her; one has ten thick, 3" wooden pegs in it and the other has ten holes. With half a smile on her face she moves the pegs into the empty block. Waldon puts a third block alongside the others and silently moves one of the pegs into it. Maria follows his lead and moves five more; then she stops and pats them all with her open palms; when she starts off again she's moving them all to the furthest block away from her, but only six of them get there and two others wind up in the middle block. She looks around to find Waldon but he's left the room so she goes back to her pegs and moves a few more. She shows no sign of worry about which block she was filling up last, she's just moving them about.

When he comes back he says quietly, almost under his breath, 'Give it to me.' She thinks about ways to lift the block. First she puts her hands in the holes and grips the sides, then she tries holding the two ends, even though she can only just reach both of them. Waldon waits quietly. Finally, going back to her fingers-in-the-holes grip she heaves it up and swings her whole trunk round to get it onto the side edge of her tray. But Waldon's hand is waiting, outstretched, a few inches beyond that, and it's not coming any nearer. 'Come on. Give it to me properly.' he says in an off-hand way, and she gives one last lunge and gets it to him. She looks very pleased with herself, but not in need of praise.

Without pausing, she picks up two pegs and holds them out to him, he tilts a jar towards her, just within her reach, and she stretches over to post them in. As she goes back for another peg, he moves round behind her, so she has to turn right around 180° to get the next two pegs in, and when she comes back with a third one he's disappeared again. He rattles the jar and she sees him, round the other side of her. As she turns all the way back again, she's laughing because he's teasing her. It's an asocial 'Hide and seek'. The next time she reaches behind her with a peg, her eyes don't follow immediately and she waves her hand about trying to find the jar by feel and from her memory of where it was before. Then her head turns, her eyes catch up with her hand and she zooms in on her target. The next time her movement is more integrated and she posts the peg straight in, but when she comes back again, with the last peg, to the same spot, he's moved off somewhere else. Her eyes scan the space where he was and then she tracks him again, following the sound of the shaking jar.

When he says, 'Give me the block' she is already lifting it up, but she's heading leftwards and he's moving round to the right, so she has to put it down and start again, swinging it around, using all her strength to get it to him. She shows no sign of resenting the casual way he makes her life so hard; in fact she seems to relish the effort. She's lifting the next block before he's put down the last, but again he wants it on the other side, so she's got to work twice as hard again.

Waldon puts a plastic tray in front of her and she rubs her hands around the edges, watching him with her black eyes wide to see what he's going to come up with next. He props eight plastic bowls around the sides of the tray, giving them a slight slant so Maria can peer over the rims. He seeds the bowls, dropping two identical objects into each one: metal jam jar tops, plastic shampoo bottle tops, wooden cotton reels, clothespegs, dice etc.- nothing that Maria would have a name for yet. Then he tips out a tub full of them onto the tray in front of her. She picks up a bottle top and looks around for somewhere to put it. He shakes a bowl and she drops it in. She feels around in another bowl and starts to take things out; he takes her hand gently back to the pile. She invents a different game, putting a die on a jam jar top and tossing it up and down a little. He points to the bowl for dice and drops one in. She finds another die and follows suit, but then she goes back to her tossing game. He indicates the bowl for jam jar tops and she puts hers in and then picks up a green, plastic, mushroom shaped shampoo

bottle top. She looks at some of the bowls to see if she can find a home for it but, failing, she starts idly turning it around in her hand. Waldon does some separating himself, moving a few objects from the pile into the bowls. Maria's eyes flit between watching him and examining her green mushroom.

She's uncertain but not anxious. She's not aware of any demand on her that she can't understand; she's just making observations. She's noticing fragments of patterns and sequences, similarities and differences, but nothing is standing out clearly enough for her to become as decisively active as she was with the pegs. Waldon has made various pointing, rattling, guiding moves to draw her attention to the patterns he wants her to see without making her feel there is any pressure on her. His moves look very casual, as if he was hardly paying attention to her; like a parent preparing a meal on the kitchen table beside a child playing. In fact he's concentrating intently on every change in the quality of her uncertainty and his interventions are timed and judged to chime in with her observations.

She is very vulnerable at this moment. She has separated a few items and shown a sign of recognising the pattern but she herself is not aware of this at all. She doesn't feel that some of the things she's done are 'right' and some are 'wrong'. She may be feeling as if she can see an organising principle 'through a glass darkly', but if her attention is now focussed on the changing state of her understanding she is liable to become anxious. Any external reward for her 'successes' - a smile, a 'good girl', or a 'well done' - would inevitably tend to generate some anxiety even if it gave her an initial feeling of reassurance and pleasure because she'd pleased an adult. Since she could not, herself, understand what made the move good, and since she might not even know which of her moves had pleased the adult, she would have to try and judge the next move blindly. She could use her own judgement as she was doing before she earned the praise, but she would now be faced with a new, and completely different problem: not 'What pattern can I see in these objects and Waldon's movements?' but 'What is it that I have to do to be praised?' and 'How does my teacher feel when I guess wrong?' The atmosphere from which the first question arises is one that tells her that everything she does is right; she is not made aware that there's anything she doesn't understand. The social dimension, on the other hand, gives rise to a question she cannot possibly answer until she has a competent understanding of separating. It is bound to focus her attention on the adult, not the movements she's making, because that's where she's going to have to look to get information about how to please adults. The greatest drawback is that it is likely to create a need, in the child, to resolve uncertainty as soon as possible and this will damage her ability to learn. The capacity to tolerate and even enjoy a little uncertainty while exploring different possibilities is a gift that children are born with; some people preserve it throughout their lives and they are often brave and divergent thinkers. Most of us, however, learn to feel anxiety when we sense we're on the outer edges of our understanding. When we become aware of yawning gaps we beat a hasty retreat into habitual or received ways of thinking or rely on the comfort that someone else must have the answer.

The normal process of spontaneous learning takes a child from doing, to noticing, and finally to understanding, and new concepts do not become coherent in the child's awareness until after she's practised the activities that give rise to them. Maria needs to separate objects before she can notice that she or anyone else is doing so. Only when she's been observing the process for some time will she begin to be able to understand it.

Two enormous hands come down very gently around her wrists and she finds her own hands separating the objects one by one into the bowls. Her eyes follow her fingers. Waldon stands behind her, towering over her: together they pick up a wooden clothespeg and take it slowly over seven bowls, as if rejecting them one by one, and then they drop it into the one that already has three clothespegs in it. No one can tell how much of this Maria takes in. She observes, and her observations fit into patterns, but they are those of her own experience, not necessarily the ones Waldon is seeing. Soon he gives her another go on her own. She puts a couple of objects in one bowl and takes another one out. She can't find a place for a cotton reel, turns it over and babbles to it until he taps a bowl of them and draws her attention that way. When he decides they've done enough separating for the time being and picks up three bowls, she quickly gets ready to pass him the others, and the tray, before he's even turned

round. Her enthusiasm suggests that some confidence is returning now that she can see the familiar 'Give me' game coming back.

Waldon spreads out twelve pairs of objects on the tray. He holds out a wooden brick to Maria, inviting her to find its twin and hand it to him, but instead she picks up two red lids and bangs them together. He takes them from her and spreads them widely on the tray so they're not directly in front of her, then she finds the match for his piece and gives it to him. He puts them back and shows her a white plastic clothespeg; she picks up something else and taps it on the tray, then notices the other clothespeg and gives it to him. He holds out a Duplo brick but she's become interested in the top of a Fairy Liquid bottle and she's twiddling it round and round. He scratches his brick with his thumb, and the sound prompts her to give him something, but it's a blue plastic cylinder not the white brick. He lets it fall from his open hand and touches the brick he wants; she gives it to him.

Different observers would describe this sequence in different ways. Undoubtedly some would say, 'She can do it, but she doesn't want to.' or, 'She can't be bothered / She's playing him up / She's seeing what she can get away with'. Some might say, 'She doesn't understand what he wants her to do.' Waldon's interpretation would always be based on the assumption that the child is expressing her current understanding. One of the reasons for this is to avoid the negative cycles that can result from putting any other construction on the evidence. If someone is not happening to see the pattern you want them to pick up, then the answer is to help them to see it. If they 'can't be bothered' you are liable to feel crossed if not punitive.

Waldon is making non verbal requests, but Maria only meets them occasionally. He interprets this as a lack of competence on her part, not a lack of compliance. To be able to play this pairing game a child must be able to check one object (in the adult's hand) and search around for its matching pair, pick it up and hand it over. It looks very simple, and most two and a half year olds can understand it quite easily but younger children have problems. One of the most typical is the one Maria is having. She has no difficulty picking things up but she cannot resist picking up the first object her eyes light upon. She can't actively reject the ones she doesn't want and so she can't adequately scan the evidence. Around nine months a child begins to be able to make choices between actions whereas, before that time she will tend to reach out and grab the first object that catches her interest - usually because the space it's in is most familiar to her. The ability to scan space and withhold reaching while searching for a particular object, develops gradually during the second year. One of the purposes of Waldon's Pairing game is to increase this ability so that Maria will later develop a well-founded capacity to match; that is, in Waldon's terms, to scan a wide range of evidence in the search for an object which is *least different* from a chosen model. In matching, the important moments of learning are not those when the student finds the match, but each time she rejects an object because it's 'too different' from the model she's keeping in mind. These rejecting moments are acts of discrimination, and the more carefully, actively and frequently they happen, the more she will learn, even if she never finds a match that she's happy with. *The learning is in the searching* - it is this ability to scan, discriminate and reject that Waldon is trying to help Maria develop.

She can't manage it yet, so he changes the balance of tolerance and constraint and gives her more help. He stands behind her, and while his left hand holds out the model object, his right takes her hand to find and pick up the match for it. Then he puts the pair to one side. Maria watches her hand doing it and the pattern begins to become clearer to her. When there are only three pairs left he lets go of her hand and leaves her to try alone. Two she finds, but the third is a small plastic man whose qualities interrupt the action. She holds him up and gazes at him. Waldon waits motionless with his hand outstretched while she babbles to the little man, walks him up and down the tray, drops him in her lap and searches for him. Waldon gives the relationship 40 seconds and then simply takes the man.

The next stage is to make the signals even clearer for her. He puts out 4 pairs of objects that are different in size, shape and colour and now, when he holds out a model, because there are fewer to reject, Maria can find the match. Each time she gives it to him he puts the pair back down with the others, so there are always 4 pairs and there's never a sense that they're moving towards the end of a task. They are simply playing a game for its own sake.

Whenever she hesitates or moves to pick up the 'wrong' one he holds her hand until her eyes settle on the 'right' one, then he lets go, certain her hand will follow her eye. Their pace together becomes quite brisk; not so fast that she can't follow, but quick enough so that her attention is sharply focussed on the evidence he wants her to see. He gradually increases the number of pairs and she scans backwards and forwards, all around the tray, again and again. 'There!, There!' she says as she plonks each object into his hand. He says nothing but there's no movement of hers that he misses and every one is a significant indicator of her understanding.

He tips seven cubes onto the tray and Maria piles three of them into a tower. He makes a chain of three, by taking one in each hand and clapping them against the sides of a third several times, repeating the movement and the sharp sound. She looks and immediately copies what she's noticed; she makes the same clapping movement with just two bricks and then piles a third on top. He adds another to his chain and then gestures as if he's going to add a fifth. She picks one up and he waits to see what she'll do, but she lets it drop. He shows her the pattern more clearly. Taking her hands he makes another cube chain, parallel to the first, but closer to her. They push one chain, like a train, right across the tray and then methodically and deliberately they do the same with the other. They take a cube from the end of one line and place it on top so the model has a vertical and a horizontal direction. Then they do the same to the other model. They push the chains back across the tray and take the top cubes off again, moving them back to the ends. At first Maria wriggles and squirms as if disagreeing with the balance of tolerance and constraint that her partner has decided on, but he shows no sign of noticing, and as they go on moving the cubes about she forgets what it was she wanted to do and regains her interest in the activity. He uses her hands alternately, and as her right moves a cube on the right hand model, her left echoes the action on the left-hand mirror image. They build vertically, then horizontally, then vertically again.

It is, again, impossible for me to say how much my observations have in common with Maria's. As her eyes follow her hands, what does she make of the pairing of the models or the contrasting effect of adding cubes to their lengths and heights? Will her half-passive experience of building leave lingering traces that will influence her play when she's alone on the sitting room floor at home? Will it have created potential variations to help her learning branch out and broaden rather than narrowing it down into particular limited skills?

He lets go of her hands and she piles freely on her own, making towers. He puts a box on the table and she puts the cubes in one by one. Gently, he holds each of her arms back, in turn, so that she has to switch her attention to the other side; he causes her to use the two sides of her body alternately.

One by one he puts out six square-ended pillars. Maria immediately piles two, and the top one topples forward and falls to the floor. Neither of them bothers to notice the loss. She bangs two pillars together. He stands two up side-by-side. She takes them down and starts to pile. He lays two pillars flat and puts another one across them and she piles two more on his stack. While he's picking up the fallen pillar, she's pulling the bottom one out of the pile; it disintegrates. With her hands, he puts two pillars upright and lays a third across as a bridge. Then they make a copy on the other side of the tray. Then a T-shape and two pillars laid flat with a crossbar and a copy of that. Each structure takes a few seconds and is built as its predecessor is dismantled. He moves her hands alternately, banging each block firmly into position. Left alone again she piles with parallels and crosspieces. Her hands work simultaneously and seem to be trying to create two models side by side like the ones they made together. There is an echo of their work in her movements, though not in her results.

He tips out a mixture of wooden cubes, triangles and cylinders onto the tray. She picks up the biggest cube and bangs it. He makes a three brick model with a triangle on top and she picks up a triangle and copies him, balancing it on a pillar. She takes another and puts it on a cube. A third she turns around in her hand.

While she's playing Waldon walks across the room in front of her and at first she doesn't notice. She picks up two pillars and sees he's now moved away from her. Her expression

changes, her eyes follow him, and, as he returns, she smiles and lifts the two pillars up close to her eyes; she brings the two ends together to touch and then separates them, brings them together and separates them. Three times she does it, hiding her eyes behind them, and then she pats them against her cheeks so that they frame a warm and slightly embarrassed grin. I felt it was a brief drama in which she'd moved the pillars apart and together again to recreate the way she'd felt when Waldon walked away and returned. She played out their parting and coming together again using the pillars for symbols.

His hands join hers as she pats her cheek and he turns her movement, unbroken, into a smooth placing of the pillars upright, side by side. On top they put a triangle and then they stand up two more bricks and crown them with triangles too. Finally, he helps her put them one by one in the bucket.

There's a narrow, glass herb jar on the tray beside her and she picks it up and shakes it. Inside, there's a wooden cylinder and she tries to get it out by turning the jar over and banging it. Then she half twists the lid backwards and forwards until it falls off, almost accidentally. She tries to fish the peg out with her fingers and has no success, but it does fall out when she tilts the jar, by mistake, while she's looking for the lid.

Meanwhile, Waldon has put out the wooden block with its ten holes, and some more jars. He takes her hands and helps her to put the peg back in the jar; then he holds her right hand ready while her left pours the peg slowly into her waiting palm. Together they put it into the block and pick up the lid. He turns her hands, and with them her wrists and forearms, so that the lid goes on with a smooth twist, which needs much more effort than the fiddling movement she was experimenting with on her own. This is not to show her a more effective way of putting lids on jars, but to help her practise a movement she may not otherwise master. This movement, pronating one hand while supinating the other, is important for her general understanding because there are many activities she may need it for (e.g. twisting and untwisting rope, wool, cloth etc., wringing water from fabric, undoing nuts and bolts and, with one hand, turning doorknobs, taps, keys, screwdrivers etc.). It also ensures that she uses both her arms together in a large, coordinated movement that involves muscle groups all the way up to her shoulders instead of using only the muscles of her fingers, and so it leads to her expending more effort and experiencing a radical change in her posture.

He is not, therefore, showing her the 'right' way to play this particular game; he is playing the game to give her some experience of movement patterns that will increase her chances of learning more, in the future, from her own daily experience. All Waldon's games are chosen with this kind of principle in mind. It's not a question of finding something to occupy or amuse Maria or of teaching her a useful skill, but of finding activities which will give rise to movement patterns and understanding that will maximise her learning potential. The means and the end are inextricably linked, because what she learns depends entirely on the route she takes to learn it.

One by one they take the jars from her left, transfer them to her right hand, twist off the lids, put them down, tip out the pegs, put them in the block, pick up the lids, screw them back on and place the jars over on her right. She struggles to do it herself, and he lets go of her hands for some of the actions and holds them for others. She is bubbling with the urge to be active, but he balances her freedom to move with the need to shape her movements. At times he only has to lift her elbow to cause her to twist her wrist around. Without his help she wouldn't yet be able to keep the activity going continuously, so he takes her hands to each next move, to keep the sequence and the rhythm flowing. He's like a man at the helm of a yacht, giving the tiller a touch to one side and then the other to make sure his craft doesn't lose momentum or direction. When there are ten empty jars on her right, and ten filled holes in front of her, they turn onto the opposite tack and reverse the process, putting the pegs back into the jars and moving them to the left. This time he holds her hands more firmly, so there is less variation and more clarity in the pattern.

Her next toy is a formboard with a circle, a right-angle triangle, a square and a rectangle. She tries the triangle first, but it won't fit, so reaches for the jars that are still on her tray, as if

thinking she might return to the last, familiar game now that she's come upon an obstacle she can't immediately see her way around. But Waldon is putting the jars away, and he takes the last few at that moment, so she goes back to the triangle and has another go. She plonks it onto the triangular space a couple of times and tries rubbing it about; then she lays her cheek close to the tray so she can look at the problem from the level of the board, to see if that helps, but when it doesn't she gives up and reaches out for the square. She takes it straight to the right hole slips it in easily and then goes back to try the triangle again. Still it won't fit, so she picks up the circle and then the rectangle and they give her no trouble. Once more she tries the triangle. She uses one hand and then the other, but she's not using them together and so she doesn't change the orientation of the piece. Waldon stands behind her and watches for a few seconds, then he takes her right hand to give the triangle the turn it needs, and her left hand taps it into place. It's unlikely that she's even noticed his help, and he could not have given it in a way that drew less attention to his role.

He replaces the formboard with a six animal inset puzzle and she starts away at it while he's noisily pouring all the objects they separated earlier back into the jar. She has trouble finding a home for a cow and, after several attempts, she begins to watch him instead. He keeps emptying the bowls and then, looking up, he meets her gaze; unsmiling, he points a stern finger at her nose and then at the puzzle; with a broad grin she returns to her cow, but soon looks back to him, smiling, and trying to catch his eye. When he finishes pouring, she's peering over the edge of her tray looking for something she's heard him drop. He tips the jar in front of her so she can see inside and says, 'Nosey Parker'. As he walks away behind her, she goes back to her puzzle. This time, undistracted, she has more success, but the distraction was deliberate. She needs, gradually, to develop a concentration that resists diversionary noise.. They move on to another activity before she's finished inserting her animals.

He stands an upright board with ten hooks on it, beyond her reach in front of the tray. On her right there's a post with ten plastic rings on it. He holds a thin stick, longer than her arm, in her right hand and takes her left across her body to the other side to pick up a ring. With her arm stretched right out, they thread the ring onto the stick and it slides down to her hand. Then they aim the stick and lift its end so that the ring slides down away from her onto a hook on the board. They go back for another ring. He carries out the movement using her hands, but her attention follows them into all the areas of space they visit. When all the rings are hanging on hooks he helps her take the first few off again. He hooks them with the stick and tilts it so they slide down again to her right hand. Then he takes her left hand and whisks the ring all the way up and off the stick in one sudden sweep that stretches her arm out sharply. He lets her take the next one off on her own and her arm sweeps out again, with vigour, but not with as much vigour as he leant her when they did it together. Then she drops the ring onto the tray; as it settles it spins and he claps his hand quickly over it, cutting short that potentially fascinating source of effortless entertainment - a spinning object. He puts it back on the stick and helps her take it off again. Then he draws back completely and she continues, managing the sequence on her own, and so completely engrossed that she doesn't even notice when he gives an enormous sneeze behind her.

Often Waldon would have repeated the whole activity with all the equipment switched round to the other side so that both sides of her body had the experience of the reaching and stretching movements that are such an essential part of this game and so that she had practice in focussing on other areas of space at the edge of her reach. This time, however, he puts it all away, and as he does so she points to another game and makes a sound to draw his attention to it. It may have been his next choice too but anyway he puts it out for her.

It's a wooden chute. He drops a ball into the top and she watches it roll down one way, change direction and continue on into a box at the bottom. She picks out the ball to make it go again, but she only reaches half way up. The ball rolls six inches and drops straight in the box. She's apparently happy with the result and gives the ball three more short runs in quick succession. Each time she seems about to lift it all the way to top of the run but stops short and feeds it in lower down. He steps forward and takes her hand, as it's rising, and helps her follow her movement through. From then on she puts it into the top. When he turns the chute

around she follows the ball's descent again, but this time her eyes are led to the right first and then back to the left. She plays with it alone for a few minutes until he surreptitiously steals the ball. She hunts around for it, all over her tray and behind the chute, until he silently takes that away too.

Her final game is a wooden tractor that he takes to pieces while she watches. It has large wooden nuts that have to be threaded on to hold the parts together. They do most of the work with his hands over hers, because he wants her to get the feeling of a stronger and clearer twist as she puts the nuts on - the same twist she practised when she took off the lids of the jars, but with a finer focus. When he lets go of her hands she can manage to get the wheels on alone, but he steps in to help her with each twist. When he's finished he steps back and says, 'Give it to me.' but she hasn't finished yet so she ignores him. 'Rank insubordination.' he mutters, and lets her play with it a little longer, before holding out his hand and repeating his order. Again she ignores him. She's pulled the steering wheel out and dropped it so she's busy hunting around for it. He takes his hand back and waits while she finds it and fiddles it into place. Then she turns and hands it up to him as if he'd only just asked for it. 'There' she says.

'O.K.' he says, announcing the end of the lesson, and as he bends down to unscrew the tray from her seat he brings his face close to hers and they eyeball each other. 'Been practising faces have you?' he says.

With her coat on she walks out, holding her mother's hand and saying, 'Bye!' with enthusiasm. He replies and she says it again and again until she's past the front door.