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The Foundation of the Human Personality – Our Hope for the Future

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The following talk was given at the China Montessori Centenary Conference, Hangzhou, Zhejiang, 30 October 2007.

Maria Montessori suggested that if we want a different adult to develop, then we must turn our attention to the child. Since *man* creates the world he lives in, if we want to make this world a better, safer, happier place, then our only hope lies in changing *man*—and that (ironically, perhaps) is a task which can only be accomplished by the child.

Mario Montessori used to say that one of the differences between animals and humans is that the animal is a body with just enough psyche to serve it, whereas humans have “a puny body—but a great spirit”:

*And that spirit had a life and needs of its own. For it was not only feelings of physical hunger or cold that drove Man on. The animals are at rest once their needs have been appeased. In Man hunger and cold were sources of activity for the mind as well as for the body. Once these had been appeased the body was satisfied, not so the mind. To the mind they gave suggestions, inspiration, problems. And these are for the mind what cold and hunger are for the body.*¹

Because they needed to satisfy both physical and spiritual cravings, humans evolved certain tendencies. To satisfy their hunger or solve the immediately pressing problem of cold, they must have explored their surroundings, oriented themselves to their environment, and ordered their perceptions into classes. Thus, lower or physiological needs stimulated more than a simple physiological response in human beings. Unlike the lower animals, humans could imagine and dream, reason and plan. Simple needs evoked not only exploration, orientation, ordering and imagining, but also tendencies to work, create, perfect, embellish, and so forth. These tendencies have allowed the human species to engage, over the ages, in an ever progressive and cumulative endeavor to create *meaning*.²

Each individual seems to retrace in his or her development, this very human search for meaning. We are driven by a *life force*—an “inherited code that unfolds (and causes the individual to develop) along a largely predetermined path or sequence.”³ The “I want” and “me do it” of the preschooler evolves into a universal kind of dissatisfaction which drives people to seek new experiences and pursue new opportunities. The way we make meaning changes over a life span: the baby looks for meaning in the descent of an object hurled from his hand; the preschooler creates meaning by putting animal picture-cards in neat little rows; the elementary-age child finds meaning in the orderliness and lawfulness of the universe and the adolescent finds a close-knit group of friends gives meaning

to life. Our meaning-making moves in a direction of increased complexity⁴ and depends upon an evolving relationship with our environment.

Montessori operationalised this human making-of-meaning and called it “work.”



From birth there is an adaptive process that drives this human effort. The “work” of the child culminates (by the age of three) in the emergence of an autonomous, enduring self—a self who can store as well as communicate memories, feelings, and perceptions. During the school-age years, the child’s activity changes and expresses itself in more intellectual industry, social and moral interest, self-sufficiency and competence. In early adolescence, a new peer-oriented, ideological and conversational self finds solace in a cooperative community of peers, and works on this community with passion.

If we take note of the individual’s developmental needs during the period of formation when creating educational environments for each plane of development, then the adult that emerges will be a man of a strong character who is self-disciplined, self-reliant, resilient, capable and creative because the relationship between individual and the environment has been developed and maintained through work—physical, cognitive, social and emotional work.

For optimal development, each successive stage must find its match in an educational environment that meets the needs of the growing individual. A *prepared environment* is less a school than an *ecosystem* supporting the evolution of the individual, an environment

to which the self could *attach*, sustained by optimal conditions of support, until it was ready to let go and be born into the next stage of development.

Because traditional schools have not understood the importance of the relationship between the child, the environment, and the adult, and because they have not understood the universal human tendency of children and adolescents to work (to make meaning), natural energies have taken strange and twisted forms.

According to psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, "Cultural stereotypes are learned early: Productive, academic activities are assimilated to the concept of work and leisure activities to the concept of play. There is also agreement as to what it means to work: It is important to one's future but something no one likes doing."⁵

Work is bad; something to be avoided at all cost. Play is good; something to be desired.

But just imagine: if we could prepare environments that met the needs of the growing individual, environments that supported the evolution of the human being throughout the planes of development, what would result? Dr. Maria Montessori, throughout her lifetime and in a prodigious volume of written work, outlined what she believed could be the consequence of such an education. Some of her ideas came from her actual observation of children in what she called *prepared environments*. Some of her ideas (particularly in regards to the adolescent) were clearly hypothetical.

But if you go back to Dr. Montessori's writings you will find she promises certain outcomes if the approach is followed fastidiously. By three years of age, if the environment and the adult are prepared, feelings of trust and increasing independence on the part of the child can be expected. The little baby will develop close emotional ties with at least one significant adult and a sense of security, adequacy, autonomy and confidence. In the first three years of life, the little child will acquire spoken language, create his or her memory and become self-aware. These are mental qualities he or she will use in the next phase.



If a Children's House environment and a trained adult are available in the next period, by six years of age the child will have had the opportunity to develop a conspicuous level of self-discipline, patience, and obedience (the willingness to follow directions). Children in a Casa dei Bambini will also develop perseverance. They will maintain their mental balance, learn to care and respect people and the environment, and make good choices. They will have a love of work and a love of their environment by six years of age. The Montessori child of six has increased knowledge and vocabulary, has developed logical thinking and sees him/herself as

having gained new skills and competencies. By six our imaginary "optimal" child is serene and calm, displaying emotional wellness. These are exactly the traits needed during the school-age years.



Twelve year-old children, who have been fortunate enough to spend six years in a Montessori class, can be expected to have formed a love of humanity. They will exhibit a thoughtful obedience and understand how their actions affect others. They may want to serve others and are not hindered "by ignorance of how to serve gracefully."⁶ The academic basics, as well as all factors of culture, will have been introduced in the form of "grand and lofty ideas."⁷ This approach has supported the eagerness of the child at this stage to learn; "The child's cognitive functions (have been) heightened and left open to later acquisitions."

The elementary child asks moral questions: "What am I? What is the task of man in this wonderful universe? Do we merely live for ourselves, or is there something more for us to do? Why do we struggle and fight? What is good and evil? Where will it all end?"⁸ During the period from 6–12, the philosophical nature of the human being comes to the forefront. The concept of justice is born and so the intimate connection of knowledge to justice. Emotionally, the child in a good Montessori elementary will become "Equipped in their whole being for the adventure of life."⁹ And, as Maria Montessori wrote in *Education for a New World*.

"As they are more balanced and more capable of orienting and valuing themselves, they are characteristically calm and serene, and for that reason also easily adapt themselves to other people."¹⁰

Aren't these exactly the traits they will need to successfully traverse the rocky phase of adolescence?





If Erdkinder environments are available, our adolescent will learn to live in domestic relations with others; learn to work through problems, learn what it means to make a contribution to the group and the necessity for cooperation. In a good Montessori adolescent environment, the young person would also have respect for others and a sense that work is noble. They would have grappled with social and moral problems—such as the right use of the natural environment and the ethics of science—and they would have developed individual initiative as well as taken pleasure in work, work which contributes to the welfare and wellbeing of others. They would have tried on various “occupations” and sought out knowledge.

Throughout the elementary and adolescent years, the web of life (interdependencies) provides a cognitive framework. The occupations of the teenager are structured around different interdependent parts of nature, and a whole interdisciplinary study emerges to inform those occupations...biology, chemistry, philosophy, history, physics, etc. The knowledge demanded for a project-based, experience-based kind of learning is not a subject to be covered, but rather knowledge to be applied for the greater good of the operating Erdkinder through the work of a common enterprise. Thus, the occupation’s roots in meaningful work extend to the related contextual study and provide adolescents with the motivation to become an “expert” in their occupational area. This infuses academic work with purpose and meaning.¹¹ (Kahn, D., Adolescent Outcomes)¹²

Around 18, or so, these youngsters would emerge with a sense of mission, a sense of their cosmic responsibility. They would



understand the connection between personal vocation and “the vocation of man”¹³. They would exhibit self-confidence, inner harmony, and happiness, along with a love of study and achievement in preparation for their future work in society. Such young people would be resilient; they would feel they can control change, internally and externally, and “believe in the human capacity to solve problems and in the spiritual source of life to overcome adversity.”¹⁴ This would truly be a New Man!



Now these are only some of the hopeful possibilities that await the human race, according to Dr. Montessori’s writings, if we make certain changes, major changes really, in the way we understand education. Taken together, these promises offer what today might be described as a positive psychology, a wellness model for growth and development. More than that, however, they offer what Montessori saw clearly as,

...the bright new hope for mankind. Not reconstruction, but help for the constructive work that the human soul is called to do, and to bring to fruition; a work of formation which brings out the immense potentialities with which children...are endowed.¹⁵

Montessori called for a revolutionary reformulation of society based on attention to and reverence for the child. Historically, this was lumped under a grand rubric: *The Montessori Movement*. It asked adults to ignore the immature traits usually associated with childhood, and focus on those “evolution-based qualities” which children embody “that distinguish and elevate human nature.”¹⁶ Those who considered themselves a part of the *The Montessori Movement* understood that concentration was “intimately connected to this biological heritage”¹⁷, and that spontaneous activity was necessary to unite the body and mind, necessary for the formation of a *new kind of human being*—a New Man, an individual who would be “on a new plane.”¹⁸ They asked us to create schools, which would support the developing child and adolescent’s engagement and interest. *The Montessori Movement* was understood by those involved as a radical social reform, and the Child was its focal point.

Over the last century, this *Montessori Movement* flowed like a river, often going underground for many years, quietly doing its work in training teachers, starting schools and preparing environments for babies, children and adolescents. With this Centenary Celebration here in Hangzhou and elsewhere around the world recognising 100 years of Montessori ...perhaps we can all again become conscious of the *Great Work* that we have been bequeathed, and allow the *Montessori Movement* to bubble up from its underground cave and flood the world with its life-giving message.

We are standing on the brink of a new day for Montessori. The possibilities are vast and so is the responsibility. At this very moment, at the moment of 100 years of Montessori in the world, we are in a position to see hundreds, perhaps thousands of schools for exponential numbers of children created in China. When and if this happens we must ask, "Are we doing Education as an Aid to Life?" In other words, "Are we doing Montessori? And if we aren't, how will we know?" Maria Montessori is no longer here to guide us.

That is the role of the AMI at this pivotal juncture point. The Association Montessori Internationale, which was founded by Dr Maria Montessori to maintain the integrity of her life's work and to ensure that it would be perpetuated after her death has been asked to come to China and help direct the future growth of the method here. We are honored and pleased to have been invited and are willing to assume the gigantic challenge to provide, not just schools called Montessori Schools, but schools that are Montessori schools. Because only if Montessori is realised in its fullest expression for each and every child will it be the force for peace and prosperity in the world that Montessori promised. So the challenges are great but so are the possibilities. It is an invitation I am afraid we cannot refuse.

We can choose to believe and have faith (as Montessori obviously had faith) in the human capacity to renew itself. Perhaps we can share her faith in life, in other people, and in ourselves...and we can have faith to allow the spontaneous to be spontaneous, in its own way and in its own time, understanding that "living things never move at random. They go towards goals, and their lives follow natural laws."¹⁹ When change and growth is looked at from this positive perspective, the problems and the difficulties that will face us can be seen simply as opportunities. They will give us "suggestions, inspirations, and problems to solve."

The Association Montessori Internationale looks forward to this future, and is happy to be here, working with you, for the children of China. Here and elsewhere through this *great work* we can "then become witnesses to the development of the human soul; the emergence of the New Man, Who will no longer be the victim of events but, thanks to his clarity of vision, will become able to direct and to mould the future of mankind."²⁰

"You must see these new children in this new light," Montessori said in her conclusion to the 1946 lectures. "Inside man is a hidden nature and a hidden energy....If the child has the freedom to development at this age, the result will be seen at the adult stage."²¹ So everywhere, around the world, there is hope.

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