

The Spiritual Preparation of the Adult

By Eduardo Cuevas

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The Montessori philosophy embraces the notion that man's life is a two-dimensional reality: a reality encompassing that which is material and a reality of that which is not material, but spiritual in nature.

- Material reality impels one to survive as an individual; spiritual reality directs one to thrive as a community.
- Material reality drives one to construct; spiritual reality leads one to create.
- Material reality allows one to exist; spiritual reality prepares one to live.
- Material reality requires one to think; spiritual reality demands that one dream.

The preparation of the Montessori educator is two-fold: both formative as well as informative; spiritual as well as intellectual.

The Montessori philosophy is therefore uniquely akin to this ancient and great land of China, it being both a great constructor and creator of realities.

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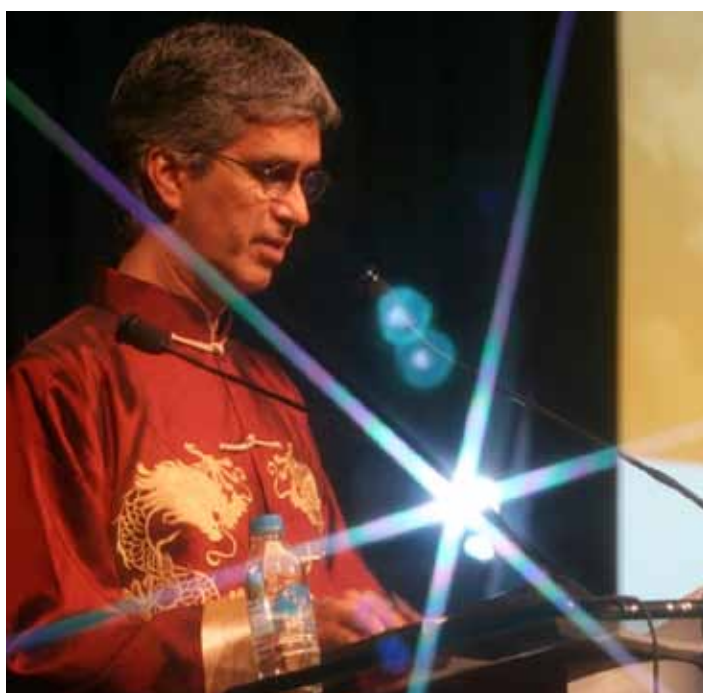
There is no task greater than guiding the new generations of budding individuals in the forging of their particular destinies. When adults look at a newborn, they are profoundly moved. Somehow they are able to see beyond the little helpless body lying in front of them. They look upon the child as a hope for a better tomorrow – a future of peaceful and harmonious living, of eradicating war, hunger and sickness – for all. The adult intuitively feels this as a new opportunity to "get it right." This can mean only one thing: that the adult recognises the fact that children signal a new beginning. There is the realisation that these new beings are born without hate for anyone; they have no disdain for any that look different than they do, nor do they harbour animosity for those that practise other customs or traditions. Wherever they come together – children of different races, creeds, social standing and even languages – they immediately proceed to interact, to play together, without the slightest sense of hesitancy due to these differences. This is a typical scene in Canada with its multicultural mix and is becoming ever more common throughout the world as we become a *global people*.

Children inherit our racial characteristics at birth, but do not inherit our social traits – our prejudices, likes and dislikes, the language we speak nor our thoughts. Because of this they are actually able to become something other than what has already been. In so doing, they are indeed able to renew humanity. Dr Montessori sees the regeneration of humanity as the destiny – indeed the mission – of the child. The hope we place on childhood of creating a better society is not misplaced, if only.

Because of this, the right preparation of the adult who is to aid children in their development is of paramount importance. This person must understand the nature of the child, and therefore the laws that nature has provided the child, so as to guide the formation of a complete and unique individual. We seem to be more accepting of the idea that each person is unique, but not have the idea that each person is designed to be perfect. Yet perfect only means finished, complete, excellent. An individual can be considered to develop perfectly when he fulfills the dictates of each stage of development: when all that nature proposes during infancy (from the age of 0-6) actually takes place, and does so optimally; likewise during childhood (from 6-12) and later on in adolescence (12-18) and maturity (18-24).

This completeness is not in comparison to some external measure but in relation to the innate possibilities of each individual. The state of perfection would thus be a constant process of completion where the individual attains the particular characteristics of each stage of development.

And this would constitute true education. The word education comes from the Latin word *educare*, which means to "bring forth and to nurture." Both imply that there is something innate in the child – present at birth – that must be identified and responded to. What is it that children bring at birth, as this cannot mean they are born "knowing what's best for them," as some sort of intellectual understanding? Dr Montessori discovered that there are laws of development that dictate the natural unfolding of the individual.





The task of education, on the one hand, is to identify these natural proclivities, and on the other hand to respond to them, so as not to hinder their expression. Then education could never be understood as the process of filling an empty mind with information, as a *tabula rasa* or a blank chart. Rather its mandate is to provide the individual with the ideal environment for its psychic formation – much as the mother's womb offers the perfect surroundings for its physical formation before birth.

For this reason, the one who is to educate must comprehend the intrinsic nature of the child at the different stages of development. The educator must also have the ability to perceive and follow the often subtle manifestations of nature above the loud and overwhelming dictates of society at large. This person must be able to respond to the whole child, and not only its physical and intellectual dimensions. Right education must include and address the psychic phenomenon, oftentimes referred to by Montessori as the needs of the spirit, and of the soul of the individual. Without the inclusion of the psychic dimension, the educational process is fragmented, and futile in its attempt to create the new humanity we spoke of at the beginning of this lecture.

You see, the lack of prejudice on behalf of the very young child, and its willingness to interact spontaneously with others – no matter who they are – is not something they learn from the adult. Actually, it is a natural empathy they express in spite of us. The fact that the young child can shift from a fight back to play – usually within minutes – is an ability that we, as adults, no longer possess; (usually keeping score in our little “black book” – where we record all our hurts and the perpetrators).

The child's spontaneous forgiveness, which is no act of forgiveness at all, but a spiritual manifestation of the highest order, far surpasses the adult's experience of acceptance, trust, and love. We must ask ourselves how we lost this innate ability, and why is it that the children of today will most likely lose it as well – as they become adults. It is unacceptable that the attitude of hate and vengeance expressed by the mature specimen of the human race is inferior to the superior attitude of its children. This is a very serious question, one that each of us must seek to answer.

When Dr Montessori speaks about the training of the educator, she identifies the physical, mental and spiritual preparation of the adult – taking into consideration the whole person. But she gives the greatest importance to the spiritual training. Contrary to what one may think, she proposes that this spiritual training be undertaken along well-defined scientific procedures, and not the path of religion, as one would expect. This is because the goals of religion go beyond that which is material, and education – as she sees it – must respond to the life of the individual within material reality.

Yet, she does not say that science and religion are incompatible (on the contrary), only that they differ in their approach to the mysteries of life. Primarily, they each serve a different dimension of existence. She is convinced that the scientific study of man's needs, as expressed physically and psychologically, will inevitably awaken us to the spiritual nature of man. By approaching and responding on a scientific basis, the adult will encounter the soul of the child, and this will (in turn) call forth his own soul.

‘The study of a teacher is like a study of the Soul. The teacher sees what is to be found there and also sees the path the teacher himself must follow to learn.’¹ (p. 73)

This spiritual preparation is not limited to the adult that is to perform the traditional role of teaching, but inevitably extends to the parents, as they are the key educators of their offspring. Yet, the *right* preparation of the adult who is to aid the child develop optimally is sorely lacking. In the case of teachers, their training is mostly reduced to a barrage of information, much of it so eclectic that the individuals have a hard time identifying a clear means of teaching; it is the classic case of “trying to be everything and ending up being nothing.” In the case of parents, the situation is (usually) worse as there is nothing being done – or at best too little – to help them understand the true needs of their children – those that go beyond their physical and mental wellbeing.

As a whole, we do not take into consideration that ‘Because No One Was Born A Parent’[®] authorities must establish – and promote – programmes that impart a clear orientation as to how children become wholesome adults. I propose that the study of becoming human – particularly during the most important stage of all: birth to six years of age – needs to be imparted to everyone *before becoming parents*, be it in community centres or in the later years of official schooling. This is the very least we can do so that the hope we speak of can become a reality; we spend billions and the greatest effort in studying things, yet we spend virtually nothing in the study of the all-important unfolding human personality.

We expect parents to bring up physically, mentally and psychically healthy children, with very little understanding of this multi-level and multi-dimensional process. The proliferation of mental illness experienced today in most societies is a clear indication of this fragmented approach to education. Therefore, the task is not only to care for the physical needs of the newborn, but most importantly its psychological needs as well.

For this reason, both groups – the professional educators and the primordial educators – must come to understand the laws of human development dictated by nature so as to identify the physical, mental and psychic needs of the unfolding life. Both groups would then be able to understand their particular role in this drama of becoming.

Teaching is both a science and an art. The intent of science is to know, to gather knowledge, and it does so by separating one thing from another, by discerning. Art, on the other hand, studies ways of fitting together, of how to best relate one thing to another. We can say that the art of teaching puts back together what the science of teaching separates in its endeavour to know and understand. Not to reconnect the parts we study separately inevitably leads to the fragmented view of the world many people end up with after traditional schooling, thus losing sight of the interconnectedness of life as a whole. Because of this, Montessori proposes that the preparation of the adult must be threefold: physical, intellectual and spiritual; in other words, formational, informational and transformational.

The physical preparation of the adult has to do with the training of all aspects of the body, particularly its movement. Montessori focuses on movement, especially with the person who is to work with the child from birth to the age of six, because the adult's fast movements tend to be the one factor that most negatively affects the young child's understanding. The child's inability of following our every move, let alone reproduce them, is due to the physiological fact that their nervous system is immature until the age of seven. Myelin, the fatty sheath covering the nervous system is responsible for the fast transmission of data, from the

brain and to it. Therefore, when the adult tries to show the child how to do something, following the adult pace, the child is unable to do so and a mess ensues. This is the formative aspect of the adult's preparation. The intellect is trained by means of relevant information, directly related to the study of the theory and methodology that best responds to the child's needs. It must not be limited to the acquisition of knowledge, but must lead to understanding, so that application is meaningful, intelligent. It is important to establish the difference between being intellectual and being intelligent; the former implies the accumulation of knowledge while the latter denotes the ability to apply knowledge wisely; it actually means to "choose between" (*intelligere*). In order to do this one must consider the whole picture and not just the partial. This encompasses the informative aspect of the preparation.

Because of time, I cannot be any more specific about these two aspects of the Montessori training of the adult, as I want to focus on the spiritual preparation. I am sure though, that you will see the connection and the overlapping that occurs between the three.

The spiritual training of the adult must, first and foremost, help the educator to "see," to go beyond casually looking. To do *educare* requires an awakening; the educator must be able to see that which he must help to 'bring forth', i.e. to bring out from within. If he cannot perceive these inner expressions of the soul he will be unable to guide the child in the process of becoming, no matter how well prepared he is physically and intellectually. The adult must become aware of all that is going on around him – in particular of the formative process that is taking place in the child as he creates a person. Thus seeing, the educator will develop a special sensitivity, an awareness that will bring about a unique bond between the two – different from the emotional ties between parents and their children – yet just as strong. This deep connection is rooted in the identification with the other, not as a projection of oneself on the other, but as a deep sense of empathy. This strong feeling of cohesion allows the adult to put himself in the child's place – of meeting the child where he is. In a very real sense, the educator becomes the educated, as this interaction becomes a mutual experience. Montessori says that there is communication from one soul to another, and this brings about the transformation of the adult.

'This feeling of love is a connection between Souls. The Soul of the child begins to blend with the Soul of the teacher and the child becomes obedient.' (p. 74).

We prepare the adult to "see" in this manner by training the adult in the skills of observation. This training is in itself both a science as well as an art. We are all aware of the process of scientific observation, where we look at things intently to gather impartial information. Then we must apply the "art of observation" where we take that body of data and proceed to explore its connections and this will become the source of our interpretations (our hypothesis) and our conclusions (our theories); the data alone is useless unless we can discover what its relevance is.

'The preparation of the teacher is twofold: to be sensitive to the mystery and to be sensitive to the wonder of life revealing itself. This is a sensitiveness which the habit of seeing miracles often makes us lose so we no longer feel the mystery.' (p. 35)
'Thus, it is necessary to cultivate this sensibility to wonder in order to attain to more perfect observation.' (p. 36).

Yet, Dr Montessori goes on to say that the ability to observe the child objectively is not enough to educate him, for the child is a subject and not an object – it would be like relating to the child impersonally, divorced from its humanity.

She goes on to explain that this great ability must be accompanied by a sensitivity of a moral order. Dr Montessori holds that the reason we do not do what is right in education is mainly a moral issue. She identifies pride as the greatest obstacle to the process of right education. The attitude of being infallible, and demanding that the child relate to the educator as a demigod, creates an unbridgeable gap between the two. This adult that cannot be questioned can



never identify with the student, neither the student with the adult. No matter how well versed the adult may be in a given subject, the impossibility of connecting with the child's needs eliminates any possibility of truly nurturing him.

'The point is that the teacher must not learn a new method but must acquire new attitudes.', 'The more the teacher has been able to lose or forget her old position the more able she will be to become a good teacher in this method.' (p. 64)

Montessori states that the new educator must be first a scientist, trained to approach the developing human life in the same impartial way he's trained to discover all other laws and principles of life, organic as well as inorganic. She says that this new educator must be prepared to do scientific pedagogy, studying each individual with the zeal and attention one studies other fascinating phenomena of life. The unfolding personality of the child must be of the greatest significance to us, and to approach it correctly is of the utmost importance. The educator must set aside pride, the feeling that he already knows, and embrace humility in its place. Humility is the mark of the true scientist. It is the attitude that one cannot assume one knows that allows one to discover and learn. If this is what allows the man of science to explore the unknown, to invent and create new horizons in the world of things, how much more important is it in the study of man – as the creator of a new humanity.

'That humility is the beginning of work, of accomplishing something, has always been the fundamental principle of the spiritual life. This humility, however, is not humiliation, but it is an elevation and the basic principle of producing anything.' (p. 38).

Things tend to change in a predictable and systematic manner, but the change that occurs in humans is unique to each individual, and establishes what we said in the beginning of this presentation: that each human is a unique person. Montessori refers to this uniqueness, this individual way of becoming, as the Secret of Childhood. As much as humans grow and even develop physically and intellectually along similar lines and patterns, there are nonetheless innumerable ways that this occurs – and these small differences make a big difference. The educator that approaches human life as the observant scientist will be able to discover those particularities of each child. Because of his artfulness he will be able to respond to each one's abilities, talents, learning style and personal rhythm. This in turn will allow



each individual to accomplish that which he is best suited for; to contribute to society that singular gift that will bring about collective joy and a peaceful co-existence, as society is but the expression of the totality of its individuals. By doing *educare*, and guiding that which is within each child to its fullest expression, we can realise the perfected society we've always dreamed of.

'Another thing which she must learn is to be quiet, because she must not give lessons and, therefore, must not give discourses. Another thing which the teacher must learn is to contain, to hold back the impulse to intervene, to counsel or to advise. Teaching is a work of inhibition; a work of the will which is difficult to follow. The greatest height of the ability of the teacher will be attained when she has reached that point where the children can work entirely alone, without her help in any way.' (p. 64).

'Montessori says that this science of the psyche, contrary to what occurs with the science of all other subjects, brings about a transformation in the adult like no other. As one observes the depths of what is occurring in the child one cannot help but be in awe of this miracle. It is inevitable not to identify the marvellous creative process of the child's becoming as one's own process of becoming – establishing the profound empathy uniquely akin to the educator-educand relationship Dr Montessori witnessed 100 years ago. The soul of the adult meets the soul of the child and this brings about a compassionate awareness that rids itself of pride, and the evils wrought from it – like anger, and the tyranny of imposition, and the humiliation we put our children through – in the guise of educating them.'

'We might say that in our method we see life developing and, at the same time, the love for this developing life itself develops. ... In teaching the student, (the) teacher really sees himself brought back in the phenomena which he is observing, in the life he is studying. Teachers really develop a personal interest seeing human life is at its source, at its beginning.' (p. 72).

'A wonderful feeling and another love is born in the teacher, and there enters within the teacher and the scientist an Apostolic spirit. This Apostolic spirit sees not only the spirit of study about the child but the child object becomes a teacher full of lessons to teach us as his teachers.' (pp. 72-73).

True education cannot occur without this balanced combination of distance and nearness: keeping the necessary space between the observer and the observed, while at the same time becoming intimately one. Thus, the discovery of the child will transform the adult as he encounters the essence of life itself: as life shapes, moulds and creates a new being. This realisation will allow us to give the children the liberty they require to express their individual needs, and therefore be guided by these particularities as expressed in their spontaneous behaviour. The principle underlying scientific exploration is to allow the object of our investigation complete freedom to act on its own accord, as this is the only way it can be fully understood. To limit this behaviour would alter its expression and thus give us a false impression, which leads to a mistaken conclusion. Indeed, we would not be describing the observed but a distortion provoked by our untimely intervention.

'To recognise and realise that this thing grows of itself naturally and that this other thing is made by us is a sign of the great art of the intelligence. This distinction itself is fundamental and forms a grade of order in the mind of the teacher, namely, the possibility of recognising natural phenomena and the teacher's duty toward such natural phenomena. ... This is the attitude and formation of mind which the teacher, father, mother and all humans should have.' (p. 37).

In the case of the child, and Dr Montessori's indication to step back so as to get a better view of nature's direction, does not mean that we allow for destructive behaviour. The child that harms himself, others or the environment must be stopped, as it is not the pathology of the child we seek to understand but that which is normal. Our interest is in that behaviour which expresses natural laws of constructive development, so we may identify and respond to them. This is what Dr Montessori meant when she said we must Follow the Child.

It was not to follow the destructiveness of the child, who is only reacting to obstacles in his path of development, but to follow – and nurture – those manifestations that lead to the construction of the human psyche.

To follow the child (in this way) is to love the child. It allows us to respond to what is developmentally appropriate and it is only the child who can show us what it needs. No amount of theories or conjectures divorced from the actual life of the child can be developmentally

appropriate. It is the child that reveals to us his nature, and the natural laws that guide his becoming. Upon encountering these, and quietly being in the presence of the miraculous unfolding life of man, the adult's spirit is awakened, and thus itself "brought out from within" – to passionately encompass the whole being and the sacred task it has set out to participate in.

'When this has been learned, already a great step has been made in preparation.' (p. 66), 'When this same passion is born within the teacher, she will be in the same category with the modern experimental scientist. The teacher may have this scientific method in her hands for a long time. She might coldly try to apply it to the children in her class, without knowing precisely and surely whether she is really acting in the right way. But, if she comes to the point where she sees some phenomena in the child which interest her deeply and passionately, she then has the mathematical proof that she has entered on the right road.' (p. 70).

The spiritual training of the adult seeks to awaken in the individual those special sensitivities that are unique to its spiritual life; the goal is to nurture the soul – the psyche – of the adult, so as to make it receptive and responsive to the subtler expressions of human life, those that seem intangible, yet are undeniable: unconditional love, altruism, loyalty, trust, compassion, sacrifice, and many, many more.

'When the teacher reaches this point of maturity, all the rest will come of itself. When the teacher develops the method of the modern scientist, patience and constancy no longer exist in that form, but have been transformed into passion, a passion making her joyously observe the phenomenon before her eyes. Such teachers no longer need to learn to be silent and motionless.' (p. 70), 'Our own interest in watching the development of this phenomenon in the child makes it natural for us to stand silent. The birth of this passion is a central point or fulcrum upon which to build the personality

of the teacher. We might call this positive direction and it permeates the development of the teacher, the scientist and the child.' (p. 71), 'Then it is that we who have been observing and following this natural development of the child feel moved as we would feel moved by any great miracle of nature.' (p. 72).

The preparation of this trio – body, mind and soul – is essential to right education; education that considers the individual not as an empty vessel requiring to be filled up by the adult, but (one) that understands the true nature of education – educate. Our intent to fill the child with yesterday, with our failed attempts to resolve the endless questions regarding peaceful co-existence and joyful living, has only served to perpetuate the traditions and customs that have separated us for thousands of years. Imposing our prejudice and hate on our children is the greatest obstacle to our evolution as a species, which lags far behind our intellectual advancement and our physical prowess.

Every generation of children is destined to change humanity – their mission is to transform humanity to ever greater levels of awareness and sensitivity of what is good for everyone. That is why all cultures see in their children the "hope for tomorrow," the expectation being that they will be able to make all things better – especially in how we treat each other. But that can never come about if children incorporate our hates, our prejudice, and our petty pride. We must help them adapt to the inherent goodness of humanity and not to the present evils of society.

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Note

¹ All quotations in this lecture are from: Bucken-meyer, Robert, ed., *The California Lectures of Maria Montessori, 1915 collected Speeches and Writings* (Oxford: The Clio Montessori Series, 1997)

