

THE COMPANY OF THE ELECT

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In past decades there has been much snideness and vituperation about Montessori's elitism, its perceived imposition on the children of middle-class values. Some years ago the very title of this conference, "*Grace and Courtesy – a Human Responsibility*," would have been sloughed off as insufferably precious.

But times change, cycles turn, values discarded as bourgeois conventions are rediscovered, found to be essential and fundamental to the human condition and reinstated, like furniture once considered passé being brought down from the attic and reverently refurbished. The persistent rediscovery of ancient mores is a leitmotif in human evolution without which the music of the spirit would be an amorphous mumble.

There are, however, those among us who always tend to reach out for the good and the wholesome, for the beauty which they find in all of creation; who are always disposed to admire, to appreciate and to celebrate with their entire being that which the world has to offer. These are the children.

It takes great and consistent effort to destroy this tendency, but in the long run we manage to do so with remarkable efficiency, even though, in spite of us, many children retain their joyous vitality, perhaps with an early autumn tinge of melancholy.

A young princeling comes to mind who, with the greatest courtliness, showed visitors around the dank, dark and grotty basement which housed a well-known, very expensive, highly respected bilingual day-care centre in Toronto. "Please come this way. See, this is where we keep our books. And these are our blocks. If you will follow me, this is the art corner." The furniture was scuffed, the carpet filthy, the books tattered, the blocks covered in a patina left by many unwashed little hands, the art a conglomerate of snippets, dirty egg-cartons, dribbled glass paint pots ... an environment for the elect? Indeed, no. And yet the little boy presented it to the horrified guests with the graciousness of an accomplished host, far outshining that of the adults in charge who were unkempt, loud, rude and inhospitable to guests and children alike.

This is a sad little vignette depicting one out of thousands, probably hundreds of thousands of what Maria Montessori called "refugee camps" for young children. No doubt there are as many excellent day-cares, crèches, and day nurseries directed by cheerful, affectionate, intelligent people as there are horrors run by indifferent mercenaries with uneducated personnel. The fact is, that the latter are a crime against the child, therefore a crime against humanity and should not exist. And yet it is noteworthy how many professional educators, child-minders, teachers, are indifferent to children; indeed, they do not like children. The ultimate tragedy is that of parents who do not like their children, and they abound. Even more dangerous are those who like their own and no others.

When we look dispassionately at our past and think of all the people who educated us, who minded us as children, who taught us — of how many can we truthfully say they liked children? The ones who did like us, who enjoyed the mirth of existence with us, shine golden in our memories.

This makes one wonder why so many people who do not like children have them, why so many people who do not like children become teachers.

Until very recent times we were still blindly following nature's mandate to perpetuate the species. We are becoming aware that the species has multiplied to an alarming degree, abounding in

sufficient numbers to destroy its habitat. We have the knowledge and the power to take a hand in helping nature keep our perpetuation within reasonable bounds. We are acquiring thereby the interesting obligation to reconsider ourselves as potential parents, and to discover the true nature of the child so that we may best educate it.

Until very recent times there were few professions open to women, and teaching was one of them which was a somewhat meretricious but understandable reason for becoming a teacher. Now that there are professions galore, teaching can become a choice among many others; indeed, it can be taken up as a vocation which is as it should be. Again, this calls for a new awareness of what education entails, the immense responsibility it carries, the great demands it makes upon our wisdom, our endurance and the quality of our selfhood.

Parents and educators must now consciously assume the function of acolyte to nature and this requires a knowledge of the child which in earlier times was not a prerequisite either to become a parent or a teacher.

In **The Absorbent Mind** (Chapter XXVII – The Teacher’s Preparation) Maria Montessori says, “...Let us always remember, when we present ourselves before children, that they are ‘*of the company of the elect*’”. The reason we are enjoined to remember this is precisely that it requires us to question and confirm our worthiness as educators.

Maria Montessori once pronounced with great severity, “It is your duty to be beautiful.” For some odd reason beauty has seldom, if ever, been considered a necessary asset for people in charge of children. This is a dreary symptom of adults’ lack of awareness of and respect for their dignity. Not only their dignity, but also their aesthetic sense. Their spirit is alight with the joy of existence. Their inclination to find things beautiful is abundant and generous precisely because they are “*of the company of the elect*”, persons belonging to a specially privileged group, those chosen for the salvation of the species. So we wear scruffy sneakers and sweat suits.

We dress up for people we consider important, for occasions we consider momentous. What people are more important than our children, which occasions more momentous than the time we spend with them, helping them, encouraging their efforts to fulfil their pristine and powerful potential? We have learned to prepare an exquisitely clean, orderly, beautiful intelligent environment for them. Many of us still have to learn that the pivot of this environment is the exquisitely clean, orderly, beautiful, intelligent educator within it, obviously taking into consideration that the human being is an entity composed of body, mind and spirit. Physical, mental and spiritual cleanliness, order, beauty and intelligence are the disciplines required if we are to merit the privilege of calling ourselves educators. And, potentially, these disciplines are vivid within the child for us to observe, for us to relearn thereby becoming adequate to teach.

In **The Secret of Childhood** (Part II – Chapter I –The Task of the Teacher) Maria Montessori paints a scathing picture of the arrogant, proud and angry tyrant, possessed of all truth, who obviously neither loves, nor likes, nor respects children and is therefore iniquitous and unworthy of *the company of the elect*.

In **The Absorbent Mind** (Chapter XXVII – The Teacher’s Preparation) she gives wise and sensible advice to the opposite of the foregoing — the young, inexperienced teacher, hapless, helpless in front of the first group of children in her charge, whom she is prepared to love, like and respect, but does not know yet how to direct. She has, however, a good chance to achieve excellence if helped and become worthy of *the company of the elect*.

There are many unworthy types of educators Maria Montessori does not mention — among others, the intrusive pseudo-psychologist; the emotional parasite; the paraphonic iceberg. Unworthy,

because their motives in working with children are self-serving and one of the pre-requisites for any educator is to be able to set the self aside.

In **The Absorbent Mind** (Chapter XXVII – The Teacher’s Preparation) Maria Montessori writes:

“To serve the children is to feel one is serving the spirit of man, a spirit which has to free itself. The difference of level has truly been set not by the teacher but by the child. It is the teacher who feels she has been lifted to a height she never knew before. The child has made her grow till she is brought within his sphere.

What is the greatest sign of success for a teacher thus transformed? It is to be able to say, ‘The children are now working as if I did not exist.’

She will be able to say: “I have served the spirits of those children, and they have fulfilled their development and I kept them company in their experiences.”

The most appealing statement in the above quote is, “I kept them company in their experiences.” It brings to mind another individual who should be included in the list of the iniquitous — the chum teacher.

There is an elegance in companionship between young and old, between child and adult; there is implicit a mutual respect, a recognition of different experience, the comfort of authority for the child, the tenderness of responsibility for the adult. Chumminess implies a totally inelegant, poke-in-the-ribs, chortling type of relationship. We may be equals, but we are not peers, and it is ungrowthsome and disorderly to pretend we are for we then no longer deserve respect and the children are deprived.

Children are deprived in many ways, of many rights, of many privileges that are their due.

“The great task of education must be to secure and to preserve a normality which, of its own nature, gravitates toward the centre of perfection. Today, instead, all we do is to prepare artificially men who are abnormal and weak, predisposed to mental illness, constantly needing care not to slip outwards to the periphery where, once fallen, they become social outcasts. What is happening today is truly a crime of treason to mankind, and its repercussions on everyone could destroy us. The great mass of illiterates, which covers half the earth, does not really weigh upon society. What weighs upon it is the fact that, without knowing it, we are ignoring the creation of man, and trampling on the treasures which God himself has placed in every child. Yet here lies the source of those moral and intellectual values which could bring the whole world on to a higher plane. We cry out in the face of death, and long to save mankind from destruction, but it is not safety from death, but our own individual elevation, and our destiny itself as men, that we ought to have in mind. Not the fear of death but the knowledge of our lost paradise should be our tribulation.”

(**The Absorbent Mind** – Chapter XXIII – Cohesion in the Social Unit)

If we see the children as being of *the company of the elect*, we ourselves shall gain in dignity by giving them the freedom that is their right and they will attain the disciplines of their human condition in their time, place and culture.

If we see the children as being of *the company of the elect*, they will grow in the knowledge that they are worthy and no material poverty will ever darken the radiance of their spirit.

If we see the children as being of *the company of the elect*, they will together create a cohesive, peaceful community, promise, ever less fleeting, of a peaceful world where our species, young and troublesome as it is, can mature and become wise.

We shall not be there to see it but we can leave with the peaceful conviction that generation, after generation, after generation, after seven generations, after seven times seven generations, in aeternum, children will be born and these children will all be of *the company of the elect*. We are beginning to perceive this. Is it not cause for hope that knowledge and understanding of the child may become a given in our collective unconscious?

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