

CHIAROSCURO

Renilde Montessori

Paper from the 24th International Montessori Congress, Paris, France, 2-4 July 2001.

Reprinted here with permission of the Congress organisers.

All great books, all great stories allow for interpretation with the sublime tolerance of those who convey unassailable truth.

The King James Bible states on its title page that it contains

The Old and New Testaments translated out of the original tongues: and with the former translations diligently compared and revised, by His Majesty's special command.

A reputable document therefore that begins with the story of creation, told in Genesis, Chapter 1. To some artless readers it is an intriguingly simple tale that commences thus:

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.

And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep.

An image soul-chilling and alien. Our lovely rotund, colourful planet once without form, an empty lump, steeped in deepest gloom. But then

... the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.

And God said, Let there be light: and there was light.

And God saw the light, that it was good.

The emergence of light brings great relief, ratified by God's contentment.

and God divided the light from the darkness.

The fundamental order is established of contrast between opposites.

And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night.

And the evening and the morning were the first day.

Now we discern the familiar, comforting rhythm of night and day, of morning and evening, of dawn and dusk. With great expectation we await the second day, for we are being led we know not where, but we surmise the path will follow a logical sequence, as indeed it does.

And God said, Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters.

And God made the firmament, and divided the waters, which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament: and it was so.

And God called the firmament Heaven. And the evening and the morning were the second day.

There is Heaven, with its many meanings, between the waters above, and the waters below. The fascinating story continues.

And God said, Let the waters under the heaven be gathered together unto one place, and let the dry land appear: and it was so.

And God called the dry land Earth: and the gathering together of the waters called the Seas: and God saw that it was good.

There is Heaven and Earth, and on the earth there is land and water. The environment is prepared to receive life. So now...

... God said, Let the earth bring forth grass, the herb yielding seed, and the fruit tree yielding fruit after his kind, whose seed is in itself, upon the earth: and it was so.

And the earth brought forth grass, and herb yielding seed after his kind, and the tree yielding fruit, whose seed was in itself, after his kind and God saw that it was good.

And the evening and the morning were the third day.

Life has appeared. Of the four levels of being as discussed by Schumacher in A Guide for the Perplexed (Mineral - Plant - Animal - Man) two are now present. However, further furnishings are necessary before the milieu is ready to receive conscious living beings and, amazingly, these consist of a variety of lights for a variety of purposes.

And God said, Let there be lights in the firmament of the heaven to divide the day from the night; and let them be for signs, and for seasons, and for days, and years:

And let them be for lights in the firmament of the heaven to give light upon the earth: and it was so.

And God made two great lights; the greater light to rule the day, the lesser light to rule the night: he made the stars also.

And God set them in the firmament of the heaven to give light upon the earth,

And to rule over the day and over the night, and to divide the light from the darkness: and God saw that it was good.

With lights for the measurement of time, lights to light our way, lights inviting us to become enlightened as we behold them and wonder, the environment is prepared to receive conscious life.

Upon its arrival the great adventure is set in motion of coexistence between the living and non-living elements of our rare and beautiful planet, a coexistence for aeons evolving, in an intricate, leisurely dance, its steps at times measured and predictable, at times wildly capricious in their rhythm.

It is dreadful to contemplate that, very suddenly counting in cosmic time, this coexistence is becoming increasingly uneasy, increasingly dangerous to all life on earth and to the earth itself.

The leaps and bounds with which technology has advanced in recent times, the tyranny of prevalent economy, the mindless belligerence running rampant are, among others, causes of a universal spiritual malaise. Technology is allowed to replace experience, instead of being at the service of the educated human being; materialism has become the dominant ethos; ancient hatreds and fanaticism are transmuted to become mindless atrocity.

We allow politics to affect our lives favourably or adversely, the economy to tax our pockets and our patience; we experience the distress of changing mores, of the fouling of our air and our water,

of the depletion of the earth's resources. All this accompanied by an unceasing Greek chorus of information dutifully sung by the media, as is their mandate. A point is reached where senses and sensibility become dulled and one falls into the deadly trap of perennial déjà-vu.

A television ad triggers a frightening awareness. It shows city streets with traffic and people moving at prodigious speed, becoming an indistinguishable flickering mass in sharp black and white. We recognise a very accurate caricature of the way things are. Haste is a contagious contemporary disease that destroys the human spirit for it impairs peaceful discernment of life's matters. Haste is particularly damaging to children, who must be allowed a tranquil sense of endless time if they are to adapt wholesomely to their environment.

An urgency akin to panic besets us, a realisation that within our outrage we are doing very little to remedy the plight of our planet.

Having depicted the present state of affairs in a sketch worthy of Edward Munch, let us hie to the theme of this congress, Education as an Aid to Life for we unequivocally believe in education as the means to bring humankind to its senses.

When we speak of Education as an Aid to Life it is commonly assumed that, from the point of view of educators, it is merely the lives of those being educated that are under consideration—our children, our pupils, our students—the mandate being ostensibly to ensure that they, as individuals, will achieve an optimum quality of life.

However, this is a narrow view—poor, dark and dismal; a tunnel leading nowhere for a human being educated solely for his own good, oblivious of the context of his interdependencies, unaware of the web of life and his place within it, cannot be said to have received a sound education.

Education as an Aid to Life, if it is to have any meaning, must encompass the phenomena of life itself. From this perspective, it is the educators' task to allow the child's innate complicity with his environment to flourish. This is becoming more and more difficult for the child's spiritual environment is becoming increasingly impoverished.

It is imperative that the educator follow the model proposed in the story of creation, that is: to prepare environments where children will be able to develop in accordance with the inner directives that are part of their human condition. Implicit in the story of creation is that a plan existed in the mind of the creator, and systematic steps were taken to bring this plan to fruition.

Human beings, from their inception, have had the ability to follow this model. They have been very good at envisaging and systematically constructing adequate environments to suit their endeavours. Until relatively recently, environments specifically prepared for the education of the child were few and far between. The child was apprenticed to life in his immediate milieu, within the parameters established by his group.

In the past few centuries, environments for the education of children have become mandatory. Traditionally these institutions have been guided in their methods of education by prevalent social and political mores. Children were educated to fit into a particular society at a particular time. In other words, they were taught that which the adult considered they should know, rather than given the possibility to acquire immeasurable, multi-dimensional knowledge following a vital inner urge.

Man is a learning animal. In the child, the need to learn is a powerful, passionate drive, for that which the child learns is the prime matter for his self-construction.

Despite the prevalent mayhem and bedlam caused by the struggle to maintain cultural identity, in itself a highly laudable enterprise, the Global Village is a fact and a reality. It is also a reality that the future of the planet depends on today's children.

To be able to assume this responsibility, two things are necessary: an educational environment that will prepare them for life in our complex world, and the possibility to acquire first-hand, with body mind and spirit, intimate knowledge of the earth and all extraordinary phenomena within, upon and around it.

Mario M. Montessori Jr. writes:

The environment of modern man is highly differentiated and complex. A being confronted for the first time by the present world could not help but feel confused. Yet a child, once it has left the confinement of its mother's womb, must eventually come to terms with this world. It can do this only through experience. Adults must give it the freedom to gain this experience in its own way. At the same time, they must help it, when possible, to explore and assimilate its world and the principles prevailing in it. They must, therefore, construct a bridge between their world and that of the child. Montessori education provides this bridge through the prepared environment and it is here that the Montessori material plays fundamental role. The idea is not to reproduce the adult world in miniature, or to distort reality into a make-believe paradise in which children's wishes and fantasies are the only things considered. Rather, the prepared environment should bring the world at large, and thus the adult world, within reach of the child at whatever stage of development it is at any given moment. (Education for Human Development: Understanding Montessori – Chapter 2 – The Montessori Materials).

For nearly a century thousands such Montessori Prepared Environments on all continents have built bridges between the world of the adult and that of hundreds of thousands of children. Their history is well documented. They have withstood the test of time and increasingly demonstrate that their structure, if well understood and implemented, allows for optimum fulfilment of the children's physical, mental and spiritual potential. This allows them to become true citizens of the world, profoundly aware of their responsibilities towards the earth and all its furnishings, living and non-living.

Schools - prepared learning environments - are imperative in today's world, but they are a very small tip of a very large iceberg in the realm of learning the arts of life.

For one thing, we are a social species, and children are of their nature extraordinarily social beings, intensely interested in the people around them. From the beginning of life they must be taken about so that they may assimilate the doings of their community thereby becoming adequate to participate constructively.

Children are also vitally interested in the natural world and must, whenever possible, be given the opportunity to have living experience of it for if knowledge of the earth comes to them only through stories told, pictures seen, television endured, their physical, intellectual and spiritual life will be poor, their capacity for affective response wizened. Not feeling one with the earth, not being enchanted by its immeasurable bounty, will undermine if not dispel their desire to tend to it.

Having perused the beginning of Genesis - Chapter 1; summarily introduced a case for the education of our children, and submitted a brief precision the meaning of Education as an Aid to Life, what, you may well ask, has all this to do with the arcane title of this talk? Why Chiaroscuro?

The word harks back to the story of creation, where all was darkness and the first element created was light. It is an appealing word and evocative of the many other lights created on the fourth day. Light and dark - and between the two extremes the untold varieties of many lights. There is the subtle gradation as light and dark join and fade into one another; there is their interplay when they exist side by side to form a myriad intricate patterns. There is sunlight, moonlight, and starlight. The gentle, hopeful light of early dawn, the still and secret light of evening dusk. The word

chiaroscuro seems to gather all varieties of dark and light and weave them into an exquisite backdrop for the pageant performed by life as it evolves on earth.

Traditionally, light is equated with good and darkness with evil. And yet - the light of eternal bliss as presented to us in our guileless childhood, light without respite for those who have kept the rules, seems more horrible a torture than eternal darkness which strangely enough, in contrast, appears to offer a certain comfort.

In 1999, there was a partial solar eclipse. For a group of us, it was a revelation. We had heard the phenomenon described many times, we had seen solar eclipses on photograph and film. Still, we were not even remotely prepared for the unexpected facets of the experience - the drop in temperature; the hush of the birds that may well have elicited the small, unanticipated wave of atavistic panic as our sun became obscured; the clear division between darkness and light on each side of the sun. Perhaps most appealing was the delicate design, in dark brown and sepia, of leaves dancing sedately along the grass in obeisance to the movement of the moon.

We were grateful for this brief moment of festive communion with our sun and our moon and greatly pleased with the elegant display of light and shadow they presented. '

Echoes of the refrain in the story of creation - 'and God saw that it was good' - linger in our profound gratitude that the earth exists, that we belong to it, that we have been given the gift to perceive, to contemplate, to study and to find joy in it. The unequivocal conviction of its goodness flows eternal, an underground stream under the apparent havoc we are currently causing.

Somewhere, somehow we know that the besetting mess, to us so hugely disquieting, is a minuscule glitch in the leisurely progress of the earth's history. Yet we must pay heed to the disquiet for we also know that, infinitesimal, finite particles as we are in the web of life, our imperative is to contribute to the maintenance and betterment of our habitat and not to its fouling and destruction.

The prevailing contrast between light and dark, between luminous intelligence and lightless ignorance that forms the backdrop of today's stage is too harsh, too tautly stretched. It will require a miracle to mitigate its tightness, to make it pliant, to reconvert it to the exquisite chiaroscuro tapestry it once was.

The fact is, we believe in miracles for we know children. We know that they are born good, intelligent and poignantly accepting. We know they come into the world vigorously disposed to love their environment and we know they have the potential to assume responsibility for its maintenance. We believe unconditionally that if we learn to heed their inner directives and allow them to follow these unimpeded, the world will be on the mend.

© Renilde Montessori