

Nourishing the Spiritual Embryo: The Educational Vision of Maria Montessori

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**“We must take into consideration that from birth the child has a power in him. We must not just see the child, but God in him. We must respect the laws of creation in him.”
Maria Montessori, 1935 (1989a, p. 98)**

Maria Montessori pursued her educational work with a spiritual consciousness verging on mysticism. Although her ideas have been packaged and practiced for ninety years as a “method” replete with cleverly designed materials and recognizable classroom routines, Montessori’s educational vision is far more profound than this, and essentially aims for a complete transformation of virtually all modern assumptions about teaching, learning, childhood, and the very purpose of human existence on this Earth. This was recognized as early as 1912 by one of the first Americans to visit Montessori’s experiment in Rome, Dorothy Canfield Fisher, who reported that Montessori considered her “ideas, hopes and visions” to be “much more essential” than the techniques she had developed. Fisher continued

Contact with the new ideas is not doing for us what it ought, if it does not act as a powerful stimulant to the whole body of our thought about life. It should make us think, and think hard, not only about how to teach our children the alphabet more easily, but about such fundamental matters as what we actually mean by moral life; whether we really honestly wish the spiritually best for our children, or only the materially best; why we are really in the world at all. In many ways, this ‘Montessori System’ is a new religion which we are called upon to help bring into the world, and we cannot aid in so great an undertaking without considerable spiritual as well as intellectual travail (Fisher, 1912, p. viii).

Much more recently, Aline Wolf, a Montessori educator for nearly forty years, reaffirmed this position, arguing that it was time for her colleagues to make the spiritual vision at the heart of Montessori’s work far more visible and explicit (Wolf, 1996). This shall be the intent of my essay.

An Educational Physician

Montessori was born in Chiaravalle, Italy in 1870 and grew up in Rome. As she matured she became interested in mathematics and science, areas of study that attracted few women in her time or place. Overcoming prejudice and outright opposition, she became the first woman to enroll in medical school in Italy, was an uncommonly diligent student, and graduated with high honors in 1896. Immediately she embarked on a successful career as a physician, scholar, research scientist, and internationally respected advocate of women's rights. Her practice and research increasingly specialized in the problems of "mentally defective" children, and by 1900 she was involved in teacher training as well as direct pedagogical work with children. She undertook extensive studies of psychiatry, physical anthropology, and pedagogy, finding the pioneering work of Jean Itard and Edouard Seguin, earlier physicians who had worked with deaf-mute and "idiot" children, to be most relevant to her emerging understanding.

As I have pointed out elsewhere, this intellectual and professional background is virtually unique among educational theorists, providing Montessori with "an empirically disciplined approach to pedagogy and a therapeutic interest in the individual child" (Miller, 1997, p. 158). Although she did hold strong views about women's rights and social reform, her educational approach was not the result of philosophical speculation or a specific political agenda, as is the case for most educational theorists; she maintained throughout her long career that education must follow the universal laws of human development as these are revealed in the lives of actual children, rather than seek to achieve social aims by imposing adult ideals on young people. We should keep in mind that any particular way of understanding or applying "universal laws" is affected by one's historical and cultural conditioning, thus no educational method is absolutely, universally superior. But it remains significant that Montessori's educational theory began with an unusually open minded experimental approach, which she enjoined her followers to emulate.¹

Years later, Montessori's son Mario described her as a "positivist" and "disbeliever" during these formative years of her career, and her major biographer, Rita Kramer, called her a "freethinker" (i.e., essentially nonreligious, skeptical). Yet Kramer also observed a "peculiar tension in Montessori between scientist and mystic, between reason and intuition," that showed itself as early as her years in medical school, when chance encounters with children inspired a sense that she had "a destiny to fulfill" (Kramer, 1976, pp. 91, 45). Her work with children,

culminating in the founding of the first casa dei bambini (Children's Home) in 1907, seems to have touched a deep place in Montessori's soul. Kramer reports that during these years she began attending an annual two-week spiritual retreat at a convent, while Mario Montessori suggested that his mother's conversion was rather dramatic: thunderstruck by the transformations she observed in the children under her care, "she left her career, she left her brilliant position among the socialists and feminists, she left the university, she left even the family and followed Him [Christ]" (Mario Montessori, 1984, p. 51). For nearly half a century, until her death in 1952, Montessori was a tireless crusader for the spiritual renewal of humanity, which she believed could occur only by nourishing the divine creative power within the children of the world.

Outside the confines of academic discourse, she lectured around the world, held conferences, trained teachers, and wrote several books. Beyond propagating the "Montessori Method," this body of work represents a prophetic vision of human redemption. It rests on a foundation of medical/psychological/biological insight (Montessori's understanding of human development as well as her ecological conception of life were well ahead of her time), yet her work is laced with Biblical imagery and religious fervor. This respected physician/scientist would unflinchingly refer over and over again to God, Christ, Scripture and various saints.

Montessori had clearly become a devout Roman Catholic. By 1915 she was applying her educational insights to sectarian religious education and in 1929 published a book on *The Child in the Church*. Indeed, one extension of the Montessori movement, represented particularly by the work of Sofia Cavalletti and Gianna Gobbi, is an explicit Catholic approach to religious education in early childhood that nurtures the young child's personal relationship to God (Cavalletti, 1999; Lillig, 1999). Philosopher Robert G. Buckenmeyer asserts that Montessori's Catholic faith "is the basis for her educational philosophy, namely, that the child is created by God and merely loaned to parents and teachers whose job it is to respect the mysterious possibilities of each child. . . ." He argues that in contrast to the Calvinist Protestantism that has influenced American culture, the Latin faith underlying Montessori's vision emphasizes the essential goodness of creation and humanity (Buckenmeyer, 1997, pp. 232n, 203n). "It was Christ who showed us what the child really is," Montessori proclaimed—"the adult's guide to the Kingdom of Heaven" (Montessori, 1972a, p. 86).

Nevertheless, Montessori's faith was not merely sectarian—it was a transcendental, mystical spirituality, and as such it touched upon core religious teachings at the root of nearly all

world traditions. Buckenmeyer himself found “oriental” elements in her thinking, and some commentators suggest that Montessori’s seven-year stay in India during World War Two, as a guest of the Theosophical Society, influenced her worldview, particularly her notion of “cosmic” education which she expounded in the last years of her life. But I think Günter Schulz-Benesch (Montessori, 1989a, pp. 29-30) is correct in observing that Montessori’s spirituality was universalist throughout most of her career and resonated with, rather than became substantially altered by, the “oriental” teachings of Theosophy. For her, the practice of Catholicism was an opening to a direct experience of divine presence, as it was for Meister Eckhart, Hildegard of Bingen, or her fellow Italian, St. Francis of Assisi. It is significant that her teachings have been respected and even revered by people of many cultures and faiths, including Jews, Hindus, Muslims, and Buddhists. It was during my own Montessori training that I first encountered Sikhs, and I was struck by their deep interest in her educational vision. Members of the Baha’i faith, too, have found this vision compelling.

A Holistic Vision of the Universe

Kramer’s biography showed remarkably little interest in the spiritual dimension of Montessori’s life and work, and what she perceived as a “peculiar tension” between rationality and “intuition” was, in my view, neither peculiar nor tense. The blend of science and religion in Montessori’s worldview forms the basis for a truly holistic conception of the universe. Similarly to fellow Catholic theologian/scientists Teilhard de Chardin and Thomas Berry (among others), and in a way not unlike the “spiritual science” of Rudolf Steiner, Montessori looked carefully and deeply into the world of nature and found, not isolated material entities interacting mechanically, but a living and purposeful Cosmos. “All things are part of the universe, and are connected with each other to form one whole unity” (Montessori, 1973, p. 8). She was deeply impressed by the harmony she discerned in the natural world, the ecology of existence that gives every living thing a meaningful function in the larger system. Every species, indeed every individual organism, contributes to the good of the whole by performing its inherent “cosmic” function. This harmony has not emerged randomly, but expresses “a pre-established plan” that is “of divine origin”; she was convinced that “the purpose of life is to obey the occult command

which harmonizes all and creates an ever better world” (Montessori, 1989b). The Cosmos is engaged in a process of evolution toward ever greater harmony—toward the fulfillment of God’s mysterious purpose.

The guiding belief of Montessori’s educational philosophy, the fundamental point around which all her principles and techniques revolve, is her conviction that humanity has its own special function to fulfill in this divine evolution. The human species is “God’s prime agent in creation” and it is our responsibility to “learn to do more effectively our share of work in the cosmic plan” (Montessori, 1973, pp. 26, 33). Evolution is not yet complete; God’s purpose has not yet been achieved, and the mission of human life is to give expression to the formative forces within us that are yearning to complete the cosmic plan. We are called to work in partnership with the divine. This understanding of our existence places all our endeavors—our cultural, political, economic, and even our most personal strivings—in an entirely spiritual light: “The world was not created for us to enjoy,” Montessori proclaims, “but we are created in order to evolve the cosmos” (Montessori 1989b, p. 22). In an earlier essay (Miller, 2000), I argued that this striking statement is consistent with the teachings of great moral sages such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Abraham Heschel, and Krishnamurti, who all similarly asserted that we are on this Earth to contribute to the unfolding of divine justice, harmony and wisdom, not merely to amuse ourselves or satisfy our many material and sensual desires. In this light, education is not to be seen merely as preparation for a successful career or any sort of social or intellectual distinction; rather, education is the process of awakening the divine formative forces within every person’s soul that enable the individual to make his or her own unique contribution to the cosmic plan, to fulfill his or her own destiny.

Montessori wrote that humanity’s role in evolution is to construct a “supra-nature”—a social, cultural and technological extension of nature that calls forth ever greater dimensions of human creativity and understanding—a notion very similar to Teilhard de Chardin’s “noosphere.” This is humanity’s task because we, more than any other living species, “can receive the emanations of the Godhead” and transform divine plans into physical and cultural manifestations (Montessori, 1972a, p. 35). But she repeatedly observed that our material and technological progress had far outpaced our psychological, moral and spiritual development, and in the twentieth century it was imperative that we make a determined effort toward remedying this imbalance.

Modern societies, due to their pervasive materialism, have neglected the spiritual forces that animate the human being, and our institutions, particularly schooling, have become repressive and damaging, turning people into “slaves” of the machine rather than cultivating their spiritual sensitivity, she wrote. Modern people are ill prepared to deal with the great moral challenges of our age, and are unable to resist the demons of nationalism and war that threaten to engulf the world.

To address this imbalance, Montessori envisioned a curriculum for elementary school students that she called “cosmic education.” The purpose of this approach is to provide the young person with an expansive, inspiring vision of the grandeur of the universe and one’s personal destiny within it. This is an education that gives life meaning because all aspects of creation are shown to fit into a complex, interconnected whole that is far larger than our customary limited worldview. Aline D. Wolf comments that

The value of cosmic education, as I see it, is that it places the child’s life in a spiritual perspective. No one can be confronted with the cosmic miracle and not see that there is more to life than our everyday experiences. Fast foods, designer sneakers, video games and sports heroes all pale beside the wonder of the universe (Wolf, 1996, p. 97).

Cosmic education lifts the young person’s consciousness out of the mundane, materialistic concerns of modern society and instills a sense of awe, touching a receptive and searching force within the soul. This is exactly the sort of “spiritual reconstruction” that Montessori intended when she spoke at several international peace conferences in the 1930s, and asserted that only the spiritual renewal of humankind through education, not any superficial economic or political effort, could alter the violent course of human history: “The real danger threatening humanity is the emptiness in men’s souls; all the rest is merely a consequence of this emptiness” (Montessori, 1972a, pp. 44, 53). In recognition of her efforts, Montessori was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1949, 1950 and 1951.

Consistent with her holistic understanding, Montessori saw all of humanity as one nation, even one organism—an “organic unity.” She considered people as fundamentally being citizens of the Cosmos beyond their social or cultural conditioning. Given technological developments of the modern age, she argued, it was time to put partial identities and false distinctions aside, and work together globally to achieve our “collective mission” of furthering the evolution of consciousness. It is education’s task to encourage peaceful cooperation “and readiness to shed prejudices in the

interests of common work for the cosmic plan, which may also be called the Will of God, actively expressed in the whole of His creation” (Montessori, 1973, p. 74). Her views on peace, social justice and democracy flowed from this holistic religious conviction that human beings all share the task of building a divinely ordered world. Idealism born of economic analysis or ideological conviction alone would not be sufficient. A socialist early in her life, at one point later in her career she addressed a group of communists and bluntly informed them that their social revolution would fail unless people were uplifted “towards the laws that govern human nature, which are connected to the very laws of the universe” (Montessori, 1989a, p. 101). Democracy and justice follow from the unfolding of divine potentials, and social change is not authentic unless it springs from a genuine love of humanity, which is a spiritual, not simply an intellectual, commitment.

The Child as Spiritual Embryo

Montessori often compared the process of psychological and spiritual development to the physical unfolding of the human organism. Just as the material body first takes shape as a self-forming embryo, requiring during its formation the protection and nurturance of the womb that envelopes it, the human soul first appears in the newborn child in an embryonic form that requires nourishment from a psychic womb—the protective environment of loving, caring parents and a spiritually responsive education. Montessori’s distinctive notion of the child as a “spiritual embryo” emphasized her key principle that the growing human being is not simply a biological or psychological entity, but a spiritual energy seeking expression in the form of a human body within the physical and cultural world. She compared the mysterious emergence of spiritual life in the child to the Incarnation of God in Christ described in the New Testament, “when the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us” (Montessori, 1972b, p. 29). For Montessori, the Word is made flesh in every child born in the world; each human being has his or her path of incarnation to follow, his or her destiny. Montessori, like Emerson, referred to the “secret” within the soul of every child—the personal spiritual imperative that transcends whatever social prejudices, ideologies, and mundane educational curricula that adults seek to overlay onto the child’s personality.

Reflecting on the unusually lengthy period of physical dependence that human infants (compared to other species) experience, Montessori was convinced that early childhood is designed to be a time of intense psychic receptivity. The young child takes in the world through an "absorbent mind," literally incarnating (taking into its bodymind) the sensations, impressions, and feelings it receives from the surrounding environment. One of the guiding principles of Montessori pedagogy, the concept of "sensitive periods," expresses her observation that young children move through periods of development during which they are especially attuned to particular characteristics in the environment. When they are ready to acquire language they hungrily, effortlessly absorb it by hearing it spoken around them; when they are ready to develop fine motor skills they begin to act on their surroundings accordingly. It is the task of parents and educators to provide the stimulation and resources the developing child needs at these critical times. Keep in mind that for Montessori this is not simply a biological or pedagogical responsibility, but a profound spiritual task, because the child is being directed by its embryonic spiritual energies to reach out to the world to fashion a personality. Careless parenting or education, by stifling optimum development, frustrates the child's spiritual formation.

Montessori frequently commented that the child creates the adult—not, as our modern common sense has it, the other way around. The spiritual energy seeking expression through the child's encounters with the world is engaged in building a person in a way that no adult education or conscious effort can achieve. By adulthood an individual's psychological identity is deeply engrained, and learning no longer takes place through "incarnation" or absorption. Therefore it is crucial for parents and educators to allow the child's own inherent nature to emerge and act within the world. As Montessori put it in 1915,

We must believe that all beings develop by themselves, of themselves, and that we cannot do better than not to interrupt that development. We must confess to ourselves that the psychic life of man is full of mysteries.... The preparation for the teacher is twofold: to be sensitive to the mystery and to be sensitive to the wonder of life revealing itself (in Buckenmeyer, 1997, p. 35).

Montessori called the spiritual embryo humanity's "most precious treasure" because it was only this divine formative power that could transform the world: "The child promises the redemption of humanity, and we might say that this truth is represented by the mystical symbol of the Nativity"

(1972a, pp. 36, 104). By failing to appreciate the value of this treasure, and educating young people only to participate dutifully in a materialistic, mechanistic system of economic production, modern societies are diminishing the visionary creativity, the moral insight, and above all the loving compassion that divine energies promise to bring to bear on the problems of human life. Montessori was convinced that through the child, these energies could be released into the world as a powerful source of good. It is evident throughout her work that the heart of Montessori's educational mission was not to introduce special techniques or materials into pedagogical practice but to make a fervent plea to the modern world to become "sensitive to the wonder of life revealing itself" through the life of each child. That was the appeal she made for fifty years to audiences and readers throughout the world.

The Children's Home

If we perceive Montessori's message in this light, the *casa dei bambini* she established in Rome in 1907 cannot be viewed merely as a prototype for a child-centered preschool. The term is usually translated into English as "children's house," and even many Montessori schools are named with some variation of "Children's House" or "House of Children." But the learning environment Montessori sought to provide was not simply a house—a physical space with child-sized furniture and developmentally appropriate materials. The correct translation of *casa dei bambini*, as Dorothy Canfield Fisher insisted in 1912, is "children's home." Feminist philosopher Jane Roland Martin explicitly built on this understanding of Montessori's vision in her concept of the "schoolhome"—an educational setting that provides the love, caring and nurturance that young human beings vitally require for their healthy development (Martin, 1992). Martin observed that in the modern industrial age, as both men and women leave home to work, children are left without the strong "domestic context" that provides a nurturing womb for their psychological, emotional and moral unfolding. She argued that even though John Dewey, around the same time as Montessori, sought to address the problems industrialization posed to children's development, Montessori understood far better than Dewey the role of this "domestic," traditionally feminine, realm of nurturing. Montessori "had inserted family love into school," an endeavor Martin regarded as critically needed in our time (Martin, 1992, p. 14).

While this is not the place to discuss the details of classroom practice in Montessori schools, it is important to recognize that for Montessori and the movement she inspired, the design of a “home” for nurturing children’s spiritual development suggests specific pedagogical requirements. First, it is necessary to understand the meaning of freedom in Montessori education. She often advocated the “liberty” of students in the learning environment, and emphasized the principle, quoted above, that “all beings develop by themselves” and adults “cannot do better than not to interrupt that development.” However, she clearly did not mean to endorse the absolute trust in children’s actions expressed by educators such as A. S. Neill or, later, John Holt. As long as a child is engaging in constructive activity, the adult must stay out of the way because divine forces are at work, but we need to be vigilant for lapses in concentration when a child’s impulsive desires or negative reactions to earlier events start to dominate his or her activities. Montessori believed that the educator needs to be acutely sensitive to the meaning of children’s behavior, and should distinguish between random, impulsive, destructive activity, and genuinely purposeful pursuits guided by “eternal laws” working within the child’s soul. Montessori sought, above all, to cultivate inner discipline through purposeful activity. In her view, the child becomes “normalized”—capable of acting responsibly, independently—through concentration. The educator’s task is to assist the child in finding connections to the environment that call forth concentrated attention and effort.

It is the environment that educates, not the teacher directly; more precisely, it is the child’s inherent formative energies, finding material in the environment to act upon purposefully, that calls or brings forth (the genuine meaning of the word “educate”) the child’s true nature. The educational process starts with the individual, with self-formation, and then extends out into the social life of the classroom. Progressive educators have always had misgivings about the Montessori approach because this emphasis on personal independence reverses Dewey’s premise that all learning, and even the development of the individual personality, is grounded in social interaction. Montessori saw children growing from inside out, from a spiritual source, where Dewey saw the human being developed through dialogue and negotiation with the social environment. Montessori was not, however, advocating some sort of rugged individualism: She was convinced that a child allowed to develop “normally” would naturally forge a loving relationship with the larger world, starting in the classroom and radiating outward to all humanity.

Paths of Learning

This article by Ron Miller is available at www.pathsoflearning.net

Because Montessori emphasized the importance of the environment in learning, her theory has been criticized as being “empiricist” in a Lockean sense, meaning that she appeared to privilege sensory and intellectual content over imagination or the construction of meaning. The emphasis in her early childhood environment, in particular, is on “sensorial” materials, and she asserted that for the most part young children would gain more by being engaged in concrete activities (purposeful work) than in fantasy play. On this point, it is quite remarkable that even while Montessori’s spiritual conception of the world paralleled that of Rudolf Steiner (Coulter, 1991), her educational approach is vastly different from Waldorf pedagogy’s explicit and detailed cultivation of imagination, and it differs as well from “constructivist” educators’ emphasis on free play. In short, to create a proper home for the developing human soul, Montessori argued that educators must provide a “prepared environment” that would answer to specific patterns of development as she understood them. In assessing Montessori’s vision, I think it is useful to separate the principle that the growing child requires a spiritual home that enables the true self to develop from the prescription of what that environment must entail. I believe that the principle is universal, and that Montessori deserves enormous credit for formulating it. Yet, it seems likely that Montessori’s own understanding of learning and child development, despite her claim to scientific objectivity, was partially conditioned by her own historical, cultural and religious context, just as any theory of pedagogy is necessarily so conditioned. If we truly have faith in the dynamic, possibly divine creative energies seeking expression through us, then it seems to me that we must be willing to subject our assumptions, our methods and techniques to the test of ongoing experience. We will find, I believe, that various portions of the Montessori “method” will be more or less relevant to the needs of particular children in particular situations at particular times. I believe we can acknowledge this, even as we appreciate the genius of this brilliant woman’s soaring, liberating vision.

This essay has provided only a brief overview of Maria Montessori’s spiritual conception of education. Yet these reflections are enough to make us realize that current educational policies, with their singleminded emphasis on unforgiving standards, rigorous testing, and accountability to corporate and bureaucratic elites, are a sad perversion of education’s possibilities. We have before us the living child, the incarnation of cosmic energies, the potential source of social renewal and harmony among humanity, and we treat this priceless treasure as “intellectual capital” to feed

our voracious economic system. Montessori proclaimed an alternative to the deadening materialism of the twentieth century, but, except for her relatively small following of devotees, her vision has been ignored and bypassed in the march toward global technocracy. I suggest that it is time to rediscover her vision. It is time, as Fisher declared ninety years ago, to “think hard” about “whether we really honestly wish the spiritually best for our children, or only the materially best.”

Notes

1. Readers familiar with my work will recognize the point I am making here. In all my writing on holistic education, I have insisted that we look beyond the differences in particular methods and techniques and consider the essence of holistic education to be an open minded, open hearted sensitivity to the actual life of the child and to the specific social and cultural context of that child’s life. Montessori and Rudolf Steiner were ultimately exploring the same deep truths about human existence, but they formulated distinct methods in response to different cultural needs (see Coulter, 1991). John Holt, whom I mention later in this essay, derived his methodless educational approach (which finally evolved into what he called “unschooling”) from an open minded sensitivity both to children and to the social and political milieu of his time and place that was every bit as acute as Montessori’s to hers. To ask whose method (or nonmethod) is “correct” or even “universal” is the wrong question. What we need to know is whether our chosen pedagogical approach is truly nourishing the unfolding inner life of the young person standing before us.

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