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EDUCATION AS AN AID TO LIFE: MONTESSORIAN PERSPECTIVES

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Good morning. I would have preferred the music to continue. Music does not need translations and I know that I represent a problem for interpreters.

I shall try through my talk to expand on Maria Montessori's affirmation "Education as an aid to life" and to integrate three other of her concepts: the concept of Cosmic Mission, the concept of New Man, and the concept of New World.

What does "Education as an aid to life mean"? The word life is a complex one. Certain critics held that Maria Montessori belonged to a movement that philosophers called vitalism. This form of philosophy existed in Europe before the Second World War and included even Nazism and Fascism, Futuristic Art, Marinetti and so forth. I have never believed Maria Montessori to have this pathology, this illness, that vitalism was. It is clear that to say "Education as an aid to Life" entails deep consideration because deep is the concept of Life. What is Life? What is the meaning of Life? What is the meaning we give our own life and the life of others

The first thing that I would like to say is that Life is a very complex, articulated, difficult, mysterious, deep, and uncertain reality. To speak of Life is to speak also of what is "in front" of it, determining its measure and meaning, and that we call death. In spite of all when we say "Life" we also think of the idea of death. In the thought of Maria Montessori, saying "Life" is to embark in an incredible voyage, which, starting with the Child, probably reaches the furthest galaxies and touches the reality we call our Cosmos.

Certainly the first stage of this journey is a human being – an adult helping a child in his self-development. As the adult helps the Child in his construction as a human being and the child is creating the adult and is the Father of Man, then we can say that all the teachers in the world are no longer only helping the Child, but also the Man of Tomorrow. They are helping Tomorrow's Human Race. They are helping, and contributing to the creation of Tomorrow's World.

Education as an aid to Life goes even further. The teachers who help the Child in his self-development as a human being, who assist the construction of tomorrow's society – hopefully a better, fairer society – are also aiding the Child to root himself in his environment and in his own story. As we reflect on the thought of Maria Montessori we all know very well her understanding of the relationships between the environment and development, the environment and the mind, the environment and human beings, the constant dialectical rapport. It would be impossible to discuss Maria Montessori's thought without constantly referring to this on-going permanent relationship between the Child and the environment. It's as if they were the two sides of the same experience. Therefore to aid the development of the Child is to help in the construction of the Man who will "live tomorrow" and for this Man to be deeply connected with his environment, it also means

helping the Child to love life through his love for the environment and thus to love the Earth - this small incredible Cosmos.

We live in a small peripheral star, an infinitesimal tiny peripheral star, within a peripheral galaxy – the Milky Way – within what we call the Cosmos. We are but grains in this incredible cosmic reality, maybe the only ones capable of thought; I don't know. I do know that we are the children of a very small peripheral star within a very small peripheral galaxy – the Milky Way – within the infinite number of peripheral galaxies that compose the immense greatness that is the essence of the Cosmos.

Thus, to aid Life, also means thinking of the human being within this context. As I mentioned before, I would like to also use another concept to help us - that of Cosmic Mission. What is Man's mission, if not that of continuing the process of Creation; if not the process of the "making of humanity" itself; the process of becoming each day more humane?

In all the speeches we have heard today there was this hope, this longing, this yearning: to build a culture of peace, rather than a culture of war; a culture of humanity, rather than a culture of violence; a culture of Life and joy, rather than a culture of pain and despair. Well, it is clear to me that if we have these ideals and we struggle to achieve them, it is because we are still constructing ourselves. We are trying to push forth the process of Creation, and this may be our most profound duty. The Cosmic Mission to which Maria Montessori referred – whether with or without emphasis – had this profound significance. We are not born only once, not one of us is born only once; this planet was not born only once, but day after day, with Good and Evil, within all the possible antinomies, we continue this process of Creation.

We can see how "Education as an aid to Life" is an affirmation with a very strong sense, much deeper than we imagined. We educate and aid the making of Man, Tomorrow's Man. Tomorrow that man will construct Mankind (or Humanity), a world, a society; our smile and our encounter of a few years back play a part in that human being.

Education as an aid to life – when considered not only within its philology – has yet another significance. Maria Montessori often wrote the words "New Man" and "New World" with capital letters. Why do I write them with capitals? It is because behind these words there is hope. The hope that education can contribute in any way in the constructing, defining, a Man, different from the present one, and thus create a world different than the present one. Every time that any of us hope to change something – and we often do hope - our thought is described (and I use here an old disqualified word) as revolutionary.

The word revolution is in crisis. It may well be in crisis here in this city, which has seen the greatest revolution, because we all know that Fraternity and Equality are yet to be achieved. But at least that revolution had meaning. We also know that the October revolution, the Marxist revolution, failed miserably. We discovered what was in the pan when the top was lifted. We don't use the word revolution anymore. And yet this word is also a sign of hope. Revolutionary thought also implies - always – that things might change; that this World may become better than it is today, that Tomorrow's Man may become better than He is today.

So "Education as an aid to Life" is, substantially, a revolutionary project; it was so in the past and it is so in the present. In the past, it was revolutionary for historic reasons, today, for cultural reasons. If we want to build a culture of peace, we need a revolution of thought, of culture, of the school system, a revolution that involves and touches our most profound, and deeply rooted visions of the World. This is not a short-term proposition and it may not be long-term either. Nevertheless, the meaning of our journey is to start off on this path with the certainty that it is possible to build a better World.

Mrs Breines (UNESCO) expressed it very well earlier; if I start off with the idea that Man is aggressive, that He always will be, and hence that war and crime will always be necessary and that this Life can only be a carbon copy of all the preceding ones; then all this has no meaning.

Education as an aid to life is a revolutionary proposition because in it, the profound, radical, optimistic hope that Man and the World can become better, is implicit.

So how will this be possible? Our belief in the possibility of changes for the better brings us to start with the Child. We adults are failures. We have failed in all our attempts to build a World that “Yes!” has come out of the jungle - as Freud said - but has now entered other jungles, has discovered new forests, has discovered other demons. An author I greatly admire and who I shall have the pleasure of introducing tomorrow morning - Edgar Morin - wrote a book called “My demons”; a brave and honest thinker’s self-critique on all the beliefs we have held for maybe centuries.

We could call our hope for change - should revolution sound too unrealistic or commonplace - “revolt”. Mrs Breines quoted another author I admire, Albert Camus. This writer gave the Western World a very important lesson with only two books: “L’étranger” (The stranger) and “La peste” (The pest), and two philosophical works: “L’homme révolté” (Man in revolt) and “Le mythe de Sisyphe” (Sisyphus’ myth). Albert Camus had the hope and the belief that changes for a better, fairer, more honest and moral World were possible. He drew his conclusions from the analysis - which we should all make - of the problems of our world and our environment; this world, the environment, gives us feedback, interacts with us and with our children. We cannot forget this. The environment that we prepare at school is like a small box inside other boxes. This box that we prepare with great attention is the only one the child perceives when it is small; as he grows, he will see this box is contained within larger boxes. We must try to pinpoint the problems of the larger boxes.

The first great challenge is that of knowledge. Nowadays, we have such a huge amount of knowledge that they are practically impossible to enumerate.

Once there was Man and there were disciplines to face Man’s problems. These disciplines have since multiplied. They have specialized. They have fragmented the human being with such an excess of specialization that we may wonder who is the specialist. He is someone who knows everything about nothing. Specialization does not exist. Someone who knows everything about nothing is like the dilettante (or amateur); he is someone who knows nothing about everything. Nowadays we are confronted with these two risks. On one hand, the excess of specialization which entails the loss of the environment, of loss of “globality”, the loss of context, the loss of the essence; and on the other hand, the generic amateur who has vaguely heard about things and who mistakes authentic beliefs for authentic fact. This excess of information is extremely dangerous. It is one of the dangers of our time. The older Eliot said: “How much knowledge do we lose as we gain more information”, meaning, the more informed we are the less we know. Kleist said: “Knowledge does not make us better nor happier.”

The problem of excess of information has to be reviewed. We must re-unite all the disarticulated bits of information and make a whole. This theme will certainly come up also in Camillo Grazzini’s conference and in Edgar Morin’s. We cannot live of fractured, scattered, dispersed bits of knowledge, as they are totally useless to face problems.

The second great challenge of our time is very serious. In our times we all live together though from different races, cultures, and creeds - as shows our presence here today. Ironically, the World seems to be getting smaller. In this World that becomes more like a house, common to all of us, we live together side by side, believing in different gods, experimenting different ways of living, speaking different languages - and languages are always thoughts. Languages are much more than simply ‘language’. There is a vital, profound language that is our veritable mother tongue.

What does it mean, the fact of attempting to live in a planet, thinking of the World not only as Cosmos but also as a planetary reality? “Citizen of the World” is not just some sort of password. Living together, people from different cultures, stories and occupations, means we have to re-think

our common identity and our differences with complexity; what makes us similar, almost brother-like, and what makes us different. The concepts of unity and difference can never be divided. In this complex Universe in which we all live, we are expected to use with the same ease, the capacity to analyse and the capacity to synthesize; “the right hand of reason and the left hand of the heart”, wrote Pascal.

What challenge are we facing as we are forced to live together, in this planet, with our differences? I shall give you an over-simplified example to illustrate. If I declare that I am not racist and that I am ready to live in a world without racial conflicts, I also have to accept that my grandchild - the son of my daughter - will be of mixed races, a Creole. I have to understand that the challenge of creolization is one of the great challenges of our times and indeed of modern philosophy.

What is creolization? Creoles were the children of parents of different cultures, different colours and different realities – as were the Mestizos. Clearly we are going towards a culture where we are losing our “colours” and our “races”. A historian wrote once that Nazism and Fascism, apart from being the madness we all remember, were the last attempt to prevent all the colours from mixing; the last attempt to save one race – the white or arian race – from other races.

Therefore, if we wish to feel we are inhabitants of this planet, us Creoles, we need to re-define our identity. I am not speaking here of personal identity but rather of anthropological identity. Which is my identity? Which is your identity? Which is our cultural identity? I look at Renilde. What is Renilde’s cultural identity? Chiaravalle, Logroño, the Romans, the Greeks, the Maya, the Aztecs. What does cultural identity mean? I was born in a small city in Umbria called Perugia. We say Perugia is the daughter of Rome and as such, the daughter of Greece also. Then I find out that before the Romans there were the Etruscans. The Romans arrived with their weapons, they were not kind, they slaughtered the Etruscans who themselves had slaughtered the Osco-Umbrians who lived in Perugia before them. As I search for my identity vertically through history I go further away from any possibility of relation and encounter. This question of cultural identity is more complex than it seems.

We might discover that besides this second disquieting problem of compressed cohabitation on the planet, there is the fact that our roots can no longer be described as roots that go deep in the soil, but rather as rhizomes - as two French philosophers, Deleuze and Guattari defined them. A rhizome is a type of root that doesn’t go downwards; once in the ground it goes towards other roots; it feeds on other roots. It’s not a very long, strong, or deep root. It is a wandering root, that goes in search of other roots, other languages, other ideas, other cultures.

We said the first problem is the excess of information and the second is this challenge of creolization - the need to rediscover an identity within multiplicity, difference and complexity. The third problem is precisely linked to complexity. We can no longer confront problems with elementary categories. The problems of contemporary society are very complex. This is not trivial. In order to respond to complex problems adequately, we must go into depth. This means that even in very simple choices, as may be those linked with Education, we must renounce quantity in favour of quality and choose to work on elaborating and articulating information rather than accumulate it. Indeed we need quality to counter complexity, to try to understand complexity. These are some of the most important challenges of our times.

There are many more challenges besides these and we may well ask ourselves at this point what the possible solutions are. How can we meet these difficult challenges? The first answer is this. Today’s society has problems; war is present, hunger is present, hunger of the spirit is present. There isn’t only physical hunger. Maria Montessori said something very beautiful; she said that ‘children don’t only have a hunger for bread, they also have another hunger’. The hunger for food comes first, but once this has been satisfied, we must then attend the spiritual needs, the hunger of the soul, which we must also satisfy somehow, in all children. Therefore, if we are to push forth a project that will really involve aiding Life and that is revolutionary – in the best sense – in its

tendency to hope for a better World and a better Human being, we can say that Education is our first tool if not our only one. There are no other solutions.

Certainly some might argue that through genetic manipulation we could be made to better; completely pacified, totally sure of ourselves, calm, well behaved, meek, all of us side by side. This perspective of change seems to me to be extremely dangerous, terrifying or absurd. There are also certain currents of thought – I'm thinking of American neo behaviourism and Skinner, whom I mention with respect... Skinner said: "In order to change the World we only have one possibility and that is to condition children from birth." In other words, set up an active conditioning process, which through the dynamic of stimuli-response would condition the very small child in such a way that he would be as we would like him to be, just as we designed him to be. Skinner is a very serious thinker; he describes this project in a book. But then, when he realizes to what extent such a project completely disdains freedom and human dignity, he writes a second book, "Beyond dignity and beyond freedom". But if we discard this idea of conditioning from birth, and reject the idea of terrifying genetic manipulation, the only weapon available to us in order to change the World is Education, starting from the Child in order that his yet unexplored potential may – "Yes!" help us build and define a better World. Therefore, Education is the first possibility, maybe the only possibility and revolutionary hope. Education is the great "disarmed weapon" we have in our hands.

There is a second thing that we could do and that is to have the courage to enter complexity. The courage to understand that everything is not only black and white, that the problem of Good and Evil, of wisdom and madness, of prose and poetry, is a difficult plot. The courage to go from a Manichean outlook towards a complex outlook, to leave behind the idea that all that is good in the World is here and all Evil is there, to let go the idea that all Life is prose, or that all Life is poetry, to come out of the vision that the World is inhabited by Homo sapiens – there is also a Homo demens and he works every day, we can see him on television tonight, we read about him in the papers. Homo demens exists, Homo sapiens' other name.

We must also face our uncertainty. We are all filled with uncertainties and searching for something. We are worried and unsatisfied. We feel that our expectations have been betrayed, our hopes let down. Although we adapt to the rules of our environment, to generic cohabitation, to convivial obligation, deep down something akin to loneliness remains, something similar to anguish. Deep inside us lies a feeling that resembles our non-involvement in facing Life. How often do we feel like strangers to our life? How often do we open the newspapers and feel like strangers to politics, to culture, to the news, and often to ourselves? If this is true, then we must bravely enter in this complexity, helping each other to reach better understanding between all human beings, through Education. We need to understand each other more – do we understand each other much? We may speak the same language and still not really understand each other. Narcissism is a characteristic of our time; we keep to ourselves thinking only of our interest, our small solutions to small problems, as if we were searching for a little raft on which we could place our fears, our anguish and very often, our feeling of failure. On the contrary, we need to believe ourselves to be travellers, a little lost maybe, but searching for something. We must rediscover the sense of the itinerary, of the journey and of complexity, and understand that even if we are alone unity can be given to us by others - like an archipelago defines the unity of a group of islands. The sea separates me from you but also unites me with you. To help the Child to understand - understand understanding itself and understanding the World, the Earth, understand its ecology and the ecology of all minds – is to deal, through Education, with all these disquieting problems.

We need to find the ethics of courage again. We need to include in our lives those two special elements, or moments, which are ethics and aesthetics. Some people say ethics are totally laic – meaning: not based on religion – but that they have to be built; some say that ethics, that is to say,

our behaviour, precede our life; others state they stem from our life choices. Ethics are only our behaviour. Ethics can be provisional – as Descartes said – it is not important that they should be final. We need an urgent reason to act. Kant wrote many pages trying to answer the question: “What can I, as a Man, understand?” Then, in another book, he wrote hundreds of pages searching for an answer to another question: “What can I do?” We must focus on doing, on taking action, on experiencing. We need ethics of courage now more than ever because our times are times of easy resignation, impotence and escapism.

If we love Life then another element is indispensable: Beauty. Beauty educates us, helps us to grow and gives meaning to our life: a verse, a colour, a perfume. Once, our cities were built to the emblem of beauty: temples, churches of any faith and religion. Beauty really is an enigma. We shall never be able to know precisely what it is. I wonder. Is something beautiful because I like it, or is it beautifully simply because it is beautiful? I don't know. However I do know that we need beauty and that nowadays it is in danger of disappearing. The public squares of Paris, as the piazza in Rome, were once designed purely by virtue of beauty. Today, we conceive building supermarkets or parking lots where there once was a piazza. Hillman, a student of Karl Jung, even qualifies beauty as economical; in the sense that if I work in a beautiful setting I may well have fewer depressions, fewer attacks of exhaustion, I may be less tense in the evening, after work. Working in a beautiful place helps because beauty educates.

The last important element is Love. No one has used the word Love in the last fifty years; I am almost afraid to say it. Even Edgar Morin – who comes from a totally laic experience – making a self-criticism, wrote this about Love: “Even I have not had the courage of this word; the courage to use this word.” Science, the multiplicity of science, this exact reason, this pure reason, which praises itself, while forgetting day after day the reasons of the heart – as Pascal would say. What has this spirit, that becomes pure esprit de géométrie, thus completely abandoning the esprit de finesse, come up against? It met with what has been called the “terricide” of our times.

I know that Love is an ambiguous word; I know that many slaughters and many crimes have been committed in its name. Nevertheless, we need this word, because in the end, Love is the only answer to face our anguish and death. A culture of Life instead of a culture of death, Education of Life instead of Education of death, bears only one name: Love. To catch a light in the eyes of the other, and in his hand to find the touch of a brother, to feel safe to open myself to him without losing my story, and that he too can feel safe to open himself to me without losing his story.

Maria Montessori's thought is this incredible journey. It starts with the Child but it does not conclude with the Child. She was very attentive to the details of the Child's experience, but her concern is for the Man of Tomorrow, the World of Tomorrow, the Society of Tomorrow, the Planet of Tomorrow that we can protect or destroy, contemplate or transform. As we look up to the sky, aware of living on this tiny galaxy, on which we bear witness by living of the process of a perpetual creation, which will continue with us, or without us.