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Papers*

*The Totality  
of Montessori*

*By Annette Haines*

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# *The Totality of Montessori*



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## ***Introduction***

I have been asked today to begin this conference with some words on "The Totality of Montessori." There is a kind of funny poem that I have enjoyed since I was a little girl. It is called "The Blind Men and the Elephant" from John Godfrey Saxe's (1816-1887) version of the famous Indian legend. Please let me read it to you.

*It was six men of Indostan  
To learning much inclined,  
Who went to see the Elephant  
(Though all of them were blind),  
That each by observation  
Might satisfy his mind.*

*The First approached the Elephant,  
And happening to fall  
Against his broad and sturdy side,  
At once began to bawl:  
"God bless me! but the Elephant  
Is very like a wall!"*

*The Second, feeling of the tusk  
Cried, "Ho! what have we here,  
So very round and smooth and sharp?  
To me `tis mighty clear  
This wonder of an Elephant  
Is very like a spear!"*

*The Third approached the animal,  
And happening to take  
The squirming trunk within his hands,  
Thus boldly up he spake:  
"I see," quoth he, "the Elephant  
Is very like a snake!"*

*The Fourth reached out an eager hand,  
And felt about the knee:  
"What most this wondrous beast is like  
Is mighty plain," quoth he;  
"'Tis clear enough the Elephant  
Is very like a tree!"*

*The Fifth, who chanced to touch the ear,  
Said: "E'en the blindest man  
Can tell what this resembles most;  
Deny the fact who can,  
This marvel of an Elephant  
Is very like a fan!"*

*The Sixth no sooner had begun  
About the beast to grope,  
Than, seizing on the swinging tail  
That fell within his scope.  
"I see," quoth he, "the Elephant  
Is very like a rope!"*

*And so these men of Indostan  
Disputed loud and long,  
Each in his own opinion  
Exceeding stiff and strong,  
Though each was partly in the right,  
And all were in the wrong!*

The parable originated in China during the Han dynasty. There is an African version of this tale as well as the Indian version. The story is a universal one which says that each of us is blind in so far as we see only a part of the totality. We often have our own version of reality and see things through the filters of our interest and experience.

## ***The Origins of the Montessori Movement***

Montessori's gift, on the other hand, was her clear sight and the largeness, of her vision. From Montessori's discoveries in the first Casa dei Bambini in San Lorenzo in 1907, an idea was born which was destined to spread the world over. This idea, which was only germinal at the dawn of the twentieth century, stirred the imagination of everyone it touched. From the beginning, this idea, which we can call the Montessori idea, inspired intense interest and many flocked to take her training courses. From these many, a few became disciples, vanguards of a world-wide dissemination effort called "the Montessori Movement."

That there was a "movement" at all was due largely to the efforts of a mere handful of apostles. The original enthusiasm for Montessori waned quickly in the United States, perhaps because of an anti-European sentiment generated by WWI, or perhaps because of the professional antagonism of a few influential American university educators .... Regardless, Montessori quickly became a persona non-gratis within the American community and the flurry of newspaper and magazine articles which had been written between 1914 and 1915 came to a virtual standstill.

Surprisingly, however, the Montessori idea did not die. Rather, it gathered a strength that would not be felt until much later. In far distant places with exotic names, Montessori went about her work of spreading the idea by giving teacher-training courses. These first courses were large by current-day standards, with hundreds of participants, and were an efficient way to influence many people in a short amount of time. Mostly the students of these courses went out and started schools for children. But a handful were so moved, so touched, by the idea that they acted as missionaries, eschewing family ties and financial security, to spread the idea.

Working outside the educational establishment, often in church basements or town halls, these few people quietly and yet with surprising effectiveness told the Montessori idea. They told it over and over--to anyone who would listen: teachers, local officials, public servants. But mostly, they inspired a kind of grass-roots support from the mothers and fathers of the small children in their adopted countries.

Those wonderful individuals, the first generation of trainers, each brought their own version--charismatic in its own way. "But like the blind men and the elephant, each version may have been only a part of the whole. And the Montessori idea, in each region, was colored by the personality of its trainer/advocate. In Minneapolis, for example, teachers trained by Joosten thought that children should sit on the floor and work on low tables as they did in India. In Mexico, teachers trained by Nan Hanrath thought children should sit properly at tables with chairs and the teacher should have a desk in the European style. In schools whose teachers were trained by Miss Stephenson, children poured water from vessel to vessel in one way; in schools whose teachers were trained by Miss Lena, children poured water in another way.

## ***Parts of a Whole***

### **Blind Man #1: Montessori as early childhood education.**

Present-day studies and brain research point out that the first two years of life are of exceptional importance in the formation and evolution of the human being. The child embodies "a nucleus of energies and capacities" that must develop "wholesomely." Montessori understood that "in this period, man's positive as well as his negative qualities come into being and that the sum total of these qualities will characterize the adult."<sup>1</sup> Having lived in India for seven years, by 1949 when she lectured at the 8th International Montessori congress in San Remo, Italy, she was wized by eastern thought...

*Above all else, she said, the Indian people realized that to have a good harvest it is necessary to plant in the proper season so that power of the sun best be utilized.<sup>2</sup>*

And so we need to have "education" for young children because this is when the power of the absorbent mind and the sensitive periods is at its zenith. But this creates our first problem. In Montessori's time and even today, early childhood education has been seen and still is seen as a second cousin to "real school." Lip service is given projects and programs such as Head Start, All-Day Kindergarten, and so forth, but the money is not really put where the mouth is and Montessori is still too often seen as simply a program of early childhood education—usually the purview of the upper-middle-class suburbs, a nice thing to indulge in until children become of school age. Like the blind men we are, we still talk about Montessori as a "pre-school," and advertise it as such.

Montessori herself said, "education must begin at birth."<sup>3</sup> But she was even misunderstood in this, at least in the understanding of the word: "educate." What she meant, and said so beautifully in the San Remo lectures, is that education is "the development of latent possibilities."<sup>4</sup> Rather than educate, she says, we are to cultivate. To cultivate mankind by activating the hidden psychic energies existing in the child and allowing humanity to "flower" with "greater richness and beauty."<sup>5</sup> The totality of her vision in this regard is vast...a humanity devoid of aggression, meanness and stupidity, and blooming with the fruits of those god-given gifts: intelligence and love, reason, and will. "The child," she said, "is God's instrument for the evolution of mankind."<sup>6</sup>

### **Blind Man #2: Montessori as material**

Others were taken by the beauty and ingeniousness of the Montessori materials. Little factories began to produce the materials and businesses began to compete with one another for the growing Montessori school market. From the beginning, Montessori was criticized for combining business

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<sup>1</sup> Montessori, Maria. (1949). "Lecture III, The Absorbent Mind." The San Remo Lectures. AMI pamphlet, p. 20.

<sup>2</sup> Montessori, Maria. (1949). "Lecture IV, World Unity through the Child." The San Remo Lectures, AMI Pamphlet, p. 40.

<sup>3</sup> Montessori, Maria. (1949). "Lecture I, The Creative Capacity of Early Childhood." The San Remo Lectures. AMI pamphlet, p. 9.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>6</sup> San Remo, "Lecture III," p. 27.

with education and the ethics of patenting the didactic apparatus was questioned. As early as 1912, a critic wrote in the Journal of Educational Psychology,

*“The commercialization of a system removes it, in spirit, at least, from the realm of scientific contribution to educational progress. If Montessori has discovered a new and far-reaching principle which will reconstruct the whole theory of child training and which will directly benefit the children in every land, then let the discovery be disseminated freely to all who will employ it. To patent a scientific contribution of that kind would be on a par with patenting the discovery of ether or of antiseptic surgery.”<sup>7</sup>*

Criticized for not sharing her ideas, it is ironic that Montessori probably started the whole idea of “hands-on” manipulatives in education. The world out there may not generally have bought the Montessori idea, but they’ve bought the idea of educational toys lock stock and barrel. Today its big business: We buy (and are sold) special gadgets touted by educationalists, black and white mobiles that are scientifically “proven”, brightly colored blocks and shapes, and thingamajigs. Everyone wants to make a super-baby, sparing no expense. And everyone else wants to get into the business of selling this stuff.

On the other hand, the authentic Montessori materials are beautiful and inspired and no one should realistically try to implement real Montessori without them. The lovely materials, like those made by Nienhuis and Gonzagarredi, who have helped sponsor this Congress, are central to the first and second planes of education. But as much attention as has been and continues to be focused on the didactic apparatus by Montessori disciples, the usefulness of the apparatus depends on the total environment in which learning occurs. We must guard ourselves in the importance we place on the material, always understanding it as a means to an end, and not an end in itself.

The physical environment of objects and the psychological environment of the non-teaching teacher, both work together to support the child’s independence and optimal development. “We are here,” she said, “to offer to this life, which came into the world by itself, the means necessary for its development, and having done that we must await this development with respect.”<sup>8</sup>

### **Blind Man #3: Montessori as Academics: Letters and Numbers**

The first wave of interest in Montessori’s work quickly took the world by storm, coinciding with the introduction of popular magazines in American culture. In the early part of the last century, articles were written that talked about the Montessori Method, “A New Primary System”<sup>9</sup>: how amazing it was that children of four and five “master(ed) the technique of penmanship,” and how the little children learned to read and to do arithmetic.<sup>10</sup> It was the success of early academics that surprised everyone and made such an impact; if those first little children had not “exploded” into writing and reading, Montessori would hardly have made a tiny ripple of interest.

The same interest in early academics is still present, as you all know, as an abiding concern of parents and administrators. Consequently, the totality of Montessori is often ignored in a push towards letters and numbers. Today as well as in Montessori’s time, early reading, the ability to manipulate letter and number symbols, is thought to predict success in school, and success in school is clearly understood to be a predictor of success in life. And so we have the incessant push to early symbolization--to paper and pencil.

In Discovery of the Child, Montessori addresses this common misconception directly, writing:

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<sup>7</sup> Montrose, Guy Whipple. (1912). “The Ethics of Patented Education.” Journal of Educational Psychology, pp. 343-344.

<sup>8</sup> Montessori, Maria. (1914/65). Dr. Montessori’s Own Handbook. NY: Schocken, p. 34.

<sup>9</sup> Warren, Howard C. “The House of Children—A New Primary System,” Journal of Educational Psychology, pp. 121-132.

<sup>10</sup> Tozier, Josephine. (1912). “The Montessori Apparatus: A Description of the Material and Apparatus.” McClure’s Magazine, pp. 289-302.

*Not all children reach the same standard of achievement at the same age. Since none of them are ever encouraged, much less forced, to do something that they do not care to do, it happens that some children, since they have never asked for help in learning, have been left in peace, and can neither read nor write.<sup>11</sup>*

This is one of my favorite quotes...and it always brings to mind a child I'll call David who, at the age of five, fell in love with mathematics and spent his final year with me in the Children's House working away at the memorization of arithmetic tables: addition, subtraction, multiplication and division. As he was headed for the elementary class the next year, the teacher there asked me about David:

"Can he read?"

"I don't know," I was forced to reply. "He's never tried."

The next year, David went to the elementary class, and yes, he spent the whole year reading.

Montessori reminds us--we must have faith in the child: "It is imperative," she says,

*that we truly believe that every individual, if he lives in an appropriate environment, can realize his own psychic evolution, according to a pre-established design. Should the process not be immediately evident, and the results, in the beginning not those we expected, we must still maintain our faith in nature's design and in its laws.<sup>12</sup>*

Which takes me to my fourth "blind man"...

## **Blind Man #4: Montessori as Elementary School**

Many followers of Montessori were smitten with her advanced materials and the integrated curriculum created for the older children: a whole system growing out of the Casa dei Bambini but designed to match the psychological characteristics of the school-age child and therefore based on the emergent faculties of reason, imagination, memory, and abstraction.

The child at this age can do a great deal of mental work. Eager to learn about his world, he is a "fertile field, ready to receive what will germinate into culture."<sup>13</sup> All items of culture are received with enthusiasm at this age. The youngster's vivid imagination is ready to explore out-of-this-world ideas, and he eagerly delves into subjects such as ancient history, astronomy, geology and chemistry—in other words, "cosmic education."

Big ideas are presented as allegory and myth. The creation story, "How Mother Earth was Created," tells a morality tale: "Life alone can say, 'In service is perfect freedom.'" Work as the cosmic expression is ever a necessity of life and a joy; shirking it means extinction, the doom of original disobedience." After creation, the subsequent millennia of transformations to the surface of the earth is depicted as a "Primeval World War" and again there is a message: During the Cretaceous period, for example, she tells a little story:

*Endless was the variety, for different tastes had to be considered and each flower had its special friend among the insects. The plant prepared the nectar, and the insect made himself more beautiful for invitation to the feast, the bee adding fur and velvet to his coat and the butterfly shimmering with the gay hues on her wings. Collaboration was perfect between plants and creatures. The bees carried pollen on their furry bodies to fertilize the seeds of the flowers that they visited to collect their toll of wax and honey, so the needs of both were satisfied, and the deeper purposes of nature served.<sup>14</sup>*

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<sup>11</sup> Montessori, Maria. (1939/1967). The Discovery of the Child. NY:Ballantine, p. 234.

<sup>12</sup> San Remo, "Lecture IV," p. 30.

<sup>13</sup> Montessori, Mara. (1948/67). To Educate the Human Potential. Adyar, Madras: Kalakshetra, p. 4.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 59.

These lyrical fables, however, were grasped by some blind men as great ways to teach biology and history and geography, and so forth. Today, you can buy ready-made Research Guides for Biomes, Astronomy, History, and Biology on Ebay. Computer programs for virtual manipulatives are designed for Montessori schools. One program is designed to ease the burden of the Montessori teacher: the computer makes assignments; the teacher delegates the making of assignments directly through the computer (and I guess he doesn't even have to talk to his students any more). Standardized tests, teaching to those tests, using workbooks and Xeroxed pages leaves little time left for human consciousness to "come into the world as a flaming ball of imagination." But then, even Montessori realized, "it is not always as easy to present the whole as it is to present a detail." Montessori as subject matter to be learned (no matter how interesting) takes us far from the original educational goal of cosmic education. She says,

Culture "is a means, not an end. Properly understood, this fact makes the work of teachers, professors, and parents much easier and completely changes our ideas about education."<sup>15</sup>

### **Blind Man #5: Montessori as Infant and Toddler Day Care**

In 1936, Maria Montessori wrote, "The feeling we should have toward the newborn is...a reverence before the mystery of creation."<sup>16</sup> When the newborn comes into our world, we must know how to receive it.

By 1947, Montessori had realized that starting with children three years and older was too late to have the most powerful effect. Adele Costa Gnochhi implemented Montessori's far-reaching vision by establishing a school in Rome for children 1-3 years of age. In 1961, Centro Nacito Montessori, a birth center, was organized to study the pre, peri, and post-natal periods and help mothers in the home. In 1980, Dr. Silvana Quatrocchi Montanaro began the Assistants to Infancy Course in Rome. In 1983, the first Infancy course was held in the United States. Now, those who enjoy working with babies can take the Montessori Assistant to Infancy course in venues around the world.

However, sadly perhaps, the vision of assisting mothers and fathers through pregnancy and the birthing process, and of attending to the needs of the new family at home has succumbed to the pressures of modern life. There is indeed a need for infant day care that is growing throughout the world. Economic pressure and the lack of access to hospitals work against Montessori insights and the natural rights of parents and babies to bond and grow together in the more natural way.

### **Blind Man #6: Montessori as Middle School & High School**

The latest development in our saga is the current interest in the adolescent. It is surely a natural outgrowth of the many successful years of Montessori practice at the level of the first and second planes to wish to extend this success on to the third plane of development. So a whole new group of enthusiasts are exploring the largely uncharted terrain of the third plane.

Montessori gave very clear, if sparse, guidelines in the Appendices A & B of *From Childhood to Adolescence*. For the adolescent to be born again<sup>17</sup> as a conscious member of society, he needs to be removed from the narrow circle of family life and placed in a kind of communal living arrangement with "life in the open air, in the sun, with a diet rich in vitamins furnished by the nearby fields."<sup>18</sup> Academic study gives way to work on the land and in the shops and hostels of the Erdkinder. As a social newborn, the adolescent undergoes a second period of transformation parallel to the first plane of development and once again has a "sensitive period" for the development of "feelings of justice and personal dignity."<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Montessori, Maria. (1949/1972). *Education and Peace*. Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, p. 97.

<sup>16</sup> Montessori, Maria. (1936/83). *The Secret of Childhood*. London: Sangam Books, p. 24.

<sup>17</sup> Montessori, Maria. (1939/73). *From Childhood to Adolescence*. NY: Schocken Books, p. 101.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 106.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101.

As for the adults who work with this age, no special training was thought to be necessary for the teachers at this level. They were to be teachers qualified to teach in a secondary school, coming from outside to teach, and willing to adopt the methods of the Montessori institution. She thought they should be “young and of open minds, ready to take an active part in the life of the school and contribute personally.”<sup>20</sup> There should also be technicians, specialists in agriculture or horticulture or business or art or music who could share their special expertise. The adult staff would need to be able to handle the day-to-day practical life of the establishment, the cooking, sewing, repairing, and building so that life with the young people could be truly communal and the responsibilities of daily life evenly shared.

Today, instead of Erdkinder, we more often find Montessori as Middle Schools & High Schools, some which are Montessori in name only. Unlike the other Montessori age levels, there is little consensus (beyond Appendices A & B) to define Montessori secondary education. Consequently, what has grown up is a composite of the experience of those working at existing so-called Montessori middle schools and High Schools.

Yet, like the adolescent, the Montessori vision is coming of age; interest in the adolescent and a real desire to create Montessori Erdkinder is growing around the world. I believe we will see this dimension expand quickly in the near future.

## ***Conclusion: The Dreaming***

Now please don't misunderstand me. None of these ideas are wrong in and of themselves! In fact they are all, as the poem says, “partly right.” What each misses is the totality of the Montessori idea. This is natural. Montessori's genius was very large, and when the rest of us try, in our more limited ways, to wrap our mind, our time, and our too finite life around her very large idea, we naturally come up short. Yet, on the other hand, there obviously are many aspects—all important—to this complex thing we call Montessori.

Montessori is a BIG IDEA. As we become aware of the interconnectedness of the cosmos, we are stretched in our responsibility towards the world and its inhabitants, particularly the weak and the small. As we are privileged to be with these new children, we become better adults, stretched to exert our own maximum effort by the dawning understanding of the possibility for happiness in this life and the potential for a peace in this world.

Today, opening the 25th International Montessori conference, we come together from around the world to Sydney, Australia, to celebrate the vision of Montessori: a total vision which may only now be coming into focus, coming into being. Australia is a perfect venue, the land of “The Dream-time” and “The Spirit Child.” It is a perfect place to dream our Montessori dreams—and dreams are necessary because they give birth to action. Montessori said, “It is obvious that a great reform can only be accomplished through action.”<sup>21</sup>

So if together we can dream a dream as large as “***championing the cause of all children, in all strata of society, of all races and ethnic backgrounds, within and beyond the educational institutions,***” we have already begun to reinvigorate this thing called the Montessori Movement and restore it to its original dimension.

Each of you (you, and you, and you!) is a part of the whole and your work is a part of the totality of the body of Montessori thought alive in the world today. If we all understand that what each of us is doing, our small part, is a piece of the whole, then the size and energy of this movement can increase exponentially. But this will happen only when we begin to understand the strength of our unique network. Together we are a powerful global effort on behalf of the children of the world. So allow me to end with another story. It is the aboriginal story of Australia and it goes like this:

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., pp. 124-125.

<sup>21</sup> Montessori. (1949). “Lecture I, The Creative Capacity of Early Childhood.”, The San Remo Lectures, AMI Pamphlet, p. 6.

*We have been here since time began. We have come directly out of the Dreamtime of our creative ancestors –*

*We have kept the earth as it was on the first day.  
Our culture is focused on recording the origins of life.*

*We refer to forces and powers that created the world as creative ancestors.*

*Our beautiful world has been created only in accordance with the power, wisdom and intentions of our ancestral beings.*

*The Dreaming tells of the journeys and deeds of creator ancestors.*

*The creator ancestors made the trees, rocks, waterholes, rivers, mountains and stars, as well as the animals and plants, and their spirits inhabit these features of the natural world today, mountains and stars, as well as the animals and plants, and their spirits.*

[aboriginalart.com.au/culture/dreamtime.html](http://aboriginalart.com.au/culture/dreamtime.html)

The Dreaming is the Aboriginal understanding of the world, of its creation, and its great stories. The Dreamtime is the beginning of knowledge, from which come the laws of existence. For survival these laws must be observed. The Dreaming is not something just long ago. It is now, too.

And from the laws of the universe, from the Dreamtime, if you will, also come what we would call Montessori principles. But they are not Montessori principles. They are laws of the “Spirit Child” who informed her of the natural order of things, something that involves all mankind, the universe itself and cosmic harmony.

Our teacher, therefore, must also be the “Spirit Child”—

*—or rather the vital urge with the cosmic laws that lead him unconsciously. Not what we call the child’s will, but the mysterious will that directs his formation—this must be our guide.<sup>22</sup>*

The education that can result “will lead the way to a new humanity” and that education—

*—has one end alone: leading the individual and society to a higher stage of development. This concept involves many factors and may seem obscure, said Montessori, but it becomes clearer if we realize that mankind has to fulfill a collective mission on earth, a mission involving all of humanity and therefore each and every human being.<sup>23</sup>*

It was Montessori’s genius to understand that the child was...a universal spiritual force...the true means to attain unity among the human beings of the world.<sup>24</sup> The Totality of Montessori spins around the universe and comes back to rest at home, within our hearts.

So for the next few days, let us come together, uniting to *champion the cause of all children*--not as Australians, or Europeans, or Asians, or Latins, or Americans, but as human beings--people united by a common vision and a common mission. When we work together with a common purpose and for a common goal, we can create a mighty stir.

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<sup>22</sup> Montessori, Maria. (1989). The Formation of Man. London: Clio, p. 16.

<sup>23</sup> Education and Peace, p. 77 (emphasis added).

<sup>24</sup> San Remo, “Lecture IV”, p. 33.