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Work: A Vital Instinct

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Human Work

Everything we know, everything we have, everything we do, requires and involves the work of other human beings. If only we stop to think about it, we realise how absolutely incredible this is: everything I put in my mouth, on my back, the house I live in, the road I walk along, the transport I use for getting about faster, the temple or church or mosque I pray in, the music I listen to, the books I read, the very knowledge I have of the world, all of this depends on the work of others. None of these things could I have, do or understand without the help, the work, of other human beings.

Take away the veil of money and what do we see? The most incredible exchange of the products of human work; of services rendered. In other words, what we see is an interdependency, an interdependency which Mario Montessori calls an 'unconscious exchange of services'. Many individuals pride themselves on their self-sufficiency and independence of others. But the truth, the reality, is quite different. The extent to which any human being is self-sufficient and independent of other human beings (or indeed of nature itself) is minuscule in relation to the extent to which each one of us depends on the work of other human beings, both those of the present and those of the past.

Irrespective of whether our lives seem simple or complicated, irrespective of whether we are rich or poor, how we live depends on the work, the discoveries, the inventions and ideas of untold numbers of other human beings, both living and dead. Fire, the needle, pottery, bricks and mortar, the wheel, cultivation of the land, domesticated animals, the calendar, silk cloth made from the cocoons of moth larvae, the alphabet we use for a silent language that breaks the barriers of time and space, the symbols for silent speaking in numbers, the compass, maps, printed books, microscope and telescope, gas and electricity, water running from a tap, telephone, electronic mail, the train, car, boat and aeroplane, and countless, countless, other things that we take completely for granted, are all eloquent expressions of human work, both past and present.

Through their work, human beings have transformed their world into one that is now beyond nature's contriving; it is a world *created* by the work of human beings and Montessori calls it *Sopranatura*, which we can translate as *Supranature* or *Supernature*. All of us now depend on this world of *supranature* and therefore we completely depend on each other's work.

What are the implications of all this human interdependence that permeates time and space? Well firstly and most obviously, the work undertaken by individual human beings benefits other human beings; secondly and concomitantly, there exists a great, albeit unconscious, collaboration on the part of human beings; and thirdly, what is revealed in this fashion is an incredible human solidarity. This human interdependence of individuals, of communities, of nations, is based on work, on the organization of work; and it has emerged gradually over the millennia to culminate in the present-day organization of societies and, indeed, of a great world society. Here we have the deep, underlying story of humanity: the story that has taken us from an early hunting and gathering way of life right up to the complex societies that exist today. This is the deep story that lies below the surface story of tensions, rivalries, conflicts and wars, which have also accompanied and plagued the story of mankind. On the surface we see so much division and cruelty; but

underlying this, there is a story of collaboration and exchange: the circulation and exchange of goods and services; of ideas and knowledge.

Which story shall we give to our children? Which history of mankind? If we speak only of wars and other forms of cruelties, what kind of humanity are we presenting, revealing, to our children? What kind of truth are we recounting? Dr. Montessori wants us to recount the human drama as, above all, the story of human work, of human effort, human endeavour. This too is a story of truth, of reality, and one which therefore also deals with facts. It is the story that has led us to the world of today and that explains how today's world functions: a supranatural world which has been created by the work of human beings; a world in which each individual can do his very own work whilst at the same time providing himself with all he needs from what is produced by the work of others. Certainly today's world and today's humanity are both very far from being perfect, but perhaps both are better than we may think.

Thus Maria Montessori says:

Men are better than they appear to be. Indeed, human beings impress me as being extremely good and charitable, but they practice goodness and charity so unconsciously that mankind does not realize that it possesses these virtues. It might be said that human strife and men's inability to understand one another are surface phenomena, and that beneath that surface there have been immeasurable depths of goodness and sacrifice in men's hearts throughout the ages, a goodness and a spirit of sacrifice that history has hidden and of which humanity is unaware.

Montessori illustrates this as follows:

Men do not work to fulfill their own needs but to fulfill the needs of others. Let us consider the baker, for example. While others sleep, he stays up to bake bread that will be ready when the others awaken. Does he bake the bread for himself? Neither he nor his family will eat all of it. The baker works and sacrifices for others. Does he do so just one night or two? No; this self-sacrifice lasts all his life.

Let us consider the miner who extracts coal from the earth. He gives up sunlight and fresh air and buries himself alive; he knows that he may lose his life in an explosion at any moment. When he bids his children goodbye in the morning, he is not certain whether he will get back home alive. A hero. And not a hero during just one battle, but a hero who sacrifices his entire life. He certainly cannot use all the coal he brings to the surface just to heat his own home or cook his own food. The coal is for the use of countless people who are unknown to him, who can't even thank him for his sacrifice. The coal will be used in furnaces that the miner will never see, and thus he will never have the satisfaction of witnessing the results of his sacrifice. (...)

And those who work the land by the sweat of their brows do so in order that the grain and the fruit that they grow, the wood that they hew in the forest may be consumed by men who live far away. And those who mill grain, those who transport fruit and flowers long distances reap no thanks.

This universal charity is not like a deliberate act of charity, which requires some concrete motivation such as seeing the suffering and the needs of the poor. It is not an occasional or sporadic sort of charity that ceases once the expected thanks from the beneficiaries is forthcoming.

No, cosmic charity is universal. It requires the lifelong dedication of each man to all mankind, the rich man and the poor man alike. It does not relieve some particular form of misery. It lifts up the hearts of all men and helps civilization

rise to a higher level as it ensures the existence of each and all. The depths of this goodness and dedication are thus boundless.

It will be objected that these people do not work for the good of others; they labour only to earn their livelihoods in order to live as enjoyable lives as possible. That is true; that is the conscious part of it. But unconsciously they are carrying out the work of creation. They are obeying an unconscious command that rules events and preserves life everywhere in the universe.

(Education and Peace: Chapter 15 – Educate for Peace)

What we offer elementary children is a story which views ordinary human beings as great workers and thus as the true heroes of history. It is a story of Man the worker; Man the transformer of the environment; Man the creator of supranature; Man, in other words, as God's chief agent on Earth for creation.

All Creation is Life, Movement, Work

Chief agent of creation? Yes, because in Dr. Montessori's thinking, all the forces of nature, all the elements of nature, are all great workers and all of them are therefore agents of creation: sun, land, water, air, life in all of its myriad forms and down to the tiniest cell, work, work, work. Thus Montessori says:

Watch the unending activity of the flowing stream or the growing tree. See the breakers of the ocean, the unceasing movements of the earth, the planets, the sun and the stars. All creation is life, movement, work. What about our hearts, lungs, our bloodstream which work continuously from birth till death? (...) Not even during sleep are they inactive. What about our mind which works without intermission while we are awake or asleep?

(What You Should Know About Your Child: Chapter 20 – Work and Discipline)

Nature, in other words, is all about activity and we, together with Maria Montessori, can look on this activity as work: it is subject to laws; it brings about order and harmony; ultimately it leads to transformation. To put it another way, the order and harmony we find in nature depend on activity, on work; and the essential part of that work is cosmic work, the work that benefits the whole, the work that benefits others.

Montessori often emphasises the role played by life as, for example, when she says:

The most interesting, and indeed almost awesome fact (...) is that the earth is a creation of life. Life created rocks and soil, and it is life that sustains the harmony of the earth (...) The oceans are kept in constant chemical balance by living things, and living things also maintain the purity of the air. All creatures who live on earth have a cosmic role to play. The maintenance of life on earth depends on many species, each one of which has a special, specific function. Animals feed and live and reproduce; each one has a life cycle that fulfills a special role in relation to the life of other species. Everyone knows, for instance, that the disappearance of one species in a certain place upsets the balance, because the lives of all species are interrelated. Life therefore can be regarded as an energy that maintains life itself.

(Education and Peace: Chapter 9 – Fifth Lecture)

If movement, activity, work, constitute the very essence of nature, of the universe, what about human beings? Are we not part of nature?

This is how Dr. Montessori puts it:

*Does not man also have a cosmic mission to fulfill on earth? Is it conceivable that this being who has such great intelligence, who is the worker par excellence, has no part to play in the labour of the cosmos? Human energy, too, has appeared on earth to undertake and fulfill a specific mission.
(...) Man is a great worker, capable of creating a supernature through his labours.*

*But we might now ask ourselves: if animals labour so joyously, why do men not also take delight in their work? Man should be much happier than animals. His unhappiness is proof that there must be errors inherent in human society and in the supernature that humanity has constructed.
(Ibid)*

Thus sometimes the human instinct to work, the human tendency to work, takes a wrong turn. Perhaps more often than not, it is channelled in the wrong direction and we bring about 'miracles' of destruction rather than miracles of creation. For one thing, our ever-increasing technological powers are outstripping, on the one hand, our human capacities of conscious understanding and human powers of foresight and, on the other hand, our moral development. But that is exactly where we depend on the children: only the children can bring about the betterment of mankind, only they can bring about the transformation of humanity itself. So let us turn to the children and their development.

The Child's Work

When Montessori first started working with normal children (for she had already worked with children who were *not* normal), she worked with children from three to six years of age, in a very poor neighbourhood of Rome. And what she discovered was that the children were great workers. It was as though energies which had been dammed up, repressed, frustrated, dissipated, had found a constructive outlet and now expressed themselves quite naturally and passionately in work. The key that opened the door to this discovery was twofold: a suitable environment prepared for children of this age and the child's freedom to act within and on that environment. Despite the fact that the young children of that first Casa dei Bambini stayed there from eight o'clock in the morning until six o'clock at night, they wanted more work still, even work they could take home with them at the end of that long day. They were tireless in their work: instead of manifesting fatigue, they seemed refreshed by their work. They worked with concentration; they repeated the activity/the exercise; and they only became stronger, more capable, more independent, as a result. Typical childhood deviations such as timidity, lying, aggression, possessiveness (we say typical childhood deviations but I think these are by no means limited to childhood!), disappeared and a different child appeared: calm, happy, self-possessed, kind, disciplined, obedient, a great and indefatigable worker. Montessori also observed another striking phenomenon: the children not only became psychically stronger but also physically healthier, despite the fact that the deprived conditions of their lives had not changed. Montessori felt herself to be in the presence of a veritable miracle, and eventually decided to dedicate her life and work to this child that hides within the children of the world, to this "secret of childhood".

The process of psychic healing that Montessori witnessed in the children came to be called normalisation. With this expression, Montessori emphasised that the newly-discovered hidden nature of the child is the child's actual, normal nature. But this 'normal' nature can only reveal itself in the right conditions, that is, when the child has the opportunity, the freedom, to work for his or her own development. This is not work as we may usually understand it: it is not paid work, it is not work that has to do with earning a livelihood; it is not a hobby. But the child's work does, like any work, require time (much time!), energy, effort. It is a work of and for development, developmental work and, as such, it is *spontaneous* work. Spontaneous work is work freely chosen by the child; freely carried out by the child, which means safe from any adult interference; freely carried on for as long as the child wishes; and carried out at a pace or rhythm that is the child's own rhythm. Spontaneous work, Maria Montessori discovered, is what is required for both normalisation and normal development (normalisation in fact is nothing other than a return to the path of normal or natural development). Spontaneous work is the cure for the child's ills and it is

the child's natural way of life, if only for the simple reason that this is the only way that the children can develop.

The child's spontaneous work for development is undertaken with *concentration* and what Montessori calls *maximum effort*: the greatest possible effort, as befits a work of creation. Working with concentration means the individual is completely focused and totally, deeply engaged: every fibre of his being is involved in the work. Certainly in the case of children, concentrated work is only possible when the activity undertaken is simultaneously both mental and physical: the work of the hand must be guided by the mind; mental work, effort, learning, must be accompanied by the use of the hand. Is this so surprising? Hands are one of the special human gifts: what humanity has built over the ages was built by the work of the hand; the child builds/constructs himself, his intelligence and his character, through the work of *his* hands. It is the hand that permits the most intimate of relationships between the human being (adult or child) and the environment. Work for the child's mind must be, at the same time, work for the child's hands. That is why the environment has to be specially prepared for the child, with appropriate objects, so that all is within the reach of the hands as well as of the mind.

What about working with maximum effort? The child grows, develops through effort. Work that is too easy does not lead to growth and development; and when we try to make everything easy for the child, when we try to offer the child the easy life (and this is a very modern tendency), we are not helping him, we are not helping him to grow and develop. And the child becomes bored. Instead, when the activity permits the child to work with maximum effort, we see the child repeat the activity; we see that repetition that so often seems senseless to the adult mind. Nature has not offered the child a path of low-energy development; nature has however provided much help for the child during his development, including great energy. Sadly, the child's great energy is often not appreciated and, all too often, it is seen as a downright nuisance in the present-day adult world. This is why the children need their own world, their own prepared environment with adults who are prepared to understand the child's drive to do, to act independently, to work.

Let us listen to Dr. Montessori's own words:

*The child has said, "Don't help me. Don't bother me. Leave me alone." All adults have had this experience but they have paid no attention, or they have failed to act on the child's suggestion, for it has seemed too simple (...) Let us say it straight out – the child wants to do everything all by himself (...) The child likes neither to play idly, nor to waste time doing useless things, nor to flit about aimlessly, as most people believe. He seeks some very precise goal, and he seeks it with an instinctive directness of purpose (...) When he has freed himself of the oppressive adults who act for him, the child also achieves his second goal, working positively toward his own independence.
(Education and Peace: Chapter 7 – The Form Education Must Take etc.)*

And she also says this:

*Our observation of children has made us realise that work is man's fundamental instinct and that the child can work from morning till night without ever feeling tired, as if his labour were part of the order of nature. Fatigue is not natural. It is not the result of work, but of working the wrong way. The child does his work without getting tired and proves to us that we have immense untapped energies.
(Education and Peace: Chapter 13 – Supernature and the Single Nation)*

Dr. Montessori also points out that not only is the child an individual who works very hard and who is very observant, but that he is also incredibly meticulous and performs tasks scrupulously. In fact working with concentration and with maximum effort is strictly related to *exactness*.

Thus, Montessori says:

In our tiny children the evidence of a mathematical bent shows itself in many striking and spontaneous ways. In fact, if we showed them exactly how to do

something, this precision itself seemed to hold their interest. To have a real purpose to which the action was directed, this was the first condition, but the exact way of doing it acted like a support which rendered the child stable in his efforts, and therefore brought him to make progress in his development. Order and precision, we found were the keys to spontaneous work in the school.
(*The Absorbent Mind: Chapter 17 – Further Elaboration Through Culture and Imagination*)

And this is what Dr. Montessori has to say toward the very end of her long life:

What was forgotten was to give exactness to the children. The importance of this detail was not understood but it is the Centre of everything. It is from that that there comes activity, joy, work, perfectionment, freedom. (...) The point is not to render a person exact in his usual way of acting, tied to details instead of to the whole; it is to render the mind capable of seeing (...) without which capacity one remains blind, grows in a blind way. When the details of exactness (which gave such brilliant results in the beginning) are neglected there comes about a decadence in the results of our education – even if grand ideas adorn the theory.
(*From a letter written to Giuliana Sorge; probably in 1951*)

Dr. Montessori believes that the normal child, who remains hidden unless circumstances are propitious, has much to teach us about ourselves, about the true nature of humanity as a whole, and thus she says:

The child has proved to have instincts whose existence we did not even suspect. He has proved to possess a surprising fundamental instinct – he wants to work. We do not use the term work in the ordinary sense of the word. The child teaches us that work is not a virtue, not an effort that man is forced to make; it is not the need to earn a livelihood. Work is man's fundamental instinct. (...) Man is born to work. The instinct to work is his most outstanding trait.
(*Education and Peace: Chapter 12 – First Lecture*)

Montessori points out that, as the child works, many traits (both good and bad from the adult's point of view) disappear. And she says:

What is left is the new man, who has none of our defects – the man who works diligently, the man who is healed of all his ills.

This man has genuine qualities: love, which is something different from attachment; discipline which is different from blind submission; the ability to relate to reality, which is something different from flights of fancy. The child brings us light; he shows us the new man, the moral man.
(*Ibid*)

Work and the Planes of Development

The subject of my talk today, *Work* or to be more specific, *Work: A Vital Instinct*, is far too vast to render it justice in a short space of time. Perhaps only a whole book devoted to this subject would render it true justice. In particular, it would be most interesting to systematically trace the manifestations of this vital instinct through the various planes of development. For, as Dr. Montessori tells us, development is not linear but unfolds in stages or planes according to the age, which means according to the ruling interests. Everything must change in correspondence to these deep interests which spring from within the developing individual: the environment must change, what the environment contains must change, the role of the adults must change. In essence what this means is change in the kind of work undertaken by the developing individual: from, for example, the work of observation undertaken by the tiny baby through to the participation in adult work by the adolescent.

What is particularly fascinating in the case of the six to twelve year-olds, whose intelligence is thrown outward to embrace the whole of the cosmos and the whole of humanity, whose developmental hunger has to do with understanding the functioning of the world and the functioning of human society, is that not only do they live their work (as do the younger children) but they can also reflect on work itself. They can become consciously aware of work, think about work: the value and importance of all the different forms of work undertaken by all the forces of nature, by all forms of life, by mankind past and present; the value and importance of collaboration in work; the value and importance of work undertaken for the greater good, that is, cosmic work. In this way, the elementary children can develop what I would call a cosmic morality which involves respect for, and gratitude to, nature, life, mankind; respect and gratitude which are most desperately needed at the present time. The greater good, after all, concerns not only human society but the whole of the earth, our one and only planetary home. Children who develop a cosmic morality will feel that deeper responsibility that Montessori speaks about when she says:

(Man) is conscious of his own intellectual and physical needs, and of the claims on him of society and civilization. He believes in fighting for himself, his family and nation, but has yet to become conscious of his far deeper responsibilities to a cosmic task, his collaboration with others in work for his environment, for the whole universe.

(To Educate the Human Potential: Chapter 5 – The Drama of the Ocean)

Conclusion

How is it possible that the child reveals man's deepest instinct to be that of work and yet so many adults find work painful, almost a curse along biblical lines? How is it possible that a fifteen-year-old, for example, when asked what he wanted to do could only reply that he wanted to do whatever would bring wealth and success? An answer which reveals no calling whatsoever to any particular kind of work. The answer could be an error of understanding, of vision. If our vision is only limited to earning a livelihood or to earning as much money as possible, then we may not find congenial work; and no money in the world will be enough to compensate for what Mario Montessori calls forced labour. He says:

A distinction must be made between work and forced labour. The outer appearance may be the same, but the former is of a spirit that finds its expression in activity, whereas the latter is a burden that deadens and crushes any spirituality one may possess and fosters resistance, rebellion, resentment and hatred. Work is the natural function of man, the means to his higher achievements and spiritual development; but it must be work undertaken willingly, not forced labour.

(AMI Communications 1998/4: Keys to the World of the Child)

Unfortunately children, more often than not, are subjected to forced labour throughout their years of education, and the greatest lesson many of them learn is a distaste and repugnance for study and work. The instinct to work then becomes deformed and work comes to be seen only as a means to procuring wealth and success or, to put it another way, a means to power and possessions.

Humanity is made up of both adults *and* children: the adults work on and transform the environment, something which is more than evident from human history; the children can transform humanity itself. But for this to occur the child's work has to be respected as spontaneous work for development, spontaneous work for the gradual acquisition of independence. Therefore education has to be based on natural, normal development, and this requires a fundamental reform of education which only adults can bring about. What is required of the adults is not only their work as builders of the external world but also their work of protecting the moral and spiritual forces that appear with every newborn child.

Dedication

I wish to dedicate this talk to a great worker: to my teacher, co-worker and husband, Camillo Grazzini.

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