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*A Change Within:
Removing Obstacles
to Development*

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A Change Within: Removing Obstacles to Development

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“The child is both a hope and a promise for mankind. If we therefore mind this embryo as our most precious treasure, we will be working for the greatness of humanity”¹

Over 50 years after this statement was first published and almost 100 years after the first Casa dei Bambini was established the full impact of these words have still to be realised amongst ourselves and amongst the many agencies who work on behalf of the child.

This powerful statement lies at the heart of Montessori education as an ‘aid to life’ and demands that those of us who would like to call ourselves educators, parents, teachers, Montessorians, take account of the child as ‘our most precious treasure’ and that education itself take account of the powers of self-construction that lie within the child, if it, (education) is to work for the ‘greatness of humanity’.

Regrettably, today, in spite of all we know about the extra-ordinary creative energies of childhood and adolescence and in spite of the fact that we know much more about the way that life unfolds (as Montessori put it) ‘in all its beauty and potentialities, we have remained blind to it, covered it with words, stifled it with our preconceived ideas’²and then wrapped it up in an educational system which emphasises ‘outcomes’ ‘learning goals’ and ‘standardised tests’.

As David Whyte said:

“Much of our education has been bent towards raising us not as an intricate ecology of qualities, but as a monoculture, where our own internal leaf-moulds are eradicated from our self-identity in the name of drying us out, tidying us up, and making us presentable for the great economic system that awaits us.”³

‘Intricate leaf-moulds’ this is such a beautiful way to describe the ‘wholeness of the human being’.

Our vision is very different; Dr. Montessori put it like this in an article entitled Disarmament in Education written in 1950.

“When we speak of education we are proclaiming a revolution, one in which every thing we know today will be transformed. I think of this revolution as the final revolution; not a revolution of violence but one from which violence is wholly excluded.

What has to be defended is the construction of human normality... this then is education, understood as a help to life; an education from birth, which feeds a

¹ Montessori, Maria. *Education and Peace*. Clío Press (1949/1992) Page 31

² Montessori, Maria. *Child Society and the World: Public Lecture, Paris*. Clío Press (1949/1989) Page 102

³ Whyte, David. *The Heart Aroused (Poetry and the Preservation of the Soul at Work)* London: The Industrial Society 1997 (p245)

peaceful revolution and unites all in a common aim... This is the bright new hope for mankind”⁴

So we are revolutionaries and the banner that we hold high is one that proclaims:

‘Education must defend the construction of human normality so that it can become a help to life.’

Our revolutionary purpose, however, is even greater than that, for we place this aim against a global backdrop giving it a universal dimension.

‘To unite all in a common aim’: this is a call for collaboration across cultures and religious and political boundaries, a call for individuals, communities, countries and nations to unite around their ‘most precious treasure’ - the child. It is a call for collaboration. Your presence here today with representatives from every continent attests to the fact that the revolution has started for we are all here together united in a common aim. All of us, with our ‘intricate ecologies’ and ‘internal leaf-moulds’ have united around the child.

The children stand before us as our ‘hope’ bringing with them an opportunity for humanity to renew itself, an opportunity for change, an opportunity for mankind to progress..... and what do we teach them? To quote Pablo Cassals, we teach them that;

‘2 and 2 are 4 and that Paris is the capital of France!’⁵

We have an approach to education that is capable of nurturing human beings of all nations, cultures and creeds. We have an education that empowers children to take responsibility for themselves and others, to seek out solutions, to face difficulties and overcome them, to work together for the common good. In order to achieve our vision we must turn back and make the child our principal concern. We must act in defence of the child. The child has no choice but to rely on us for this and to do this job well, we have no choice but to get to know ourselves more deeply, that we might better serve the child.

What children need most if they are to achieve their potentiality are adults united in the certainty of their **faith** that children have within them the power of their own self-construction; **humble** enough to believe that children have an enormous capacity to develop into beings far superior to ourselves; **diligent** in the creation of environments that will nurture them; **courageous** enough to give freedom to the individual child while being strong enough to set limits for the group until spontaneous social cohesion takes place; **honest** enough to identify qualities in ourselves that may hinder our abilities to see the child clearly or act supportively. **Patient** enough to let the child unfold according to his own personal developmental trajectory and **hopeful** as we wait for the child to reveal himself. We are gardeners who lovingly tend the soil and watch as each bud opens – to reveal a ‘rose’, a ‘lily’ or even a ‘venus fly-trap’!

(I am reminded of a story of a group of children who were planting seeds. Each child could choose either to plant coriander or fenugreek. One child who chose to plant coriander put in one fenugreek seed unnoticed. When all the seeds germinated he rushed around pointing at the one fenugreek in the midst of his coriander shouting ‘how did it know?’)

Faith, hope, charity, humility, diligence, courage, patience and the tenderness, the thoughtfulness, the watchfulness, the reverence of love.

*The teacher nevertheless has many difficult functions to perform. Her co-operation is not at all excluded but it becomes prudent, delicate, and manifold. She must acquire **a moral alertness** which has not hitherto been demanded by any other system, and this is revealed in her tranquillity, patience,*

⁴ Montessori, Maria. *Disarmament in Education*. Article: AMI Website 1950/2004

⁵ Cassals, Pablo. *Joy, Sorrow and Reflections*. Simon & Schuster

*charity and humility. Not words but virtues are her main qualifications.*⁶
(p151)

Not words but virtues.....

An education that relies on the virtues of the educator! Now, I can imagine what you are thinking! "That sounds so last century". But I am very serious. It is these qualities, with the addition of humour, that we need to develop and strengthen in ourselves if we are to act in defence of the child. Some of you will be thinking: "I have my albums, I know my theory (4 planes, sensitive periods etc.) what do I need virtues for, I should be fine if I just present the materials to the child."

Go back to Dr. Montessori's lectures, pamphlets and books. Dr. Montessori refers to what we have called the virtues of the educator on nearly every page of every book that bears her name. It is these qualities that protect the integrity of the relationship that is built between adult and child.

As education begins from birth, it is not confined to 'school'. And since adults are part of the structure of the child's learning environment from the very beginning of life, they play a vital role, not simply in the education of the human being but in the actual formation of the human personality or as Dr. Montessori described it, in the 'formation of man'.

To know how formative the work we have chosen to do is, can be very daunting. We may have our philosophy and our theories, our materials and our techniques but even with all of these we can feel overwhelmed when confronted with such a grand vision. We can feel lost, unsure of where to begin or where we are going. In seeking security we can focus on one aspect or another but lose sight of the purpose of our work. Without the slightest intention we can reduce our vision to a pale shadow of itself.

Whilst in the process of formation it is vital that children from birth to maturity develop relationships with people who believe in their potential and their greatness.

People who have such faith in the constructive powers of childhood that they believe that:

*"The child is our teacher. Adults must above all be educated to acknowledge this fact so that they may change their behaviour toward the generations that come after them."*⁷

Our capacity to learn from the child gives form and direction to our theories and our techniques. It shapes and enriches our philosophy, making it alive, contemporary and significant. To acknowledge this fact changes our relationship to the child and our understanding of what it means to educate. It removes the child as the 'object' to be educated and places him as the subject, the guide, the principal actor.

Our ability to translate this simple, but profound statement into action must be one of the first steps that we take if we wish to ensure that our imperfect understanding of the role that the adult must play in the education of our most 'precious treasure' does not put obstacles in the way of the child's development.

This altered relationship between adult and child is as startling in its conception as were the theories of Copernicus in the early 1500's.

It is hard for us to understand now, given our current understanding of the cosmos, that there was a time when it was thought that the earth was the centre of the universe and that all celestial bodies, including the sun and the stars revolved around it. Not only was Earth at the centre but Man of all creatures, the most superior. It was a theory that appealed to human nature, a theory that fed the ego of humankind and was therefore very difficult to relinquish.

⁶ Montessori, Maria. *Discovery of the Child*. Clio Press. 1948/1997. Chapter 10, p151.

⁷ Montessori, Maria. *Education and Peace*. Clio Press (1949/1992) Page 37.

*"Of all discoveries and opinions, none may have exerted a greater effect on the human spirit than the doctrine of Copernicus. The world had scarcely become known as round and complete in itself when it was asked to waive the tremendous privilege of being the centre of the universe. Never, perhaps, was a greater demand made on mankind - for by this admission so many things vanished in mist and smoke..... No wonder his contemporaries did not wish to let all this go and offered every possible resistance to a doctrine which in its converts authorized and demanded a freedom of view and greatness of thought so far unknown, indeed not even dreamed of."*⁸

The most important aspect of Copernicus' work was that it forever changed the place of man in the cosmos; no longer could mankind legitimately think his significance greater than other creatures.

In just the same way, whilst accepting responsibility as a model and guide for the child, the adult must accept that he is the self-effacing servant of this marvellous expression of life and not the creator. We must serve the child who comes with such spiritual energy and capacity for self-development, attentively, conscientiously and as carefully and perfectly as we can. If we do not have faith in the powers that lie within the child we will believe that everything depends upon, or is generated by us and this is too great a burden. If we are unable to make this leap of faith, to have faith in the child, to have faith that they will attach themselves to those things that they need from the environment then we may not observe where the child's attention is directed. This is vital, as this direction comes not from the external objects, but from the internal requirements of the developing personality. The more aware, the more watchful we are of these connections between the child's inner and outer worlds, the more we become aware that our observations are not purely practical but have a spiritual dimension to them because, through collecting information, incontrovertible, over time, we become aware that we are observing the inner life of the child. If we do not become attentive to the child in this way then we may not truly believe that they are the masters of their own self construction and if we do not believe this then we shall never be able to give them the **freedom** to make the choices that follow their inner directives. We will place ourselves between the child and their spontaneous activity forever, controlling and mediating their contact with the environment. If however, we can stand back, waiting patiently yet alert and watchful, we should see certain characteristics emerge, common to all children of all races; characteristics which are the basis of all human construction. This attitude with which we attend the child is one of love.

Dr. Montessori was very clear in her insistence that those who chose to work with children must engage in a process of continuous preparation themselves to be with the children. It is vital that children are guided by people who have prepared themselves morally, ethically and spiritually to accompany them along the path of their development.

An education based on virtues demands that we accept responsibility for making those virtues apparent in the way we relate to others. We are faced with a great deal of inner work. Virtues become real and actual through the words and deeds that we espouse in our daily lives. As we develop our moral and ethical compass it will guide us as we become committed to action on behalf of the child. Without action, visible, tangible and real we have no power to transform ourselves in order to serve the child better.

It is helpful to seek to place our actions into the wider context of the processes of the universe.

"Life processes....depend on an immense background of harmonious co-operation that builds up the system... In an ecosystem, plants normally exist in interdependence both with each other and with the animals that eat them, and those animals depend both on one another and on their predators. Even at the chemical level, there is a tendency to form bonds and to move towards greater complexity.

⁸ Goethe

*It is not surprising, then, that conscious life, arising out of such a background, acts in fact in a way that is much more often co-operative than competitive. And when we come to consider social creatures, we see clearly that co-operative motives supply the main structure of their behaviour.*⁹

We need to find a new way of being with our children, one that is based on collaboration and not conflict; one that is based on wonder, reverence and respect for the children and what they bring; one that recognises that this journey, if we wish to make it, must be one of collaboration and involves a life-long process of self-reflection, a continual assessment of our moral and ethical compass in all relationships.

Humanity is one nation and collaboration is the key to removing obstacles to its development. A country in conflict with others today *'is an illness that all of mankind suffers'*¹⁰

Let us resolve to stand in delight at least once in each day and look to see what we can learn from the child. To stand for just a short moment is to see compassion, kindness, co-operation, selflessness, humour, diligence, courage and love.

Do we really believe that the child is our guide and teacher or are we so busy organising the day, the children, the parents, the work cycle that we forget the nature of this new relationship with the child?

Or, in spite of all our knowledge do we still feel that it is the adult's responsibility, even duty, to form the child's mind, to shape the child's personality, to praise and develop the socially acceptable elements of the child's behaviour and to correct and reform the unacceptable! To determine what should be learnt (the curriculum) and how best to transfer the knowledge.

We need to follow a new path, a spiritual path. This path is not one in which the child becomes the object of our attention and teaching rather it is one in which the adult seeks a new relationship, seeks the potential of the child and believes in their greatness.

Dr. Montessori says in 1934

*It is necessary for him (the adult) to learn restraint towards the child. We preach moderation and patience as a basic preparation for the teacher and moderation and patience to all mothers and fathers and to all those who come into contact with children. This moderation will not weaken or spoil the child, but will remove the greatest obstacle to the healthy development of the personality of the child.*¹¹ (21)

It is necessary for us to become the safe harbour from which the child who sets sail on the sea of life can leave and return to whenever they wish. In order to become this safe harbour it is necessary for us to become highly attentive towards the child, attuned to all the clues that their external actions in the world describe. It is only when we are able to observe the small details, that we are able to interpret better the inner motivations of the child.

It is only when we start to learn from the child that we can begin to learn more about ourselves, more about our society and more about humanity itself. It is only when we learn to how to listen to the child, and observe with attention that we find the answers that we have been looking for. It is hard for us to abandon our understanding of children that is so often based on what we have absorbed ourselves from our environment and our past experiences. Unless we develop a better understanding of ourselves, what our past experiences have been and what possible 'prejudices' we

⁹ Midgeley, Mary. *The Ethical Primate*. Routledge 1994

¹⁰ Montessori, Maria. *Education and Peace*. Clio Press. 1949/1992.p25

¹¹ Montessori, Maria. *Basic Ideas of Montessori's Educational Theory*. Clio Press 1934/1997

hold in relation to children we will not understand what influences our actions and therefore will, no matter our good intentions, continue to be an obstacle to the child's development.

If we are to 'mind this embryo as our most precious treasure,'¹² what is it that we must do in practical terms to become effective.

If we are looking for direction we have a three-fold task.

- To pay closer attention to what naturally motivates and guides the child
- To extend our understanding of the principles and practice (the 'tools' we have at our disposal (the prepared environment and the materials that we use within it)
- To develop the art of sustained observation of the children, learning to note what is meaningful and significant.

These three steps are necessary and part of the ongoing work that every collaborator with the child is engaged in, but each of these steps has a counterpart which is needed to ensure that our intentions bear fruit.

- To pay closer attention to what motivates and guides our thoughts and actions.
- To debate our understanding of the principles and practice (the prepared environment and the materials that we use within it)
- To develop the art of observing our own actions and interactions with the children and adults within our daily lives.

To learn more about what naturally motivates and guides the child. Let us choose just one of those creative energies we have been talking about. I would like you to ask yourself these questions.

Do you actually **believe** that the child possesses sensitive periods which help in the task of self construction?

How do you translate this belief into action in your own life?

How does this knowledge inform your responses to the children?

How do you share this knowledge?

In your opinion is knowledge of the sensitive periods relevant to your work? Are they so last century?

Which of the following quotations belongs to Dr. Montessori?

"Thus during development certain critical or sensitive periods occur during which the brain is specifically primed to respond to environmental context and in doing so to acquire particular capacities or behaviours".¹³

The discovery of sensitive periods in the life of a human child, one of the most illuminating chapters of modern biology, is one of the bases of the modern theories of evolution. The young in the course of development have special sensitivities, special impulses which impel them to carry out certain actions which help them in their life. When the aim or purpose is served it disappears and another one takes its place.¹⁴

These early years – perhaps the first four – form a sensitive period for the acquisition of language, as exemplified in the term 'mother tongue'.¹⁵

¹² Montessori, Maria. *Education and Peace*. Clio Press (1949/1992) Page 31

¹³ Rose, Stephen. *The 21st Century Brain*. Jonathan Cape 2005. p115

¹⁴ Montessori, Maria: *Creative Development in the Child (Volume 1)*. Kalakshetra. 1939/1998.p18

¹⁵ Rose, Stephen. *The 21st Century Brain*. Jonathan Cape 2005. p130

The second one was written by Dr. Montessori in 1939. The other two were written by Dr. Stephen Rose in his book 'The 21st Century Brain', published in March 2005.

When was the last time you discussed them with your colleagues, debated their existence and questioned your understanding of them?

When did you last observe them in the children and what were you looking for?

What might the obstacles to development be for the children in relation to this sensitive period in your environment? How would you know?

'Yet, in the environment, the child may find certain obstacles, usually placed there by adults who do not understand the needs of the child. The child, on account of these obstacles cannot develop those things that he needs to develop. Then an adult comes along, who instead of trying to remove the obstacles faced by the child, tries to correct the faults which have arisen in him. This is the eternal story'.¹⁶

Whatever your conclusions - and there are no wrong answers - these urges are all creative energies that we must talk about, discuss and use to inform our practice and extend our knowledge. These discussions need to take place with parents, colleagues, assistants, administrators, auxiliary trainers, trainers, directors of training. They need to be open and enquiring exchanges of views and observations.

To develop the art of observing our own actions and interactions with the children and adults within our daily lives.

In order to do this we must also be open to debate our understanding of the principles and practice.

Dr Montessori's books are a rich source of material to which we should refer as often as possible. I would suggest that each week one phrase or sentence is chosen from one of her books and debated as to its true meaning. For example:

One of the most difficult principles for us to follow is what Dr. Montessori calls her first and most important principle which is that

'every useless help given to the child becomes an obstacle to his development this is not merely philosophy but a fact to which we attach fundamental importance.'¹⁷

And yet in this quotation there is a subtly different emphasis.

'we must give the child all the help he requires, but that which is most noxious to psychic life is the excess of help.'¹⁸

How do you know that the help was unnecessary? Have you ever made a particular observation to see how often unnecessary help is given in a day?

When is it alright to intervene to help a child and when would this be called interference?

Let me give you an example: A small boy, (somewhat of a pest) is suddenly polishing a small hand mirror. He has everything out rather haphazardly, the basket is on the floor and in his enthusiasm he is stepping on the basket from time to time. Do you ignore it or do you gently and quietly help him to pick it up and put it more safely?

¹⁶ Montessori, Maria. *Creative Development in the Child, Volume One*. Kalakshetra Press. 1939/1998. p24

¹⁷ Montessori, Maria. *Creative Development in the Child, Volume One*. Kalakshetra Press. 1939/1998. p15

¹⁸ Montessori, Maria. *Creative Development in the Child, Volume One*. Kalakshetra Press. 1939/1998. p87

In a recent observation that I made, the directress gently, kindly and supportively picked up the basket and placed it on the table. And what was the result? The child quickly and effectively put away the work that he had chosen and was so busily engaged upon.

And so to another dilemma that needs discussion and understanding. Dr. Montessori again gives us apparently contradictory pieces advice. However, with study, discussion and application they become a compass to guide us in our work.

“The teacher’s skill in not interfering comes with practice, like everything else, but it never comes very easily. It means rising to spiritual heights. True spirituality realizes that even to help can be a source of pride”¹⁹

“Non-intervention is justifiable only when something substantial has already intervened in his life, that is when he has acquired the ability to direct all his attention on something and dedicated himself to it.”²⁰

*“Not to interfere (when a child begins to concentrate) means not to interfere **in any way**.....If the teacher merely says ‘Good,’ it is enough to make the trouble break out all over again.”²¹*

As educators we must understand and know the limits of our intervention, if we are to be of real help in the child’s development.

‘As educators we must find orientation for our actions, in the needs of the child. Only then does that beautiful and necessary sentiment of humility begin to arise in our souls so that we can ask ourselves how to help, rather than become obstacles to development’²²

How can we help ourselves not to help the child? Many of us find difficulty in this. How do we stand back and watch the child struggle, how do we know when the struggle is too much for the child and they need help? All these questions need to be talked about, discussed experienced and observed. A few guidelines:

- do not do for the child what they can already do.
- observe first, act second.
- observe other children for they tend to offer each other the right amount of help.
- If adults substitute themselves for the child in all the acts the child wishes to perform, then the adult becomes ‘the greatest obstacle to the development and evolution of the child’²³

With regard to the child’s use of the material and your responses.

“The material for development is necessary only as a starting point. The material part does not contain the impress of the whole soul, any more than the impress of the foot is the impress of the whole body.”²⁴

“teach teaching not correcting”²⁵

“The objects should be used in a way that has some relation to development to be achieved by the child. Now by this we do not mean prejudicially, that the child should only use the objects in the way we think they should be used. When the

¹⁹ Montessori, Maria. *The Absorbent Mind* Clio Press. 1949/1988 Page 254

²⁰ Montessori, Maria. *The Child in the Family*. Clio Press

²¹ Montessori, Maria. *The Absorbent Mind* Clio Press. 1949/1988 Page 255

²² Montessori, Maria. *Creative Development in the Child, Volume One*: Kalakshetra, 1939/1998 p16

²³ Montessori, Maria. *Creative Development in the Child, Volume One*: Kalakshetra, 1939/1998 p28

²⁴ Montessori, Maria. *Advanced Montessori Method Volume I*. Clio Press page81

²⁵ Standing, EM. *Maria Montessori Her Life and Work* Plume 1957/1984 page 219

*child uses the material for mental development, no matter how he uses it, it is right*²⁶

“Our aim then must be ‘to teach the action and at the same time destroy the possibility of imitation’²⁷

- be wary of the fail-safe, catch all presentation that does not leave room for the child to struggle or to reveal their own particular orientation towards the material presented.
- be simple, precise, engaging but non-present.
- present in order for the child to be led towards repetition.

With regard to the freedom of the child?

*What is the freedom of the child? Freedom is **attained** when the child can grow by his own inner laws, in accordance with the needs of his development. The child is free when has gained independence from the oppressive energy of the adult.*

Work is the cornerstone of freedom. The freedom of our children has as its limit the community, for freedom does not mean doing what one wants, but being master of oneself.²⁸

Perhaps the issue of freedom is the most important and most misunderstood. We walk a tightrope in this respect and often fall off! Freedom is something that the children gain and achieve as they become able to direct themselves towards constructive activities, limits are required for children to attain this freedom. Another important reflection that needs visiting and revisiting both personally and collectively amongst those working with children

I would like to read you a short poem and then ask you, for a moment to think about what I have said and see if there is one thing that found resonance within you and that you will make a resolve to do.

*‘He who would have beautiful roses in his garden
Must have beautiful roses in his heart.
He must love them well and always.
He must have not only the glowing admiration,
the enthusiasm, and the passion, but the tenderness,
the thoughtfulness, the reverence,
the watchfulness of love.’²⁹*

(Music played)³⁰

*‘Man needs spiritual tranquillity and peace; he needs light.
Who can offer him a little light’³¹*

Let’s take up the challenge to develop ourselves so that we remove as many obstacles to the development of the human spirit as we are able.

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²⁶Maria Montessori : Creative Development in the Child, Volume One: Kalakshetra, 1939/1998 p16

²⁷ Standing, EM. *Maria Montessori Her Life and Work*. Plume 1957/1984 page 218

²⁸ Montessori, Maria. A New Education: ‘The Foundations of My Pedagogy’ *Basic Ideas of Montessori’s Educational Theory*. Clio Press. 1934/1997

²⁹ Hole, Dean Samuel Reynolds. Horticulturalist; Founder the Horticultural Rose Society. (Quotation courtesy Rob Gueterbock)

³⁰ Menhuin, Yehudi & Shankar, Ravi. *West Meets East. Track 1 Prabhati*. BGO Records. BGOCD445

³¹ Montessori, Maria. *Education and Peace (1949/1992)* Clio Press, Page 86