

THE CHILD, OUR MASTER¹

Maria Montessori

I have received so many proofs of affection from you all, even of admiration. I am most certainly profoundly grateful for them and also reciprocate them wholeheartedly. At all our meetings, we see many faithful apostles. Many of them have given their intelligence to our work to which they have devoted their lives. There also always are many new persons who come to these meetings having heard about me or about new methods of education. All of them bear witness to their conviction that our work is great the worthy, as if my life would continue for ever and not last only the few years which are left to me.

If, for instance, I were to live like some biblical personages, for 900 years, all this would go on for still a very long time. I am certainly most grateful and also touched, but also a bit disillusioned. I am a bit like someone who—and just imagine for how many years already—does all in his power to indicate something. Can you understand how I feel when I find that everyone looks at me and at my finger with which I point towards that something? All talk about me and comment on my finger. It seems to me that they should be talking about something very essential. If, instead of looking at me and my finger, talking and writing about me and my finger, people would only look at what I am trying to indicate. They would all of a sudden become aware that this is not in the first place a method of education, nor a new philosophy, but something much greater than these.

What I am trying and have during the whole of my life been trying to indicate is a FACT, a great and grandiose fact! If I could still see that people would stop looking at me and would look at the fact, I could die in peace. If my finger were to indicate a path of great practical value which really exists in this world, that seems to be losing itself, do you not understand what emotion and anxiety I feel when I observe whether or not people notice that which I point out?

How can they really think that it matters to me whether I am compared to some great figure: Pestalozzi, or Froebel, Dante or

Michelangelo? What does it matter whether people compare this method with other methods? What does it matter whether one criticizes or the other praises? What does it matter whether one decides to follow this one and another that one?

What does matter and what may seem to be a criticism on my part, something perhaps not very agreeable, is to see whether the moment has not come at last when those who take an interest in our work and who, themselves, work for it have succeeded in saying: "Let us go out of the schools; let us all go in procession into the world and proclaim that the child opens to us a new gateway which it lies in our hands to throw open for the benefit of the world!"

And this IS a fact!

Yet, this fact remains hidden when people continue looking at us; when they run after us, whether with praise or with criticism. Instead, they should be going after the Truth, the Truth which is this great force, this rich treasure that really exists in the unknown soul of the child!

We proclaim something that is not only useful, but necessary in our world and our times. The soul of the child has revealed itself at the right moment when it can serve practically and really all the great needs of this unhappy humanity which is mature, which stands at great heights and has done miraculous things, and, yet, begins to understand that something in it is broken; that something is lacking. It is the best part that is lacking: the part of the children. All forces, all energies have been harnessed by humans, but the force and energy of the soul of the child has been left out, is ignored and by ignorance oppressed.

The child is not merely the beginning of a human body, nor only the beginning of a human soul. The child is the point where all that the human being really is and is meant to be can be revealed—even easily and in a beautiful way.

This is my philosophy about which people talk so much while looking at me and not at what I point out. This is my optimism which some consider so touching. This is my 'illusion' so many refuse to share. This is the greatness of my heart about which so many sentimentalities are spoken. This is what we must learn and penetrate, understand profoundly and when we start doing so we

are nearly safe. Then we can discover that there is something more and something different at our disposal which we can take up and utilize. Then we shall really be all together and then we can really unite and work for mankind.

Already, as a result of whatever we have been able to do, we have discovered that the child is really a Master to us. He is not a teacher because a teacher is someone who teaches. If you say that the child is a teacher, everyone especially the teachers, will come and say: "We can give better lessons than he!" Let us not be confused. The child teaches by his life and shows and reveals something to us that is very clear and easy, but also something we cannot find out by ourselves. All that the child has shown to us is immensely useful for US, not for the child. We all too readily say: "Oh, how beautiful to be a good helper for children, to try and help their life" and think of ourselves and how wonderful we are to try and help the child. It certainly is very beautiful and also very necessary to help the child, but, excuse me, look at something else also.

The child is a Master. This is the truth we try to indicate and this is the fact we point out. This is not just an idea. If this were just an idea, then what right have we to criticize those who consider it absurd, exaggerated, impossible? This is certainly not an idea of mine. This is a discovery. This discovery would and should help all to share with us. Man has not yet made this discovery. Man still sees only the weakness of the child. But, in humans from the very beginning of life there exists a great force which we should and must utilize. This force is equal in all the children of the world. You can find it in the children of kings and in those of beggars, in one nation as well as in any other, in one civilization and in another. Everywhere, where there are children, you can find this force. All children reveal a great creative force; all embody it and give body to it. All reveal this creative force within the womb as they develop, outside the womb, as they nurse and as they move, walk and speak.

All children also give another revelation: they reveal that all human beings are equal. Look at the adult world and all the difficulties it has to accept this Truth and to live according to it! Naturally, all grown up humans are each different from the other, yet each one also has the foolish idea that he is better than the other, that the

world revolves around him. All these grown up people, those with good will and those without, are different towards each other; they fail to understand each other. But, they do proclaim—this is an idea, you see—they do proclaim the principle of equality and of union.

The child is the living DEMONSTRATION, the living demonstration of this fact. This, then is also a great revelation of human life at its beginning. All humans are, at this initial phase and moment, one. All the children also become adult humans by means of their own activity and under the direction they receive from the Creator, not from us. If we were children's sole guides, we would guide them with our blindness! We may perhaps say that it is a grace of God that at this early moment the child cannot understand us and can escape from us. Everyone agrees that early childhood is a beautiful age, a glorious age. Yes, so childhood is, but also because then the child can escape from us! And, when it can escape, well, or better still, when we consciously help it lead its own life with all the means at our disposal, it can take what it needs. Then, what does it do? Then it fulfils its mission! Recognize this well! Each child does not only have within self a great creative force, a fiercely burning fire and a brilliantly shining light, it also has a MISSION.

Nothing in nature is done without some purpose, without some mission to accomplish. And the child, who is the same in every part of the world and at all times, has a mission too. The child's mission is to build up man, any man, all human beings. And these children, at this stage of life, are, in a way, 'neutral.' We speak about neutrality and say: "I am neutral with regard to this or that, or perhaps even to everything"! "I do not consider this or that difference." Look out, perhaps you do not consider anything at all! But, the child is neutral; the child can become anything; the child is open to everything and to all and all children, at the beginning of life are like that. Children at the beginning of life are all equal, but in a positive, a constructive and an active sense. Children at the beginning of life are not indifferent, but enthusiastic; they are open and on this foundation they build themselves and can build a better world and a better human society.

One more revelation we must mention. (If we mentioned all, one Conference, one Course would not be sufficient and not

many of them either.)

The child has also revealed that work is not tiring and not something to be avoided or replaced or done to a minimum. The child has revealed that work of the mind, of the hand—is a vital necessity in order to be strong. When we adults think that work is something that tires, something which consumes our strength, then we think along lines different from the reality which the child has revealed. Nowadays, in the adult world, we see men even fighting to work less and earn more.

Now, look at the child: he says: “My life is work.” The child says: “It is by work that I grow rich not materially, but in the reality I am with riches nobody can take from me, and I can give to others without ever growing poorer.” Everyone asks my children: “Are you not tired?” These people say: “I am tired.” If the child could speak to us about himself, he would say: “Poor humanity, poor people! They are starved for lack of work; they are in a most dangerous condition.” The child says: “Work and be interested in something! Give all your strength to something; then you will find both strength and peace...” But, this seems paradoxical to adults.

Yet, in reality this is the life of the child.

There are many more things the children have revealed to us, too many to speak them here. But we can already see a new world, can we not? Go to it; look at the child. Take the revelations of the child and respect them. Help children learn from themselves. Acknowledge that the child also has a mission, that we, adults need the child’s comprehension. Then you will feel new hope in your hearts and a beautiful, very real vision in front of your eyes. Your vision also will not be confined within the walls of one of my Houses of the Children, even if beyond those walls there is a lovely garden, a play ground and so forth. You will see beyond.

Of course, we have great work to do in these Houses of Children and in education but not there only. There we take help and revelations, but then we must go out into the world of adults and spread them there. Go along the path that the child shows and you will find all you are seeking and can give others what they are seeking: the realization, the reality of many ideals the adult world has carried in its heart for millennia, but has been unable to realize.

The Child lives these things: the unity of all men, great and indefatigable work for the well being of all men, a constructive, conquest of the whole world and all it contains, a perspective wherein all differences find their proper place and cease to divide.

We cannot hope to obtain all this from a Declaration of the Rights of Humans. No, we cannot hope to acquire this from a declaration at all, but only from the nature of the soul of the child and from the ideals and revelations that we cherish in our heart. Yet, we, without the child, are incapable of realizing these ideals. So, for this reason, I always say that and continue saying that the child is a great helper to go to; then we can go forward to make a better world, a world where the warmth and brilliance of love will dispel the darkness of hatred.

We are not talking about the child who goes about smiling, playing and amusing us. We are not talking about the child who does what pleases us. No, we are talking about a Helper who has a great mission and from whom we can take something very precious, a path that was not traced by adults, but by the Creator to Whom the child is so near. Then go, all of you adults and find that path. Let us go together with this bright and strong hope. Go into the world with it and spread these revelations of children. May this be your mission as it is mine! Let us be and remain united therein and give ourselves to it, warmed and strengthened and guided by deep and ever growing love for the child as the hearer of this message, the revealer of these truths!

Notes

¹ Maria Montessori gave this talk as the concluding address to the IX International Montessori Congress held in London, 19 May 1951. The organizer of the Congress was Phyllis Wallbank. It is being published here with permission from Mrs. Wallbank.