

The Child's Place in Society - Maria Montessori, 24th Annual Conference of Educational Associations, 1936

I know that in this country the child is held in high esteem and is better cared for than in other countries. It would be difficult to find any point to which attention has not already been drawn. I am not here to talk to you on the subject of technique. I am one who is proud to admit that I have been led onwards and upwards by the child himself: he has always appeared to me as a guiding star. We are here tonight to consider him from quite another point of view, and then to determine his place in society. I come rather to try to explain the great majesty of the child and the supreme hope that comes to us from him.

Let us for a moment consider him from a more practical point of view, i.e., the child as a living being in the midst of life. I have always considered him thus, an individual who has vital needs which must be considered and those vital needs include a close study of his environment.

This is the basis of the whole biological conception.

In the biological conception the aim to be reached is an environment in which exists the most favorable means necessary to the life of the individual, but this conception is limited and seems to be a scientific and egotistical point of view. In fact we may ask ourselves, 'Why does the individual live?' Sciences which deal with life cover a larger section and consider the matter from a wider point of view. We all know the conception that Geology holds today.

Life does not merely allow beings to enjoy their environment; living beings do not just derive benefits for their own advantage from the environment; in the geological conception we have a clear demonstration that they contribute to the construction of the environment itself. The individual is an indispensable element in that which makes the existence of the universe possible; he contributes to the maintenance of the universe by his work and activity, and this is the purpose of his life. By work I mean the cooperation of all vital activities which, when combined, produce harmony and order in the universe. Geologists consider this a cosmic energy. For instance is it not true that the coral reefs are built up by the coral insects? These require a certain amount of heat and water continually renewed, a certain pressure as a condition of their existence, but they produce by their work a mass of hard substance which serves to protect them, but it is larger and out of all proportion to their needs; in fact they build islands and continents. The same can be said of shell fish, and in almost every expression of life there is a motive which is greater and deeper than the needs of the individual. If we say motives represent a cosmic work then we must admit that man also takes his part in cosmic construction.

Certainly man is essentially in his nature a worker; the earliest traces of the appearances of man on earth are not skeletons but those of his hewing. There must be in man a powerful urge which compels him to accomplish a lofty work which is not that of merely keeping alive; and this fundamental urge is the center of his life, and there is a need in man to investigate and thus acquire knowledge of all around him to a much greater extent than would satisfy his vital needs.

From this we see that the aim is not to reach a balance between man's needs and his environment; on the contrary, the fact that strikes with almost overwhelming force is the disproportion between the two as we already see in our shell fish simile. It is through reasoning that one arrives at this conclusion that in man

there exists this strong urge toward work, but we also have tangible proof of the fact in the psychology of the child. If our Montessori work has been of value, it is because it has revealed to us 'Man As The Worker'. We had to prepare a favorable environment, full of all necessary means for his living and then leave him free to act in it. It is interesting to note that the child did not use his liberty merely to experience enjoyment from the environment, neither did he behave as one who hated restrictions, but he manifested himself as one fascinated, attracted to concentrated work. When he found himself in a suitable environment he burst forth into work, as a spring of water suddenly released. He repulsed many of the conditions that stood for individual satisfaction; he discarded all aids and did not seek for rest, but asked for more and more work. He took from the environment for himself only that which was purely necessary for his existence, and he merged himself in the fascination of a work of his own selection, without rest, moved by his own urge. Through this phenomenon there came a complete transformation of the child, a new kind of child was revealed - one full of joy and at the same time orderly and calm, thus providing happier social relations with all his companions irrespective of their age. Not only was this beneficial to his mentality, but also to his physical health. It was as if another nature had arisen and come to the surface.

We saw then that it was through 'work' that the normality of man revealed itself to us. It is not an environment which merely offers an individual satisfaction which is necessary, nor one satisfying all the exigencies of physical hygiene, nor one that offers play or dissipations, nor one that entertains the mind in brilliant fantasy, nor one that seduces by the warmth of affection - all this is not sufficient; in order to call forth from the deep 'normality' work is necessary.

This 'work' goes beyond all needs of the child himself, and it reminds us of these other creatures we have already mentioned whose 'work' exceed their needs. This need for a similar reorientation with regard to 'work' has been pointed out to us by the child, so he has indeed taught us some fundamental secret which concerns humanity. Through him we have been able to decipher something clearly written in the soul of man which had not been seen before. It is then clear that the child - the creature from which we have sprung - contains intact the directive principles of human life which we have lost.

Were the child our teacher he would say that we were mistaken in believing that we do everything for our own satisfaction. We really do it impelled by that inner urge which goes beyond our individual needs because we have a cosmic finality to which we must contribute.

Instead, man has made himself the center and aim of his work, he has considered it done for his personal satisfaction and from this conception arises the tragic conflict of human existence.

In this profound error, this giving exclusively egotistical aims to the enormous environment which he has built up, man has forgotten the child, he has omitted to build an environment suitable to its needs, and has forgotten to establish conditions of freedom for the child.

We have worked for our own liberation and yet we have forgotten to liberate the child; we have forgotten to frame laws for him, he is the forgotten citizen. The child must also have an environment of his own, acquire his own freedom - this is the foundation of all social questions. We must consider the child from a loftier point of view and to do this we need not remain in the field of ideals only; on the contrary we must consider the child as he really is - as the active builder and not only the germ of man. He is as it were a worker in a mighty construction, that being the cosmic mission entrusted to him - the construction of humanity itself.

He is working under the guidance of an interior directive and it is the adult which is to him this aid of his work. Therefore we say 'The Child is the Father of Man'. Hence we see the importance of the child and not only his weakness; he is indeed a force, a source of life on which we depend.

He might be compared to a spring of ever clear water renewing continuously the enormous flux of humanity. We should do well to remember our own need of refreshment occasionally! Why is human life so short? And why so enormous the 'work' which continues to evolve throughout the centuries? 'Work' requires new life, life which is always fresh and which keeps intact in itself the impression of creation.

Man cannot have a greater interest in the care of his own origin than that of his own constructor and of his successor who will carry on the 'work' he leaves behind him. So it is to the child we owe the continuation of humanity and from him we must look for the rebirth of our lost normality.