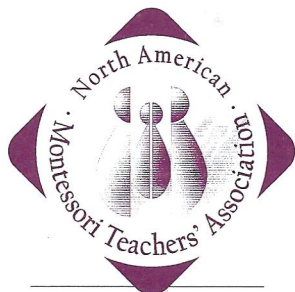


# THE NAMTA BULLETIN



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## Individuality, Sociability, and Peace

by Annette Haines

In 1932, Dr. Maria Montessori, when asked to speak on the subject of peace, said:

To ask anyone to speak on peace would appear quite foreign to our time, since we think today that nobody is worth listening to on any subject unless he is a specialist.... How strange it is therefore that there exists no science of peace.... Great numbers of people devote their lives to the study of the hidden causes of natural cataclysms, such as earthquakes, which mankind is powerless to overcome.... But it can be asserted without hesitation that no research study of peace, even of the rudimentary character, has been undertaken. (*Peace and Education* 3-4)

And so it is even today.

### From Individuality to Sociability to Peace

The child's task of self-construction is twofold. Its first task is the development of the individual, but equally important is the construction of the social human, that is, the individual in society. This task, the task of the development of the individual and the construction of human-in-society, begins at birth and continues throughout childhood in increasingly widening contexts. As Ashley Montagu has said, "Man is related to himself only insofar as he is related to others.... To love is to relate oneself to others. Life is social and man is born to be social, that is a cooperative and interdependent part of a whole, a working interacting part of a community" (cited in Warner & Rosenberg 48).

A dictionary definition of *individuality* is "total character peculiar to and distinguishing one individual from another." At first, at birth, there is no individuality in the sense of a self, an ego. If human beings are ever alike, they are alike at birth. Montessori suggests that the baby is like an ego asleep, a spiritual embryo, entering a second gestation in the outer world, "waiting to incarnate a spirit whose seeds are only latent and unconscious within him" (*Education and Peace* 17). In order to create this self-to-be, the infant must relate immediately to another human being.

The infant is born with drives whose urgency is directed toward relating himself to others and having others relate to him. The first infantile impulses, to root and suck, to grasp and smile, to gaze and cuddle closely in the mother's arms, are precisely those needed to establish and maintain an emotional closeness. In sequential and characteristic patterns of touch and eye-to-eye contact, the mother and newborn reconfirm their union. And in the first days, mother and child are entwined in this synchronized symbiosis whereby the infant comes to understand the world as a comfortable and positive place.

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The great achievements of humankind—the cathedral at Chartres, a person on the moon, and so forth—represent a combination of individual achievement and group collaboration in the pursuit of something of lasting beauty and significance.

It is in the context of this relationship with the mother that the infant develops a sense of self. Attachment, the forming of affectional ties to one significant person, binds the child and adult together in space and time. With consistent and loving care within the family, the baby acquires a sense of security based on positive experiences in the early months and from this secure base will begin to actively explore the environment. This increased emotional independence parallels the child's increased physical independence as he or she begins crawling and walking.

If the child learns to trust, by three years of age he will be able to employ all his previously developed skills, move out into the world, and cut those same bonds, those same "oedipal apron strings" (Schiamberg 48) he worked to tie so tightly. In a safer, more idyllic age, perhaps, children of two and a half or three years of age would "play together in the street, in the farmyard or in the garden" (Montessori, Unpublished lectures, London 79). Today little children everywhere still let their mothers know, in one way or another, that they need the society of other children.

Yet watch these little children. They do not play *together*; they play *next* to each other. Nature has wisely provided this time of "solitary play" or "parallel play" (as the psychologists call it) because "the first essential of the child's development" is not play at all! It is "concentration" (Montessori, *The Absorbent Mind* 222). Concentration is what lays the basis for the development of an individual's character and subsequent social behavior.

I have studied this phenomenon of concentration closely. Allow me to read you a bit of what Dr. Montessori had to say on the subject. She suggested that a child concentrates when she focuses her attention, her energies, on a single exercise, a single work, "where the movements of the hands are guided by the mind" (*The Secret of Childhood* 149). Further, Montessori said that given "an environment favorable to the child's spiritual growth," the child "will suddenly fix his attention upon an object, will use it for the purpose for which it was constructed, and will continue to repeat the same exercise indefinitely" (*Spontaneous Activity in Education* 153).

And with concentration, she said, the majority of children grow calm. Their "nervous systems rest" (*The Discovery of the Child* 314). "They only move their hands when they work. A child who concentrates does not disturb others" (Unpublished lectures, London 123). When children find objects that interest them, "disorder disappears in a flash and the wanderings of their minds are at an end" (*Secret* 157).

"When a child concentrates," she said, "his character is changed. It is as though he had taken off a mask" (Unpublished lectures, London 121). "It is as though a connection has been made with an inner power or with the subconscious and this brings about the construction of the personality" (124). It is concentration of power which gives strength, and whatever means that provoke this concentration ... become a means of building up of character" ("The Organization of Intellectual Work in School" 28).

"Concentration connects the exercises with something inside. If the creative energies of a child ... are disconnected, broken, concentration brings a new connection which results in normality" (Unpublished lectures, London 118). "When this spiritual connection is made, all the powers in the individual will function, all the little lights in the individuality begin to shine. When we have obtained this," she said, "we are at the starting point" (Unpublished lectures, Poona 128).

The children are then orderly and have a harmonious discipline, a discipline in which each has different interests. It is different from the discipline of a

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soldier, with forced obedience, when all have to do the same thing at the same moment. This is a social discipline, and it brings people into harmony with each other (Unpublished lectures, Poona 126).

*Sociability* is defined as “the quality or state of being sociable”; *sociable* means “inclined by nature to companionship with others of the same species.” *Homo sapiens* are social animals. The recluse may choose to live alone, and great insights and inventions may occur as a result of this isolation, but it is in group cooperative work that these same insights and inventions become a reality. The great achievements of humankind—the cathedral at Chartres, a person on the moon, and so forth—represent a combination of individual achievement and group collaboration in the pursuit of something of lasting beauty and significance.

Jon Osterkorn defined socialization as “the process by which each individual acquires the knowledge and dispositions that enable him to participate as an effective member of a social group in a given social order” (12). A cohesive society rests not on personal wishes but on a combination of activities that have to be harmonized. The ground rules act to harmonize the children’s combination of activities within the given social order of the *Casa dei Bambini*. Each child is free, for instance, to choose what helps him to construct himself according to his developmental task at each stage; yet there is only one specimen of each object. So if the Pink Tower is in use and the child wants to use it, he will have to wait for it to be put back on the stool before he can take it for himself. Children are free to use a particular piece of material for as long or as short a period of time as they wish. So the waiting child develops patience, a respect for the work of others, and the idea of waiting one’s turn. Morality comes from everyday experience as, day after day, year after year, “the idea of respecting others and of waiting one’s turn becomes a habitual part of life which always grows more mature” (Montessori, *Absorbent 224*).

Another ground rule of the prepared environment is that each material must be returned to its appropriate place on the shelf so that it is “ready for the next person.” Even the youngest children are asked to wipe up their spills and replace their chairs under the tables. Each begins to apprehend that he or she has something to contribute to the care of the environment—and this not only enhances the child’s respect for the other’s right to work but is a germinal impulse towards a spirit of community that grows during the preschool years.

Children are free to move and talk, to choose their friends, and to make their own work partnerships within the mixed-age group. Because of the easy availability of a large number of individual differences, there are no inferiority complexes; envy is unknown; the small child understands that she too will come to be able to do all these wonderful things when she is bigger. Given a large enough group, a child can always find someone to work with who is at his or her own level of development.

So individual differences are understood for what they are and individuals are appreciated for their differences. Through this daily give and take, this inter-communication, a kind of cohesion grows, a cementing of the class by affection.

An evident sense of community, of harmony, then, can be seen in the *Casa dei Bambini* as each little individual goes about his or her own “work.” This social microcosm seems to be united more by the unconscious absorbent mind than it does by a conscious effort. Yet each individual acts as “a cooperative and interdependent part of a whole, a working interacting part

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of a community" (Ashley Montagu, cited in Warner & Rosenberg 48). It is as if the formation of a society goes through an embryonic phase in the period from three to six. Little by little, the children become aware of forming a community and come to feel a part of a group to which their activity contributes. They begin to take an interest in this community and work on it profoundly.

Once they have reached this level, the children no longer act thoughtlessly but put the group first and try to succeed for its benefit. This unity, born among the children in the prepared environment, which seems to be produced by a spontaneous need, directed by an unconscious power, and vitalized by a social spirit, is what Montessori called "cohesion in the social unit" (*Absorbent* 232). Together the children form new bonds, building upon the first bonds with the mother and family but extending to a larger "family" of peers. This cohesion forms the "warp" on which is later woven the "woof" of law, producing the fabric of society (236).

The prepared environment of the *Casa dei Bambini* is designed to offer The World to the young child as he steps from the close-knit family unit into the larger but equally protective and nurturant society of the classroom:

- The Sensorial materials offer the qualities of the world.
- Practical Life offers a "hands-on" history of the child's culture.
- The areas of Language and Mathematics offer the greatest human accomplishments, the language of communication and the language of invention.
- Geography is presented with globes, puzzle maps, cards, pictures, and stories, and offers the child a view of the world based on the Needs of Humans.

Thus the concept of community becomes more universal as the child learns about other countries, other peoples, other cultures—that those interesting individual differences are a result of the marvelous ingenuity of human beings. The child sees that although people all over the world may eat, travel, find shelter, dress and decorate themselves, sing and play in various ways, they have the same basic needs and desires as he has. The Montessori approach is based on respect for the worldwide community of humanity. The child in the *Casa dei Bambini* is introduced to a yet larger "family"—the family of humanity—and the ripples of social cohesion spread outward.

This is an idea whose time has come. Our planet, with our continuing help, is shrinking fast. We travel anywhere on the globe in a matter of hours. We see ourselves from space—and know that the tiny, shining, beautiful blue and gray sphere, which is our world and upon which we depend for life, is dangerously unstable: politically, economically, and ecologically.

We are not only social animals, but unfortunately we can be aggressive animals—so much so that some theorists have suggested that aggression is programmed deep in our DNA. This would almost seem the case since, from the beginning of time, no human society (that we know of) has been able to achieve an absence of violence.

In the modern era, we have progressed to the point that, as a result of our incredible inventive intelligence and ingenuity, that violence now takes on increasingly frightening dimensions. At the beginning of a new millennium, when all of us had thought the so-called Cold War was over, we see turmoil in the Middle East, Bosnia, Ireland, Iraq, and Indonesia, human rights violations in Africa and China—and on and on. Humanity still faces the very real

possibility of nuclear, biological, or chemical annihilation. As Montessori understood, an absence of war does not insure peace.

But what is social life, if not solving social problems, behaving properly, and pursuing aims acceptable to all? The children in the Montessori prepared environment live in an active community that prepares them for the next stage, the conscious phase of social development that occurs during the elementary years. From the limited world of the *Casa dei Bambini*, the children grow in social awareness and reach out into the dual environment of the Elementary Class in an ever-broadening spiral.

*Peace* is defined as both “a state of tranquility or quiet” and “harmony in personal relations.” Children in the Children’s House play a game called The Silence Game. It is a group game, in which each child tries to sit absolutely still—to make no sound at all—so that all together we can *create* something. If you try this exercise you will find yourself (as you try to sit very still) gradually becoming much more aware of your breathing. You begin to sense the back of the seat against your spine, your feet on the floor. You become suddenly very aware of yourself. You feel a minor discomfort, an itch perhaps, but you hesitate to scratch, sniff, clear your throat, or readjust your position because everyone would hear. It is so quiet now you would ruin it for everyone. Time passes and you forget your discomforts as you begin to notice little things that previously had been below your threshold of awareness: the clock ticking, birds singing outside, voices from other rooms. As you become quieter, stiller, more aware, you gradually begin to feel a *light and rare tranquility*. The silence deepens, becomes palpable....

One of the classics of world literature is Goethe’s *Faust*, the story of a man who sells his soul to the devil. At the outset, Faust wants to experience everything, to live without limits. He wants to read all the books, speak all the languages, taste all life’s pleasures. He wants to be like God, going beyond human limitations. So the devil gives him everything he wants—women, wealth, travel, and power. Faust does it all, but he is still not happy. There is still an unsatisfied hunger within him.

“What we need,” said Montessori, “is a world full of miracles” (*Peace and Education* 27). And she found a miracle in the simple figure of the little child who showed her what productive powers lay latent in the soul of the human being. The secret of childhood was the revelation of humanity’s fundamental instincts: When allowed to develop naturally, children demonstrate a love of work and a love of the environment. The love that most of us experience is a kind of love that causes us to be attached to others. But Montessori felt that this was a passing love. Another kind of love, a love that does not change, that does not die, comes naturally to children. “It is ... the essential fire in man, without which he cannot live. It is not simply tender affection.... I have called it ‘love for one’s environment’” (*Education and Peace* 106).

This love of the environment, according to Montessori, is the energy behind all of humanity’s progress and the source of social evolution. It inspires humans to learn, to study, and to work. She felt that if the adult had not taken a wrong path during the growing years, he or she would have a natural love for the environment and a love of work.

Montessori felt that our modern age, our time, represented a time of crisis, a period of passage from one era to another comparable only to the opening of a new biological or geological period in which new conditions of life would be realized that have never existed before (*Peace and Education* 30). Today, new knowledge in the fields of physics, microbiology, chemistry, and genetics is available to anyone who has the time and (perhaps) the patience to access

it on the Internet. We talk of the “information age,” and information, per se, is amoral, morally neutral. Montessori warned us, “If the sidereal forces are used blindly by men ... in view of destroying one another, the attempt will speedily be successful in doing so, because the forces at man’s disposal are infinite and accessible to all” (30).

The natural boundaries of mountains, deserts, and seas no longer limit the human being, “now that he can fly over them,” she wrote (*Peace and Education* 30). In this new age, laws and treaties will not be enough; the limits will have to come from within. For this, we desperately need a fundamental change in education: one that can contribute to the formation of individuals and their personalities, for “the child who has never learned to act alone, to direct his own actions, to govern his own will, grows into an adult who is easily led and must always lean upon others” (30).

Dr. Montessori, living through a period of great war, tyranny, and oppression, grappled with fundamental questions of humanity and society, and asked herself how education might best enhance our hopes for a world of peace:

How can the idea of individual freedom and that of life in society be reconciled, since the latter is fraught with restrictions that force the individual to obey the laws of the collectivity? The same problem, the same apparent contradiction seems to characterize our every day life in society. Yet freedom is the necessary foundation of organized society. Individual personality could not develop without individual freedom. (*Education and Peace* 121)

With all our ingenuity, humans have mastered the earth and created a new world. But in the process, we have lost ourselves. According to Erich Fromm:

Our moral problem is man’s indifference to himself. It lies in the fact that we have lost the sense of the significance and uniqueness of the individual, that we have made ourselves into instruments for purposes outside ourselves, that we experience and treat ourselves as commodities, and that our own powers have become alienated from ourselves. We have become things and our neighbors have become things. The result is that we feel powerless and despise ourselves for our impotence.... We have no conscience in the humanistic sense, since we do not dare trust our judgment. We are a herd believing that the road we follow must lead to a goal since we see everybody else on the same road. (249)

By the end of Goethe’s play, Faust is an old man. Instead of engaging in fisticuffs and dalliances, he is at work building dikes to reclaim land from the sea for people to live and work on. Instead of trying to be like God, he has now become like God, separating the water from dry land, planting gardens and setting people to work on them:

To wisdom’s final fruit profoundly true  
Of freedom and life he only is deserving,  
Who daily conquers them anew. (340)

The tragedy of Faust, of course, is that, for him, it is too late.

Montessori saw the possibility of a new kind of education: an education that would begin at birth, an education that, rather than merely helping children adapt to what presently exists, rather than helping them accommodate, would

allow for the formation of individuals who are adaptive to human concerns, individuals with the critical insight and awareness necessary to penetrate ideology and ensure a more responsive culture. She understood that peace could not be taught through a curriculum. She understood that a "New Age" would not emerge from meditation or peak experiences. A peaceful society cannot not be built on a foundation that does not seek to integrate body, mind, and spirit.

What the world needs—and soon—is *whole* men and women: not mutilated persons, but individuals who can work with their hands, their heads, and their hearts. I have seen some of these *whole* men and women that Montessori spoke of—and they are the same children who grew up in our schools and are now just becoming adults. Their life is already superior to ours. And their lives will reach a higher level—I believe this.

The children can still show us the way.

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