

PRACTICAL LIFE FROM THE SECOND PLANE TO THIRD PLANE: ORIENTATION TO HISTORY AND SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

by James Webster

In lyrical prose, Jim Webster lays out his view on the universal human use of tools and how “humans meet the practical demands of life.” Webster lauds physical work and the work of the hand as they both support engagement, social cooperation, a deepening of relationships, and sustainability. Practical work is valuable and is plentiful as it generates reciprocal community, dignity, self-awareness, and provides opportunity by giving comfort, refining skills, expressing creative insight, and imparting a sense of gratitude.

I remember as if it was a moment ago, our son, four years old, curly headed in the sunlight, behind us on a busy sidewalk, marching a few steps forward, then stopping, taking a few steps, then stopping. He was chewing his first stick of gum and could not yet walk and chew gum at the same time. Poised, a foot just rising, he worked his mouth, his eyes blank with concentration, before darting forward a little way, only to stop to resume his efforts.

There is so much for us to learn. Our bodies are not born with grace. It is learned with effort. There is within us an urge toward grace and strength and capability. We strive to lift our heads, to crawl, to walk, to leap. Each day for the young is spent intent upon

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practices that will bring about this coordination of parts (including, with time, the will). We need only to be given the time and place in which to move: play, adventure, and work.

Adolescents must begin again. They are born into new bodies and must learn to use them well. They require activity through which to discover and refine these physical gifts. Early on they are clumsy and loud. We must give them the time and opportunity to move purposefully, a school full of play and adventures and practical work, and so we thus find assurance in watching, as they, through their efforts, discover new strengths, new voices, new capacities for creation: new confidence.

It is now believed that for 3.4 million years or so we have been using tools to meet our needs, turning wood, bone, stone, and sinew to our purpose (Heness). If that span is one hundred yards, it's only in the last two feet that we have built pottery, in the last seven inches that we smelt metals. We have been, until yesterday, living off the land. Yet, we thrived. We peopled the Earth. We crossed every barrier, adapting to every landscape and climate, forming things of



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beauty to meet our needs. Each generation fulfilled the promise of hands working with intelligence in the face of challenge. I believe that we remain, in our essence, paleolithic. We are the same people and hold the same capacity to meet each changing circumstance through the work of the hand reflecting the mind's insight. The root of this strength lies in the same pattern of unfolding that we celebrate and utilize in our classrooms. We do not serve a method formed at the turn of the last century but rather the manifestations of ancient, fundamental, practical tendencies.

Despite appearances, today our physical and spiritual needs remain pretty much the same and central to our lives. Virtual clothing and bit food will not suffice. But for most in this country, the hand's role has been, of late, radically diminished. We have been divided from labor. We push buttons. Out of view, the necessary work is done. An Oxford study predicts that 47% of current jobs in the United States can and will soon be carried by machines (Frey & Osborne). It was a dream: to be freed from toil and drudgery and to have time to spend. As with many aspirations, we have failed to anticipate the full consequences.

Fossils and artifacts and museums and the very nature of our children demonstrate that it is the skill of the hand expressing the intelligence that is the essential human act. Work is what we do, or what we did. For some time now we have been drifting toward a world for which we were not made, a world in which we depend more upon distant corporations than upon our present abilities. It is a world in which we seek satisfaction in what we consume rather than in what we make. I was raised on *Robinson Crusoe* and *Little House on the Prairie*. Today Harry Potter simply waves a wand. Or perhaps the story for our time is *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, for we have been warned: beware the magic you wield.

In retrospect, we understand the injustices of slavery and of other subjugations that eased the lives of some. Yet what about the suffering now in Bangladesh and the feed lots that facilitate our present comforts? And what of the rising tides? We sense, we feel their truth and danger, and yet too few are spurred to action. It is as if these are only stories told of *another* world, meant to warn us of

something: cautionary tales of a fallen kingdom or hubris punished. If it was actually true, it would break our hearts.

For many their relationship with the physical world is becoming more tenuous as the immediacy, an intimacy, fades. Desire and habit replace our love. We are in a deeper cave than Plato ever imagined, where we do not even know what we know. Reality recedes, or rather, we recede from that reality into a world of our own. Symbol and possibility replace blood, sinew, and bone.

We have gone too far. No Huckleberry idleness, puttering leisure, tantalizing entertainment, or even shining knowledge is worth disassociation from the Earth and from our essential nature fashioned upon it: to work to make with our own hands and own efforts better lives. The root meaning of idle is empty. What is the ideal we seek? Are we happier, healthier, wiser today? How do we spend this time we've saved? Around our work we used to gather. Where do we gather now? We knew the stars and flowers because they served a purpose in our lives, and now the stars are vanishing from view.

What of the light in our children? Clearly, it shines brightly still. It is a fire that only needs feeding. One thing makes it grow and blaze: suitable employment of hand and mind conjoined, purposeful activity requiring and thus enabling intention, practice, refinement. It is they who show us who we are, and where satisfaction lies. In Latin *satis* means *enough*. We used to say, "Enough is as good as a feast." Having feasted much of late, we might rather say, "Enough is better than a feast!" Follow the child, I say, in her intention, her sense of purpose. Learn to take as much pleasure in a simple job well done. As Montessori stated, "Work is necessary. It can be nothing less than a passion. A person is happy in accomplishment" ("The First Progressive").

That is our aim then: to provide circumstances in which there is work to be done, work which particularly engages and challenges the students in our care and by which the accomplishment, be it skill, craft, understanding or service, will be reached through the effort of the mind directing the body.

It is easy to find the purpose in an individual *Casa* child intently carrying a laden tray: the bobble and recovery, the tip of the

tongue extended, mysteriously facilitating focus, an entire being consumed in the mastery of movement. With time, movements run in ever more complex sequences: a subtle balance of force and counter force, release and rotation. Try this: raise your hands and close your eyes and attend the dance of your hands as you peel an invisible carrot; now, tie a bow; now with your pencil or chalk write Montessori's sentence, "Mind and movement are two parts of a single cycle, and movement is the superior expression" (*Education for a New World*). Can you feel the interplay of habit and intention, which could be termed rehearsal and performance, set to the music of your mind's memories, judgment, feelings, and aspiration? Is there a greater individual human achievement than the articulate, true expression of the contents of that individual's heart and mind through the hand? It is a doorway through which we join the company of present and future society.

The fulfillment of our most basic, fundamental, daily needs is not by definition a burden but rather provides an opportunity for feeling and giving comfort, the development of refined skill, the expression of creative insight, and the revelation of gratitude. To learn to happily do that which must be done, to savor the need well met, provides a foundation to our days that will support us through all seasons.

For good reason Montessori believed that an elementary education should be founded in the principles governing the evolution of the universe. Cosmic Education makes clear that everything, every type and individual, has practical, physical work to do, and through this work, the whole of continuing creation is served. Physical work is what every *thing* does, from single cells to binary stars; each of us has a vital work to carry out, work that will support this unfolding, work that is useful to ourselves, to others and to the cosmos. As such, Cosmic Education runs counter to the dominant ethos of our age—the aim of the sloughing off of work—as well as our responsibility to others.

I would put forward the Fundamental Needs Chart (along with the Timeline of Life) as the central elementary material, for it makes clear that it is the physical fulfillment of needs that engenders all

culture, civilization, migration, language, and all of our history. Any study of these begins with a consideration of how humans met and meet the practical demands of life. It is in the course of such work that Montessori children begin to look forward to the fulfillment of a noble role in the universe. They look forward to getting their hands dirty like all those who came before.

In your training, articles, discussions, and presentations we are reminded that the third plane, especially early on, is a period of physical growth and of adaptation to that growth. It is a time similar in a number of respects to the first plane. But then, before long, we go on to focus upon other aspects of the program, to the “learning part.” In our brochures and websites we are sure to mention physical work and hands-on experiences as key components of what we provide, at the same time assuring all that these are provided in the service of engagement in academics, thus perhaps diminishing a vital principle by making it a marketing tool. I have been trying to add a ninth grade to our program. Sometimes student and parent anxieties about transitions, testing, and college undermine the possibilities of what we do. Perhaps our own anxiety is added as well. We love them. We want to be sure they will be OK, always. And so the future bends the present out of shape. Or it is our own love of ideas and words that leads us to choose, when time is short, to make the page the place where we will meet them. It is easier in a pinch, in our staffing, in our schedules. And as we have discussed earlier, despite our long history to the physical and practical, the hands that built this world are not esteemed in our culture. What practical life skills do you think the core curriculum mandates? What do our students discern from us? What would they say we say, in all the ways we speak, is more important: the work of the hand or of the mind?

Thus, it is understandable given this context, that most of us fall short of fully recognizing or fully supporting this essential need of the adolescents in our care, namely that physical, practical activity remains at the heart of the work that young adolescent students are provided. Work is guided by the mind, and in turn supports its evolution but exists as valued work for its own sake. Perhaps your program has got it right, but for many of us it is a matter of

rebalancing, remembering from where they have come, and from where all of us have come.

I admit to a prejudice toward physical work, but it is not so much the prejudice of the man I am, but is instead, I think, that of the suburban boy I was, who did not feel quite complete or capable in the use of his hands or tools. It is not my own inclination, however, that has convinced me; my view rests, I hope, in critical observation. This is an experiment still, this work we are trying to carry out; we are finding, piece by piece, what serves. I have three measures by which I judge the success of any experience I have promoted:

- Does it engage? Do they forget themselves, do they work persistently, do they ask questions, do they talk about it the next day, do they stand taller now?
- Does the experience promote social cohesion so that they become a gathered, directed energy? Do they feel to me more greatly joined, respectful, communally empowered, brave?
- And does the experience promote a deepening of individual relationships, especially with the adults that guide them?

I am not saying that every physical experience is transformative. I would assert that in every physical experience that is challenging and in which there is a gradual refinement of skill, process, and understanding, and in which capable, committed adults participate, something of worth is created. The work should be wholly transformative and so should make up a large part of the work we provide. I am not saying that challenging physical experiences are the only ones that support growth or engagement. In our program, seminars are fully as important to us and to the students. But it is possible to talk too much and to do too little.

Montessori directs us to the farm where there is always more to do than can be done. But a farm is not required. A kitchen will do very nicely or a wood shop or bicycle shop, potting shed, theater, food bank, bee hives, shiitake logs, sugarbush, retirement home,

community garden, or a park in need of care. We have an orchard, an old one. We produce and sell under the name Sunny Orchard. Cider is our main focus in the fall, but we experimented this year with hot apple pies, mulled cider, granola with dried apples, apple cider vinegar, and apple molasses. A full day and half each week goes into production for the six or seven weeks of our season. We have a mix of Macintosh and Rome, tall semi-dwarves that we pick from ladders and then store in canoes that we fill to the gunwales. It used to be that everyone did everything. Now we break down into teams, though it is more fluid than that implies; we run to where we are needed. We have fourteen pairs of hands and twenty-five gallons to produce, pick, wash, scrub, and pare. There are jars to sterilize; product and origin labels to devise, copy, cut, glue, and punch; twelve gallons to pasteurize; and all of it to strain, bottle, seal, label, chill, and sell while smiling. Then there are records to keep, money to count, trips to the bank, clean the press, the kitchen, the floor, fix the press, surveys to send and tally, advertisements to design and send, coordination with the office, thank-you notes, and of course we do a lot of problem-solving. We spend much time in conversations, songs, and in crises (worms, maggots, does that cut need stitches? yes, definitely stitches!), analysis, suggestions, praise, and lots of research (when and what to plant, pruning, regulations, organic certification). We have a spot for our store on the street, parking and electric, but until the program grows we cannot produce more than we do now. This season we reached an efficiency and commitment of effort and communication that could hardly be bettered.

But that isn't the whole story because you do not know them individually or know the evolving culture of the program. You do not know how much that young man at the press needed to show his strength because he feels his weaknesses are so apparent; you couldn't know the worth of his smile to us. Nor could you know how bound, loving, and appreciative they have become, despite differences of age, understanding, and consciousness. It was of consciousness and conscience that the teachers and a ninth-year spoke, observing the hubbub as we cut and tossed together at the sink. In the *Casa* it is the silence game that is the test: "Can you sit quietly, calmly?" For adolescents, the test is "Do you know and see what needs to be done and do you do it, without being asked or even being seen?"



MDP © Sara Guren

Sugaring, Hershey Montessori School, Huntsburg, Ohio

And because that is more and more common in our program culture, I know that the work they are doing serves them.

It has, for me, been the same, no matter the place or activity: around the arch boiling syrup, building a bridge stone by stone, Table Nine Bistro, twelve cords of firewood in two days, extracting honey, a feast in which we raised every single ingredient. As long as it challenges so that the all of everyone is required, so that it stands with the work of any man or woman or community, as long as the thing made or done is sweet or beautiful, rare, valued, original or practical, it will act upon them. *Practical* is defined as “useful; acquired through practice or action, rather than theory, speculation or ideals; that which is required.” To be required, necessary, useful: what more could or should anyone ask?

As adults, we are required to act as master to their apprentice. That’s the way it’s been across the years, since before there was counting. Saying, “This is how it is done. I pass this thing to you.

Take it up. It is worth knowing. The spear. The care of the fire. The healing herbs. The fence and field and flock. The press. The bread. The child. The Earth. Take up the care of yourself, your family, your community, of life." This is how they become true adults, through the willing acceptance of the responsibility for the care of life in ever-widening circles. It is economy, the care of your house., and this care is, still and ever, a practical enterprise. As the *Casa* child learns to carry the tray, the adolescent learns to carry responsibility for others. There is not one set of particular skills that I would prescribe in order to ensure success in this undertaking. But there is a short list of things that are worth knowing, for they are the things that have always been worth knowing:

- First, each of us needs to know we are capable, competent, sufficient, or rather, we are capable of becoming capable and that we need only apply ourselves to that end. We should not suffer feelings of our insufficiency, but should pursue their redress. The rewards of that application are adaptability, self-respect, and the ability to give that which is of worth to others.
- Second, nothing of true worth comes without effort and time, and its corollaries, that only things of true worth are worth pursuing, and that even the smallest things can carry remarkable value.
- Third, there are few greater satisfactions than being able to contribute that which is necessary and good, and to be trusted to be reliable in our ability and willingness to do so. This is the basis of personal dignity and a reciprocal society.
- Fourth, there is enough for all of us to do, and no work is more important than another. Working side-by-side is not a dependence; it is an efficiency and communion.
- And fifth, the fulfillment of our most basic, fundamental, daily needs is not by definition a burden

but rather provides an opportunity for feeling and giving comfort, the development of refined skill, the expression of creative insight, and the revelation of gratitude. To learn to happily do that which must be done, to savor the need well met, provides a foundation to our days that will support us through all seasons.

Physical, practical work cannot always be a source of joy or even satisfaction. Since the time of the first cities, perhaps before, there have been those that have borne, willing or not, the brunt of toil for others. The students I've taught, with some reason, have been the princes and princesses of the land. Who better to know rough hands and a sore back? Who better to know the skill required and the respect due those who face danger and drudgery each day? We learn compassion through experience. Experience can lead to an appreciation of the food on our plates, the heat from the stove, or the achievement of a wall or ditch. It is, in fact, the most successful path into all of history that I have found. How else can we feel any circumstance but by putting ourselves in it? It is better to be history, than to read it.

If you could have been there that day when those Pioneer Project students cut down with an axe, chip by flying chip, that tall maple. There is such glory and sadness and relief in that moment when it becomes clear that it is falling and falling right. And then the ground shakes. I swear they cried, "Hurrah!" With a two-man saw we bucked it into lengths and Dewey, the Haflinger, happy himself it seemed for the work, pulled the logs up to the cabin and to the wood furnace. And the cows ate every last sweet maple leaf for dessert. That day will not soon be forgotten. What better sense could be made of the opening of the forest, of the obligations owned by frontier youth (and of, in contrast, the obligations of a modern youth), of why it took so long for that Wilderness Road to breach the Cumberland Gap of Jefferson's yeoman ideal? You need not have an axe and horse, just an opportunity to fulfill a human need and to create as others always have. Paint a WPA mural or Renaissance fresco. Compose sonnets. Build a long house. Track an animal across the snow. Cook over a fire or in a pit in the ground. Map the land. Thresh wheat. Mummify a mouse. Let them feel, in

their muscles, in their beating hearts, on their fingertips, that history is real. What worthwhile lessons can it teach if it is not physically, empirically true to them? If it is not their story as well? How else to know what was and is wise or foolish? History is so much more than a handsome string of ideas. It is life upon life upon life, the deepest mix of joy and sorrow, and so deserves our full respect, attention, and intention. Nothing is as engaging as consequence. Consequence is adventure.

Because they inhabit new bodies that yearn for employment and to be tested and taught, because they are called to discovery of themselves, because they need to know how, as much as who, when, or even why, these students at every opportunity are relieved and inspired when they can physically engage the world, no matter the discipline or context. And to be clear, their minds are engaged as well. This is not an either/or. It is twice as much and more; it is memorable. Engagement means the world is inside them and they are fully in the world; it is a union.

But recently, most U.S. schools, public and private, have chosen to set aside activity, mirroring the broader culture. Art and music, home economics and shop, no longer deemed vital to our prosperity, have been cut; practical life no longer practical. There is a growing trend toward virtual labs, even in physical science. Often now the ungrounded intellect must go it alone, constrained in its expression, rushed along a narrow track. In this unnatural state it is sadly prone to anxiety or disengagement. As Montessori writes, “the intellectuals of today are all cripples as long as their hands remain useless. Their spirit will dry up if the grandeur of the practical reality of our days is completely shut away from them, as if it does not exist. Men with hands and no head, and men with heads and no hands are equally out of place in the modern community” (*From Childhood to Adolescence*).

Some students do compete and seem to thrive. But many do not thrive, for such is not conducive to the strong support of the average student, by which I mean the normal and ready, not incapable or ill adapted; it is most schools that are currently ill adapted to our nature. Too many, young men in particular, are taxed to their limits, struggling, unable to find a way to discover, develop, and demonstrate their gifts.

Sports, being physical and feeling consequential, have captured our attention, providing the central opportunity today for the fulfillment of a developmental requirement. They hold an important place in our culture, in some respects more important than education, and so have garnered almost equal time and resources. They provide challenge and facilitate the exploration and refinement and expression of some capabilities; they are social. What sports are not is practical, as in useful. They do not much facilitate the maintenance of life, except perhaps in the symbolic fulfillment of some spiritual need. They are something, but they are not enough. Sports are play, good and necessary, but what all students, all humans need to know is the importance and satisfaction of productive work. The etymology of sport, shortened from disport, means “to carry away” or “not to carry.” The root meaning of productive is “to lead forth.”

Perhaps you think me out of touch with the culture and are likely to send my charges unprepared into the digital age. You have me pegged as a luddite? That is not the case. I love technology, though not as much as water or fire or food or children. I love it when it is a tool that serves, when it makes us more aware, more capable, more in love with the world, more likely to act, not less. Sometimes it makes us more likely to seek escape (or to pretend we can), more likely to become distracted from our purpose, to lose our creative impulse, to forget the truth of consequence, to forget what is fundamentally important. I love technology when it is useful. No, that’s not true, I love it most all the time. It is such a beautiful and powerful dragon, rabbit hole, opiate, hall of mirrors that sometimes I love it until I feel sick with it, until it undermines my resolve and keeps me indoors. Each member of the average American family spends just short of ten hours each day watching some sort of screen (eMarketer). That same family spends in total eleven minutes a day in the care of its home (Manetti), and thirty minutes a day in total preparing meals (Barlow).

I am not a Luddite, but I am wary of anything that leads us toward a dependence, that pulls us from the things we once held most dear. I hold most dear friendships, families, communities; I hold dear relationships. Anything that might undermine these is something that should be approached with caution. Anything that promotes genuine, loving relationships should be extolled.

And that is what practical activity does: it builds relationships. Through the proving of strength and worth, it builds one's love of self, and through mutual care it binds families and communities, and through the earning and demonstrating of respect it builds friendships. As one's hands work to craft from some small piece of the world a thing of useful beauty, we come to better know and love the world and ourselves.

This is my hope for my students and yours and all: that they better know and serve themselves and the world through the ever more skilled employment of their hands, guided by an ever more capable intelligence. I am grateful to receive students already skilled and confident, eager to engage work that challenges each part of their beings. They are distinctly independent minded yet succeed through interdependence. They are present and happy and satisfied in what they do, yet they are ambitious and joyful in creation.

Although I am sure they are well prepared, I fear they will forget these things they know as they go out into a world that does not always honor industry, depth, grace, and sincerity. I hope that wherever they go they will gather to them those who take pleasure in work large and small, who see beyond the moment into the past and future, who feel for and care for others, who seek to mend and build, for whom this real world is enough. I have worked with my companions, my friends, to give them a place where they could learn such things themselves. We have sought to understand their humanness and to serve that ancient strength. For it is that strength we need now, as ever, to take what lies before us and to make good from it.

I think the world is changing and that if we hold to what we know, we will play a part in the rebalancing of human ambition. It is a change long in coming, but this is the way of such things. Seven hundred years ago the Renaissance was founded in a vision of renewed human capability in which the mind again played a dynamic role. Sustainability, justice, and perhaps our survival depend upon another renaissance in which a renewed vision of human capability is embraced, in which the mind and hand in true balanced measure together serve the future of our kind and of this Earth. And that, I think, is Montessori's vision.

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