

FROM COSMIC EDUCATION TO CIVIC RESPONSIBILITY

by Judith Cunningham

Bookending her article with questions for the Montessori practitioner, Judith Cunningham provides a theoretical overview of how the Montessori child is empowered to enact social change and is inspired to work for the betterment of the world. Cunningham lays the foundation by describing the world in which Maria Montessori lived and how the events of her time shaped her work and thinking. She discusses the importance of the unity that is formed through Cosmic Education and how important this unity becomes to the mission of the adolescent, "By understanding his cosmic task, his contribution to the preservation and betterment of the world, and with the ultimate goal of creating true peace, the child is empowered."

Why did you become a Montessori teacher? What called you to Montessori education? Why did you choose Montessori over other educational methods? The reasons for entering the teaching profession are diverse. However when AMI surveyed recent graduates with this question, they discovered that many graduates had not intended to go into teaching. It was the discovery of the Montessori method that changed their minds.

To understand the reasons behind why the Montessori method is so compelling, it is important to understand the background to its conception. Why did Maria Montessori create her educational program? What were the social forces at work that helped shape her work?

Born the same year as the Italian Republic, Maria Montessori grew up with a belief in social change due to her experience during

Judith Cunningham is the executive director of Montessori Model UN. As a Montessori teacher and administrator, Judith, along with Ambassador Francis Lorenzo, conceived of the MMUN in 2006. She founded MMUN to help students find their voices, take action, and build peace as a way of honoring Maria Montessori's legacy and implementing her dream of world peace.

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the early years of Italian unification. During this time there was much optimism that reforms would take place to ameliorate living conditions for all people and especially for the poor. Born into an affluent family, Montessori's ambitions could be supported, and she became one of the first female physicians in Italy. In medical school she was influenced by many of her lecturers to look closely at the social problems of Italy, and she became involved in social reform movements, especially those that had to do with women's rights and the welfare of children (Trabalzini).

Furthermore, Montessori was a feminist, and in 1896, the year she graduated from medical school, she represented Italy at the International Women's Congress in Berlin. She delivered an address on the rights of working women that coincided with Montessori's role as a social activist. She spoke at congresses in Italy and throughout Europe advocating for liberty and social equality for women including equal pay and the right to vote. She prodded women to use their intellectual ability to solve social problems. Montessori spoke out against the miserable working conditions for women and children in factories, opposed child labor, and advocated for peace and social reform. She began to draw the conclusion that social problems were the result of inadequate education.

When Maria Montessori founded the first Children's House in 1907 in the San Lorenzo neighborhood of Rome, she was already known in Italy. She was recognized for being one of the first women graduates in medicine in Italy, for her feminist struggles and for her social and scientific commitment to children with disabilities. Her experiences as a woman who overcame social barriers informed her work in education. In addition, her interest in overcoming many social problems of the age informed the development of the Montessori method. Montessori crafted her vision to create a new humanity and implemented it into the Montessori pedagogy. Her legacy is the great work of inspiring children to become global citizens by utilizing their cognitive, emotional, and spiritual potential to create a better world.

As a contributor to the UN's Convention on the Rights of the Child, Montessori stated to UNESCO, "If the world would listen to the children they would hear new, innovative solutions to the world's

problems” (Barres). She recognized and respected their empathy, thought processes, and critical thinking skills. Furthermore, her experience during both world wars inculcated a strong desire for world peace. She stated, “True peace makes us turn our thoughts to the triumph of justice and love among men, to the building of a better world where harmony reigns” (Geneva 1932). She knew that for there to be real peace, there

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must be harmony among people. She saw the commonality of our humanness as the uniting factor in the face of the diversity found throughout the earth. “Preventing conflict is the work of politics; establishing peace is the work of education” (Brussels 1936). Montessori saw her role as an educator as critical to creating the more peaceful world she desired. And it was for her work as a scientist, child advocate, and peace activist that Dr. Montessori was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize three times in 1949, 1950, and 1951.

Montessori’s development of her methodology was directly related to her desire to develop peace in the world saying, “Education is the best weapon for peace” (Copenhagen 1937). It is this belief that imbued Montessori’s teaching philosophy with its focus on the child, its preoccupation with social justice, and in identifying the commonality of all humanity. It is this philosophy that has become such a draw for many Montessori educators and put them on the path to the teaching profession. Many of those educators and parents alike find the focus on peace to be one of the core values that is integral to them choosing Montessori education.

For the elementary child, Montessori created Cosmic Education as a way to teach peace through the understanding of human needs, the interdependency of life and the earth, the interrelatedness of all

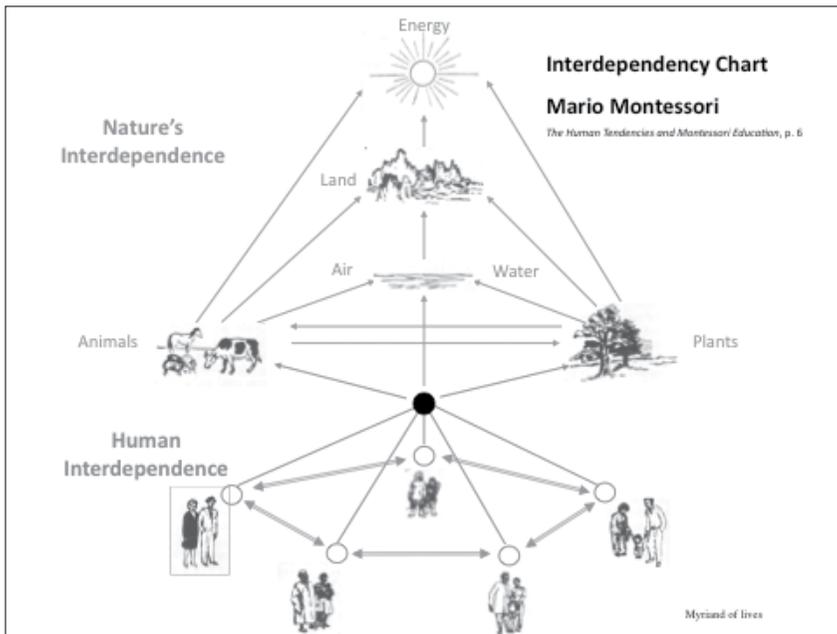
subjects, the unity of humanity, and the gratitude to all of the past peoples who have created the basis for our culture.

The Fundamental Needs of People chart develops the paradigm that people all share the same needs, and the only difference between various groups of humans is how they satisfy those needs. The differences are unique to geography, time period, and social economic status. Humanity, therefore, is more alike than different. This conceit reinforces the value of peace because it encourages children to see all humans as belonging to a global humanity.

The Interdependency chart (shown below) reveals the interrelationships that exist between living and nonliving aspects of the world. In *Education for a New World*, Montessori pointed out that:

Animals do not eat merely to satisfy themselves, but to fulfill a mission prescribed to them by their behavior, in the interests of the harmony of creation, which is achieved by the collaboration of all beings, animate and inanimate (26).

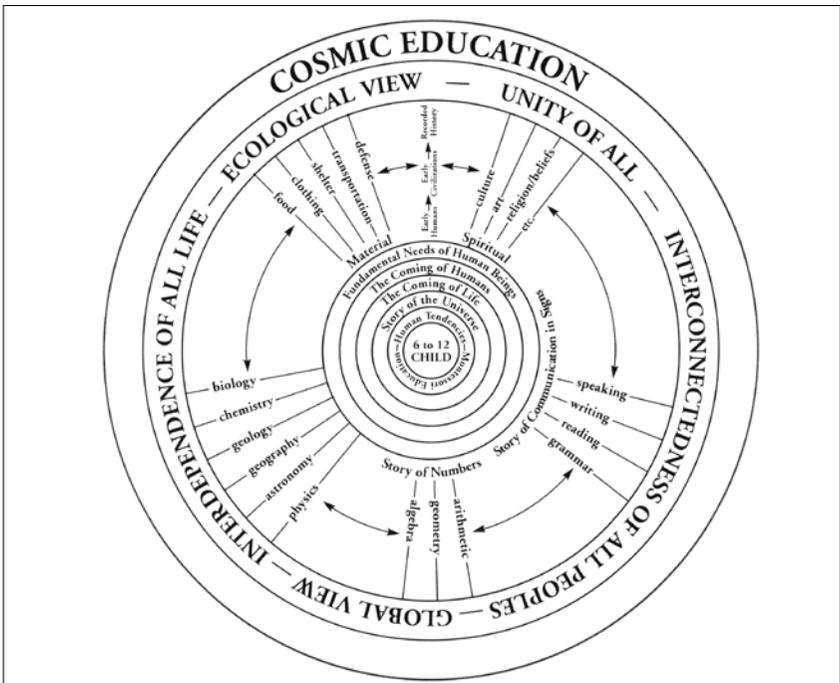
Every component of our world, Montessori noted, has a *cosmic task* to perform. This cosmic task is carried out as a result of the



day-to-day actions of each and contributes to the maintenance of balance and harmony for all. In *To Educate the Human Potential* (44–45), Montessori discusses the action of water as it acts as a “furniture remover,” removing carbon dioxide from the air as it falls as rain and dissolving and depositing rocks. She refers to the work of bees, to the actions of earthworms, to the scavenging of crows and vultures, and to the filtering of the seas by such creatures as coral polyps (who build their homes with the filtrates), as further examples of cosmic tasks in action (Kahn). Likewise, every human being is part of this great work and is ingrained with a cosmic task upon birth.

The circle chart of the Cosmic Education curriculum presents the interconnectedness and interdependency of life and the environment. Subjects cannot be studied in isolation but interwoven to provide the integral framework.

At the center of the chart is the telling of the story of the universe. This is the beginning of all creation—the starting point of all history, science, life, and existence. Along the circumference of the curriculum chart, it reads, “unity of all, interconnectedness of all



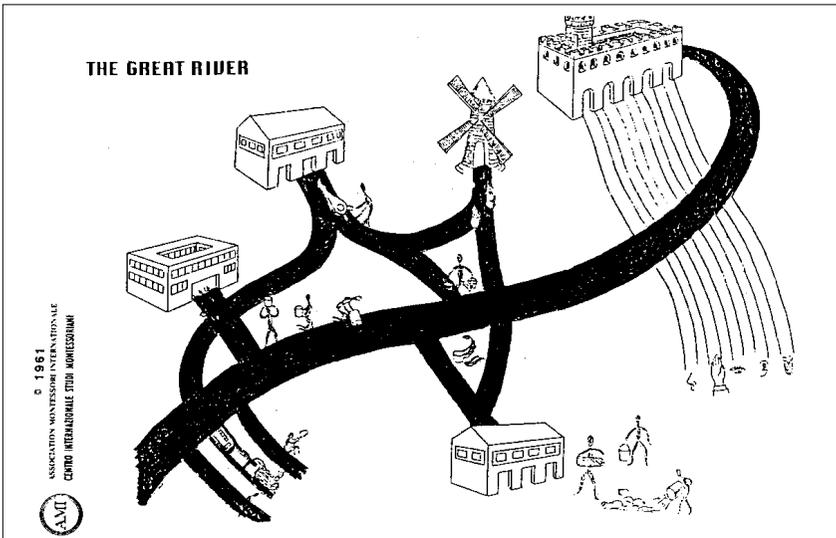
people, global view, interdependency of all life” (Kahn). Our experience as human beings cannot be dissected into categories but must rather be looked at holistically.

Montessori’s systems approach to the Great Lessons provides both moral guidance through the examination of history from the Big Bang to the present combining of the sciences and humanities. The Great Lessons integrate the studies of the cosmos, Earth, life, and humans. As David Kahn wrote,

The Great Lessons are impressionistic ideas: Where does the universe come from, what are its limits, what is our solar system, where did first life find its food, etc. Here they are in graphic form, each Great Lesson begetting the next time span with connected sequencing of great events in time, not told with complete accuracy but with an absolute conviction that the patterns of history are pathways, not just to knowledge but of a fundamental faith in the positive outcomes of unfolding reality. (44)

Therefore, the developing child sees existence as an ongoing process where they are an important unit in a greater whole with a cosmic task in which they have been entrusted.

The Great River chart (shown below) reveals how different systems of the human body work together in harmony. Independen-



dently, the systems of the human body are weak, but when united and working together, they create a strong cohesive unit. This chart has been referred to as a metaphor for human unity. As David Kahn has pointed out, "Montessori's famous quote, 'humanity is an organic unity that

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is yet being born,' refers to human organs as they specialize in order to do the unified work of the human body. The world, then, is the body writ large, ready to become an effective unit wherein the organs work together to form "la nazione unica" (45).

According to Montessori, the Great Lessons and Cosmic Education curriculum are integral to helping the child develop his identity and finding a place in the world:

The role of education is to guide children in an initial examination of the question "Who am I?" This profound metaphysical question requires that we examine the nature of life and of self. However, this question requires that children analyze their past by answering the question, "Where did I come from?" This question then leads to a third question, "Where am I going?" With harmony and peace as the ultimate goal, Montessori focused her attention on helping children find answers to these questions in Cosmic Education.

The "I" is paramount in the child's understanding of himself since he must see himself as an individual. However, this is juxtaposed against his understanding of the greater world, humanity as a whole, and viewing all human societies as intrinsically linked. All this is developed in Cosmic Education and as defined by Camillo Grazzini: "Cosmic Education results in creative attempts to lead a new and different kind of human life, with responsible participation in all natural and human phenomena." By understanding his cosmic task, his contribution to the preservation and betterment of the world, and with the ultimate goal of creating true peace, the child

is empowered. Rather than seeing himself as a cog in the machine, the child sees himself as an individual who is critically placed in a time and place where he has a positive role to play.

The empowerment of children is integral to Montessori's philosophy. It is this empowerment that encouraged her to speak about "The Aims of the Social Party of the Child." Montessori developed this idea in 1937 because she saw children as the world's forgotten citizens. Her belief was that children should,

be considered as a nation, the Nation of Humanity; that, since its population is the most numerous and its importance paramount, its authority outweighs that of any other nation, as its members form part of all nations and represent their most sacred interest, the interest of Life and Existence. That, therefore, when a League of Nations is formed with the aim of organizing a peaceful society, the Nation of Childhood be legally represented.

It is Montessori's philosophy of peace and the focus on positive outcomes of our cosmic task that prepares young people to become successful adults.

Montessori was concerned about the type of adult who develops due to the educational experiences of childhood and adolescence. In appendix A in *From Childhood to Adolescence*, she puts forward the idea that modern education is not preparing individuals adequately to become fully functioning members of society. The core of her belief rests in the fact that "the problem of education today is of a general order of importance. Its solution must aid and protect the development of man. Promoting the betterment of the individual is the way in which education must better society" (96). The creation of the Erdkinder program was a step forward in order to rectify this situation. One of the key aspects of the Erdkinder program is the prepared environment since it is integral to supporting the development of the individual and his human potential as well as the development of individuals with a sense of social responsibility. This is a direct continuation of the work of Cosmic Education. The experiences in the Erdkinder program help prepare the individual for adult life in a safe, caring, and nonjudgmental environment where the personality of the individual is allowed to continue developing naturally and

where a sense of social responsibility is fostered. The organization and set-up of Erdkinder is essential to developing individuals who will contribute productively to society and help transform human society towards its next stage of development.

Throughout adolescence, students develop new emotional, social, and continuing cognitive tasks. As Dr. Stephen Hughes shared at the AMI/USA Refresher Course 2017 in Austin, Texas, the adolescent spends more time in collaborative work developing the skills of social interaction. The Montessori adolescent community continues and expands the work of the elementary as the adolescent refines core values and unique contributions to the world. The adolescent is in search of a mission that will help him understand his place and role in the world.

As Montessori educators, what are we doing to help create the new humanity about which Montessori wrote? Is peace education at the forefront of your teaching? Will your students contribute to the unfolding of justice, harmony, wisdom, and peace? How is Cosmic Education or civic responsibility promoted in your classroom? These are all questions teachers must continuously ask themselves as they strive to embed Montessori's teaching philosophy in their everyday practice.

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