

# What Is Montessori?

By Wendy Calise

Educational Director, Countryside Montessori School

I've been asked many times, "Just what is Montessori?"

One of the most common misunderstandings of Montessori is that it is a great teaching philosophy, especially for some children. Montessori is not, in fact, a method of teaching that is beneficial for some children and not for others. From its conception Maria Montessori built her ideas around only those commonalities that are present in all human beings, despite differences in intelligence, learning styles, culture and background. For example, some of these commonalities are periods of development when learning occurs effortlessly, the tendency of all human beings to explore, to speak, to orient themselves, to strive for perfection, to repeat activities until perfection is achieved, just to name a few. Her directives complement the universal qualities of all children and at the same time afford the freedom necessary for the differences that makes each child a unique individual.

That is what I consider the *technical* aspect of the Montessori classroom. But more important is what Maria Montessori believed about the spirit of the child, and ultimately the spirit of the human being. She was a gift to humanity in her revolutionary understanding of the process of the development of moral intelligence in the child. Even a cursory glance at some of her writings illuminates just how transcendent her perception of the child is:

Children have an anxious concern for living beings, and the satisfaction of this instinct fills them with delight. It is therefore easy to interest them in taking care of plants and especially of animals. Nothing awakens foresight in a small child, who lives as a rule for the passing of the moment and without care for the morrow, so much as this. When he knows that animals have need of him, that little plants will dry up if he does not water them, he binds together with a new thread of love today's passing moments with those of the morrow. <sup>1</sup>

When else have you heard global responsibility spoken of so eloquently and in regard to the young child?

If education were to continue along the old lines of mere transmission of knowledge, the problem would be insoluble and there would be no hope for the world. Alone a scientific inquiry into human personality can lead us to salvation, and we have before us in the child a psychic entity, a social group of immense size, a veritable world-power if rightly used. If salvation and help are to come, it is from the child, for the child is the constructor

of man, and so of society. The child is endowed with an inner power which can guide us to a more luminous future. Education should no longer be mostly an imparting of knowledge, but must take new path, seeking the release of human potentialities. When should such education begin? Our answer is that the greatness of human personality begins at birth, an affirmation full of practical reality, however strikingly mystic.... Human teachers can only help the great work that is being done, as servants help the master. Doing so, they will be witnesses to the unfolding of the human soul and to the rising of a New Man who will not be the victim of events, but will have the clarity of vision to direct and shape the future of human society. <sup>2</sup>

In regard to the teacher Montessori wrote the following:

Montessori teachers are not servants of the child's body, to wash, dress, and feed him – they know that he needs to do these things himself in developing independence. We must help the child to act for himself, will for himself, think for himself; this is the art of those who aspire to serve the spirit.... Here is the child as he should be: the worker who never tires, the calm child who seeks the maximum of effort, who tries to help the weak while knowing how to respect the independence of others; in reality, the true child.<sup>3</sup>

These words speak of a fundamentally different understanding of the nature of the child, and furthermore the task of childhood. This is not about a "teaching method." Montessori is about the development of the human being to its fullest potential, a human being with an awareness of self in relation to society, not solely in vision and ideal, but rather in how to provide the environment that will actually allow for this potential, encourage it, nurture it, protect it, and honor it. But as we consider Montessori in this day and age we must recognize that her vision for education was complete and deliberate. There were no aspects of the classroom left to chance or included incidentally. We cannot pick and choose and sample from her directives. *I like the mixed age group but not extended day. I want the full day just on Mondays and Fridays. I like everything but the class size: fewer students would be better. I want my child in the primary class for the first two years, but not the third. Montessori is great for the younger children, but not for the elementary children.* Although still grand and exciting, with missing pieces the result is not the same. We are providing an environment for the development, evolution, and growth of the child and therefore the future. With each missing piece, with each compromise, with each accommodation, we sacrifice immeasurable unrealized potential of the child.

One of the most important potentialities in each child is that of morality. Every child has the potential to

grow into a moral and responsible adult. Yet our society indicates that what we are currently doing for many youths, in all social groups, tragically is not enough. What was "good enough" twenty years ago is not necessarily "good enough" any longer. Far too many children are somehow missing the basic lessons of life that most parents desperately try to pass on to them. And in fact, when we consider the young child we are often confused about how exactly to do this "passing on." Is morality passed on in words, in actions, by example? Is it passed on by means of freedom or discipline? Is it passed on in the home? in the school? in society? And when does this "passing on" begin? At six years? Ten? Eighteen? Twenty-one? Or rather at one, two and three years old? Are we conscious that the young child of this age is already being "passed on" to? He is already making moral choices, constructing his moral character. Is the child of two years shown firmly that food is not to be thrown all over the kitchen? Is the child of three shown that his coat is his responsibility? Is the child of four expected to speak politely to the other children and adults with whom he comes in contact? Is the child of five encouraged to resolve conflict peacefully and creatively? Even the child of three years is already developing his will...or not. What choices are we giving him? How are we enabling him to develop his will? What opportunities are we giving him to make human choices, to develop his moral character? For it is only through his own actions that the child can develop morality. Morality exists as a matter of choice. And one day each child will have to make a choice on his own, a choice of compassion or selfishness, one of generosity or greed, one of love or hatred, and the only thing that will guide him at that moment of independent choice is the sum of all the choices he has had the opportunity to make prior to that moment.

Maria Montessori made a profound discovery about the child. She realized that this freedom to *choose* moral action must be present in the child's life at all time, in the home and in the classroom. She directed that the classroom offer and protect these opportunities for choice, and therefore development. Each aspect of the Montessori classroom serves the development of the moral child. It is in this way a preparation for life, rather than a method of education.

So in answer to the original question, "What is Montessori in just a few words?" Perhaps:  
*Compassion. Generosity. Beauty. Grace. Joy.*

I offer the splendor of these opportunities that I have been fortunate enough to experience with children in my class:

I have observed a child be pushed to the ground by another and respond kindly, "Touch me gently...like this..." and then softly stroke the arm of the offender, so to give this child another choice for how to interact peacefully. – *Compassion.*

I have witnessed a child throw tantrums day after day for

weeks on end at every turn just to get what he wants, discover for the first time how it feels to offer something of value to another. – *Generosity*

I have watched five children sit together and teach each other a song, laboring over the correct melody of each note until it is pitch perfect. – *Beauty.*

I have noticed a child's inexperienced, inept fingers fumble pitifully with a button day after day, only one day to be able to button. – *Grace.*

I have seen a child come to school; hang up his coat; decide to help another child struggling with his coat; notice the clean towels on a rug and fold them and put them away; sit peacefully admiring a story written by another; be then inspired to write his own story; ask another child to listen while he reads it; stop mid-sentence to help another child find dry clothes to change into; exclaim with delight when this usually obstinate child finally accepts his help for the first time: He let me help him today!"; return to finish reading his story; sit back and rest in the comfort of his own delight and accomplishment. – *Joy.*

This is Montessori. Montessori offers no less than this at any moment, to any child, ever.

Footnotes:

- 1 Maria Montessori, *The Discovery of the Child*, (New York, 1973), p. 71
- 2 Maria Montessori, *Education for a New World* (Adyar, Madras) p. 20
- 3 *Ibid.*, pp 88-89

Reprinted by permission of Wendy Calise, teacher at Countryside Montessori School, Northbrook, IL