

Question: "Dr. Montessori speaks of "re-births" and explains that during the period of his development man "is born" several times. What relation is there between the re-births and four planes of education?"

Answer: Maria Montessori describes the development of the butterfly. First, when the little insect is out of the egg he begins almost immediately to change, but fundamentally he remains the same kind of animal with the same needs and the same laws of growth. But then he changes, weaving himself a cocoon where the chrysalis dwells developing. There seems to be no connection between the former state and the second, but we are still dealing with the same creature. And finally out of the cocoon comes the butterfly, and certainly this animal with its colours and its ability to fly is a far call from the insect which came out of the egg. Similar metamorphoses, Maria Montessori claimed, happen also in the life of man. His growth is like that of the butterfly and not like that of other animals such as the horse, where the newborn is not fundamentally different from the full-grown of the species. By looking at the baby and the adult we can see that the physical growth of man does resemble that of the horse, but we must remember that man has a psyche also. It is this that follows the growth of the butterfly. Because who, looking at the helpless baby unable to feed himself, incapable of co-ordinated movement, unable to utter anything except a meaningless cry, would believe that in a few years the same child will be able to walk upright, communicate in language? Later still he will be able to imagine, abstract prove that he has intelligence and then we realize that this being is truly a man. None of us can fully realize the feeling we had when we were children because we go through these metamorphoses. We are born several times, each time emerging as a new creature and as the child cannot remember the womb, we cannot properly re-integrate the feelings of the previous states.

Maria Montessori stated that these phases reveal themselves even physically. The child from 3-6 years changes as the insect out of the egg, but remains fundamentally the same. At 6 or 7, however, he passes from one state to another visibly, often becoming thinner yet stronger; the quality of the hair changes. To illustrate the new level at which the child has arrived, the dottoressa speaks of the child's teeth. When a milk-tooth becomes loose, not much notice is taken of it and it is often pulled out by a thread, even if a certain fuss is made as the parents realize that the child is passing on to a higher plane. But, once the second teeth arrive extracting them is a different matter because they are now stable organs meant to last the child through life.

Psychically changes in temperament are noticeable. For instance, the child becomes outwardly less loving towards his family and less easily managed. At 12 the child goes through another metamorphoses to emerge as the social being and from 18 to 24 we have the final step before the full adult is born.

In the chart which Maria Montessori uses to illustrate these discoveries made by her through

observation, man's life is illustrated by a horizontal red line divided into four sections and each one is divided into two parts to give a "vee" progress so that each new section begins on the red line or on the same plane on which the child was physically born. Maria Montessori called these sections of man's life "planes" to stress the idea of rebirth. It is not simply that man evolves along an upward pointing gradient but after each period of development he arrives in a new "world", stepping on to a new plane capable of new things as the different creature he now is.

It is perhaps through this power of being reborn that man has achieved all he has done because rebirth means a renewal of energy, so that each time a child passes on to a different plane we have a new vigour and life-giving element in the world. The recognition and understanding of these metamorphoses in the child's psychic life are essential in education, because otherwise we may waste most of the potential. Everytime a child passes into the following period his needs alter and if we are unaware of the progress we will continue to treat the 6 or 7 year old as the 3 year old, ignoring all the wonderful faculties the child has constructed in the years from 0-6: intelligence, the power to abstract and imagination, all the qualities which differentiate man from the rest of the animal kingdom. Maria Montessori called all the subjects taught to the children psycho - e. g. psycho-geometry etc. because everything was adapted to the needs of the child and not presented in an adult frame. In such conditions the children revealed their own psychic way of dealing with the subject, achieving results undreamt of in ordinary school circumstances. Hence, the importance of adapting the subject to the needs of the child and not to the adult's logic. She declared that her shoes fitted and suited her very well but they were useless to a child learning to walk.

But, what is more important still, she saw to it that everything she gave to the children on the different planes in the stages towards adulthood, was suited to the demands of the new psychic being. Thus to the child trying to conquer the environment in the Casa dei Bambini she gives a limited environment which the child himself can keep in order and in it she puts material which helps the child to bring to consciousness all that he has absorbed from the world around him, achieving clarity of mind by means of classification. But to the 6 year old she gives the world because he has an insatiable thirst for knowledge, to use all the instruments which he has built within himself without realizing it. To the social being of 12 years she wants us to give the opportunity of playing their part in the economic and artistic functioning of human society.

If we do not realize the form man's growth takes, then we shall hinder and often destroy important potentials of development. If the 6 year old, even in Montessori institutions, is no longer interested in school, it is our fault because by continuing to give him the treatment suited to the constructive period from 3-6 we confine him to a limited environment when his mind is soaring towards infinity. We give a cocktail savoury to a hungry man. If through ignorance of the natural laws we put ourselves in conflict with them, we cannot hope to produce a man with all his faculties fully developed.

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