

Peace through Education

Two years before the outbreak of World War II, in 1937, the Sixth International Montessori Congress on Peace was held in Copenhagen. During one of the lectures the Congress participants were addressed by Maria and Mario Montessori who pleaded that humankind must come to terms with themselves and the environment. They recognized that increasing efforts were being made all over the world to understand the elusive concept of peace, as more and more groups of people were organizing peace efforts in their communities.

In organizing its 6th International Congress—on the theme *Educate for Peace*—the Association Montessori Internationale did not intend to depart from its aim of protecting and illustrating the personality of the child, joining instead the political struggle. On the contrary, many societies are fighting in the field of politics to stem the immediate danger of an overwhelming and general conflict. But we want to draw attention away from the blinding and passion-raising actualities and to fix it upon the need for a constructive effort, showing what contributions the child and education can bring to this effort.

The effort for peace must not be limited to last-minute endeavours to remedy political errors, nor can peace be secured by justly or unjustly blaming one or another form of government. Even if these are considered to be the cause of the present danger, the blame cannot be laid upon them but rather upon Society which allowed conditions to develop that made these forms of government necessary. Peace is a complex, many-sided construction that has never yet existed. At present, its name merely implies the cessation of war. In order to attain peace something must be done besides preaching vague idealisms.

To determine the conditions for establishing peace in the world, indirect and complex

factors must be studied and organized into a structured science. The most important of these factors is the human one. Peace is essentially a human problem. Therefore, the human element should be our first consideration. To date, it is given almost no attention at all.

In Man a dual personality exists: the far-sighted conqueror of the external environment and the blind slave, ignorant of his own inner energies. Man has solved many of the riddles of the Universe. Mankind has become united by material and intellectual interests to form one nation. Man has conquered hidden forces and he rules the earth, yet, this ruler of the outer world has not succeeded in conquering his own inner energies. Among the innumerable ideas determining the concept of peace, these energies remain conspicuously absent.

The place education holds in the great interests of humanity is secondary—it is considered a luxury rather than a necessity. In times of stress, if any cuts are to be made, it is the budget for education which usually suffers. This is because, especially in democratic countries, education plays the minimal role of imparting in an abstract way certain ideas contained in a standard syllabus.

The role of education should be a very different one. It should hold first place among human interests and, even if it retains the

same name, its scope must be much wider. It must place the human personality at its very centre. In creating its programmes it must be guided by the laws of psychic development. These have never yet been considered in education. Nor has the fact been taken into consideration that if an adult is strong or weak in character, if he is balanced or unbalanced, it is due to the conditions he met with during his psychic growth. The structure of education should not only have as its basis the protection of Man during his physical development and the response to the vital needs of the growing child but also the knowledge and valorization of the moral attributes inherent in Man.

Much is said today against unitary forms of government which are criticized for restricting the liberties and the rights of Man. Few, however, realize that, no matter how hard their discipline may be towards the adult, the unitarians valorize by every means the personality of Man in the process of development. Although this valorization is built around the ideals of their respective regime, it is nevertheless a valorization and it starts from a very early age. Each individual is made to feel that he forms a necessary and important part of an organization with aims so lofty as to seem almost unattainable. By allowing them to take part officially in the national activities, the individuals are made to feel that their help and collabora-

tion is truly necessary if these aims are to be reached. What an immense impulse to the formation of their character! What a tremendous enhancement of the dignity, of the inner values of the individual, to feel the importance of being a constructive unit in a disciplined organization with altruistic aims and to have this importance recognized officially, even at four years of age, when passing in front of a General the latter renders him the same military salute with the same dignity as he renders to the adult soldier. Is it to be marvelled at that, in individuals so valorized, constructive enthusiasm forms part of the psychic constitution, sacrifice appears as a pleasant means to achieve an aim and discipline and obedience are sought with joy?

No, nor is it to be marvelled at that all efforts of democracies to infuse a spirit of peace in their youth meet with a lukewarm response. It is not—as many believe—that human nature is bad or warlike, far from it. It is only that democracy treats its youth in a benighted fashion.

Democracies valorize individuality when it has reached the adult stage but the adults who have had no active preparation towards any definite aim are divided into classes groups which are in a state of continuous conflict. These often destroy—and always hinder—the method of progress advanced or elaborated by a class with views different



Group picture at the 1937 Montessori Congress at Christiansborg—the seat of the Danish Parliament. Standing in front is the Danish Minister of Education, Mr Joergen Joergensen. To his left hand side is Dr Maria Montessori, a lady called Mrs Ventegodt, and Mr Mario Montessori.

from their own. Yet, democracies valorize freedom of the individual's personal values no matter what class he belongs to nor to what race. Democracies protect and cultivate individuality and personality for their own sakes. By law, any citizen born in the United States can become President. Any attack on, or attempt to restrict, personal liberty is strongly resented individually and collectively. So the democratic state is considered by the majority as the best, as the one most corresponding to our civilization, as the careful protector and cultivator of the independent human personality. And so it is. But only for those individuals who have reached the adult stage. For Man in the course of development, democracies have a dictatorial regime, worse than any witnessed in the past or in the present, among adults. The developing individual is not given any consideration whatsoever. His needs, the natural laws governing the growth of his intelligence and of spiritual and moral values, are not even remotely taken into account. The only real interest in education is the development of programmes in the schools and theoretical inculcation of moral or religious principles outside the schools. Thus is imposed on the developing individual a life in which, hour by hour, he depends—both in action and in thought—entirely on the actions and the thoughts of the adult from whose authority he has no appeal. This weakens the will of the individual who remains apathetic, depressed, unconsciously humiliated, dissatisfied and unable to act without continual guidance. So, on reaching adulthood, in order to live and to take part in the life of the nation, he throws himself into the group which seems to embody ideas that express his inner dissatisfactions. Is it a wonder that these young people will respond with little enthusiasm to the theories of peace which demand from them still further

passivity, still greater resignation to violence? Is it not much more natural to rebel, to find expression in theories and the practice of measuring strength against strength?

Among the means advocated for attaining the *Psychology of Peace* the ones more frequently mentioned are the reform of teaching history, the teaching of the Covenant of the League of Nations and the teaching of a common language. That education ought to be reformed, if we wish to achieve a mentality of peace, is self-evident. Every peace movement is convinced of this and has an educational commission. But we must be very careful as to the path we take for the wrong path will bring wrong results and, through these, discouragement and the conviction that human nature is not made for peace.

If education for peace is to be attained, another path must be taken. The proposed reforms would leave unaltered all the conditions which lower and often destroy the values of the growing individual but the crushing tyranny would remain unchanged. The only difference would be that certain subjects, instead of others, would be imposed upon minds often rebellious. The futility of these reforms by themselves is shown by the following facts. In learning history, nothing is so tiring to the pupil as having to remember a series of dates and names of wars or battles. It is certainly not this boredom which will evoke enthusiasm for war in the pupil, rather the contrary. The use of a common language is recommended under the illusion that, if only one language were used, humanity would reach a universal understanding and solve conflicts by discussion instead of violence. But do they not speak the same language in Spain? (This was written during the Spanish Civil War). Did they not speak the same language in South America during the Paraguayan-Bolivian war?

These are only two of the hundreds of cases that might be mentioned. As for teaching the Covenant of the League of Nations, if theoretical teaching were sufficient to promote a moral construction which would respond to the aim we are trying to achieve, all wars would have ceased in Christian nations some 2000 years ago. The Gospel is something much more inspiring, much more profound and divine than any Covenant since, according to Christian belief, God is its author. It is taught minutely and profoundly to people of all ages. Yet, if we look back upon history, we see that even Christians' wars did not cease. Educational reform cannot be achieved without taking into account the laws of psychic growth.

Long experience has shown the extent of the child's contribution to solving the problem of achieving peace. The child has revealed the laws of human growth and the needs peculiar to each of its different stages of development. The innate tendency of human nature is to achieve an increasingly refined form of independence growing from basic functional independence to mental abstraction and social acquisitions. These different acquisitions are conquered in different epochs of life through a special sensibility placed by nature into each individual, a sensibility that lasts only through the time in which the acquisition is made leaving the perfected mechanism for the individual to use through the exercise of his will.

Usually no consideration whatever is given to the vital needs of the developing human being: the basis of education is a cultural and moral programme which the experience of centuries has dictated as necessary: this is imposed and to this the individual must adapt himself. Human nature rebels, not against the programme, but against the way it is imposed. The impulses of growth compel the individual in one direction, the

imposition of the adults force him into another path. Thus work becomes hateful, and a natural defence arises in the individual. The result is a permanent conflict both in the home and the school where 'the healthy hate between pupil and teacher', as a modern writer has expressed it, has become historical. To curb rebellion and encourage children towards the path, indicated by the adult, punishments and prizes are used. Collective discipline is achieved but only external discipline, which lasts as long as fear lasts, but which turns into the wildest disorder as soon as the restraining hand is taken away. Resentment, hate of work, cruelty, love of possession, competition and facility to be influenced by suggestion become part of the personality. And this is so prevalent, and so general as to be considered natural to mankind.

Children in their school communities—in the old systems of education—gave a picture, in miniature, of the masses which form society. If a teacher left the class pandemonium broke loose as soon as his steps died away. Objects were thrown, ink was splattered about, the walls of the room were soiled with balls of chewed paper, children screamed at the top of their lungs. When, for some reason, the government and the commanders of the army lose control the same phenomenon—but with more tragic consequences—happens in the country. Arson and murder are committed, convents are burned, priests and innocent citizens are tortured by people who, until some days before, had led peaceful and respectful lives.

The master comes back to meet with sullen and defiantly triumphant silence on the part of the pupils to which he responds with scathing words, punishment and sharpened discipline. Repression, punishment and stern disciplinary action are the results of any outbreak in the adult world: 'for only

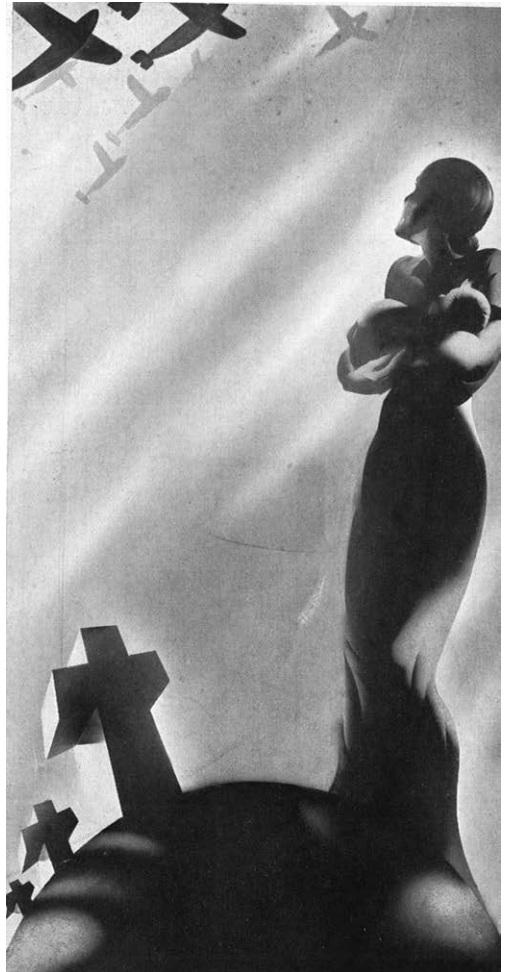
discipline will keep anarchy away, the world cannot function without law and order’.

True, very true! Even anarchy, when triumphant, must and does resort to law and order. But there is a good and better world! Anarchy need not exist and imposed discipline may become unnecessary. When children were given what corresponded to their needs they showed something fundamental—the real nature of Man—heretofore hidden under the cloak of psychological defences. They not only adapted to the moral and cultural programme considered necessary by our civilization but they sought it with enthusiasm and a spontaneous discipline developed. It was a calm inner discipline caused by activity and collaboration. Also, such a love for work developed as to clearly prove that in childhood work is a natural necessity. Possessiveness disappeared because objects were only means to an end and had no other value in themselves. The children showed love for their companions and for their teachers. They went out of their way to assist those who needed help and they did it with simplicity and enthusiasm, not as a sacrifice, but as a pleasure.

The children, under the old conditions, reflected the mass psychology of society even as it exists today. Let us provide new conditions that will allow them to give us a true picture of the society of the future.

Maria Montessori
Mario M. Montessori

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A poster symbolizing women of the world protecting life against the aggressions of war.