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# Box 12, Folder 02 - "...Dr. Montessori's artistry "(E.M.S.) + Public Lectures [Chapter III]

Edwin Mortimer Standing

taken on a unique and particular character, and those who have attended most say they have never known two to be alike. But it is Dr. Montessori's artistry in exposition that evolved the "central theme" as a technique - partly to give variety and partly to vitalise a course; since the tendency of a creator is to be busy with some particular aspect, and enthusiasm is communicated more readily along the channel in which the creative gift is specially occupied at the time.

Yet the act of teaching is itself a stimulus to creative thought and the line chosen for this creative work may in turn have been dictated by the needs of the audience, or of the country, in which the course found itself.

I am inclined myself tobelieve that the course is a combined product of both elements; of genius impinging upon the learner's mind, and of the learner's mind upon genius; and for that very reason, the effort to pre-plan or predict its form by means of too close a syllabus, or published, programme, would have been to cramp or impede the development of a thing not yet in existence. Certainly no organiser, however pushed by inquiries or the advice of publicity-experts, ever succeeded in extracting from Dr. Montessori a list of topics at stated dates, until a course quite late in the series, when she seemed to groan under the burden, and once apologised to the audience for keeping to a schedule which both she and they (by that time) were longing to evade.

The idea of building up the mind on a basis of order struck me, in those days, as a distinctly new conception in pedagogy, when everyone was preoccupied by how and what to teach. The laying down of order enables the individual himself to do the building while not becoming buried in bric-a-brac. It restricts the work of the educator to a minimum function, in which he sheds the burdensome responsibility of deciding how much the pupil shall learn, in favour of the less burdensome, but more far-reaching task of ordering his mental intake, much as a good librarian, by labelling the shelves, doubles their value without limiting their contents.

To distinguish objects by their function, as well as by their form; to know the purpose of a thing, how to use it and where it is kept, is the beginning of this order; to classify impressions of colour, form and quantity, with the appropriate word for each, continues it. Thus mental content emerges from the state of chaos and becomes organised, much as (to quote Montessori) the story of creation begins with a void in which order is first established, the waters are divided from the land, night follows day, so that a basis is provided from which higher forms may spring.

The next London course, held at the Mary Ward Settlement in 1921, concerned itself with the child's gradual conquest of independence; then we had one about the will and its strengthening by use - what happens when the child's will is replaced by the adult's will.

Later came courses on child-psychology, the deviations of personality and their rectification under normalised conditions. The "sensitive periods" - a phrase coined by the Dutch- biologists - in which instinct itself has phasic changes at the different levels of development; so that growth is marked not only by changes of size but of kind.

Finally, has come the great world-view, now invading science, by which man is seen as having a cosmic part to play in the living environment he inhabits, and helps (like all the creatures) to maintain in its balance and perpetuation. At the same time man makes for himself a world within this, which being over and above the natural world, yet not super-natural in the religious sense, she christened the supra-natural, a thing needed for living as the diving-bell is needed for diving. Far from aiming at a return to nature, education must regard this as natural, and man's constant development of it as a human characteristic.

So pedagogy has seemed to lead to a philosophy, rather than the other way round, and this is a reversal of most educational reforms by which the fruits of a philosophy previously held have been, as it were, imposed upon the child.

These themes never, of course, ousted the practical details but acted as a kind of leit motif or point of radiation for the rest, which often appeared in a new light because of them. Meanwhile these practical details multiplied every time; so much so that the four months seemed to burst with them, and some invariably got neglected though not, fortunately, the same ones in every course. But as certain things entered into common knowledge and general practice, it became less urgent to speak of them, so that a gradual swing in emphasis could take placetowards the new. Nevertheless the need is always felt for a longer course, but when the time comes practical difficulties supervene.

One reason for this is that teachers can obtain leave of absence for a term, and, by adding a long vocation, obtain sufficient time away from their work; but a course encroaching on two terms would be another matter, while the strain on all concerned is heavy enough, as it is, without a lengthy break, which again would be expensive for visitors from a distance.

So the problem remains unsolved.

Since the 1939 war began attempts have been made in this country to hold similar courses without Dr. Montessori's personal presence. The first was in Edinburgh in 1943, where Miss Margaret Drummond read from typescript the lectures given by Dr. Montessori in the course of 1939. That course had already been relayed to Edinburgh at the time it was given, so this was really no fresh departure; it was just a repeated relay. More novel was the shorter course organised in Acton during 1944 for teachers in war-time nurseries and nursery classes, and therefore restricted in scope to the years under six. Three sessions were held weekly, each of an hour and a half, and a team of instructors took turns in demonstrating, supervising the work of practical handling of the apparatus, etc., while "doodle-bugs" thundered outside. Miss K. A. Stevens, a Montessorian of many years standing, and head-teacher of one of the infant council-schools in Acton, read lectures by Dr. Montessori of which a selection was made fom recent and earlier courses.

I gathered up the fragments left over, of which there were plenty to occupy a weekly session held at the strange hour of 1.30 p.m. on Saturday afternoons. And here was an odd fact. The limitation of age-period enabled ample time to be spent on details which usually get rushed in the larger course, and this amplication took the following form. First a demonstration would be given, for example of how to teach a given movement, washing hands, scrubbing a table, folding a rug; then students dividing into pairs would repeat the lesson, one pretending to be the teacher and the other the child. Watching this process being enacted it became apparent that many had only half understood the demonstration, simple though it may have seemed; others would, unconsciously to themselves, be making errors of various kinds - for example, introduce a superfluous gesture which could distract the child's attention form the main point of the lesson. Only by observation could these errors have been detacted, since they were totally unforseeable; yet by correcting each in the presence of the whole class invited to watch, everyone became gradually more sensitive and less likely to fall into them. The knowledge thus gained constitues the difference between practice and theory, between enthusiasm for the method and success in applying it. As I pointed out, mere idealism, or a mere belief in principles, is not enough; one can believe in the efficacy of medecine and be enthusiastic for the triumphs of modern surgery, but only immsense experience can diagnose successfully, while the leading surgeon is he who has at his finger-tips the greatest mass of detail.

Not having been present at the Edinburgh course, I was gratified to observe the success of readings from Dr. Montessori's lectures, and to admire once again their clarity and depth. Closing one's eyes one could recapture again the dramatic intensity of the atmosphere in which I had originally heard them, and visualise the presence of the speaker, as one does at a recording.

The courses held in other countries no doubt had a theme-song also, but I was not told it and can only mention other features at second-hand. Los Angeles out-did the films by building a "Children's House" of glass as part of the great Exhibition, and I've not any doubt the teacher suffered from caged-lion night-mare, though not the children. Below a certain age, observers never worry them, and even when a corwd swarms round one or two, they seem to conduct life on a plane which may intermingle with that of the adults, but is not interfered with by it, somewhat as (to the eye of a chemist) the smaller molecules of a solution can slither about in the gaps between the larger ones.

Anecdotes which come from the courses are usually personal - too personal, sometimes, for narration! - and if one asks for information about the lectures, the most enthusiastic hearer cansay only that they were marvellous - whether testifying thus to the quality of the lectures or to limited powers of intake, being a question I prefer to leave open, though inclining to the latter alternative. Indeed, neither the Pharisees nor the High Priests of learning have been prominent in these courses, but rather the humble of heart and (it must be confessed) very often the lowly of mind. Yet those with the larger bucket could certainly have filled it many times over in these waters, and if explanation is needed, it must lie rather in the difficulty of the richly loaded in discarding prized possessions, for novel ideas - like furniture - need elbow-room and the cotter's attic may be more receptive than the parlour of Dives.

Many have urged Dr. Montessori to establish an entrance - examination but all experience has gone to show that love - as tested by the entrance fee - is the better guide, and I am willing to assert, and - short of burning at the stake - to go on asserting that a school-girl of fifteen, with a gift for this work, can burgeon and blossom into a personality, and in five to ten years practical experience have a fuller knowledge of what education really means - than any five professors of education pooling their knowledge (not that this will multiply the sum total very much, since mostof it

belongs to the past which all possess equally.)

The personal factor common to all these courses has been Dr. Montessori, and Mr. Mario Montessori, whose college education took place in the American United States, in which - having the physique of a gladiator, and the kind of courage which enjoys risks - he cut a figure sufficiently unusual to become news. Having celebrated one wrestling tourney by flinging the instructor into the bath and dealt with a ragging-party by the simple process of tying it up in sheets and letting it down from his study window, the press gave him a nation-wide renown, picturesquely complementary to that of Dr. Montessori. Other figures came and went, the two sisters Fancello, in Italy; Senor Homs and Senorita Villuendas in Spain, Fraulein Ochs in Berlin, and later "the Axsters", a young German barrister and his wife, who became important in the International Montessori organization; the Joostens (mother and son), and Miss Van Tromp, in Holland, with several professors of the university.

Holland, in fact, was the one country in which interest began at the top (in the cultural sense) and percolated down-wards; here and elsewhere it is still filtering slowly up from the bottom - so much so that only of recent years has a university lecturer taken part in the actual conduct of a course, Miss Margaret Drummond, M.B.E., of Edinburgh, for many years a lecturer in psychology at Moray House Training College, and celebrated authoress of a book called "Five Years Old, or Thereabouts."

## CHAPTER 111.

## The Public Lectures.

Long before her schools burst upon the world this was a person famous in her own country. Certain public utterances had caused a storm. Of these we know the first only by hearsay. It would be called in English a prize oration, for it was given by the prize-winning medical student of the year, as one of the public events of the University. The lady doctor! The figure of fun, incredulity and curiosity; the pioneer in a land where pioneering for woman's emancipation was a good deal harder than in England. The Josephine Butler of her day - I had almost said the Mrs. Bloomer, for so did her action rank in Italian ribalrdy. Five years since a non-committal name had appeared in the student's register, one "M. Montessori", and only on arrival for the first lecture had the truth dawned and the storm broke. Agitated search among the rules, but none findable to exclude women; a contingency, therefore, so remote as to be unforeseen. What remains? Torment! Rudeness; at first blatant, then more subtle; for a look from this student could quell like a howitzer. As a girl at school, she tells of hearing a boy in the row behind her say to his neighbour, "I am immortal."

"What makes you think that?" was the answer.

"If I weren't I should be dead. Didn't you see the look she gave me?"

To have no friends and to be disowned by her father; this was the lot of the new collegiate. Not so her mother, who seems to have understood at a very early age that she was entrusted with the upbringing of genius, and to have planned accordingly. Even the boy friend was tested too high; for the medical career decided itself on the sudden and without previous consultation even with its chooser, who, till the night before she registered at the University, intended to study mathematics. Having seen with paralysing certainty that her path lay in medicine, she paid her visit in the morning, simply signing in that faculty instead of in the other.

But who could be expected to believe a story like that! He felt he had been deceived and remained offended.

No doubt there are many stories, of which mine will be a poor sampling, but this was told to a British journalist in my presence, and may be worth adding to richer collections. The dissecting room without a seat for the lady entering last. No one moves, but the Professor retains his chivalry and gazing about with mounting rage, finds words at last.

"Do you want me to throw this knife?" No infection so deadly as that of necrosis, and none more fearful of it that the medico in training - so a place is quickly round.

Another story is that of the public clamour finally quelled by the Pope; for after much newspaper debating the question was brought to hi, whether it was proper for a Christian woman to study medicine. Whether his opinion would be influenced by the personality in the case will be judged as the reader wishes, but the facts are that this particular personality during the days of his pre-Papal ministry as a bishop, and he made reply that he knew of no authority that could forbid the mission of healing to a woman. Criticism was thus stilled, at least among the Blacks, or Papal party which held majority-sway among the upper strata of Roman society, while the anti-clericals, would I suppose have had liberal leanings already.

Anyway, peace reigned at least outwardly after this, till the time came for examination-tests, when another menace raised its head, the eclipsing of all previous standards by this interloper; for the normal six-years work had been done by her in five, and the medal for forst place went to her also. Fearing a hostile demonstration the authorities suggested her name as winner be read out in general assembly, but that it would be more tactful not to appear in person, when it could be forwarded by post. The young doctress, or "dottoressa" as the Italians put it, not only attended in person, but took care to arrive early and stood with arms folded facing down a long corridor, along which each man would have to pass on his way to the hall.

This to prove that she had not run away. Whatever may have been prepared, the ceremony passed off peacefully. Later came the oration, in which she chose as her theme the process known to biologists as cytosis, or the division of parent cell into two after fusion between the male and female elements had taken place.

It is perhaps the most fascinating page in natural history, needing for its appreciation a sense of life which isalmost mystical; indeed, the poet in Edward Carpenter aspired, to, but hardly reached, the needs of it; and beautifully as she hasspoken since, she says she has never quite touched the inspiration(on)that moved her on that day. The hall was crowded, as one would expect, since curiosity towards the notorious could have filled it alone; people stood on the radiators, sat on the window-ledges, clung like flies to the pillars,. And when, as all agreed, a great success had been scored, something else happened which must have meant more than one would infer from her simple words, "It was then that my father forgave me!"

This gentleman- in the truest sense, for I met him in his eighties during the Rome course of 1913 - had, it appears, been so profoundly shocked by his daughter's choice of studies that, although continuing to provide her with a home, he had not spoken to her for three years. A staunch and cheering soul, none-the less, who lived to see the dawn of world triumph, and whose last years can seldom have been equalled in the loving care of a devoted daughter which gladdened them. The mother I did not know, but by all accounts a great woman also, who practically companioned her daughter through her medicalstudies,, discussing her notes and sharing the meditations which they inspired in her.

This meditation has always been characteristic of Dr. Montessori's mode of study, and the fruits of it shine through her lectures enlivening what a materialistic outlook could render arid, cumbersome and dull. As she says in a fine passage of her "Pedagogical Anthropology."

and once again in a lecture to her course, "There is a great difference between being unable to solve a mystery and being unaware of its presence; it is the difference between a traveller who sees, and one who does not see, that he is walking on the edge of an abyss." To study life is to fill one's self with the realisation of what is unexplained, or even unexplainable, since we may even lack the mental apparatus needed to understand; the knowledge that one is ignorant may not, it is true, equate with knowledge, but to know without knowing one's ignorance, this is ignorance indeed.

It is the gift of conveying this deeper knowledge that places Dr. Montessori in a class apart from and above, all other lecturers that I have heard, and, it may be, that accounts for much of the enthusiasm with which her expositions are greeted, and the grandeur that seems to envelop them. And here may be mentioned a curious and universal fact that when Dr. Montessori enters a room to lecture, whether to her course, or to a public knowing her only by name, some collective impulse seems to seize upon the audience whereby, without any signal given by anyone, they all stand up, and remain standing till she is seated. It seems like an instinctive tribute to a great benefactress, whether one is disposed to agree with her or not.

The second great public lecture (or the second of which I have knowledge) took place almost impromptu at a congress, and many regarded this as the beginning of her reputation, anyhow in education. Speakers were allowed ten minutes, but a spell broke and she was allowed an hour and a half. The subject was sex-education and it was here that she laid down an immortal definition of vice which, if it isancient, deserves recalling, and, if it is new, deserves dissemination. Vice is function deprived of purpose; and she illustrated this by the banquet of olden times which far exceeded the needs of nutrition; indeed, the Roman ruins contain a <u>pisces</u> wherein the gorged could provoke a vomit and return again to the table. This was eating deproved of purpose and reform lay in

restricting the function to the purposes of nutrition. But although mankind has reached this level, the other orgy remains in which young men are even encouraged to frequent the brothel, and the ruined lives of the women, therein she compared to the murdered babies whose blood became a bath in which a certain Emperor could allay the itching of his skin. Sex-education would show to youth the marvel of his power, enhancing the natural idealism whereby chastity can be set up as a challenge to the pioneering spirit of human courage and devotion to man's mission on earth.

Hardly out of her girl-hood and with the radiant face and smile of a Joan of Arc mustering her armies, people said to one another, "Who is this beautiful young woman?" - a phrase reminiscent of the query at once commonplace and classic, wherever the unexpected branches from the ordinary, and which we already know in its sublimest form, "Is this not the carpenter's son?"

This discourse was published as a pamphlet, and when many years later the "Children's Houses" brought their creator into world-wide prominence, many Romans could not rid their minds of it and imagined that any lecture they might hear from "the Montessori" would be an elaboration of its theme. Chairmen would almost always start by an affirmation of their belief in the value of sex-education, much to the astonishment of visitors to Rome whose interests and expectations lay in the management of infant-schools, and who used in fact to hear nothing at all from her on this subject; since she was almost over-cautious in not wanting to draw what would, in those days, have been a red-herring across the trail of questions far more important.

About other great lectures given in Italy I have a less clear idea, knowing only those parts of them already published in Dr. Montessori's own books. There was the speech to a congress at Turin on the importance of caring for defective children as a means to diminishing crime, and the Inaugural Lecture to the opening of the first Casa dei Bambini (the importance of which many thought to have been much exaggerated by it) appears in full in "The Montessori Method", the book in which she announced her first results with normal babies in the heart of slum-land.