

Hope for Humanity: My Travels with Maria Montessori
The Unitarian Church of Montreal
Rev. Diane Rollert, 3 May 2009

I've always wondered why Hollywood has never made a major motion picture out of Maria Montessori's life story. Sometimes I dream of writing the screenplay and retiring on the royalties. The story would go something like this:

It is 1870 and Italy has just become a nation. You can imagine the gorgeous cinematography and the glorious costumes.

A baby girl is born in Chiaravalle, 300 kilometres northeast of Rome. She grows up a brilliant and independent soul. At the age of thirteen she enters an all-boy engineering school. As a young woman she manages to convince the Pope to grant her dispensation so that she can study medicine at the University of Rome.

In medical school, her fellow students – all men, ridicule her. It is unseemly for a woman to study anatomy in the presence of men, so special arrangements are made for her to do the required dissections of cadavers alone at night.

Her first night in the lab she has a failure of nerve. A shiver runs deep through her bones as she finds herself surrounded by death. She goes over to the window. Outside there is light. The world is beautiful. Everything is alive. She flees the lab, running toward home. This aloneness, this gruesome work with death is too much to bear. She tells herself she'll quit and be like every other woman in Rome.

In a nearby park, she passes a poor and dishevelled woman with her child begging for money. The child is about two years old. She's playing with a scrap of coloured paper. She's joyously absorbed, as if nothing exists but this beautiful, beautiful treasure of colour to be bent and turned and contemplated, again and again.

In that moment, Montessori recognizes that she has a vocation, a calling in life. She returns to the lab, she overcomes her revulsion and fear. She finishes her studies and graduates as Italy's first female doctor.

In those days in Rome children with mental disabilities are called *deficienti*, the deficient ones. They are locked into asylums, left to pine away with little stimulation. This is where Montessori begins her work, convinced that it must be possible to educate these forgotten children.

One day she observes a child grasping at crumbs on the floor. She is told that the children are greedy. They are looking for more food. No, she says. Watch. The child isn't eating the crumbs. He's feeling them. He's touching them. His senses are hungry. That's what we need to do. We need to feed these children's senses. And so she begins to experiment, bringing solid geometric forms, cubes, spheres, pyramids and the like for the children to touch and to learn their names. In time, her students miraculously pass state tests designed for those who are considered "normal."

Cut to a romantic scene. The young Dr. Montessori falls in love with a colleague and they have a clandestine affair. Today she tells him with great shame that she is pregnant. They pledge that they will keep their child and their affair a secret and remain single and true to each other forever. But soon he leaves for another woman and she is forced to send her infant son to be raised by a family in the countryside outside Rome. Her son Mario will not learn his mother's identity until he is fifteen. She will never publicly acknowledge him as her son, though he will grow up to dedicate himself to her life's work. She keeps silent about her pain and throws herself into studies, research and projects.

The success of her early work catapults her into public recognition and she is asked to start a school for children in a housing project in Rome. These are children without mental or physical disabilities, but they are wild and out of control and their parents are poor and illiterate. There is no budget for the usual classroom set up. No desks, no workbooks. So Montessori is left with tremendous freedom to put her theories to the test.

Follow the child, she says. The child can teach us everything we need to know. She observes these children of the poorest areas of Rome and she sees how they crave both order and independence. One day the school cupboard is left unlocked and she arrives to find the children are carefully removing items and setting to work. She treats them with trust and they blossom.

They don't need excessive amounts of words to receive instruction. They find peace in silence. They find pride in handling materials that other adults wouldn't allow them to use. Gentle but clear instruction, stepping back and allowing them to help themselves, she sees the joy they gain in mastering things for themselves. Silently, she demonstrates how to wash dirty hands, and the children become so proud and adept at this activity that they hold out their hands to show passersby who mistake them for beggars.

She introduces them to the alphabet through letters cut out of sandpaper. They trace the letters with their fingers, repeating each sound. One day the children have a mass epiphany. They discover that by putting together sounds they can write (oh, the gift of a phonetic language). They begin chalking words everywhere. The children cry with delight, "I can write! I can write!" and in that moment a method and a movement is born.

Montessori's Children's Houses are established throughout Rome's poorest neighbourhoods.

In the end Montessori's contributions to the lives of children were many, most of which we take for granted today. She pioneered what we now call educational toys and the open classroom. She made the world see that children are not miniature adults, and that infants learn from birth on. She showed us that environment and stimulation make a difference.

Ultimately, Mussolini would force her into exile and she would flee to Spain until the beginning of the Spanish Civil War, and then on to India and the Netherlands, all places that have significant Montessori educational presence to this day.

That's the film, but then there's the book I could write about the way Montessori literally changed my life. I first discovered her through a children's biography. As a young girl I was inspired by the story of Italy's first female doctor. Since I grew up in a family of early

childhood educators, Montessori method was considered suspect. So, in a dark and challenging adolescent phase, I did the most rebellious thing I could think of. I went to work as a teacher's aid in a Montessori school.

There I met one of the most important mentors in my life, a woman named Krishna Murthi who was among the last teachers to study directly under Montessori in India. With calm and patience, Mrs. Murthi taught me to how to appreciate each child, including myself.

My life went on to take different turns, but after university and an 8-year corporate career, I found myself drawn back to Montessori. My youngest child was still an infant when I began going to school at night to obtain my certification as a Montessori teacher. There I read Montessori's own writings for the first time.

It was her book, *The Secret of Childhood*, which set me on this path toward faith and ministry more than anything else. I was mystified when our instructor assigned this very Christian book the very first week of the very first course of the program. Written in 1936, it used language I'd never read before. Words like "incarnation" weren't wounded words for me, they were simply incomprehensible. I read the book twice. Slowly, slowly, I absorbed the book into my own understanding and a whole new spiritual world opened up to me.

Montessori's work had always come from a deeply spiritual place. She had a unique theology that deeply touched me, once I boiled it down to its essence. For Montessori, the newborn child embodies the holy. We come into this world with an inner desire and drive to grow and develop into the best that humanity can be. But adults take children and force them into an adult world. What could be worse for the infant, Montessori asked, than to swaddle it so that it can't reach out and explore its world? What could be worse for the young child than to sit in a desk for 8 hours a day at a time when they need to develop mastery over their movement?

In education we too often try to pour information into children's heads, rather than leave space for children to learn with joy for themselves. As Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote in his famous Divinity School Address, "Truly speaking, it is not instruction, but provocation, that I can receive from another soul."

Follow the child, learn from the child, and humanity will flourish. As Montessori wrote:

"If help and salvation are to come, they can only come from the children, for the children are the makers of [humanity]." This is the hope of humanity, that we are born with this potential; that we are born with this spark.

I think of Nick Page singing with us last night. "Fall in love with something and then sing those sounds of the first song ever sung, before there was language," he encouraged us. Oooo says the mother. Eeeee says the child.

That is what is holy and sacred in the world. That is where I found the holy began, after a long journey through the spiritual desert – and Montessori gave me the words to describe what I had never been able to describe before. Call me a spiritual humanist because I still

believe in this great source of goodness. I still have faith it is there in us at birth – if only we adults could nurture what is already there. This is what both our Unitarian and Universalist ancestors believed, it is what ultimately drew them together into one religious movement: the belief that humanity does have the capacity for good – not that everything we do is acceptable – but that we have the capacity to live just and purposeful lives, that we can love and be loveable, that we can create peace in this world.

I did become a Montessori teacher and I took her philosophy to heart. I let the children be my guides. Each child moved at his or her pace, and I was always happy with that. I loved the time we spent together, especially when we gathered in a circle to share stories and to have our snack as a group. Yet I found myself in conflict with the school's administrators. I wasn't pushing the children fast enough to read and write. In their minds, Montessori wasn't about following the child. It was about producing accomplished students. But Montessori wanted children to naturally flourish. If they aren't ready to sit still, take them outside, introduce them to nature, she would have advised.

At the ages of 3, 4, and 5 many of the children in my classroom were already over stimulated by videos, television, and computers. With many moms and dads who were academics and high-powered professionals, of course most of these children could learn to read and write early. But that wasn't what they needed. They needed to reconnect with the awe and wonder of this world. That's when I found myself on the path to religious education and the ministry. Montessori brought me back to faith and moved me out of a classroom that had all her materials and her name, but none of her truth.

In my first years as a director of religious education, I met a lovely woman named Nita Penfold. "You know," she said, "I'm thinking of taking the Godly Play religious education work that's been adapted from Montessori's religious materials and recasting it in a Unitarian Universalist light. Are you interested in working on this with me?"

"What a fabulous idea," I said, "count me in." But I got busy and then decided to go to divinity school, and the rest is history – Nita's history, because she took a brilliant idea and made it real and she called it Spirit Play. Many years ago I was in one of her first teacher training courses. Today the program has come a long way, and I am very proud to say that this weekend we have been host to the first ever Continental Spirit Play conference. How thrilled I am that we now have a team of Spirit Play teachers who are ready to deepen into this approach to religious education for our children.

When it came to religious education, Montessori created materials to bring to life the stories of her faith. How can children learn the language of their faith if we don't give them tools to fully engage in those stories? Today, Nita and others have expanded this work to engage our children in the stories of who we are as Unitarian Universalists and in the stories of the many sources that inspire us. This is Spirit Play, an approach to religious education that engages children's spirituality, and that creates sacred and respectful space for our children to express themselves creatively in response.

Yesterday, I got to hear Nita's keynote speech. I loved that she could speak about spirituality without apology. It is all about connection: to ourselves, to each other, to this

earth, and as each Spirit Play teacher here can tell you, “to the spirit of love and mystery that some people call God.”

It is that thirst that Montessori saw in the newborn child, reaching out to the universe, embracing it with a resounding “yes!” It is that thirst that Montessori saw in the child sitting beside her mother, enthralled by a scrap of coloured paper, or in the child who reached out to feel the sensation of crumbs on his fingertips.

We all begin with that thirst for connection, and as Nita reminded us, religion is simply a container. It is that connection, that spark, that thirst that brings us here to light candles, to sing and share silence, to listen to this beautiful choir, to join this community as members, to raise up the next generation, to fulfil the promise and the hope of humanity.

May that hope ever kindle in our hearts, for what else do we have to face the future?