

The Cobbler

Ephesians 6:15

The Newsletter of the Christian Montessori Fellowship

October 2007

National Conference 2008 July 31 – August 2nd San Antonio, Texas Plan Now to Attend

Grace and Law

I continue to be amazed at God's inspiration given to Dr. Montessori. In this celebratory year deserved honor has been given to the Doctoressa but missing in the deserved honors has been the recognition of from where her inspiration arose (and where that inspiration should take us.) Her biographer, E.M. Standing, in the foreword of "The Child in the Church" states:

"Montessori herself admitted to the present writer on more than one occasion that in the working out of her own educational ideas she learned much from what she called the "pedagogical method" of the Church. Furthermore, she put on record that – as one of the results of her experiments, particularly in Barcelona - her own method could only find its fullest expression when applied to the teaching of the Catholic faith. In fact, she was convinced that this new method was, by a peculiar and providential concatenation of circumstances placed in her hands for the advancement of the Kingdom of God through its application to teaching the truths of the Catholic faith."

This long introduction is to remind us that this great gift of Montessori education springs from the very inspiration and love of God's own heart. The way we are to look at our children is through the same eyes that God looks at us. Dr. Montessori also says "A teacher must be able to see the child as Jesus saw him."

Montessori education is to traditional education what Grace is to law. Law is a demand, a minimal expectation, a duty, a requirement while Grace is a desire, a calling, a going beyond the minimum. Jesus was very clear when He said He did not come to do away with the law but to fulfill them. (Matthew 5:17) And in the Sermon on the Mount six times He says "You have heard that it was said ..." and then He speaks about the law - do not murder, do not commit adultery etc. Then He takes it one step further because His grace is not satisfied with law – it wants love – a higher calling. It is not the letter of the law, it is the spirit of the law that He comes to fulfill and to fulfill in us.

This is the gift that He has given us in this wonderful way to teach and to live. It is a gift of grace. It has been well said that mercy is when we don't get what we deserve but grace is when we get what we don't deserve. And Paul spends much time in the New Testament helping us to understand that while Grace is a free gift it is not a license to do what we please.

(Montessori, isn't that where kids can do anything they want?) Grace has a higher demand than law. Grace looks for the best, law expects the worst.

The dichotomy of grace and law mirrors our theological challenge between works and faith. James tells us "Faith without works is dead." (James 2:26) And yet without faith our works are dead. They just become hay wood and stubble. They have no life, they give no life. It is faith that makes work come alive – observe your classroom.

It is the power of God, the grace of God, the inspiration of God that gives life. It is one of the ironies of contemporary Christianity that we have divided believers into camps that seem to preach either grace or law. Grace – you have the freedom to do what you want or law -you must do these things to be a Christian. I grew up in a church culture where you couldn't smoke, dance or chew etc. Others have grown up in a culture that required attendance, confession, fasting etc. Neither culture provided for the joy of grace only the condemnation of failure. (Because who can live up to the law?) It is only in later years that I could see the irony of the churches who preached grace but insisted that we live by law. Maybe that was even more disheartening than the churches who only preached law.

Where is this theological introduction taking us? Back to our environments. We have been given this unique gift of grace of Montessori education but if we are not careful we turn grace into law and hinder all that God has for our children. Montessorians are true believers. We also have this treasure in earthen vessels. And we want to guard it. The major Montessori societies, to their credit, wish to maintain an integrity of

the Montessori method. Even so, we find ourselves separated into Montessori denominations. There is high church, low church, no church and everything in between. So how do we maintain the integrity of the method? By doing the same thing we are supposed to do in our Christian walk – return to the writings, return to the inspiration.

Our challenge (as Montessorians and Christians) is to be authentic. And that authenticity does not come from the denominations (both Christian and Montessori) but comes from the inspired words that create the canon. The Bible is the inspired word of God and its words breathe God's very Spirit. In much the same way (but not with the same Biblical authority) Montessori's writings are breathed by the same spirit and that same spirit is available to each of us.

However, we tend to replace the method with the methodology in Montessori and replace the relationship with the religion in Christianity. Uniquely, Christianity is based on a personal relationship with Jesus. All the trappings of religion and theology are there to enhance our understanding, appreciation and enjoyment of the relationship. Likewise in Montessori, what we have is not a method but a relationship.

Ponder this question. What does a substitute guide do in an environment? The substitute may know the materials, may know the schedule and may know the expectations. But it is what they don't know that is significant – they don't know the children.

Dr. Montessori says "There was no method to be seen, what was seen was a child." (The Secret of Childhood, pg. 136) And it is in the seeing of the child that a relationship is formed and a child

is blessed by the respect, observations and modeling of the adult.

Therefore, we need to challenge ourselves as we enter the arena of the environment. In traditional education, the child is seen as the challenge. In Montessori we are our own challenge. We need to become like John the Baptist (John 3:30) "He (Jesus) must increase and I must decrease." Do you ever wonder why it is so difficult for people to become Montessori teachers (or even want to)?

To become a "teacher" requires a transformation, a conversion and this can only happen by grace and not by law. Many people may take the training and learn how to manipulate the materials but the materials are not what make a Montessori environment. They add to, they help but they are not the real essence of Montessori education. The essence is in the relationship, the respect, the observation, the modeling and following not only the child but the principles.

Yet it is in following the principles where the danger lies in our missing the essence of Montessori. It seems contradictory that in following the principles we would miss the essence. That is what makes this so subtle. When we have good training, we learn that precision in presentation is vital. But precision is first for the adult. The child will not come to precision for some time. In the presentations it is time that the child needs not precision. Given enough time, the child will develop precision. We have to be patient in our expectations (grace) and not fall back on the demand for precision in our own time frame (law). It has taken me years to appreciate the principle of not correcting children when they do it

wrong but to re-present. You don't find that in a traditional classroom because you don't often find the principle of giving the child time to work out his own mistakes.

One other aspect of law for which I wish I were not guilty is allowing children the time to explore and discover the materials or rather new uses for the material. We tend to think (because we are often trained that way) that red rods are red rods and they have a standard use (perfection). And yes, there may be a variation we've been trained on but beyond that we often become protective of the materials, the environment, and the principles. We are not often open to the child "experimenting" with our materials. Experimenting is grace, perfection is law. How do you think Dr. Montessori discovered the uses of the materials? By experimenting.

One of the major principles to understand is that adult intervention in the environment is predicated on four things. First, to prevent damage to the materials. Second, to prevent harm to a child. Third, to prevent disruption of the learning environment. And fourth, to prevent behaviors that are socially unacceptable.

There is a place for both law and grace in our environments (as there is a need for both in our training.) There is a need for law (rules). But law will never bring us or our environments to our very best because it is grace that makes us go beyond the law. It is grace that helps us live up to the spirit of the law – well beyond the letter.

"Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of Heaven." Matthew 18:3
Ultimately, we need grace to follow the child.

Function of Words and The Word of God

Applications for the classroom.

By Don Barber
Newfields, NH

Language is a gift from God, but no mere gift. It is God's chosen tool for creation (see the first chapter of John's gospel). God spoke the word and not only did creation become animate; it became!

While not having that same power, human language is amazing in its own right. A written symbol and/or a spoken sound is formed, then interpreted by another in order to transmit the initial idea from one person to another. It is truly a gift from our creator. When an exchange is successful, we should give thanks. Think about all the failures that occur even when the meaning of the sounds and symbols is well understood.

We have been given a mighty, powerful gift. Considering the source of the gift, it should not be surprising to see that the primary purpose for our ability to hear and speak is not so much so we can communicate with each other, but so we can speak with and hear God. "It is not too much to say that this was the very reason man was created able to speak and hear; that is, in order that there might be communication between God and man and, secondarily man and man." (The Genesis Record, Henry Morris, Baker House Company, Grand Rapids, MI 1976)

There are a variety of ways in which our speech is used to communicate only with God. There are private utterings of prayer (Rom 8:23 and 2 Corin. 5:2-4).

These "groanings" have little to do with interpersonal communication, but much to do with how we call upon God in our need. A second example is speaking in tongues (1Corin. 12:10). Of course, this gift, when used in public, also needs the gift of someone to interpret the speech. These uses of language are primarily for the benefit of an individual's relationship with God.

Given these examples of how God works outside the boundaries of human language, and given that language is a gift from God, are there ways that God is evident within the confines of how people use language to communicate with each other? I believe there are.

The Montessori "Function of Words" lessons lead directly to some examples. The lessons give participants an opportunity to experience the power of words. Sometimes it is the power to change behavior; other times it is the power to make things move. In each case, in the midst of the practical human application of language there are opportunities to see who God is and how He reminds us of Himself even as we speak to each other.

Part One - - The Noun

The Montessori lesson introduces the noun as the name given to an object. In this lesson the teacher uses the spoken or written word to have students collect objects from around the class. Once the objects have been gathered and labels have been put by each item, students return the objects and then come back to the lesson and find only the labels on the rug. This of course sets up the marvel of the words in general and nouns in particular. When the object is gone, the

word serves to help us remember the object. In fact, the word will even outlast the object. The power and truth of this lesson has allowed students to remember pets or family members who are no longer with them.

In an attempt to capture the long lasting quality of the noun in a single symbol, Maria Montessori turned to the oldest man-made object on earth for a shape, the pyramids. She looked to one of the oldest organic objects on earth for a color, the black of coal. Thus, the black pyramid is representative of nouns.

This lesson leaves students with powerful impressions and images; just what a good Montessori lesson is supposed to do. God's presence in this lesson is not far away. With a few added sentences, students can become aware how He is evident within nouns.

For instance, as each student returns to the lesson with objects in hand and the teacher asks them what they have brought, a simple reminder of Adam's naming of the animals (Gen 2:20) could be inserted. As a teacher you could say, "Just as we are naming the things we find in the class, Adam named what he found in the garden." This is also a chance to remind students just how language works. God created everything with His Word. Our creativity finds and names those things God created. This work goes on even today as we continue to find what God put in the world, how it works and how it can be used.

Another example is the ability of a word to help us remember an object. Just as a noun helps us to remember any object that is not there, The Word helps

us remember that God is always there, no matter what our circumstances. Throughout the Bible, Jews were told to remember God and return to Him, and Christians are reminded to remember Jesus and what he has done and what he will do for us.

Next, at the point in the lesson when we mention that a word can outlast its object, a teacher can remind students that not only will God's Word last forever, like other words can, but that God is an object that will last forever. Tell students that in Psalm 90 verse 2 it is written, "From everlasting to everlasting, You are God". God will outlast every other object because He is forever. You could even put out a label for God, and remind students that God is still there! Another place to bring this point to the attention of a student comes when describing the noun symbol. After describing Montessori's story behind the symbol, remind students that even as old as coal and the pyramids are, they both had a beginning and will have an end, but God and His Word are everlasting!

A final quality of God that this lesson points to is God's transcendence of time. The label allows the object to transcend time; to be real outside of the present. When the object is gone the label remains. This is a reminder that when all is said and done, God, His Word and His love, will still remain.

Noun – The word is everlasting. Even when the object is gone, the word remains. Allows the thing to transcend time. (everlasting covenant, life, God, one of His qualities.

Future columns on:

The Article – a word that declares a noun is coming – John the Baptist (Is 40:3-5)

The Verb – The verb is action. Just as the sun gives life to the world, the verb gives life to words Noun becomes animated through the verb The Son gives life to the world. (John 3:16)

The Preposition – What is your position with the Lord? The Holy Spirit is in, on, near, ahead, upon, left

**From Saint Patrick's
Breastplate**

Christ be with me, Christ before me,
Christ behind me, Christ in me,
Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ on my right, Christ on my left

The Interjection – The key to the heart! Let's people know who you are, how you feel, God knows who we really are too. (Isaiah 44:2, Luke 6:45, Psalm 139, 1 Sam 16:7)

Pronoun – This is us, trying to be something we are not (ie. God)

Adjective – Describe the wonder of creation
Worship the Lord in the beauty of Holiness

Adverb – “it is not what you do it is how you say it” (famous momism)
God knows the heart, our attitudes

Conjunction – anybody have any good ideas on this one?

Regional Conference Schedule

November 3 Rock Hill, SC
Freedom Montessori
215 East Main Street
Rock Hill, SC 29730
(803) 327-7885
Jamie Laymon

November 10 Metuchen, NJ
Children First
Christian Montessori School
10 Jersey Ave
Metuchen, NJ 08840
(732) 635-1300
Maria Hager

November 17 Dallas
Apostles Day School
322 S. MacArthur Blvd
Coppell, TX 75019
(972) 393-0655
Diana Smith

Membership

Please join the fellowship. Your support helps us to continue the great work of sharing about Christian Montessori.

Children's Letters to God

Dear God,
Instead of letting people die and having to make new ones. Why don't you just keep the ones you got now?
Jane

Dear God,
I went to this wedding and they kissed right in church. Is that OK?
Neil