

# The Cobbler

Ephesians 6:15

The Newsletter of the Christian Montessori Fellowship  
February 2004

## **National Conference**

June 24 – 26, 2004

San Antonio, Texas

**“The Absorbent Mind,  
The Absorbent heart.”**

## **That’s a Good Question.**

Sixth in a series of questions often asked  
about what is Montessori.

### **How can you say you are Christian and Montessori?**

This is a unique question because it has two different groups, with two divergent viewpoints asking the same question.

Let’s take the question from the Montessori side first. Montessorians are concerned that you are importing a formalized, “rigid” structure of orthodoxy into the wonderful light world of Montessori discovery. Montessorians are concerned that you are imposing this “set” belief on children in distinction to letting them “discover” the beautiful spiritual world for themselves.

The problem with this concern is a failure to understand both true Montessori and true Christianity. True Christianity, though it does involve an orthodoxy is not primarily a “religion” but a living relationship with Jesus. A growing and maturing Christianity involves the “discovery” of the

personality and person of Jesus and our relationship to him. If you fail to understand the relationship nature of Christianity what you will be left with is a set of dry theological rules and dogmas which will lead you to the concept of Christianity as a “religion”. And Montessorians, having gained this tremendous educational liberty, do not want to surrender their environments to any “prescribed” dogma. With Christianity you don’t.

Every environment has three teaching dimensions – the environment, the students and the guide. But it also possesses a fourth dimension – the spiritual. This dimension is present, whether it is named or not, recognized or not or acknowledged or not. It is the spiritual dimension that gives Montessori its uniqueness, warmth and ultimate power to impact children’s lives

By proclaiming Christianity you are giving the child a three period spiritual lesson – this is ---, show me ---, what is this? You are allowing the child to be introduced to spiritual reality, allowing them to acknowledge it and then allowing them to recognize it and name it.

Without this spiritual “presentation” the child has no definitive, effective power to handle (manipulate) the spiritual components of his life. He will have no vocabulary, no experience and no definition that will help him focus on

and master this important area of his life and learning.

The concern against introducing Christianity into the classroom (even if it is the rigid, set, orthodoxy of religion) is a misplaced understanding of the Montessori philosophy. Montessori was not a “libertarian”. Yes she believed in liberty but in a liberty that is a “prescribed” commodity. She wrote in her handbook that “freedom without organization of work would be useless.” She never advocated, like many modern critics assume, that children can do ‘whatever they want’. What she does say is that the child “has absolute freedom to do right.”

Where the real freedom and liberty for the child come in is in the environment. Who do you think creates the environment? Who organizes the environment? And who determines what is found in the environment? It is not left up to chance, whim or fancy. It is an environment “ordered” for the best interests of the child. The furniture is child size, the materials are child size and the learning is child sized.

The “truths” that are introduced into the environment to be discovered by the child are chosen by the guides. Children aren’t left free to discover their own alphabet. They are free to discover the alphabet that is true. In English there are 26 letters, in Spanish there are 30. They are not free to create their own number system but they are free to discover the system that will give them the power to correctly comprehend it and then apply it to their environment.

It is the same with their spiritual discovery. The parameters of “truth” are prescribed. They are set into the environment by the guide. And here is where many Montessorians go astray and

become indignant especially over religion. They feel that religion is an imposition on the child. Is it imposed? YES, but so are red rods, pink towers, practical life, golden beads and a whole lot of other tools to allow the child to discover the tremendous and fascinating world around them.

And is there any greater tool needed than the truth to find the spiritual life within them and the love of God that surrounds them?

Montessori discovered her method within a Christian society and a Christian context. Her writings are full of Christian and Biblical insight. Her quest for liberty for the child was not only physical and emotional but intellectual and spiritual. “The truth will make you free” was a baseline understanding that Montessori comprehended well. Therefore failure to give the child the tools to discover the most important truths (spiritually) would in the end deny them the ability to be truly free.

Therefore for those who have this personal relationship with Christ how can you be anything but Christian and Montessori?

Now this same question is asked by religious people as well – “How can you be Christian and Montessori?” For many it is this same lack of understanding of what it means to be Christian (a personal relationship with Jesus). Because their religion is dogmatic rather than personal they often have great difficulty in seeing how this Montessori “liberty” can be compatible with their faith.

Sincere religious people have a problem with their understanding of Montessori. They confuse it with a

concept of “libertarian” Montessori i.e. where children can do **anything** they want. This ignorance of what Montessori liberty really is hinders them from embracing this truly liberating philosophy.

It is only when we understand Montessori and Christianity in the light of being able to choose wisely – not from compulsion, ignorance, or fear but out of love for God - that we will be truly free and enjoy the liberty that God intends for us.

## **Brighten the Corner ...**

Ellen Palmer tells of over hearing a conversation between two preschoolers in January:

“Jesus died on the cross.”

“I thought He was just born.”

## **A Baker’s Dozen Of Montessori benefits for the child**

### **Working out mistakes**

The ability (and the time) to work out mistakes is one of the greatest teaching tools available. It has been said that in school you taught the lesson and then given the test whereas in life you’re usually given the test THEN you learn the lesson.

Being able to work out the mistakes gives you a whole different viewpoint on life. Instead of shrugging your shoulders and moving on when you make a mistake taking responsibility for your actions and fixing your mistakes creates a totally different attitude.

Knowing that you have to come back and fix whatever you didn’t do right

makes you more careful to begin with. Second, it elevates your sight from just getting by to concentrating on mastering your task. Third it gives you a greater respect for the tasks at hand knowing that you won’t be able to shrug it off and go on.

This attitude of working through mistakes impacts not just a classroom approach but a life approach in dealing with people and situations. Learning to apologize and make amends when needed is a great virtue. Many business relationships, friendships and marriages will be impacted positively during a life time because the child learned to “work through” the mistakes.

Not letting a child slide by when they have the ability to rectify their mistakes begins the building of a lifetime asset – the ability to be responsible for an enterprise or undertaking from beginning to the very end.

Success in life comes to those who finish – not those who start and go 70 percent of the way.

## **Saint Patrick’s Day**

You don’t have to be Irish to celebrate St. Patrick’s Day. In fact, neither was St. Patrick. Now if you haven’t taken down your “Christmas” tree yet you can make it a St. Patrick’s tree (after all it is green). But if you’ve already packed it away you can make a mobile to hang your shamrocks on.

St. Patrick used the shamrock to explain the Trinity – though there are three parts (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) they are one.

Again this makes a good writing exercise both for the child’s name and for those with the ability –Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

## **The 10 P's of Ministry**

### **Problems**

#### **Part 5 Performance**

The problem of performance is not only a challenge for administrators to deal with but for co-workers, parents and even the children.

Nobody likes to judge other people. Well, that may not be totally true. The people who like to judge – the super critical, the judgmental – often don't have the qualities that would make them good and impartial judges. Therefore their judgments are often less than valuable and usually not constructive.

However for most of us we reluctantly judge critically. We are required to make judgments and choices all day long. We do it fairly effectively until we have to come to a point where the judgment turns critical. We tend to remember what mother told us: "Don't say anything if you can't say anything nice." And of course we remember the Biblical injunctions of "Do not judge." And "With the same judgment you judge you will also be judged." This tends to make us wary of passing criticism. But our positions and responsibilities require us to make judgments; if not for our own sakes (job description, effectiveness, responsibility) then for the sake of the children who we serve. They need to have the best of what we can give them. They need our best performance, attitudes, actions, skills, involvement, caring and love.

Becoming a great teacher is a process. Many are "born teachers" but even with that gifting it requires time and skill to refine and develop those God-given talents. Even the best of us need coaches. And coaches make judgments. Jesus was the master with his disciples.

He taught them – coached them as it were. We may get a little nervous (and have a sense of false modesty) by putting ourselves in that category of being a master (and having "disciples") and yet by virtue of our calling and position – administrator (and yes, classroom teacher) we are required to make judgment on people's performance – teachers, staff and students.

Judging performance must be a teaching tool to help those who we oversee to become better.

The first difficulty we face is to understand that a headmaster (headmistress or principal) is a teacher foremost and not just an administrator. That is what the etymology of "headmaster" indicates – head teacher. Sharing your knowledge with your staff is a must to insure better teaching. As part of the evaluation process we need to help our staff understand that our purpose is not negative (and make sure it is not negative) but part of a continuing education program.

The second difficulty is to actually make ourselves evaluate performance. It takes time which we feel we don't have but the investment in evaluating performance brings great benefit to our schools.

The third difficulty is that most of us hate to do it. We shy away from it. We avoid it. We don't feel we are good at it. And we don't enjoy it.

The fourth difficulty is the less we do of it – the bigger a problem we create and the less effective we are in reaching our goal of becoming the best we can be.

What are the steps of evaluating performance?

1. We have to make a determination that we must evaluate performance.

2. We need to have a tool (a form) by which to make our evaluation and to express our expectations.
3. We need to prepare our staff for evaluation by sharing with them exactly what is being evaluated.
4. When we make our evaluation we need to share our findings expeditiously.
5. Evaluations need to contain both commendations and recommendations.
6. Recommendations need to be specific and achievable.
7. There needs to be an interim mechanism (mini-conferences, notes etc) to evaluate and encourage progress.
8. There needs to be celebration over progress and achievement.

One aspect of evaluating performance is to gain consistency across our classrooms. If you have multiple environments it is important that each reflect the best possible teaching.

A second aspect of evaluating performance is to keep consistency between our words and our actions. Are the guides delivering in the environment what you are sharing in the front office? The only way to be assured of this integrity is that we make every effort to match our classroom actions to our office words. Will we ever succeed completely? Of course not, but evaluations help us get closer to the ideal of what we strive for. Just as we share with our children, so it is that we share with each other – perfection is not our goal, mastery is. And the closer we work together the better our chance of becoming master teachers and master learners.

One aspect of teaching that we need to be careful about is to recognize the temptation to feel we know it all. The temptation doesn't assail us at the beginning of our careers when we are still enthralled by the amazing method and the amazing response of the children; when everything is new to us; when everything holds wonder. It is after we begin to succeed and we don't feel it's dumb luck anymore but the application of skill and experience that we begin to become less teachable. This is not just a teaching malady but a spiritual malady as well. We need to retain the humility of being a disciple even when we've become a master at what we do.

It is hard for an administrator to evaluate seasoned teachers both out of respect for their expertise and for fear of offending them. It is hard for an administrator to evaluate new teachers because there is so much to share and you don't want to overwhelm or discourage. It takes a great sensitivity to be able to evaluate at all stages on the teaching continuum.

What should be our attitude to being evaluated? Jumping up and down with joy? (Should people like that even be allowed with children?) No, but we need not be intimidated by the process either. Improving our gifts and skills will involve coaching. We need to find good coaches. We need to ask for coaching (evaluations). I know this might give your director heart palpitations but they also need to keep their powers of observation sharp. As Yogi Berra was reported to have said, "You can see a lot if you just look." You can learn a lot if you just ask. And then with humility apply what you've learned.

Now here is where the meddling starts (or should that be continues?). If you cannot receive correction, guidance or teaching from your principal because you do not respect them or their expertise (or lack thereof) then it is best to find someplace to teach where you have respect for a master teacher and where you can gain skills and insights under their tutelage.

I once hired a teacher who asked if she was allowed to run the environment as she wanted. I said no. We work together to keep the integrity (wholeness) of the environment and teaching method. All of us are tempted to make accommodations, take shortcuts and occasionally fudge in the application of the method. We do this not only in our teaching but in our spiritual lives, our family lives etc. It is when we are held accountable; when we have the coaching we need (that comes from pastors and spouses and friends and principals) that we will walk and talk (and teach) to the best of our abilities to the glory of God.

Evaluations require great humility to give effectively and great humility to receive willingly.

## **Educational Principles Of Montessori 2. Aesthetics**

Is there any other teaching methodology that makes aesthetics one of its core principles? Maybe Waldorf but none of the major teaching components of modern pedagogy will hold up aesthetics as being central and critical to the teaching and nurturing of children.

Montessori's insistence on the aesthetics within the environment is a major factor in nurturing the whole child. The use of china and crystal sets the environment apart. The aesthetic commands respect. Non-Montessorians have great fear for the china and crystal and would make it all plastic for fear that the children will destroy it. Ironically, it is the china and crystal that engender great care and respect from the children. When you have plastic glasses you don't have to be careful with them. If they fall there are no visible immediate consequences. When you drop crystal it shatters. Children are not destructive by nature. Things do get destroyed by carelessness and inattention but when the children are focused on the delicate materials at hand they take great care to preserve it. My wife and I have one set of china that we have used everyday for 34 years. In that time period 11 pieces have been broken, the adults broke 8. The quality of the materials in the environment is a significant contribution to the well-being of the children.

The color coding and color coordination of the materials create for the child a visual and intellectual pleasure. There really is a sensual pleasure for the child. Fine woods, and strong colors contribute to this aesthetic. And it is the pristine condition of the materials that speaks quality to the children.

It breaks a director's heart (and pocket book) to have to replace a Pink Tower that is past its prime. But you have to replace the materials that are no longer aesthetically pleasing or you create an environment of disrespect. It is similar to the "broken window" phenomena observed in cities. If you have a broken window that is left

unrepaired you will soon have a second broken window and then a third because that environment says no one cares. The same phenomena is observed in classrooms. If the material looks abused it won't make any difference if I abuse it some more. What do you get if you have a small hole or tear in a sleeping mat, rug or coat – you get a larger hole.

Aesthetics play a significant part in the child forming who they are. By having the aesthetic component in the learning environment the child absorbs this. This becomes part of the absorbent mind, the absorbent heart. It is received as if by osmosis and yet it is enhanced because the child's attention is drawn to it both verbally and visually.

This early aesthetic "training" sets patterns of operation and enjoyment for a lifetime. Putting things back where they go does result in an aesthetic pleasure of order. It also allows the child to be able to "order" their environment, take dominion over the disparate parts of life and organize themselves for productive and focused work for the rest of their lives. And just think all of that from a Pink Tower with no rounded corners.

The scriptures encourage us to understand that "man does not live by bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of God." Jesus, God's Word, created this whole wonderfully aesthetic environment for us to enjoy. He could have made everything gray but he infused it with color, shape, aroma and delight for all our senses.

Education is more than mental stimulation. It is the awakening of all the senses – intellectual, emotional, physical and spiritual – to the grandeur that God has created for us. Aesthetics is not an add on, neither in Montessori

nor in life. It is an integral part of God's great care, plan, and love for us. It is in the aesthetic that we begin to glimpse God's glory. What greater tool can we share with those we love?

**National Conference**  
**San Antonio**  
**June 24-26**  
**The Absorbent Mind**  
**The Absorbent Heart**

The conference begins at 10:00 A.M. Thursday June 24<sup>th</sup> and runs through Saturday evening.

Conference cost is \$325 (\$300 if paid by May 1<sup>st</sup>, an additional \$25 discount for CMF members) and includes 3 lunches, 2 full breakfasts, morning and afternoon breaks and Saturday dinner. More details are available on our websites:  
[www.christianmontessorifellowship.com](http://www.christianmontessorifellowship.com)  
[www.crossmountainforum.com](http://www.crossmountainforum.com)  
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### **Consulting Services Available**

Do you need a fresh perspective on your program? Consider combining a parent meeting, in service training and a school consultation in one visit to give your program that added boost to reach the next level of excellence. Contact us today to set up a visit.

### **Membership**

We need your support to continue the work of the fellowship. We need your support to encourage those who are in Christian Montessori schools to continue the great work they have started. We need your support to encourage Christian Montessori teachers who teach in secular schools. We need your support to encourage the creation of Christian Montessori Schools. We need your support to encourage the transformation of traditional schools into Montessori schools. We need your support. Your membership is vital. For many it is a significant investment but one which will have eternal benefits.

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