

Montessori Talks to Parents II:

The Spiritual Embryo

By Maria Montessori

Montessori shows the vital significance of psychic life in early childhood.

It follows that the newborn child has to do a piece of formative work which corresponds in the psychological sphere to the one just done by the embryo in the physical sphere. Before the child there is a period of life different from that which the child experienced in the womb; yet still unlike that of the adult he is to become. This postnatal work is a constructive activity which is carried on in what may be called the "formative period," and makes the baby into a kind of "Spiritual Embryo."

Human beings seem to have two embryonic periods. One is prenatal, like that of the animals: the other is embryonic period is postnatal and only the human being has this. The prolonged infancy of the human being separates him entirely from the animals, and this is the meaning we must give to it. The prolonged infancy forms a complete barrier, whereby the human being is seen as different from all other animals. The powers of the human being are neither continuations, nor derivations from those of the animals. The appearance of the human being on earth was a jump in life: the starting point for new destinies.

What causes us to distinguish between species is always their differences, never their likeness. What constitutes another species is always something new. A new is not merely derived from the old, but it shows originality. A new species bears characteristics that never existed before. A new impulse has appeared in the kingdom of the living.

So it was when mammals and birds came into existence. They bore with them novelties. They were not mere copies, or adaptations, or continuations, of the earlier creatures. New features that appeared when dinosaurs became extinct, were, in the birds, the passionate defense of their eggs, the building of nests, the care of their fledglings and their courageous protection. The reptile, on the contrary, has always left their eggs. And the mammals surpassed even their birds in their defense of the species. They built no nests, but they let their young grow in their own bodies, and fed them with their blood

These were quite new biological features.

Then came another new organism, that of the human being. The human being species has a double embryonic life. The human being is built to a new design, and has a fresh destiny in relations to the other creatures.

This is the point at which we must pause, and make a fresh start in all our studies of child development, and of the psychological nature of the human being. If the work of the human being on earth is related to the spirit, to creative intelligence, then the spirit and intelligence must be the fulcrum of existence, and of all the workings of the body. About this fulcrum behavior is recognized, and even the physical economy of the body. The human being develops within a kind of spiritual halo.

Today, even our Western ideas have become receptive to this idea, which has

ever been prominent in Indian philosophy. Experience itself has forced us to notice that physical disturbances are often caused by psychological states, the spirit no longer exercising proper control.

If the nature of the human being is to be ruled by a “spiritual halo which enfolds him,” if the human being depends on this and all behavior derives from it, then the first care given to the newborn babe – overriding all others – must be a care for the mental life, and not just for the bodily life, which is the rule today.

The developing child not only acquires the faculties of the adult human being: strength, intelligence, language but, at the same time, adapts the being he is constructing to the conditions of the world about him. And this is what gives virtue to his particular form of psychology, which is so different from that of adults. The child has a different relation to the environment than the adult. Adults admire their environment: they can remember it and think about it; the child absorbs it. The things the child sees are not just remembered, they form part of the child’s soul. The child incarnates within all in the world about him that his eyes see and his ears hear. In us the same things produce no change, but the child is transformed by them.

One example of this, as we have seen, is language. The child does not “remember” sounds, but incarnates them, and can then produce them to perfection. The child speaks the language according to its complex rules, with all their exceptions, not because he has studied it, nor by the ordinary use of memory. Perhaps his memory never retains it consciously, and yet this language comes to form part of his psychic life. Undoubtedly, we are dealing with a phenomenon different from the purely mnemonic activity: we are dealing with one of the strangest aspects of the infant mind. There is in the child a special kind of sensitivity which leads him to absorb everything about him, and it is this work of observing and absorbing that alone enable him to adapt himself to life. He does it by virtue of an unconscious power that only exists in childhood.

Nothing has more importance for us than this absorbent form of mind, which shapes the adult and adapts him to any kind of social order, climate, or country. On this, the whole of our study is based. It is opportune to reflect that anyone who says, “I love my county,” does not say something superficial or artificial, but reveals a basic part of himself and of his life.

We can therefore understand how the child, thanks to his peculiar psyche, absorbs the customs and habits of the land in which he lives, until he has formed the typical individual of his place and time.