

# „I was Aladdin“

Impossible, but true:  
An interview with Maria Montessori

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Let's disregard time and space for half an hour, OK?

Maria Montessori: Then how will we know when the half hour is up? (She laughs)

Agreed. Let's simply disregard time and space completely?

OK.

I once read a very lovely and also very sad quotation from you. It went: "Here is a person, he does not bear God in himself, he is as if emptied and is already humiliated and marked by such powers as should have been able to defend him."

Yes, I had to experience this.

The definition in the dictionary on the other hand sounds somewhat more down-to-earth: "Maria Montessori, founder of a modern teaching method, which allows scope for the individual development of the child."

Sounds good.

And what does it mean?

I have to start from the beginning, I mean with birth. It's my opinion that when a child leaves the womb, it does not come into a natural environment, but "the environment of civilisation".

There's only one environment.

You're confirming what I said. The environment of civilisation is an environment, in which the life of

the adult happens. A living space which has been achieved over nature – and at its expense.

For what purpose?

To make man's life pleasant and make adaptation easier for him.

But that is a good purpose.

But the question is rather: what help has civilisation provided for the man who has to make the biggest adaptation? Who through birth steps out of his previous life into a new one?

There are delivery rooms that are painted in the colour the inside of a womb is when the light is coming from outside.

We don't have anything like that. But I don't mean that either. In my opinion we have no feeling for the new born. It's still not a person for us. He comes to us and we don't know how to receive him, although the task of proceeding beyond what we have achieved will fall to him.

What should we do in your opinion?

Before we educate, we must educate ourselves. We must change our thinking. For example, it is not quite right, if you speak of the parents as the creators of the child. Much more is the child the architect of the person. The father of the person.

Interesting. But difficult. When I start thinking about that, I get a sort of pressure in my head.

That doesn't matter. Carry on.

Where, do you think, it'll get me?

(She considers.) The parents are the guardians of the child, but not his owners. They must care for him and protect him in the deepest sense of the word. Like someone who takes on a sacred task, which goes beyond the concerns and concepts of the external. Parents are supernatural guardians like guardian angels that religion speaks of. And they understand exclusively and immediately the commandment of Heaven, are stronger than all human authority. And united with the child by ties that cannot be undone. Even if they are invisible. For such a task parents must purify the love which was put in their soul by nature. And they must understand that this love is the conscious part of an even deeper feeling





that must not be spoiled by egotism or lethargy of heart. Parents must with openness and willingness confront the most burning social problem: I mean the fight for the recognition of the rights of the child. And then at some time you come to the point where the responsibility of the adult is so great that the duty develops in him to investigate with all scientific thoroughness the psychological needs of the child. And then to give him an environment appropriate to them.

**That is the task?**

Yes, we must give children an open environment suited to the stage of their life. In these circumstances the child's soul will spontaneously reveal itself.

**What do you mean?**

(She thinks about it) The secret of the child must reveal itself. First of all it's about discovering the child, next about setting the child free, then about working out the help, which must be offered to the child.

**What does such an environment look like?**

It is an environment in which all obstacles have been reduced as far as possible.

**Are there teachers in this ideal environment?**

Passive teachers, so to speak, i.e. teachers, who endeavour to put aside the obstacles that their own activity and authority could represent. And who that way make it possible for the child to take action from his own accord. Teachers who are not happy until they see how the child is acting from his own accord and is making progress. And who don't claim the merit for that themselves. I feel very strongly about respecting the personality of the child.

**Passive sounds somehow passive.**

You shouldn't misunderstand. The world of the mind is like an exclusive salon, which is closed to the stranger. Whoever wants to enter it must be introduced by someone, who is already known there, must go "from known to stranger". On the other hand the new must either break the doors down or sneak in secretly. Then it causes surprise and confusion. Take the example of the researcher Volta.

**Volta?**

The research Volta observed how a dead frog's leg began to twitch. That will have triggered disbelief and confusion in his head. But he held on to the fact – and isolated electricity from it. This means: once in a while a tiny thing is enough to open up unlimited prospects. Do you know what I mean? Man is by nature a researcher, a seeker.

**Can you tell us a little bit about the birth of the Montessori Method?**

In January 1907 our first school for children aged from three to six was opened. The Method – we'll keep the term – still didn't exist at that time. But it developed from it. To start with there wasn't much more to see than fifty very poor, intimidated children. Lots of them wailed. Almost all had illiterate parents. The expectation of our new school was basically that we would look after the children while the parents were working. Why? So that the children wouldn't get up to anything while their parents were away.



**Not a big expectation then, was it?**

No. But that didn't matter. (She thinks.) An indefinable feeling said to me that more was emerging here. I still remember exactly: the words of the liturgy that were read in church that day (Note: the opening day was the feast of Epiphany) seemed to me to be of prophetic portent: "Darkness shall cover the earth ... but the Lord shall arise upon thee... and nations will come to thy light."

**But so hard?**

I remember that almost everyone taking part in the opening ceremony was surprised and was wondering: "Why is Montessori exaggerating the importance of a simple home for the poor so much?"

**But that didn't seem to have irritated you or held you back at all.**

No. I began my work like a farmer, who has useable seeds and to whom they lent a fertile field, in which he can now sow any way he wants. And then it turned into something quite different. (She thinks.) That is what I meant just now, when I said, that here the method developed. You see, I found gold instead of corn. A hidden, precious treasure. It showed that I was not the farmer as I thought.

**But?**

I was Aladdin and held, without knowing it, the magic lamp in my hands, which opened the entrance to hidden treasures for me.

*Maria Montessori, born 1870, Italian, doctor, pedagogue. In 1952 Maria Montessori died at the age of 82. Her "Montessori Method" is being experienced today throughout the world in children's homes and schools. Inspiration for this text "I was Aladdin" was one of the books written by Maria Montessori "Il Segreto dell'Infanzia", which was published in 1950 by Garzanti, Milan.*

*The photographs of Beat Streuli are from the Villa Monte School in Galgenen in Switzerland.*