

# PRACTICAL LIFE: THE KEYSTONE OF LIFE, CULTURE, AND COMMUNITY

by Uma Ramani

*Uma Ramani's characterization of practical life is philosophical and anthropological, suggesting that "human history is the story of the evolution of our practical life activities." Practical life is a collaborative activity that creates community and culture. One's adaptation to life through the daily work of ordering our environment lends meaning to all learning and to living a good life.*

"Practical" refers to that which is concerned with the actual doing of something; that which is manifested in action. Practical life, then, is life in action, the work of life. These actions are the manifestation of our thoughts, an expression of our feelings through our movements. Practical life is thought realized.

The practical activities of daily life put us in relationship with the environment. Dr. Montessori referred to our movements as a "system of relationships" – actions are the outcome of the relationship between the sensory, nervous, muscular, and skeletal systems. In turn, actions are the interface between our inner selves and our environment. This relationship brings about changes in the environment and in our selves. Our perception becomes more refined and in turn, informs our actions. As Dr. Montessori says, "There is

---

*Uma Ramani is an AMI trainer (primary) and holds AMI diplomas at both the primary and elementary levels and a master's degree from Cornell University. Uma is currently a consultant to the Hartford Public Schools Montessori Initiatives and works with teachers, administrators, and parents to help integrate authentic Montessori practice in the program. She continues to work to promote Montessori education in India. Her vision is to take Montessori training to the grassroots where she hopes that it will be a catalyst for sustainable development and social change.*

*This talk was presented at the NAMTA conference titled Whole School Practical Life: A Comprehensive View of Community, the Intelligence, and the Hand, Dallas, TX, January 17-20, 2013.*

a constant interaction between the individual and his environment. The use of things shapes man, and man shapes things" (*Education and Peace* 57).

The activities of practical life:

- Sustain life,
- Create culture, and
- Build community.

### **SUSTAINING LIFE: MEETING OUR FUNDAMENTAL NEEDS**

Mr. A.M. Joosten defined practical life as the activities that we do in order to establish, maintain, and restore the conditions that are necessary for life. Man meets his fundamental needs of food, clothing, shelter, transportation, protection, beauty, and spirituality through work. Human beings have been doing this since millennia and continue doing so to this day. We use the resources from our environment and the knowledge from our experiences to create the conditions necessary to meet our needs. The resources available in the environment and our ability to use them determine the form of the activities. Since we are constantly learning from our actions, the result is that we are continually establishing new ways of meeting our fundamental needs: take for example the way our food supply chain has changed over time or how our energy source has evolved through the centuries. Human history is the story of the evolution of our practical life activities.

Care of the self, care of the environment, and social interactions punctuate our day from the first moment of waking till we go to bed at night. They fill our lives with comfort and care, a full belly, a clean body, beauty and friendship, love and laughter, and give structure and purpose to our lives.

### **CULTURE AS THE TREASURY OF HUMAN KNOWLEDGE AND ACTIVITY**

These practical activities of daily life then become the culture of a people. We establish rituals and practices around when we eat, what we eat, and how we eat; the clothes we wear; belief systems; ways of interacting with one another; celebrations; worship; dance; music;

and art. These ways of doing things become part of the value system and behavior pattern of a people. We build on the knowledge gained from our experiences and pass on this knowledge from generation to generation. Science, history, literature, music, and art are all the result of our learning from the practical activities of daily life.

#### COMMUNITY AS THE OUTCOME OF COLLABORATIVE ACTIVITY

As social beings we act in cooperation and collaboration with our fellow humans in order to meet our needs. We need the newspaperman, the mailman, the grocer, the baker, the people who produce our food and electricity, gas and oil, the mechanic, the plumber, the list is endless. We work to earn our living and contribute to society; we play sports and read books, go to restaurants and watch plays. Practical life activities thus become the foundation of community, and the ways in which we cooperate and collaborate become part of our culture. We evolve rules to regulate our interactions and create laws to enforce them. Community is the outcome of the harmony of human activity.

#### PRACTICAL LIFE: THE KEYSTONE OF LIFE, CULTURE, AND COMMUNITY

The keystone is the central supporting element of the arch. This wedge shaped stone locks all the pieces in place and maintains the structural integrity of the arch. What is the central supporting element of our lives? It is the activities of practical life: Without these activities, there could be no life, no culture, and no community. Practical life activities are the keystone of life, culture, and community.

The myriad activities of daily living: Care of the self, care of the environment, and social interactions punctuate our day from the first moment of waking till we go to bed at night. They fill our lives with comfort and care, a full belly, a clean body, beauty and friendship, love and laughter, and give structure and purpose to our lives. They sustain life, build community, and form the fabric of our culture.

The keystone plays a very functional role in supporting the arch, but this very functionality makes possible great creativity and complexity. Just as effectively, through the activities of practical life, human culture and civilization has evolved in complexity through

time and human beings themselves have realized their potential in increasing depth.

#### **THE TWO ASPECTS OF PRACTICAL LIFE ACTIVITIES: FUNCTIONAL AND CREATIVE-CONSTRUCTIVE**

We tend to focus on the functional, utilitarian aspects of the activities of practical life, but these activities have a creative-constructive role in our lives as individuals and as a species. These two aspects of the activities of practical life—the functional and the creative-constructive—go hand in hand. Function inspires creativity and complexity, which in turn improves function. Beyond the merely utilitarian, practical life activities foster

- the development of humans as individuals and as a species,
- the evolution of human culture and community, and
- the development of our environment.

Every activity of practical life thus has significance not only at the personal level but also at the social level. Every activity of practical life has significance not only for the individual but also for the community.

Beyond meeting our fundamental needs, what role do practical life activities play in our lives as individuals? These activities place the individual in relationship with human society. These activities support

- the creation of self and
- adaptation to culture and community.

#### **The Creation of Self**

In order to survive, every newborn must insert himself into the human narrative. That means that we must, each one of us, become part of this life of activity. To do that we must have the capacity to act, and the newborn must create in himself this capacity to act. How does

he do this? Any action is an expression of a thought or feeling, and through the effort of the will, these thoughts are manifested through movements. Practical life would not be possible without thought, will, and movements functioning in harmony. Before the newborn can act, he needs to create his intellect, his will, and his movements.

From birth, the child takes in the practical life of his environment and makes it the foundation of his personality. Through the work of the absorbent mind, the child incarnates his environment and the behavior patterns and values of the community into which he is born. On the basis of this he lays the foundation of his intellect, his will, his movements. Impelled by his need to become part of the human narrative, the newborn begins to act on his environment. In the process, the intellect, the will, and the movements get strengthened and refined and the child develops as an individual. Intelligence and character develop through the use of the hands. The activities of practical life become the means for the creation and development of the self.

### **Adaptation to Culture and Community**

This creation of the self happens in the context of the community in which one functions. The ways of the people of the community become the ways of the individual and the child becomes a person of his time and place. As the individual develops, he begins to discover that his actions have an impact on his environment and his community and we begin to see the emergence of the social self. Action is not just for the fulfilling of personal needs, but also for fulfilling a social function. The individual becomes a member of the community not just because he behaves in accepted ways but also because he is making a contribution to that community. Through practical life the individual becomes a member of a community. And so each individual becomes part of the ongoing human narrative, the continuously evolving cycle of practical life: establishing, maintaining, and restoring the conditions necessary to fulfill the fundamental needs of human beings.

Practical life activities have shaped human culture through the millennia. It is in working to improve the functionality of these activities that we gained knowledge and skills: We evolved as a species.

Our culture changed as new ways of doing things became part of our practice. Our communities grew in complexity as we learned to cooperate in ever more efficient ways to meet our needs.

Practical life today looks very different from what it was a generation ago, a century ago, a millennium ago. My grandmother lived in a small village in India. She got her milk from cows in her backyard, grew her own vegetables, and occasionally visited the nearest town to shop. My mother came to a large city as a young bride and got her milk delivered by the milkman, bought her locally grown vegetables from the producer who brought them to the market, and my mother had ready access to shops that carried goods from around the country. I live thousands of miles from where I was born, pick up milk and produce grown a continent away from a large supermarket, and with a click of a button on my computer can buy goods from half way across the world. Thanks to developments in transportation and communications, I am much more dependent on a global community of workers and producers than my mother and grandmother were. Practical life activities tell the story of our evolution as individuals and as a species and these daily activities of practical life are the human narrative.

The creative-constructive aspect of practical life is also evident in our changing environment. As the ways and means of practical life have evolved, our environment has changed to reflect our ability to adapt the environment to meet our needs. Our environment reflects the effects of our activities of practical life. Supranature as we know it today is the product of practical life activities of generations of human beings.

#### **PRACTICAL LIFE IN OUR CLASSROOMS**

It is through practical life that individuals find their place in the human narrative. The activities of practical life give us orientation, identity, and a sense of belonging; They give purpose and context to our lives as individuals. Education that is a preparation for life is meaningless without the context of practical life. It is what connects and locks the different parts into a meaningful whole.

When talking about the practical life of everyday, Dr. Montessori does not refer to them as activities. She was quite deliberate in

her use of the term *exercises* of practical life when she wrote about the daily life activities in the Casa. The noun here is *exercises*. She saw the practical life of everyday as a means for the development of the

Our environment reflects the effects of our activities of practical life. Supranature as we know it today is the product of practical life activities of generations of human beings.

individual and that is why she refers to them as the exercises of practical life. When we drop the use of the noun *exercise* and refer to these activities as *practical life*, we lose the essential purpose of these activities in the classroom.

Dr. Montessori did not see the exercises of practical life as the group of activities in the Casa for children to master spooning, pouring, dressing and undressing, or washing a table. These, to her, were only the first step to developing the skills necessary for the real activities, which would be carried out in the context of daily life in the community. To her, this was where the heart of the activities lay: It was here that the activities truly became exercises for the development of the whole child.

One detail usually very little understood is the distinction between teaching how one ought to act—leaving free, however, the practical applications of it – and the other plan (which is done by other methods) of guiding the child in his every action and imposing the power and the will of the adult on the child. ....

One ought to teach everything, one ought to connect everything with life, but there ought not to be suppressed, by directing them ourselves one by one, the actions which the children have learnt to carry out and to place in practical life. This assigning of their proper places to actions is one of the most important things which the child has to do.

That means that the various things which he has learnt perfectly must be used and given their right place in the varied times and circumstances of life. It is he who decides; this application is the work of his understanding, the exercise of his own responsibility. In this way he is set free from the greatest of dangers, that of placing upon the adult the responsibility for his doings, thus condemning his own intelligence to the inertia of sleep.

The new education consists not only in supplying the means of development for separate actions, but in leaving the child at liberty to make use of them. (*The Discovery of the Child* 159-160)

Whether in the infant community, the Casa, the elementary classroom or in the adolescent community, it is the activities of practical life that give purpose and meaning to all learning. For why do we learn except to become part of the human narrative? As we practice education for life, we must make practical life activities the keystone of our classroom communities: It is this that will give context for action, where children can practice and refine their knowledge and abilities. This implies the necessity of the preparation of our environments not just to support the development of specific actions and knowledge, but to also provide scope for the children to find opportunities where they can use their knowledge in the context of the daily life of the community—a community that must expand to keep pace with the developing abilities of the child. From the family to the community, to the cosmic whole, the sphere of action grows as the child's abilities evolve.

...one principle will remain unchanged during all these stages: the child must be furnished at all times with the means necessary for him to act and gain experience. His life as a social being will then develop throughout his formative years, becoming more and more complex as he grows older. (*Education and Peace* 56)

#### REFERENCES

- Joosten, A.M. *The Exercises of Practical Life*. Mumbai: Indian Montessori Training Courses, 1968.
- Montessori, Maria. *Education and Peace*. 1949. Oxford: Clio, 1992.
- Montessori, Maria. *The Discovery of the Child*. 1948. Thiruvanniyur, India: Kalakshetra, 1966.

