

GRACE AND COURTESY: EMPOWERING CHILDREN, LIBERATING ADULTS

by Ginni Sackett

Ginni Sackett delves into the many implications of grace and courtesy, from social relations and the basis of community to respect for the child's personality. Her point of departure is modern social living with grace and dignity. Hers is an exploration over two generations of seeing grace and courtesy as a comprehensive social view that is the greatest goal for the Montessori teacher to empower adults and children to live sociably. She suggests that standards have changed greatly over two or three generations. To live within the school microcosm of a "society by cohesion" means that grace and courtesy is pervasive with every material used and work chosen, implying that it is part of nature's plan demonstrated by Montessori children in a prepared environment with social life practiced daily.

Our topic for this weekend NAMTA conference is grace, courtesy, and civility across the planes. We are going to have the opportunity to explore many facets of this topic, benefiting from the experience and insights of a wide range of fellow Montessori practitioners. I'm going to try to set the tone from the perspective of the first plane of development by exploring the twin themes of *empowering children* and *liberating adults*. But first, I'd like to put this into the context of the conference as a whole.

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According to the conference publicity, we are exploring:

- Social relations applied to the functioning of the whole school; we'll be looking at how social relations become the basis for community life, and I hope we'll be discovering how this experience of social relations goes well beyond the grace and courtesy typically associated with practical life in the Children's House.
- There is also an assertion that the Montessori school must convey its perspective on child development with a paramount focus on respect for the child's personal dignity while remaining sensitive to the parent's view of their own child.
- And there is a mandate that all of this works best when simply felt, not stated—when all teachers, administrators, and students model graceful and courteous social relations at all times.
- Some of the components successfully addressed through these positive social relations are identified: conflict resolution, discussions and seminars, self-expression, meeting decorum, special events, hospitality to school visitors, adults listening when children talk, and children listening when adults talk.
- Some of the ways that grace, courtesy, and civility can be continuously and regularly modeled and practiced, not just across the planes but beyond the planes and throughout the adult stages of life as well .
- Finally, we are invited to contemplate grace and courtesy as skills that develop from within; and that these skills are nurtured through fundamental lessons in a Montessori environment that emphasizes the art of living sociably in a modern culture.

This is a very tall order indeed, so I'd like to start by looking at that last statement, "the art of living sociably in a modern culture." What does it mean to live sociably in our modern culture? Our publicity text also points us in the direction of an answer.

- *Living sociably* means living in a society based upon respect, dignity, and grace .
- The foundation for a social life based upon respect, dignity, and grace can be found in the *Casa*—in the daily lessons and practice of grace and courtesy among children under the age of six.

I am really happy to be here today for this conference topic. It seems that, for me, grace and courtesy, and by extension the foundations of harmonious, congenial, and positive human social life, form a lens through which we can view and understand the entire purpose of Montessori education and the goals of the world-wide Montessori movement.

I began serious exploration of life and the universe, all through this lens of grace and courtesy over thirty years ago as a Children’s House guide. It has been a major focus of my practical and theoretical work in Montessori education ever since. I began presenting on this topic (to teachers, assistants, parents, students, basically anyone who would listen) over twenty years ago. Twenty years, that’s a single human generation ago by demographic standards, but by our modern standards of social and technological change, in our modern culture, twenty years more likely represents any number of generations ago.

I have always been convinced that the topic of this conference has been of the greatest significance when implementing Montessori education. Today, I find myself asserting this conviction at a whole new level; asserting that at this particular time in human history, in our particular modern culture, the significance of grace and courtesy is greater than ever both at the individual and at the societal level. For there is no greater accomplishment we can aspire to than the goal of empowering children and liberating adults to live sociably.

So back to our question, What is it to *live sociably*?

I see two dimensions encapsulated in this phrase. To live sociably is the dimension of an individual human being and the dimension of human society as a whole. To live sociably as an individual is to live

in society in a manner based upon respect, dignity, and grace. But to live sociably also must mean living in a society that itself is *based upon* respect, dignity, and grace. Both dimensions are vital and necessary for optimal human social life. Grace and courtesy in the Children's House does indeed provide the foundation for this kind of social life: a social life based in respect, dignity, and grace, and it provides this foundation at both the individual and the societal level.

Grace and courtesy provides the foundation for young human individuals to experience and practice the skills of living in a manner based upon respect, dignity, and grace. And the cumulative effect of all these individuals living in this manner is the creation of a microcosm society—a microcosm Maria Montessori called *Society by Cohesion*. This microcosm of a human society that itself is coherently and consistently based upon respect, dignity, and grace. Maria Montessori did not claim to have invented this microcosm of a positive and harmonious human society. All she did was discover that a positive and harmonious human society is the intended birthright of every human being. And as with all of her discoveries, her message, loud and clear, was that nature itself guides construction of such a society from potential into reality. She assures us that nature itself can guide us:

It seems clear enough that nature lays down a plan for the construction both of personality and of social life, but this plan becomes realized only through the children's activity—when they are placed in circumstances favorable to its fulfillment. (*The Absorbent Mind* 233)

As advocates for Montessori education, we have the honor, the privilege, and the responsibility to provide the circumstances favorable to nature's plan, the circumstances favorable for optimal individual and social human development. The educational environments and opportunities we offer to children are uniquely designed to provide those favorable circumstances, and grace and courtesy in the Children's House is an essential ingredient of that uniqueness.

And yet, there is not a specific physical area of the environment dedicated to grace and courtesy: you won't find it on a shelf; grace and courtesy has no specific materials; it is not tied to any particular time of the day or to any particular season of the year, nor is it directed to-

wards any particular age or type of child. Rather, grace and courtesy is present in every area of the environment; it is a component of every material used and every work chosen by the children; it is a factor in every social interaction among the children; it is offered to every child regardless of age and experience; and it is offered to every child throughout every

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year she is with us. Grace and courtesy becomes a constant work of every child every day, and also the constant work of every adult every day in the school community. This is such a very big job description for an area with such a quaint and unassuming title.

Using the perspective, the tools, and the skills of grace and courtesy, we offer circumstances favorable to the fulfillment of nature's plan and so doing we offer a unique and life-long empowerment to the children who come to our schools. Our children come to know, through these circumstances in their daily life, what to do and what to say in an entire spectrum of personal and social events and happenings. This is empowering indeed, reaping a harvest of confidence, of consensus, of security in interpersonal relationships, and eventually, in the certainty of what is considered to be right and wrong in those relationships.

Twenty years ago, I was confident that this is a valid perspective on the foundation that grace and courtesy creates in a high-functioning Montessori Children's House, and I am confident that it still rings true today. It has always been exciting to see the positive empowerment of young children through this deceptively simple lens of grace and courtesy. The extension of liberation for adults through this same grace and courtesy has always been implied in my own mind and experience, but I think it has become vitally important to articulate this perspective now in 2014.

Let's elaborate on this a little bit more: We know about the fulfillment of nature's plan for optimal individual and social life. We know that the first plane of development is the critical stage in a child's fulfillment as a fully realized, uniquely formed human individual. And we know that this is equally true on the social side of normal human development. Montessori saw the later years of the first plane as

the age in which social or anti-social qualities are going to be evolved, according to the nature of the child's surroundings. This is their point of origin. (*The Absorbent Mind* 227)

All of this means that nature has a plan, but it can easily go awry according to the conditions in the child's environment and according to the opportunities the child finds in that environment. It is the conditions and those opportunities that will determine whether prosocial or antisocial qualities emerge in any particular child's personality. Montessori also states that this first stage of development, prior to age six, represents the birth of social life. She elaborates by describing what we mean by *social life*. She writes,

Society does not rest on personal wishes, but on a combination of activities which have to be harmonized....

Montessori observed that when the environment provides favorable conditions and experiences, children in the late first plane spontaneously exhibit the evolution of very positive social qualities, and these positive social qualities represent

...a change, an adaptation, which is nothing if not the birth of social life itself. (*The Absorbent Mind* 224)

But then, Montessori asks, "What is social life?" In other words, she asks our question "What is it to live sociably?" This is a reasonable question, and her answer is so simple, so deceptively simple.

What is social life if not the solving of social problems, behaving properly, and pursuing aims acceptable to all? (*The Absorbent Mind* 225)

I think we would all agree that nature's plan was around long before the discoveries of 1907 that launched the Montessori move-

ment and long before our articulation of grace and courtesy as the foundation for living sociably. So how are human children, during this vital first plane that is the “birth of social life,” meant to fulfill nature’s plan and meant to evolve the social qualities that will govern them for a lifetime?

How do personal wishes adapt and change to accommodate all of the harmonized activities that combine to create human society? How does a child identify those social problems that need solving? And how does a child know the acceptable ways in which those social problems can be solved? How does a human child discover how to behave properly? How does a human child discover the aims acceptable to all? Most significantly, how does a human child discover the proper ways to pursue those aims, those ways which are acceptable to all?

Children discover and embody all of this simply by living and being with other humans who are farther along the developmental continuum and, in particular, by living and being with the adults who represent organized human society. And here we come to a particular conundrum that is possibly unique in human history and which is the conundrum of living sociably in our modern, technologically adept culture.

To understand this conundrum, let’s visualize some images from our recent past as well as some sample images from the world our children today experience and absorb as they learn the behaviors and acceptable aims of human social life. Let’s consider a few random samples for us to contemplate from the perspective of this conference, along with a personal disclaimer: I offer these images not in judgment but as simple statements of fact, as fragmentary images of current patterns of human social behavior.

I chose a few obvious themes just to explore what it means when children learn to live sociably in any era. I think you’ll get the idea. Let’s start by imagining what children see as they watch adults do their everyday banking. Once upon a time (not all that long ago), a toddler might find himself balanced on his mother’s hip while she stood in line inside a bank, waiting with a large number of other well-behaved adults to transact business with a person known as a bank teller.

This child would have experienced, observed, and absorbed on a daily basis (just as our children do today) adult human beings going about their daily lives to fulfill needs, fulfill their tendencies, and just get stuff done. A child in, say, the mid-twentieth century, no doubt absorbed throughout the day countless examples of human-to-human social interactions such as interacting in a bank. And because of what we know about that child's absorbent mind, we know he would have absorbed not just the literal events of these interactions, the exact words used, for example, when greeting a stranger whose job it is to provide a service. He also would have absorbed all of the nonverbal and emotional elements of these interactions. He would observe body language, facial expressions, tone of voice, socially approved gestures, and all of the socially approved and expected ways



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to conduct oneself in a bank. We would also see how one dressed when going to the bank, how one found and kept one's place in line, how one addressed or did not address those other people in line, how adults might interact or not interact with a toddler on his mother's hip, the reaction of those adults if he suddenly leapt off his mother's hip and began running and screaming around the bank lobby, and the social permission for adults to smoke cigarettes while in the bank that would have been signified by the shiny, cylindrical ash canisters conveniently located in line.

Of course, human-to-human social interactions like this in a bank are still possible, but what is the more likely image repeated over and over again today for our toddler's absorption? Children in the twenty-first century (for whom the 1950s are appropriately ancient history) are more likely to see countless, very proficient, highly valued, any time of day, and securely solitary human-to-machine interactions, such as with an ATM machine. And perhaps not just for passive absorption, a quick internet check showed that for a very modest price, one can purchase a child sized, plastic ATM for imitative play.

Here are a few more images to consider:

- A parent in the front seat of a car, interacting with a gas station attendant who, for a cash fee, will provide not only the fuel necessary for the car to function but can also provide a map and verbal directions needed to reach a destination. Compare this with a parent holding a small plastic card, standing out in the weather, competently fueling their own car, then turning to the tones of the GPS for that same directional information.
- Adults interacting with a grocery store clerk, perhaps chatting about the weather or that home town team, making those important decisions (paper or plastic, cash or card, debit or credit) versus the highly convenient, no friendly banter needed, self-service U-scan.
- And for a final image, let's imagine spontaneous and unpredictable conversations of the back fence

variety with its ebb and flow of verbalized ideas, the etiquette of taking turns or speaking over someone else, of communicating agreement or disagreement, and watching body language. Let's compare that with images of conversation as will be absorbed from birth by any child in our culture today. To the acutely observant first-plane child—who doesn't have the full story of how we act here—cell phones might mean one can walk down the street completely ignoring all other human beings while talking to oneself, and smart phones might mean one can interact with a hand-held machine any place in the world at any time and be very interested even if appearing to be heads-down mournful while doing it. Mobile devices of all kinds mean a young child can see small clusters of older people (and the definition of *older* gets younger every year), standing together in a conversation formation, but interacting only with that device. Texting and Facebook generate intense human-to-machine interactions by using literacy in a manner that mimics face to face communication.

All of these marvels of twenty-first century communication eliminate from a child's absorption the vital *human other* at the other end of the message. For example, the cell phone user projects only one-half of a conversation for the child's language development, and images of texting come too fast and follow too many intuited rules to offer support for a child's absorbent mind to know how spoken words are magically conveyed through arbitrary, drawn shapes.

We as Montessorians understand childhood development in this first plane, and we understand that the fulfillment of nature's plan depends solely upon the experiences and opportunities available in a child's environment. We as Montessorians are not surprised that our modern culture is also full of images of children as young as infancy grabbing that cell phone right out of the adult's hands, holding anything vaguely small and rectangular up to their ears, gliding their fingers deftly across any blank, screen-like surface, and obsessively punching those buttons that beep so intriguingly when touched.

I said that I'm offering these images as statements of fact and without judgment. For every negative connotation we might find in these images of human-to-machine interaction in our modern culture, there are countless, real, positive possibilities and benefits opened for us by our new technological options. Just ask any grandparent who can now see and talk to beloved grandchildren who live thousands of miles away via Skype.

But we cannot deny or fail to ask how these images of twenty-first century modern life fulfill the transmission of social expectations to our children. Rephrased, what information about social expectations is being transmitted to our children through these constant models? And, how do these models fit into our definitions of social life and what it is to live sociably. I'd like to repeat Montessori's answer to that question: What is social life if not the solving of social problems, behaving properly and pursuing aims acceptable to all.

What is our modern culture projecting about how we solve social problems, how we behave properly, and how we pursue aims acceptable to all? We should not be deceived as the answers to these questions are being transmitted by adults to children constantly. The messages that we are sending about the acceptable ways that humans live in our society are being received and reinforced in the thousands of moments that children observe and absorb in their pursuit of nature's plan. And, as a caution, we must also remember what else Montessori observed when she tells us by writing that the first plane of development is the age in which prosocial or antisocial qualities are going to be evolved, according to the nature of the child's surroundings. What is transmitted and absorbed by today's first-plane children will shape and inform the acceptable social behavior of their future selves.

Now, let's go back to those two aspects of living sociably, those two dimensions I mentioned earlier. To live sociably as an individual is to live in society in a manner based upon respect, dignity, and grace. But to live sociably also must mean living in a society which itself is based upon respect, dignity, and grace.

Where and how are respect, dignity, and grace between and among humans being projected and lived in the common images

of modern culture? More importantly, how are respect, dignity, and grace being learned and experienced by anyone, adult or child, in our modern culture? These are vital questions to ask and to answer. Only we, the adults of this culture, can ask and answer these questions. Our children have no choice because they simply accept and embrace and love what we give them, what we project as being of most value in our lives and in our relationships.

Have you ever seen an infant desperately urgent to get that cell phone into her hands? Already in her young life, that infant has absorbed the immense value and importance her people place onto this device. She doesn't have to know how it is used or why it is used, she only knows that it is the center of her people's attention and that her people will stop anything when it summons them. Possibly she perceives that device as the center of her people's lives. All of her developmental needs and tasks, therefore, require that she too make it the center of her life if she is going to fully adapt to this time and place.

The gift of grace and courtesy today might be the image of human behaviors, of social problem solving, and of aims acceptable to all and these opportunities may not exist anywhere else in this child's environmental experience. We don't have to erase those other cultural messages. We don't necessarily want to erase those images, for these children must adapt to become people of this time and place. But we can add other messages to the social mix, and these other messages can be grounded in interpersonal, human-to-human respect, dignity, and grace as we add other skills to this child's social tool chest.

But what about the liberated adult, the other half of my title? Today, more so than at any time in my Montessori career, I see that liberated adult in two forms: the adults of the present and the adults of the future. In the present time, I see first and foremost, ourselves as guides of childhood development. Grace and courtesy liberates us to devise, model, and practice forms of social relationship, of social life, and of living sociably. These forms are grounded in respect, dignity, and grace that might not exist anywhere else in our societies. We might lack or have missed these model behaviors in our own social development, but through the daily practice and



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experience of grace and courtesy, we can liberate ourselves and create the habits to live in society in a manner characterized by the highest qualities of harmonious social life.

As we liberate ourselves, as we feel and don't just preach the behaviors and values of grace and courtesy, we can simultaneously liberate other adults in our sphere. And for any of the adults in our community—co-workers and parents alike—we can lead them to also experience, practice, value, and appreciate the benefits of respectful, dignified, and gracious social life. And while liberating the adults of today, we can, through our example, our guidance, and our own perseverance, liberate the future adults who fill our classrooms today. We can liberate them to enjoy the benefits and conveniences of modern culture without abandoning nature's plan to create a human society based in respect, dignity, and grace.

Empowered children and liberated adults are perhaps a form of positive social consensus, a type of conscious human social organization, which hasn't been nurtured on our planet for a very long time. I'd like to end here with one more image for your imaginations. I can think of no better words to predict the features of a human society liberated to truly live sociably than the words Maria Montessori used to describe the empowered children of the first *Casa*.

The children had no shyness. No obstacles had been set between their souls and their surroundings, they had expanded fully and naturally, like lotus flowers opening their white petals to the full to the rays of the sun, and sending forth a delicate fragrance. They had nothing to hide, nothing to shut away, nothing to fear...

Alert, active minds were at work in the world, finding themselves always at ease, sending forth a spiritual light and warmth that melted the oppressive coils round the souls of those adults who came into contact with them.

These children welcomed all with love. (*The Secret of Childhood* 137)

What Montessori describes remembering the children of San Lorenzo, and what evolved out of that spontaneous, microcosmic society based in respect, dignity, and grace that accidentally formed in the conditions of the first *Casa dei Bambini*, could also be described as nothing less than the awakening of love. Just contact—connecting—with such empowered children liberates us, the adults, who are still learning to live sociably in our modern world.

May such a reality be the destination for all of us as we explore the possibilities of living sociably wherever we live and work.

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