

HISTORY: HUMAN SOLIDARITY: MAN WHITHER BOUND



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by Baiba Krumins Grazzini

To Educate the Human Potential by Maria Montessori, first released in 1948, conveyed the Montessori theme of human solidarity as a unifying force for human history and integrated the sciences of geography, chemistry, biology, and physics. The concluding chapter of this journal places the reader in touch with the great questions of life on Earth while linking each answer to the central theme of positive fundamental human needs and the role of humanity as a cosmic agent.

Camillo Grazzini writes, "Indeed, Montessori goes so far as to say, 'I can never insist enough upon the importance of the study of history in all its details, for the education of the child to the idea of universal solidarity.' Thus, when it comes to the study of humanity, our aim must always be to make this profound realization of universal solidarity blossom in our children" (Grazzini 112).

The human solidarity concept is a second-plane orientation to the human story in the context of the environment from the beginning of all time. Montessori's "Human Solidarity" lecture is a positive projection of a unified world, past, present, and future; therefore, the final end of the elementary calls again to the adolescent to see all living things as one community bound with a sense of purpose to realize the highest potential of humans and nature as a great work within a peaceable kingdom.

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Today I shall talk about what's special about the Montessori approach to history, what makes it very different, in every way, from the usual or traditional or mainstream approach. Well, first of all, of course, our aim is different. Our aim is always different, and therefore it's also different for history, or indeed for any other subject area, as we saw when we talked about Cosmic Education yesterday. The aim is really always to help the children in their development. And when it comes to history, the aim is also that of building human solidarity.

In 1994, Camillo Grazzini gave a talk on Cosmic Education, which includes some very important sections on history: "Man—Whither Bound," which is actually the name of a chapter in Maria Montessori's *To Educate the Human Potential*; and "Human Solidarity in Time and Space," which is the title of a lecture Maria Montessori gave during the San Remo Congress in 1949. In both sections, he gives many quotes from these Montessori sources, and he concludes the latter section as follows:

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If history is offered to the children with the Montessori approach, human solidarity becomes part of how the children develop. They come to feel this human solidarity and, if they feel this human solidarity, it means they have understood, they have seen realities that are normally hidden from our eyes. Then, Montessori says, it's almost as though humanity becomes sacred in their eyes, and therefore it would become absolutely impossible to kill or hurt other human beings.

In order to examine Montessori's idea of history, the first thing I want to do is to present what is, in all probability, a caricature of the usual approach to history. This, however, serves the purpose of providing a contrast. Therefore I am not saying that traditional history is inevitably always like this, or that the mainstream approach to history has not changed at all; I simply want to use this caricature so as to obtain the greatest possible contrast. Thus, in terms of a traditional approach, what is, or was, the span of time involved in the study of history? That involving civilization, which means little more than the last five thousand or so years. That was all for the traditional approach to history, and that was certainly the approach when I was young. Historians, at least once upon a time, only studied civilization. Although history was divided into ancient, medieval, and modern history, ancient history simply meant the ancient civilizations. Thus our "past," humanity's past, was limited to an extremely short span of time.

As for the content and the focus of traditional history, it does seem to be mostly about wars, treaties, cessation of wars, and generally speaking, horrors of all kinds. And who are the human beings who are actually presented in this particular story of mankind, in this mainstream story of mankind? They are always the important figures in the sense of the powerful and the famous; thus it is the powerful and the famous who are the heroes of this kind of history. National history is still usually taught in this manner.

All in all, traditional history was often a very pessimistic kind of story, a very pessimistic presentation of humanity. To illustrate this point of view, I want to give you a quote from Edward Gibbon, the English historian who wrote that famous work *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*: "History...is indeed little more than the register of the crimes, follies, and misfortunes of mankind" (chapter III). There you have that authentically negative, pessimistic sort of vision, which is so characteristic of traditional history.

Now I want to give you various quotes from a rather special Montessori excerpt, where she's speaking about history. This excerpt is taken from *Pedagogical Anthropology*, which is not a book we would normally read. It is an early book, written a few years after she became involved with what was to become the Montessori approach. She writes this: "One branch of learning which might have utilized the important scientific discoveries regarding the antiquity of man, his nature considered as an animal, his first efforts as a laborer and a member of society, is pedagogy" (3). Montessori goes on to speak about the sorts of stories that we could tell the children and then she says:

These marvelous accounts ought to be easily understood by children and to awaken in them an admiration for their own kinship with humanity, and a profound sense of indebtedness to the mighty power of labor, which today is rendered so productive and so easy by our advanced civilization, in which the environment, thanks to the works of man, has done so much to make our lives enjoyable.

But pedagogy, no less than the other branches of learning, has disdained to accept any contribution from anthropology; it has failed to see man as the mighty wrestler, at close grips with the environment, man the toiler and transmuter, man the hero of creation. Of the history of human evolution, not a single ray sheds light upon the child and adolescent, the coming generation. The schools teach the history of wars – the history of disasters and crimes – which were painful necessities in the successive passages through civilizations created by the labor and slow perfecting of humanity; but civilization itself, which abides in the evolution of labor and of thought, remains hidden from our children in the darkness of silence. (4)

Montessori often uses metaphors to make a point, to help us to understand, and now she's going to use a metaphor of the railways, which in her day were the main means of transport and communication.

As for the content and the focus of traditional history, it does seem to be mostly about wars, treaties, cessation of wars, and generally speaking, horrors of all kinds. And who are the human beings who are actually presented in this particular story of mankind, in this mainstream story of mankind? They are always the important figures in the sense of the powerful and the famous; thus it is the powerful and the famous who are the heroes of this kind of history.

Let us compare the appearance of man upon the Earth to the discovery of the motive power of steam and to the subsequent appearance of railways as a factor in our social life. The railway has no limits of space, it overruns the world, unrelenting and unconscious, and by doing so promotes the brotherhood of men, of nations, of business interests. Let us suppose that we should choose to remain silent about the work performed by our railways and their social significance in the world today, and should teach our children only about the accidents, after the fashion of the newspapers, and keep their sensitive minds lingering in the presence of shattered and motionless heaps of carriages, amid the cries of anguish and the bleeding limbs of victims.

The children would certainly ask themselves what possible connection there could be between such a disaster and the progress of civilization. Well, this is precisely what we do when, from all the prehistoric and historic ages of humanity, we teach the children nothing but a series of wars, oppressions, tyrannies and betrayals; and equipped with such knowledge, we push them out, in all their ignorance, into the century of the redemption of labor and the triumph of universal peace, telling them that "history is the teacher of life." (4)

("History is the teacher of life" is really a quote from Cicero.)

With a Montessori approach to history, all of this changes: the span of time that we explore, the content, the focus. Something else also changes: Montessori's vision of history is optimistic, and this is crucially important for elementary children, particularly for young elementary children. An optimistic view is not one that is based on illusion or delusion; it simply means looking at the good side of human beings, at the positive achievements of human beings. The time will come when they will have to look at the other side of things; but they need to feel part of humanity, part of the *nazione unica*, before they come on to deal with what is bad, negative, cruel, etc.

I want to first consider the span of time. We could immediately say that Montessori deals with the whole of humanity: She doesn't start with civilization, as we know very well; she deals with all of humanity. But actually, it's even more than that. In *To Educate the Human Potential* (which is a hugely important reference source for us, for the Montessori approach to history for elementary children), it's clear that we don't start only with humanity because, from a certain point of view, history starts from the very very beginning.

In Italian, the word for history is *storia* and the word for story is also *storia*; where we use two different words, the Italians have one and the same word. (And the two English words have the same etymological root: the Latin word *historia*.) Thus story, understood as stories of truth, and history are one and the same, and where does the story begin? Right from the beginning. In this sense, although we say that the story of God Who Has No Hands, for example, is really for introducing geography; from another point of view it's also history, because God Who Has No Hands is the history or story of the universe. Thus history can start from the very very beginning, which is the story of the universe itself. Therefore history and geography go together; history and biology, or life, go together; history and the story of all humanity go together.

This very grand story is a story of evolution from the evolution of the universe and the Earth, to the evolution of life, to the evolution of human beings, to the evolution of culture and civilization. Moreover, since it's a story that has been, and is still being, unraveled for us by scientists, the wonderful thing about this story is that it's a universal story. Let's face it, each and every human group has always had its own story of creation: the creation of the world and mankind, the creation of its own people, etc. Consequently, each of these creation stories tends to focus on one particular human group, and they all vary from one human group to another. Our story, however, is a story for all time and for all people (and one which doesn't preclude other stories that one may wish to tell). Our story of truth, this huge story of truth, which unfolds in episodes (rather like the successive acts of a great drama), we can look on as a universal story for all of humanity; it's a story, if you like, for *la nazione unica*.

What is the importance of all this for the children? After all, we know we always have to think about the developmental aspects of what we are doing, of what we are offering. When the story, or history, is approached in this way, it means that, from the beginning, the children see themselves as part of the universe, part of life, part of all of humanity. There's a sense of belonging on a grand scale. We say we want to help the children understand that they're built out of the very materials of the Earth. Brian Swimme, in his book *The Universe Story*, says that we're all built out of the materials of the universe, out of stardust, because it was the stars that created all those materials of the Earth, the materials from which we're actually built. All of this means that there's a sense of solidarity that goes beyond a sense of solidarity with humanity: There's a sense of solidarity with the universe itself, with the Earth, with all of life. When we tell the story of life, it is easy to understand that all forms of life are our relatives. They can be more closely related or more distantly related, just as we can have very close members of a family or very distant members of a family; but nonetheless, we're related to all of life, we're part of life, and all forms of life are our relatives. And, if you like, so are the bacteria that we can look on as our planetary ancestors. To my way of thinking there is nothing irreligious or ignoble in all of this; on the contrary, I find it wonderful that such an incredible sense of relationship and solidarity can be evoked on such a very grand scale.

Now what about humanity itself? As we know, at a certain point in the story, we focus on that very special form of life to which the children belong; on that very special being, the human being. The human being comes with some outstanding gifts: a special mind, special love, hands. This specialness is constantly reinforced: We even have material, as we know, for reinforcing that. And again, the emphasis is on belonging to the whole of humanity. But it's not that we say to the children, "Oh, *la nazione unica*," and all that, because we don't. However, in effect, we are preparing for that kind of understanding; the whole way the history unfolds leads the children in that direction, and sooner or later they can reach that understanding. Let me reiterate yet again that the story of humanity begins from the beginning: It's not just about civilization, it's not just the story of the progress of civilization. Therefore it includes what we may think of as pre-history.

As you can see, the idea of what history is, determines the span of time involved and, inevitably, content and focus as well. To conclude this part, I want to quote Mario Montessori, who says (in an unpublished lecture given in 1950): "[our] history begins with the creation of the Earth, to then consider the coming of life, as well as the story of human beings."

We now have to examine further the other aspects of the Montessori approach to history. I've already said we put the emphasis on what's positive and good about humanity, before we come on to deal with the other side of the human story; and ultimately, our point of view is an optimistic one. What about the heroes of this history, of this Montessori approach to history: Well, if we're talking about the whole of humanity, the heroes are actually all human beings. That means not just the famous, not just the powerful; but also the ordinary human beings, human beings whom we could not possibly ever know. We know the famous by name; sometimes we know them by their faces, because we've seen their faces. But what about all of humanity, all the past generations as well as all the human beings that exist today? We'll never know them on a personal level; we'll never know their faces, we'll never know their names. The Italian expression Maria Montessori uses for all these countless human beings is *uomini senza volto*, which literally means "men without a face"; the faceless human beings, in other words, whose features we do not, and could not, know. But we do have to consider all of these ordinary human beings; all of them have that special mind, that special love, and those hands. And the story, then, is a story of how they lived their lives, of their struggles to survive, of how they tried to make life more comfortable for themselves. It's a story of work, really; it comes down to a story of human work. Human beings worked to satisfy their needs in order to survive not only physically but also psychically or spiritually. For the human being has a body, and therefore a drive to survive physically; but above all, the human being is spirit. Mario Montessori says that, when we think of the human being, we should think of a small body that serves a great spirit. That is why we always do have to emphasize the mind, the love, and the hands as the instrument of the mind.

We want to help the children to think about human life in the past, to imagine life as it was. Here's where the imagination is so important because, as Montessori says, how could we possibly explore the past, or history, without the power of the imagination? We have to imagine how human beings set about living their daily lives, satisfying their needs. And we do have certain key materials that

It is really important for the children to understand how we are all united. The fundamental human needs tell us that we all share the same needs, and this means that we're bonded in that way. And they also help to put diversity and difference into perspective. . . . It's important to be able to both appreciate the diversity and also see what is common to all, what we all do share that makes us all belong to this same great nation of humanity.

help us. Those of us who are elementary trained know all of this perfectly well, but I want to suggest that we actually have three keys. One is the *fundamental human needs*. The fundamental human needs are both material: food, clothing, shelter, defense, transport; and spiritual: culture, art (and here you have the problem of how to interpret culture), religion, vanity. What is of vital importance about these needs is that they are universal. At all times, in all places, at all ages (child or adult), there are always these needs. What varies is how these needs are satisfied; that is what creates the differences and the diversity between the different human groups, in the past and also in the present. You know it's really important for the children to understand how we are all united. The fundamental human needs tell us that we all share the same needs, and this means that we're bonded in that way. And they also help to put diversity and difference into perspective. There is much talk of multi-ethnic classrooms these days; but even if we don't have multi-ethnic classrooms, it's important for the children to open up to all of humanity as it lives its life in the different human groups all over the world now, and also as it lived in times past. It's important to be able to both appreciate the diversity and also see what is common to all, what we all do share that makes us all belong to this same great nation of humanity.

The second great key is, of course, *migration*, and for this, too, we have a material, the migration charts. Living in their different human groups, human beings lived in different parts of the world, where nature provided different climates, different terrains, different plants, different animals, and so on. Each human group developed considerable knowledge of its own part of the world; of the biology, if you like, of the plants and the animals that were used in order to satisfy their needs so that they could eat, defend themselves from sickness, and so on. If that knowledge could become a heritage for all of humanity instead of for just one particular human group, then there could develop a huge group intelligence. Such an intelligence is not limited to only this human group, or this group intelligence, to this other human group; instead, it's as though every group commits to a great human intelligence. For that to happen it's important that knowledge, discoveries, inventions, ideas, be put into circulation. And the old way of putting these into circulation was through migration. People first carried the inventions, the discoveries, the ideas, on foot; then by other means of transport; and now these ideas can fly through the air, in a disembodied fashion. Once upon a time, in other words, knowledge and ideas had to be carried along physically, together with the people. Thus migration is another great key, because, as Montessori says, what good are discoveries and inventions that remain isolated, that don't serve humanity as a whole? It all has to go into circulation.

And the third key is that story, history, unfolds over *time*. To have a story, you need a certain kind of unfolding over time. Thus history in that sense, or indeed story in general, is embedded in a matrix of time. And then what's extraordinary (because human achievement is extraordinary), is that time itself, the keeping of time, measuring time, is a story in and of itself, yet another story of human achievement.

When we present the stories, history, to the children, we have to depend on their imaginations. (This is also important from a developmental point of view; because, if this is a time of sensitivity for the use of the imagination, the children have to use that imagination. History requires the children to use the imagination, and the children must use their imaginations for developmental reasons.) The children only live and know their own way of life; to explore the past, they have to imagine other

ways of living, different ways of life, and we have to help them. Precisely because children tend to live in the present, they tend to think that things are unchanging; and that is so untrue. For little children it's fine. They have to live in an eternal present, and we shouldn't disturb or rush or hurry them. But the older children can understand that, in the end, everything changes.

Everything changes. I find that absolutely extraordinary; I, myself, feel wonder at that. Everything that we think is fixed and constant, if you look at it over a long enough span of time, actually changes. Just to give you some extraordinary examples, not too far off our main topic: The tilt of the Earth has changed; apparently, even the length of the day has not always been the same. Thus nothing ever remains the same; and that's very hard for children to imagine. Coming back to humanity, it is difficult for children to imagine (somehow we have to help them imagine) what it would mean to live life without the modern conveniences that we have now. There was life before the computer (and there still is); there was life before the cell phone (and there still is); there was life before etc., etc. We must help them imagine what that other way of life is or was.

Another thing in this story that is history and the human story, and that has to do with change, is that not only did human beings work with their hands; but also, because of those special minds, they learned to satisfy their needs in different ways over time. That's where you get the invention and the discovery. Therefore ways of life differ and change not only because of living in different parts of the world, but also because over time there were all sorts of inventions and discoveries, all of which we've inherited. And so many of those inventions and discoveries come without the names of the inventors and discoverers. For those of more recent times, we may know the names or, at any rate, we could find them out. But what about those of long ago? If we go far back enough, the greatest discovery is considered to be fire. How on Earth could we possibly know who first figured out how to control and use fire, or to make fire? And that's just one discovery that made such a huge difference. But there are an untold number of discoveries that have made an enormous difference to human lives, to our lives; and they were made by an untold number of people whose names we will never know. This, too, we want the children to understand; and it's part of this emphasis, this focus that we have, on all human beings and all human groups.

What's important about this approach is that it permits the children to see themselves as part of it all. You don't have to be famous, you don't have to have a lot of money, you don't have to go on television, in order to contribute and lead a worthwhile life. All children, all human beings, belong to this human drama. We are all the new protagonists of the Earth, the new actors in the drama of the Earth. Even though the child is not a prince or a princess and will never become a king or queen (if you go back in English history, for example, you find so much emphasis placed on kings and queens), even if the child were never to make the famous trip from the log cabin to the White House, does it really matter? The children can be themselves and play their important part in an ongoing drama that is the story of mankind: every single child. What more could we want from a developmental point of view?

As indicated already by the excerpt I gave you from Montessori's *Pedagogical Anthropology*, there really is so much to admire about human achievement; achievement which is always the consequence of human work, be it physical or intellectual. And if we really think about it, then surely we can feel nothing but wonder at how much humanity has achieved in such a short space of time. And when we recognize that, not only can we feel a sense of wonder but also a sense of gratitude and one of grateful belonging. The history that I was taught emphasized what was specific and not what was great and grand; it emphasized what was individual; it emphasized what were details; and, in terms of our lives, in terms of how I live my life or how you live your life, it often emphasized what was trivial. Furthermore, as we heard Montessori saying, it also emphasized the horrors of history.

What the children can come to appreciate (and this is also important from a developmental point of view) is that humanity constitutes a cosmic agent. Montessori talks about humanity or mankind as God's chief agent on Earth for creation. Any cosmic agent, any agent of creation, is an agent of change; but humanity is a cosmic agent that brings about change in an extremely rapid way, the rate of which is accelerating all the time. Humanity's achievements, for better or for worse, have involved

the transformation of the Earth. Human beings have built a supernature for themselves, an environment that's literally above nature and one on which we all now depend.

To bring that home, I would like you to imagine this: Take away supernature, take away human work; imagine that everything in this room, in this building, that has to do with human work, is taken away. What is left? The whole building disappears with everything it contains; all our clothes fly off; and we end up sitting on the ground naked. That's what happens if you take away human work, if you take away supernature. And it makes us understand how much we depend on supernature, on civilization, on what is the creation of humanity; it helps us to understand why Maria Montessori calls humanity God's chief agent on Earth for the continuation of creation.

I want to reiterate and reinforce that what is also amazing, is the space of time that's involved, the time it's taken for humanity to create our supernature. Whatever you consider the duration of human existence to be, whether you consider it to be one million, two million, or two-and-a-half million years (which include the five or six thousand years of civilization), it's all just the blink of an eye in relation to the age of the Earth, in relation to the duration of the Earth's existence. And how did it happen? We come back once again to human beings with their special gifts, with what makes them different from all of the other life forms on the Earth. Yes, they were driven by their needs; yes, they had to satisfy those needs in order to survive; but they always learned how to survive and how to satisfy their needs in very different ways through their discoveries and inventions. Thus, starting in a very simple way, they learned to use the kingdoms of nature and to harness the powers of nature, to make themselves stronger and more powerful.

There is an image that I like to use for this. Let's suppose that we compare nature to an eagle, and human beings to a sparrow. If the sparrow flies with the eagle, actually rests on the eagle, and the eagle flies as high as it can, then the sparrow, who's just rested with the eagle, can actually fly that little bit higher than the eagle. The forces of nature are far more powerful than those of human beings. So what permitted human beings to become as powerful as they have? They harnessed the powers of nature. That's how we have made ourselves so powerful. While living their daily lives and trying to satisfy their needs always more and more efficiently, human beings gradually developed all branches of learning. Always wanting to satisfy their needs in a better and better way, eventually led human beings on to a path of endless discovery. It may not have been a conscious drive; it could have been an unconscious drive. In any case, human beings developed great knowledge of, for example, plants and animals; knowledge which was acquired for the purpose of satisfying their needs for food, clothing, shelter defense, transport. They learned how to build. They developed a knowledge of architecture while making use of wood, stone, and metal, and taking advantage of laws and forces infinitely more powerful than themselves. They developed a knowledge of physics, of chemistry, and so on. Therefore, starting from the simple, practical beginnings of a daily life existence, human beings developed the incredible knowledge that we possess today.

I haven't even talked about language and maths. Language and maths (which for me is actually the three branches of arithmetic, geometry, and algebra) are also part of the human story. We think of human beings as God's chief agent for creation – and by the way if you have the power to create you also have the power to destroy – but they couldn't have carried out that role, they couldn't have transformed the environment and built a supernature, had they not had language which permitted them to develop a group intelligence, as well as mathematics.

If the children can learn to appreciate how, starting from very simple beginnings, living in nature as part of nature only, human beings came to achieve what we have today, and also how we have benefited from all the work of all human beings who came before us, then the children will come to feel that gratitude to humanity that both Maria and Mario Montessori talk about. Yesterday we were talking about gratitude to nature, to God; today the emphasis is on gratitude to humanity. We can feel gratitude to all living human beings, from whom we receive so much and on whom we depend for their work; we can feel gratitude to all human beings of the past, from whom we've inherited so much and whose work still benefits us today.

Yesterday I gave the example of the alphabet. It's extraordinary to think that every time we make a little sign, that little sign goes back to over three thousand years ago. Did the Americans invent the alphabet? Did the British invent the alphabet? Did the Romans invent the alphabet? (We identify our alphabet as the Roman alphabet, don't we?) No, it goes right back to long before the Romans, and yet millions and millions of us are still using it. What difference did this particular invention make? An absolutely unbelievable difference. And the same thing is true for those numbers that we also inherited from so long ago and so far away. And what's amazing is to see the continuity, a continuity which is like a long chain of solidarity throughout time.

Montessori talks about these bonds of solidarity: If only we can see, then we can understand that we have all these bonds to human beings of the past. This understanding builds gratitude: without our having to preach; without our having to give sermons; without our having to say we should be grateful, we should say thank you. This kind of understanding also builds human solidarity. It's the kind of understanding and appreciation that we want these second-plane children to grow up with. Children feel a natural attraction to, and an interest in, what is extraordinary, what is magnificent; and they have a natural tendency to hero worship. All of this can be directed to humanity, instead of to some pop star or football star.

Perhaps I should finish with human solidarity, which is where I started. From a Montessori point of view, we want to help the children in their development; with this kind of approach to history, we do help the children in their development. The aim, the underlying aim that we always have to bear in mind whenever we work in history with the children, is human solidarity. Montessori says the whole point of exploring history is to help the children become aware of how we have become a *nazione unica*, a single nation of humanity, which means we are united with all the people of the past as well as with the people of the present; and our aim is therefore to have this sense of universal human solidarity blossom in our children. Then the children who grow and develop in this way will become adults who are builders and keepers of peace.

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