

By Camille Scent and Judith Cunningham

GREAT LESSONS

of the Montessori Elementary Program

The elementary child asks great questions
and the Montessori classroom answers with six Great Lessons.

*"[Everything] sink(s) into insignificance beside the importance
of feeding the hungry intelligence, and opening vast fields of knowledge
to eager exploration."*—Maria Montessori, *To Educate the Human Potential*

AS ANY PARENT WHO HAS LIVED with a six-year-old knows, elementary children are insatiably curious. Their hunger for knowledge about the world leads them to pose a seemingly endless stream of questions, forever asking why and how things happen. Maria Montessori saw this characteristic as a special gift of childhood, and she understood that the crucial aspect of education at this age is to respond to this quest for knowledge without stifling the child's curiosity.

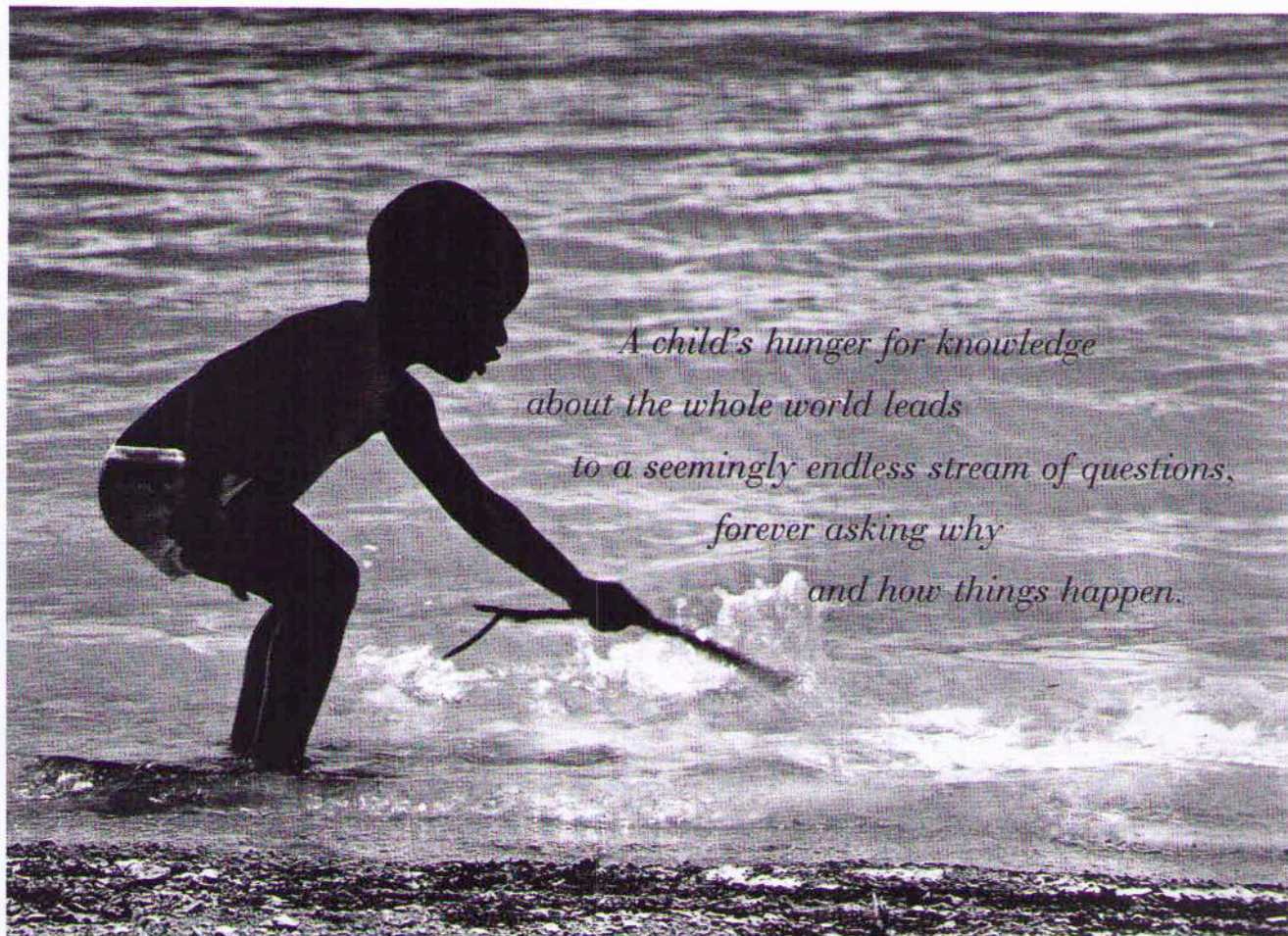
The way to do this, she said, is by offering children everything the universe has in it—not in simplistic bits and pieces, but as an integrated whole. "Let us give them a vision of the whole universe. The universe is an imposing reality and an answer to all questions," she wrote. "All things are part of the universe and are connected with each other to form one whole unity. This idea helps the mind of the child to become fixed, to stop wandering in an aimless quest for knowledge. The child is satisfied, having found the universal center of self in all things."

The child at six years of age is entering a new developmental plane in which reason and imagination are the guiding forces. Instead of exposing the child to knowledge that is fragmented and uncertain, Maria Montessori devised her plan for the elementary to be unified around a central theme that she called Cosmic Education. Cosmic comes from cosmos, which means order or unity. The organizing prin-

ciple of Montessori elementary education is to provide a framework, or context, in which all the details a child learns can be related and therefore remembered. In this way, the universe is presented as the answer to the great curiosity of the elementary child. The elementary child asks great questions and the Montessori classroom answers with the Great Lessons.

Repeated every year, the Great Lessons tell the story of our universe from its origins through our modern-day civilization. These six presentations shape the whole elementary curriculum and serve as the jumping off point





*A child's hunger for knowledge
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for children's explorations into science, history and all the humanities. They are:

- The Creation of the Universe
- The Coming of Life
- The Coming of Human Beings
- The Story of Communication in Signs
- The Story of Numbers
- The Story of the Country

Though the ritual varies from school to school and even from classroom to classroom, elements of the Great Lessons can be found in virtually every Montessori elementary class. They serve as an organizing principle for the child's education, offering both an enticement to learning about the world as well as a context within which to place that learning.

In Montessori elementary education, all subject matter is integrated cohesively. Dr. Montessori observed that "it is necessary to make use of the psychological state, which permits the view of things in their entirety, and to let them note that everything in the universe is interrelated. Thus, when the children want to understand everything, the world which they have before them can fill the need."

Beginning with The Creation of the Universe, children hear six major tales and numerous smaller ones, each presenting a set of ideas key to our understanding of how the universe works and humanity's place in it. The lessons themselves are designed to be impressionistic—that is, to create impressions or ideas in the children's imaginations—rather than laden with details.

The aim is to so intrigue the children with these impressions that their natural curiosity is stimulated and they are drawn into asking and then seeking answers to their own questions.

After hearing each presentation, children are free to choose their follow-up work. This is the heart of their learning, for it is through seeking answers to questions they have posed that they build their understanding of both the universe and themselves.

Charts, experiments and timelines accompany the Great Lessons. The purpose of the Great Lessons is not to memorize the facts of the stories or to reproduce charts, but rather to ignite the imagination of the elementary students so their curiosity propels them to fill in the details of the picture.

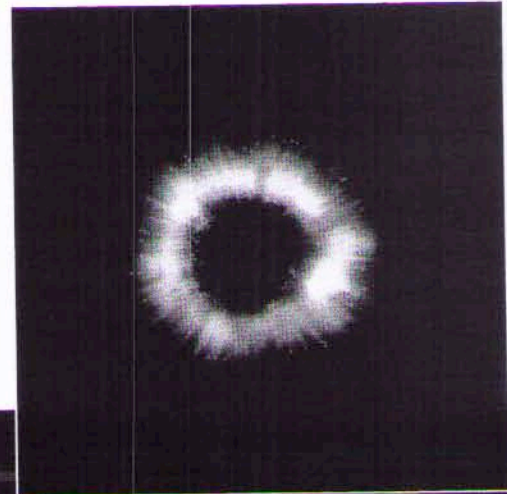
Dr. Montessori said, "It should be realized that genuine interest cannot be forced. Therefore, all methods of education based on centers of interest, which have been chosen by adults, are wrong. Moreover, these centers of interest are superfluous, for the child is interested in everything. A global vision of cosmic events fascinates children and their interest will remain fixed on one particular part as a starting point for more intensive studies. As all parts are related, they will all be scrutinized sooner or later. Thus, the way leads from the whole, via the parts, back to the whole. The children will develop a kind of philosophy, which teaches them the unity of the universe. This is the very thing to organize their intelligence and to give them a better insight into their own place and task in the world, at the same time presenting a chance for the development of their creative energy."

THE FIRST GREAT LESSON

The Creation of the Universe

THE CREATION OF THE UNIVERSE begins with the "Big Bang" and tells the story of how the universe and our solar system came to be. The lesson ends with the formation of earth and the physical laws that have been established.

One of the major ideas this lesson embodies is that while the force creating the universe remains a mystery, the universe does seem to operate on basic principles that humans have come to understand. This lesson opens up wide avenues of exploration into astronomy, physics, chemistry, geology and geography, topics not often associated with early elementary education but in which the children have a tremendous and powerful interest. Their exposure to these concepts within the meaning-making context of the Great Lessons prepares the students for future in-depth studies.



One of the favorite activities in the lower elementary classroom, pin maps allow children to teach themselves geography while learning to use an atlas. They are also an excellent material for children to collaborate on.

THE SECOND GREAT LESSON

The Story of the Coming of Life

THE STORY OF THE COMING OF LIFE is the second lesson. This story tells of the beginning and the evolution of life from the Cambrian period through the appearance of humans, with a particular focus on the unique contributions of key organisms along the way. It is accompanied by one of the favorite materials in the lower elementary classroom, the Timeline of Life.

This lesson leads to great explorations of the diversity of life on Earth, both past and present. Children are introduced to the ways scientists classify and study all living things, to ideas of biology, ecology, zoology and botany. The Coming of Life, not only shows the evolution of the plants and animals, but also how the earth changed over the eras. This indirectly prepares children for the study of plate tectonics.

In addition, it is this story, perhaps more than any of the others, that so clearly presents what Montessori called "the Cosmic Plan"—the idea that as each event in earth's history has unfolded, as each organism has pursued its own survival, those seemingly selfish events and pursuits have benefited other life forms as well, ultimately leading to the conditions that allow us to live as we do today. This idea fuels children's natural sense of awe at the wonders of the universe and adds a component of gratitude for all of creation.

"The stars, earth, stones, life of all kinds form a whole in relation to each other," says Maria Montessori in *To Educate the Human Potential*, "and so close is this relation that we cannot understand a stone without some understanding of the great sun! No matter what we touch, an atom or a cell, we cannot explain it without the knowledge of the wide universe. What



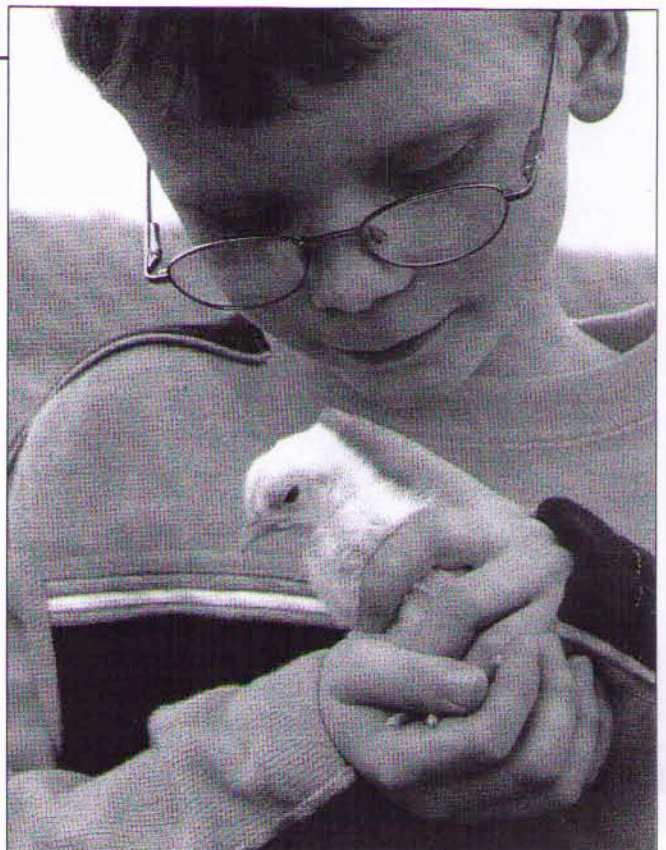
Students enjoy recreating their own Timeline of Life. Working together, they draw out the many details and connecting patterns on the timeline. In so doing, they make the information it presents their own.

better answer can be given to those seekers of knowledge? It becomes doubtful whether even the universe can suffice. How did it all come into being, and how will it end? A greater curiosity arises that can never be satiated; so it will last through a lifetime. The laws governing the universe can be made interesting and wonderful to the child, more interesting than the things themselves, and he begins to ask: What am I? What is the task of man in this wonderful universe? Do we merely live for ourselves, or is there something more for us to do? Why do we struggle and fight? What is good and what is evil? Where will it all end?"

THE THIRD GREAT LESSON

The Coming of Human Beings

THE COMING OF HUMAN BEINGS focuses on the unique adaptations of humans, those characteristics that set us apart from all other forms of life and have led humans throughout time to create communities and cultures. These are characteristics that humans everywhere and in all times seem to share: hands, which can do unique and amazing work; a mind that can imagine as well as reason; and a heart that can love not only members of our own families or even others of our own species, but also members of others species. The study of human history is undertaken through an exploration of how humans throughout time have met their fundamental needs for basics such as food, shelter and clothing as well as our uniquely human need for art, beauty and religion.



THE FOURTH GREAT LESSON

The Story of Communication in Signs

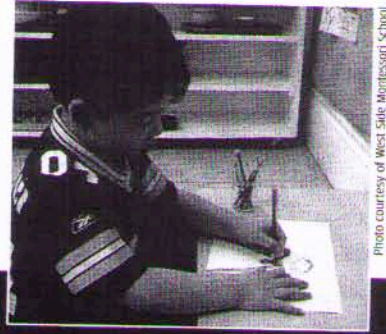


Photo courtesy of West Side Montessori School



Students enjoy recreating examples of cave art, the techniques of which they learn about through both *The Coming of Human Beings* and *The Story of Communication in Signs*.

TWO KEY TURNING POINTS IN HUMAN DEVELOPMENT are highlighted in the fourth and fifth lessons. *THE STORY OF COMMUNICATION IN SIGNS* presents the development of written language from the earliest pictograms to the Phonetian alphabet. The focus in this lesson is on the power of written communication, how the ability to communicate ideas in writing has transformed human society. This lesson always leads to exciting explorations of various systems of writing including Chinese and Japanese calligraphy, Egyptian hieroglyphics, and the evolution of modern alphabets as well as studies of significant technological developments such as the creation of paper and the invention of moveable type and the printing press. It also spurs the child to want to become a good writer and communicator.

THE FIFTH GREAT LESSON

The Story of Numbers

THE STORY OF NUMBERS details the invention of number systems and the power of our decimal system. Mayan and Roman numbers are explored, as well as count-

ing in different bases (the binary system, being the language of computers, is of particular interest) and the link between mathematics and science. Children develop an appreciation for their math studies when they begin to contemplate life without numbers. This story piques curiosity about why numbers were invented and what purposes they

serve and have served throughout human history. In this context, learning about how the Romans wrote their numbers is not just a historical oddity; it is an

expression of how one particular culture solved the problem of recording quantities, counting and figuring. (It is always an eye-opening experience to try to calculate sums or differences using an ancient number system. The elegance and utility

of the decimal system becomes readily apparent.)

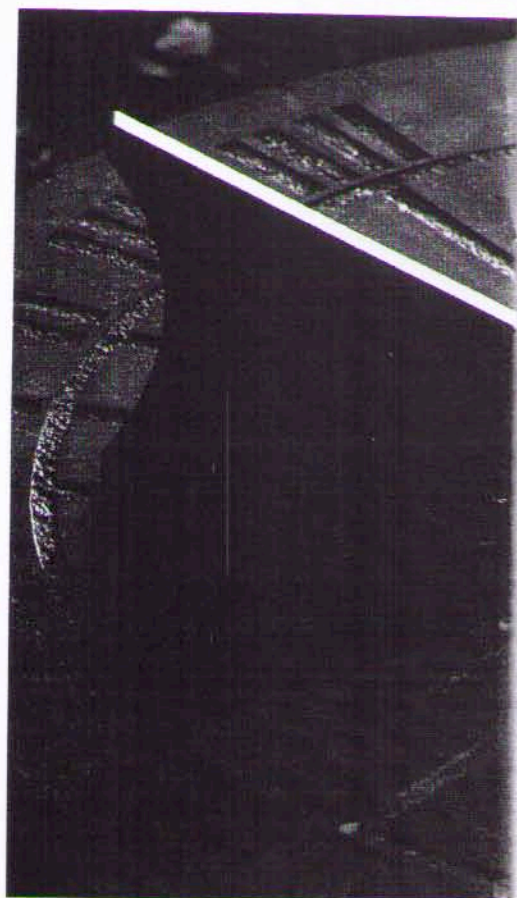
Again, from *To Educate the Human Potential*, the insight of Maria Montessori: "The child will have the greater pleasure in all subjects and find them easier to learn if he

be led to realize how these sub-

jects first came to be studied and who studied them. We write and read and the child can be taught who invented writing and the instruments whereby we write,



Through the gift of an uninterrupted work cycle, a basic component of every Montessori classroom, students develop intense concentration and focus.



how printing came and books became so numerous. Every achievement has come by the sacrifice of someone now dead. Every map speaks eloquently of the work of explorers and pioneers, who underwent hardships and trials to find new places, rivers and lakes, and to

THE LAST GREAT LESSON *The Story of the Country,* *also called the Nation of the Great River*

THE LAST LESSON IS THE STORY OF THE COUNTRY (ALSO CALLED THE NATION OF THE GREAT RIVER), an allegorical story focusing both on human anatomy, physiology and the evolution and integration of civilization. The fable tells the story of a great country that is at once strange and wonderful and is completely traversed by a great river. The river is a metaphor for the circulatory system of the human body. Eventually, the children are shown departments, which are the body systems. This country (the human body) has existed from the most ancient of time, and it hasn't changed. In the chart for the story, children see that the river branches into smaller and smaller streams and canals and manages to reach every part of the country to provide food for every single inhabitant and every part of the land, in order to maintain life. The river also carries away waste that must be disposed of, and it is the river that does so keeping the nation safe and healthy. In the same

way, the human circulatory system reaches every part of our body, bringing food and taking away waste. Inhabitants of this nation (our cells) work day and night without rest in an effort to help maintain order and harmony in the country.

While the metaphor of the Great River invites students to explore how the human body works, it also serves as an invitation to contemplate the impact the earliest civilizations had on one another and how they have slowly organized themselves toward unity. Maria Montessori observed that "just as, in the individual human being, organs are being built around separate centers of interest, to be later connected by the blood circulating systems and the nerves into an integrated human organism," so too "the child is led, by review of some of the most thrilling epochs of the world history, to see that so far humanity has been in an embryonic stage, and that it is now just emerging into true birth, able to consciously realize its true unity and function."

IN ALL THESE LESSONS,

the child's great powers of imagination are called upon. He or she can imagine life on earth in the time of the dinosaurs, how people in faraway places or faraway times have lived, how she or he might live in the future. Though people everywhere recognize the blossoming of imagination that occurs during the elementary years, Dr. Montessori recognized its importance as an aid for learning and self-development. In *To Educate the Human Potential*, she wrote: "The secret of good teaching is to regard the child's intelligence as a fertile field in which seeds may be sown, to grow under the heat of flaming imagination. Our aim therefore is not merely to make the child understand, and still less to force him to memorize, but so to touch his imagination as to enthuse

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him to his inmost core. We do not want complacent pupils, but eager ones; we seek to sow life in the child rather than theories, to help him in his growth, mental and emotional as well as physical."

This recognition led to the unique organization of the Montessori elementary program. The Great Lessons inspire children to find their own interests, and the organization of the Montessori classroom enables them to pursue those interests independently or in collaboration with other children. Great Lessons present key ideas through dynamic story telling which appeals to the imagination. Children are then invited to pursue their own interests, thus building an understanding not only of the content covered but also of their capacity to access and acquire knowledge. They build skills as investigators, scholars and researchers, as scientists conducting experiments and making observations, as collaborators teaming with others to achieve mutually agreed upon goals. Perhaps most importantly, their enthusiasm for learning and their belief in their ability to learn is nurtured and expanded.

In Montessori, this is how the curriculum is presented—as an integrated whole. We do not try to dictate the specific order and timing of what a child should know by when; rather, we present the whole and invite the child to explore the details for him or herself. In doing this, we not only give the child a powerful context for his growing knowledge and understanding of this world, but we also provide for the development of his self—his autonomy and sense of self-mastery. He is developing knowledge of the world at the same time that he is developing knowledge of himself and how he learns. He is continually assessing what he wants to know, comparing that with what

make the world greater and richer in our dwelling. Let us call the attention of the children to the hosts of men and women who are hidden from the light of fame, so kindling a love of humanity."





m: the folios

This is #4
in a series of topics
for Montessori parents

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The Great Lessons inspire children to find their own interests, and the organization of the Montessori classroom enables them to pursue those interests independently or in collaboration with other children.

process that, hopefully, will last a lifetime.

Not only does the elementary student develop as a learner, but also as a member of society. She comes to understand that her unique talent can serve to improve the world. Mental, emotional and moral growth and development are one in Montessori education. Through the context of the Great Lessons the child asks, where do my talents and the needs of the world intersect? What is my contribution to the improvement of society? The child becomes conscious of his responsibilities to his environment and for the whole universe, since all things in the universe are interrelated.

The Great Lessons fire a child's curiosity to learn more about his or her world and, as answers to questions are learned, the desire to learn more grows. As more is learned, an appreciation for learning is honed, becoming a natural part of the maturing student's life. This love of learning, this asking of questions and searching for answers, developed in the formative years, will become an important foundation as the child moves forward to face the challenges of each stage of life. 

CAMILLE SCENT received her B.A. in journalism from the University of Georgia and her M.A. in counseling from the University of Southern Maine. She has worked as a journalist and therapist, focusing on families and youth at risk, before training to teach Montessori at both the elementary and middle school levels. The Great Lessons are one of her favorite aspects of the Montessori elementary program.

he already knows and then finding out ways to learn more.

Deciding how to share what he is learning with others is the final step. Part of the genius of a Montessori elementary classroom is that while the content of the curriculum is extraordinarily rich, the organization and environment of the classroom support the development of the child's unique personality.

Children and adults utilize the framework of the Great Lessons differently. For many adults, including many Montessorians in training, the Great Lessons allow us to finally put into context the bits and pieces of information—science facts, history dates, cultural details—that we have been collecting over the years. It is as if we are at long last given a frame within which to fit our accumulation of puzzle pieces and, once placed inside, they suddenly form a coherent picture. The adult uses the pieces to construct the whole.

In contrast, the Montessori student is given the frame first and then invited to construct her own puzzle pieces, making a meaningful and changing picture as she goes. The framework, which the Great Lessons provide, creates the overarching context that continues throughout the six-year elementary cycle and endures well beyond it. Creating and integrating those puzzle pieces is a