

**Aline Wolf's**  
**AMS Living Legacy Talk**  
**Houston TX**  
**March 30, 2006**

Before you get too excited about all the books I have written, remember that I published my own books, so I never got any rejection slips.

I feel very honored tonight to speak to you as the Living Legacy of the American Montessori Society. It is exciting for me to be included with the pillars of AMS who have preceded me and whose work over the years has led ultimately to this wonderful Montessori conference with over 2000 people. And I am very pleased to be a part of raising the funds needed for scholarships for future Montessori teachers.

I want to thank all who made this honor possible, especially my committee, Dottie Feldman, the AMS staff, the editors of *Montessori Life* and all my family, colleagues and friends who contributed to the Living Legacy scholarship program in my name. And most of all I want to thank my husband, Jerry, for his loving support for all the work I have done. For 55 years he has been my sharpest critic and my best friend.

When I was preparing this talk, I kept looking back 47 years to when I first heard of Montessori, and I realized not only how much the world had changed since then, but how the direction of my whole life had changed when I encountered the work of this remarkable Italian woman. It is difficult to explain how it grabbed me. In her writing I could sense fundamental truths about children, about education, and ultimately about world peace that I felt could lead us toward wiser parenting, more comfortable and challenging schools and non-violent co-existence on our planet. Her theories and materials impressed me so deeply that I wanted them, not only for our own children and for the schools they would attend, I wanted to do everything I could to share the wisdom of Montessori with as many people as possible.

When I first heard of Montessori in 1959 I was a stay-at-home mom, pregnant with our seventh child. Tucked away in a rarely opened drawer were my college diploma and a certificate to teach high school English. My only claim to professional recognition was that I once had a short story published. But I was very concerned about our own

children's education. I knew there must be a better way for children to learn than using workbooks and basal readers, but I had no idea what it was.

And then a priest friend, Father Geno Baroni, sent me a newspaper clipping about the Montessori Method. Attached was a note saying, "This might be what you are looking for."

Even that limited description of the Method in an newspaper article excited me, and I began to search for more information. I don't think any of you who came to Montessori after 1970 can imagine the lack of information about her work that we faced in mid-twentieth century. I had a minor in education in college and had never heard of Montessori in my classes. I searched libraries, bookstores and educational journals in vain. The only book about Montessori that I unearthed in that original search in 1959 was one in the Penn State University Library that had not been taken out since 1927.

Then Nancy Rambusch began writing about Montessori in a small family magazine called *Jubilee*. My husband, Jerry and I grew more interested with each article that we read. Other popular magazines like *Glamour* and *Look* and *Time Magazine* eventually wrote about Nancy and the Whitby School she had started in Greenwich, Connecticut. So, you see this unique method did not come to America through the elite educational journals. It came in family magazines to parents who wanted better education for their children.

I was impatient; I wanted to start a Montessori school while some of our children were still in the sensitive period of 3 to 6 years. So I wrote to Nancy Rambusch; but she didn't respond. Next I tried calling her, but I couldn't get beyond her secretary. Then in the summer of 1960 when our family was vacationing in southern New Jersey, I said to Jerry, "Let's just drive up to Connecticut and knock on Nancy's door." He agreed. I called my sister who lived in northern New Jersey and asked her if we could drop off our seven children on the way to Greenwich. She said, "yes," and we set off, not even knowing if Nancy was in Greenwich that day.

But she was! And she received us graciously. We told her we wanted to open a Montessori school and to our great surprise she offered to help us. Actually she was eager, herself, to get more Montessori schools started, and I think she admired our pluck in approaching her as we did.

Nancy Rambusch agreed to come to our hometown, Altoona, to explain the method to potential parents. In January 1961, on the night of a terrible blizzard, she

arrived by train and about 30 parents braved the storm to hear her lecture that she illustrated with movies of a Montessori school in England.

I am sure many of you remember Nancy and how convincing she was as a speaker. At the end of the evening the parents of twenty-five 3-5 year olds said they would send their children if we could open in September 1961. I was expecting another baby in July, but we decided to go ahead. Nancy found a Montessori teacher from Sweden for us. Betty Stevenson found us an elementary teacher in England who was not Montessori trained, but, Betty said, she had a Montessori head on her. Mother Isabel Eugenie, an English nun who taught religion at Whitby, ordered our equipment from Nienhuis. It arrived the same day as our eighth child. We opened in September 1961 with a 3-6 class in our living room – 15 in the morning and 15 in the afternoon – and ten 6-9 year-olds in our sunroom. Five of our six school-age children were in the school that year, all except George who was too old for the classes.

In the frenzy of the first day, I realized after our lunch break that one of our all-day students had disappeared. It was our own 6-year-old son, Patrick. I was in a panic but trying to look calm and professional as I was greeting the parents of the afternoon class, afraid that someone would tell them we had lost a student after being open only half a day. Finally I found him behind the bushes at the far end of our garden. “Pat, it’s time for your class,” I said. “Oh, I quit school,” he replied. But Pat never really quit school. In fact, he is still in school as a professor at Duke University.

Unlike Pat who wanted to quit, our 18-month-old son, Chris, did everything he could think of, to get into the 3-6 classroom. He was too young to attend but every time a child opened the door to go out to the bathroom, Chris would run into the classroom to join the other children. One morning I found him in our back hall closet where he had discovered the lunch boxes of the all-day students and was taking bites out of their sandwiches.

You are probably wondering about our new baby. My mother-in-law made dire predictions that the baby would catch all kinds of germs from so many children in the house. But this didn’t happen. Dorie was a healthy baby. I brought her into the classrooms frequently and the students watched her develop – to hold her head up, to sit up, to clap hands and to wave bye-bye during that memorable first year.

That was the only year we had the school in our home. In June the parents joined us to form a non-profit corporation. We bought an old church for \$10,000 and the

parents spent the summer transforming it into a bright and cheerful Montessori school that eventually became Penn-Mont Academy, now in its 45<sup>th</sup> year. It is under the direction of Michelle Hartye who has been our excellent head-of-school for the past 20 years. Michelle and three of our teachers are here tonight.

I don't mean to imply that we were free of problems. We had many through the years, particularly with a frequent turnover of teachers in the early years. In our first 10 years we had teachers from every continent except Australia. Although it was difficult to find these teachers and to get them through immigration, they added a multi-cultural dimension to our classrooms, where we had food, games and celebrations from Sweden, Sri Lanka, South Africa, Trinidad, Ireland and England.

Another difficulty was the lack of Montessori information for parents. In those early years there was a great deal of confusion about the name Montessori. For example, In 1964 I was invited to speak at a Family Life Conference in Albany NY. These were the years before "the pill," when birth control was a big issue. When I arrived, the woman who had invited me to speak introduced me to the man who was going to chair my session. "This is Mrs. Wolf," she said, "She has nine children and she's going to speak on the Montessori Method." He looked aghast and said, "Wait a minute. She has nine children and she is going to talk about what method?"

Because it was impossible to describe the classroom to anyone on the telephone, I wanted a packet of information that we could mail to prospective parents. So in 1968 I decided to write a series of pamphlets illustrated with photographs of children using the materials. I thought I would have a few hundred printed. But the printer told me it was not worth his while to print anything under 3000. I couldn't imagine what I would do with 3000. But word of the pamphlets spread to other Montessori schools that had the same problem. The 3000 sold in just a few months. These pamphlets became *A Parents' Guide to the Montessori Classroom* and with various updates is still selling today almost 40 years later.

But the essence of Montessori is so much more than descriptions of the materials. As I read more of her books that gradually became available I sensed that she gave voice to many of my own common sense convictions that did not fit with American ways of parenting and teaching. For example each time I had given birth the nurse in the hospital whisked the baby away to a nursery down the hall so I could get some rest. But I didn't want rest at that point; I only wanted the baby close to me. So

when I read in the *Absorbent Mind*, “For the first few days the baby must remain as close as possible to the mother,” I wanted to shout for joy. Here was a woman, an educator who got it right, who advocated customs that were consistent with our human nature. She allowed children to learn while moving about and speaking freely in their most natural and comfortable way. She respected their concentration no matter what they were concentrating on, and she recognized the value of allowing them to learn with their hands and to work side by side with an adult. I wanted so much to share these insights, but modern American parents were not attracted to the old Montessori books that were poorly translated from Italian, contained many repetitions and were illustrated with photos from about 1910.

And so I prepared another book, *Look at the Child*, that combined modern photos of children with my favorite Montessori quotations, those gems of wisdom that I culled from her writings. This is still my personal favorite of all my books.

Jerry and I both received our Montessori diploma from St. Nicholas Training Center in 1965. Although I often wished that I could serve as a Montessori teacher, this was not possible for me. With nine children, there was no way I could teach full time. And although many people assume that I spent years in the classroom, the truth is I spent only a few days as a substitute, when no one else was available.

It became clear to me that I could best serve the Montessori Movement by staying at home and writing about all her remarkable insights. I started Parent Child Press in our home in 1975, but unlike our school that moved out after one year, Parent Child Press never moved out. It is still in our home. Through the years I had wonderful helpers, especially Peggy Curran, who is here tonight and whom many of you know. Another woman who packed orders for us, used to do my ironing when business was slow. So there is more than one meaning for the work at Parent Child Press.

I involved our children in my work whenever possible. For years our son, Greg, collated the 14 leaflets of the original *Parents' Guide* and placed them in the pocket of each folder. When I wrote *Tutoring is Caring* our daughter, Mary, who tutored reading when she was in high school, hand lettered all the color-coded word lists in the book. When our son Charlie, who has a great sense of humor, was about 16 years old he manned an exhibit table for me at an AMS Conference. Business must have been slow because he had a great time drawing cartoons of all the Montessori ladies in various shapes and sizes carrying their shopping bags. He made a cartoon of the man at the

Nienhuis exhibit saying, "This year our Pink Tower comes pre-assembled." And on the exhibit table next to my book *Look at the Child*, he put a cartoon advertising Aline Wolf's summary of Montessori insights on diaper changing, entitled "Smell the Child." The art series of *Child-Size Masterpieces* was also a family project. It was inspired by Jerry's beautiful collection of art postcards. To interest children in fine art, I used art postcards with the Montessori techniques of matching, pairing, sorting, three-part cards and time lines. While I was developing this project our family had to eat in the kitchen, because we had rows of art postcards on the dining room table for about two years. Our daughter-in-law, Janine Wolf, who illustrated *Mommy It's a Renoir*, has taken over as editor of this art project, and has just completed our latest volume of art postcards entitled *Modern Schools of Art*.

A special joy for me tonight is that my husband Jerry, our four daughters, and our daughter-in-law are all here with me. Jerry is a retired furniture executive. His greatest interests are art and education.

Our daughter, Catherine Maresca, lives in Washington DC, but travels throughout the country to train Catechists for Sofia Cavelitti's program – Catechesis of the Good Shepherd.

Our daughter, Mary Martone, heads a large Wrap-Around program for troubled children in the Los Angeles area.

Our daughter, Dorie, works with babies and toddlers at-risk in the Boston area and our daughter-in-law, Janine, teaches art at the Montessori School of Durham.

These three daughters, when they were college age, each worked as an assistant in a Montessori classroom and now they all work with children. Our fourth daughter, Gina Grace, after helping me to introduce Montessori in Western Samoa, received her Montessori diploma from Louise Bogart's training program at Chaminade in Hawaii. She is now teaching autistic children in Carmel, CA.

I published *Our Peaceful Classroom*, the book that is illustrated by Montessori students, in 1994, just in time for the AMS National Seminar in Boston. I took 100 copies to our exhibit, never expecting to sell them all. But they were all sold by the second day.

The next week we had an exhibit at the national conference of NAEYC (National Association for the Education of Young Children). The response of the teachers there was just the opposite. They would look at the title *Our Peaceful Classroom* and ask if it

was a joke. “There’s no such thing,” they told me. “It’s impossible.” We sold only a few copies and I was amazed at the huge difference in expectations of Montessori and non-Montessori teachers.

For years as I read and re-read Montessori’s books, I became gradually aware that her tremendous emphasis on the spiritual development of children was not fully implemented in many Montessori schools. This was due to a wide variety of circumstances, among them the lack of time in teacher training programs to explore this aspect of child development, as well as time to help trainees to become aware of their own spiritual journeys. “The best preparation for teaching,” Montessori wrote, “is a study of one’s self.” To call attention to what I believed was the most important thrust of all Montessori’s work, I wrote *Nurturing the Spirit in Non-Sectarian Classrooms*. It took me five years to do this, and it is probably my most pivotal and influential book.

Two years ago I retired as head of Parent Child Press and our daughter, Catherine Maresca, took over as president and editor. Catherine is no stranger to Montessori. She started a Montessori school in her living room in Washington, DC exactly twenty years after Jerry and I opened the school in our living room in Altoona.

Maria Montessori’s claim that “Education begins at birth” points to the family as the all-important early environment for the child. For many years I had wanted to highlight her parental wisdom in a short, readable format for modern parents. With Catherine’s encouragement I wrote *Montessori Insights for Parents of Young Children*, which was published just a year ago as a companion to *A Parent’s Guide to the Montessori Classroom*.

I thought this would be my last book but people keep asking me, “What are you going to write next?” I have no specific plans for another book, but there is a big question that keeps haunting me as we prepare to celebrate the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Montessori education. The basic question is this: “Are we, as a society, doing enough to promote peace in the world?”

When I was writing *Peaceful Children, Peaceful World* I quoted liberally from Montessori’s book, *Education and Peace* which is a compilation of her lectures as a peace activist in many European cities after the first World War. There wasn’t a doubt in my mind that the teaching of peace was one of her major objectives. I was absolutely astounded at how in the 1930’s, ten years before the atomic bomb was detonated, and at a time when passenger planes were in their infancy with inadequate radio

communication and no radar, she predicted the space age and the global catastrophes that could result from what she called the third dimension in transportation. She wrote, "If this new energy from the dimension of space is used blindly by two dimensional people for the purpose of destroying one another, they will be successful in doing so, because the unlimited lethal power now at our disposal is accessible to all." And "If man – who possesses the secret of pestilential sickness – uses that which was a sublime conquest over disease in order to spread the scourge of epidemics and poison the world, he will easily succeed in his endeavor." In view of the terrorist activity and nuclear build-up we have witnessed recently, her words seem prophetic and her writings about biological warfare seem particularly eerie and foreboding today.

In nearly every lecture Montessori lamented the fact that there was no such thing as a science of peace, since the science of war was so highly developed. "War between countries," she said, "no longer makes sense. The true defense of mankind cannot be based on arms. Peace and prosperity can never be assured until we trust in the great armament for peace that education represents."

The cooperation among nations necessary for this can be brought about only by a higher level of human understanding, free from self-serving greed. Such psychologically superior adults, she says, can emerge only from children whose natural gifts were nourished in a new type of education. For this unique vision, Maria Montessori was twice nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize.

What more can we do as educators, particularly at the elementary level, to give peace the priority that Montessori envisioned? What must we teach the children now that will best serve their future in this rapidly changing world? How can we plant the seeds of leadership that will enable our present students to work toward Montessori's goal of a better and more peaceful world? Should we implement more demanding foreign language programs? Some Montessori 3-6 classes now have total immersion in Spanish. A charter school that I know of teaches both Spanish and Chinese daily. Should we prepare our students for the real world by teaching them to think logically, and to analyze what they hear from our leaders? Should we teach them to resist the subtle lies of advertising that dominate our materialistic culture? Should care of the earth be a major subject with students actively protesting destruction of our environment? Should we encourage much more interaction with other cultures so that our students grow up respecting and delighting in differences? And then, of course,

there is the very practical question – How can we make room for any or all of such programs in our schedules that are already full?

I don't know the answers to all these questions but I would like to hear them discussed at our conferences and workshops.

In the fall issue of *Montessori Life*, John Chattin McNichols gave a beautiful tribute to Joy Turner, who had passed away last July. He said that in a series of Teacher Education Committee Meetings that took place years ago, Peggy Loeffler and Joy Turner decided the elementary model in use in the United States was an almost completely unexamined copy of the old European model. No one but Joy had the nerve to ask the obvious question, "Are there any parts of this curriculum or instructional methods which should be modified for contemporary American children?" An Elementary Study Group was then formed to give the best thinking to this very real question. I think it would be a tribute to Joy if we asked this question again in a world that has changed dramatically from the time that she posed it originally.

And I think Montessori would agree. "An education capable of saving humanity," she wrote, "involves the preparation of young people to understand the times in which they live."

AMS has had some outstanding leaders in the peace movement, among them the late Ursula Thrush and the late Marge Farmer. Their work is being continued today by Betsy Coe, Pat Yonka, Joanne Alex and others, especially by Sonnie McFarland and Andrew Kutt, who have each written a special book on teaching peace to children. Sonnie's is called *Honoring the Light of the Child* and it is geared to guiding 3 to 6 year-olds. Andrew Kutt's book is called *Living in Harmony, Peace Education for Children*. It is particularly appropriate for elementary classes. And Alicia Jewell has written a new book for young children called *The Peace Rose*. So some excellent resources are now available. And there are some wonderful sessions on Peace at this conference.

But in addition to our work in the classrooms, I feel we must be advocates for peace both in our local communities and nationally. The idea of having a Department of Peace as a counterpart of the War Department in the President's cabinet goes back to the time of George Washington. It has been proposed many times in our history but has never been funded by congress. About 30 years ago there was a big movement to build a Peace Academy comparable to West Point and Annapolis. This would be an

institution to teach diplomacy and peacemaking skills that Montessori called a science of peace. But it too foundered on the desk of Ronald Reagan.

Now Dennis Kucinich, a congressman from Ohio, has introduced a bill to try again to establish a Department of Peace. We as Montessorians can lend our weight to support this. It is worth a letter to your Congressman. The number of this bill is HR 3760. Its purpose is to establish a Department of Peace and non-violence and it has 63 co-sponsors. It is now in the House Sub Committee on Educational Reform of which Michael Castle, Rep. Of Delaware is chairman.

Unfortunately today the subject of peace has become highly politicized, and consequently it is not always easy to teach peace in our classrooms. I heard of one school where after a peace lesson, parents who supported our invasion of Iraq asked for equal time to make a case for the war. Other parents who believe strongly that this war is justified, have threatened to withdraw their children, thus endangering our fragile budgets. So we have some obstacles to overcome. But any worthwhile effort requires courage and determination.

Being a Montessori teacher is not just a job; it is a vocation to help bring about a better world. Lasting value of your life is possible when you put aside self-interest and you are determined to address a serious problem or to serve humanity, despite the difficulties it will entail. When you do this you are answering a call to do work that truly matters. "If peace were to become a special discipline," Montessori wrote, "it would be the most noble one of all."

Tonight, as your Living legacy I challenge you to put this noble discipline in its rightful place. Read a few paragraphs every day from Montessori's book *Education and Peace* so that you will never lose sight of your vocation to work for peace and to nourish children who can help to bring about a more peaceful world.

Thank you.