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In 1938 Virginia Woolf invited readers of *Three Guineas* to stand with her on the bridge “between the old world and the new” and watch the procession of men that moved from private home to public world each morning and back again each night. On those final days before the outbreak of World War II she said to women: “We have to ask ourselves here and now, do we wish to join the procession or don’t we? On whose terms shall we join the procession? Above all, where is it leading us, the procession of educated men?”

Woolf was addressing her question to women who had a choice, not to those like my mother who were forced by economic necessity to cross the bridge connecting “the private house with the world of public life.” In 1938 girls in Britain and the United States whose parents could not support them had long since gone out to work in factories, shops, offices, and schools. And while most, once married, managed to stay home each day to take care of house, husband, and children, many women could not afford this luxury. Because Woolf distrusted the civilization they would be entering, she asked on what terms the women who did not have to work outside the home should join the procession. Look at the men, she said. They have lost sight, speech, sense of proportion, humanity. The question for her was, How can women cross the bridge with the men and yet remain “civilized human beings”?

Today the view from the bridge has changed. Since 1960 millions of women have entered the procession and, right now, two out of every three new members of it are female. The great majority of these cannot afford to stay in their private houses full time, and of the ones who can, many ask
why they, rather than their menfolk, should be expected to tend the needs of house and children.

It is time to take another look. Come stand with me on the bridge and watch the procession go by. See, women are no longer just traipsing along behind as Woolf said they were in the 1930s. They have entered the procession en masse. Some are even marching at the head looking as solemn as the men and almost as confident. But what is wrong with that woman at the very front? She looks distraught. Her child is sick and she is wondering how to sandwich a trip to the doctor between clients. What about that young couple close to tears? They are so dismayed by the unrelieved grimness of their preschooler’s daycare center that they do not want to leave her there another moment, but they have not been able to find a better facility they can afford. And why are those women carrying infants on their backs and dragging toddlers beside them? Welfare workers have directed them to find jobs, but there is no place to put their youngsters.

Woolf worried that the possessiveness, jealousy, pugnacity, and greed she discerned on the other side of the bridge would contaminate women as they entered men’s civilization. “Shall we not be just as possessive, just as jealous, just as pugnacious, just as positive as to the verdict of God, Nature, Law and Property as these gentlemen are now?” she mused. She did not ask how children would be affected by mothers’ entry into the public world of work.

The Boston Globe, March 19, 1989:

Dear Beth:

I have three kids, no husband, a busy job, and never enough time for anything! My kids do a lot of work, and I tell them how important they are to our family. However, the younger ones complain that I snap at everybody and never have fun with them alone anymore. How can I? I’m stretched to the limit keeping them fed, housed, and clean. Any ideas?

Stress City

Dear Beth:

My mom works, and she’s always too busy for me. I know she’s tired, but even after she rests, she never listens to me. It’s like she doesn’t care about me anymore. I want to live with my dad, but he can’t take me. How do you find a foster home?

Sad and Lonely

Woolf may have thought that women of the future, like middle-class women in pre–World War II Britain, would have the choice of practicing the “unpaid-for professions” of wife and mother or entering paid ones like law, medicine, banking. She may not have expected women to be working both inside and outside the home, as 65 percent or more do today. If she did foresee this eventuality, she may have assumed that surrogate mothers in the form of nannies would continue to be as plentiful as they were in 1938. No one in Woolf’s day could have known that the number of latchkey children would grow so dramatically. “I have been staying home by myself until my mom gets home since I was in kindergarten,” twelve-year-old John David Gutierrez told the Time correspondent Melissa Ludtke in 1988. “I’m not really scared, because we have friends around here if anything happens.” No one could have foreseen that little ones would increasingly have to sacrifice their childhood to become parents of their younger brothers and sisters. No one would have dreamed that a new category, the daycare child, would be created or that in the daytime homes would be empty nests.

Today women from all walks of life march across the bridge, and while the wealthy can afford the kind of private child care nannies used to provide, millions cannot even manage to pay the rates charged for daycare outside the home. To make matters worse, all too few of these facilities are places where young children can thrive. As for older children, after-school care is as dear a commodity as the proverbial honest man.

At century’s end, society is more likely to ask how well or how badly women fare economically in comparison to men
once the bridge is crossed than about their contamination by men's culture. We are also apt to hold women responsible for the plight of our nation's children. Society's analysts intimate that mothers should not be leaving the house each morning. Oblivious to the demands of necessity, they do not seem to realize that in an age when many homes are headed by only one parent, a mother, and most families need two salaries just to maintain a home, the question of whether women should join the procession is beside the point. These social critics make mothers feel guilty for doing what fathers have done since at least the nineteenth century. Blind to historical fact, they forget that it is not women's exodus from the private home each day that creates a vacuum in our children's lives. It is the exodus of both sexes. Had men not left the house when the Industrial Revolution removed work from the home—or had fathers not continued to leave the house each morning after their children were born—women's departure would not have the ramifications for children it does.

The question for us as we watch the procession of people move each morning from private house to public world is not, Who can we blame? We have to ask ourselves here and now, What are we as a nation, a culture, a society going to do about the children who are being left behind?

“School and Home

It is radical conditions which have changed, and only an equally radical change in education suffices.

John Dewey, The School and Society, 1899

“I wasn't trained for this. I was trained to teach, not to deal with kids like this," said Chris Zajac, the teacher of the fifth-grade classroom in Holyoke, Massachusetts, that Tracy Kidder wrote about in Among Schoolchildren. Kids like what! Because neither Juanita's mother nor her father's new wife wanted her, she was living with an aunt and cousins and was spending every night in the bathroom crying. Pedro, whose four stepmothers had presented him with six brothers, lived with his grandmother and a transvestite uncle. A school counselor, sent to Blanca's house after the police called to say that the girl had not come home the night before, found two men there, neither of whom was related to the child. In class, Robert wrote letters to his absent father asking him where he lived, if he loved him, and when he, Robert, could see him. Glassy-eyed Jimmy seemed accustomed to staying up past midnight watching television. And Claude's mother, worried about her son, said to Chris: “I don't know what to do anymore. We do care . . . but I cannot quit my job.”

"I put so much energy and so much emotion into those kids. Sometimes I think my job is being a professional mother," the high school English teacher Jessica Siegel told Samuel Freedman, the author of Small Victories, a first-hand report on the "real world" of New York City's Seward Park High School. Whose kids? Sammy Ryan lived at home only part time, and then simply to sleep. As a child he had spent several years with his grandfather, now dead, and also with a
foster mother. Mary Tam lived in a group home where she had been placed by a social worker who thought it best to put some distance between her and her now divorced but still abusive foster parents. Lun Cheung, whose family had immigrated from Hong Kong, lived with three older brothers who bullied him into doing most of the housework while their mother sewed in a garment factory and their father spent months at a time in a psychiatric hospital.

It is a fact too seldom remembered that school and home are partners in the education of a nation’s young. Like the housewife’s labors that are at once counted on by her husband and discounted by him and his culture, home’s continuing contributions to a child’s development are both relied on by school and society and refused public recognition. This time-honored arrangement does not give credit where it is due, yet in periods of stability it has worked. Not perfectly, perhaps, but well enough because the hidden partner knows its role and is willing and able to carry it out.

The last decades of the twentieth century have been anything but a stable time, however, for “the” American home. As late as 1960 the norm of the two-parent household in which father goes out to work and mother stays home with the children accurately represented 70 percent of American families. But by 1986 only 7 percent of our families consisted of a male breadwinner, a female housewife, and dependent children. This shift in so short a period is itself remarkable, but the diversity exhibited by the remaining 90 percent of American families is positively astonishing. There are the two-parent families in which both adults go out to work and also the single-parent ones, 90 percent of them headed by women, that in 1986 were inhabited by one in four children. The picture in the two-parent families is complicated by the existence of blended families made up of stepparents and stepchildren—one in ten children today lives with a natural parent and a stepparent—of families with adopted children, of families with unmarried parents including same-sex couples. The single-parent families, in turn, differ from one another accord-
mention the exodus of people from the house each morning. Focusing on the uprooting of work, he did not seem to notice that when occupations left home, men and women followed suit. Had he been drawn to the plight of the very poor, as Maria Montessori was just a few years later, he might not have ignored this change in the household. As it was, he must have been assuming that mothers were staying home with their children and that the flight of fathers from the nest was therefore of little consequence.

With home and family having undergone radical transformation, it is downright foolhardy to overlook home's part in the educational enterprise. Now that both fathers and mothers are leaving home to go to work we have to ask anew, What radical change in school suffices?

Come stand with me on the bridge again. Do you see that piece of land jutting out into the river from the world of the private home? The men and women scurrying about over there are builders and architects, and the people they are consulting from time to time are teachers. Why are there so many children in the vicinity? A new kind of school is going to be constructed on this site, and youngsters of all ages, many of them dragging a parent along, have come here to make sure that their needs are met. Whose idea is this school and what is its name? I call it the Schoolhome and the idea is mine. I hope that by the time I have finished describing and presenting scenes from this new American institution you will agree with me that it is the kind of school our nation now needs. Let me begin by explaining how I arrived at my idea.

I

We Italians have elevated our word “casa” to the almost sacred significance of the English word “home.”

Maria Montessori, *The Montessori Method*, 1912

When she spoke in 1907 at the opening of her second school in Rome, Maria Montessori also had home on her mind. She directed her audience's attention to the plight of the inhabitants of the district around the school. In the Quarter of San Lorenzo the underpaid and the unemployed mingled with recently released prisoners. The district had become the poor region of the city when a building boom followed by an economic panic left standing unfinished, unsafe, unsanitary apartment houses. Into these moved people, many of them families with children, who could afford nothing better; indeed, could afford not a whole apartment but merely a room or a corner therein. With twenty to thirty individuals huddled together in a space originally intended for three or four, disease and crime flourished. According to Montessori, the crowding was so bad and life in the apartments so miserable that it would have been more hygienic for people to take refuge in the streets had these not been scenes of brutality and bloodshed.

At the time of Montessori's address the Roman Association of Good Building, incorporated to acquire, remodel, and administer the “tenements,” had bought fifty-eight houses, three of which had so far been transformed. Upon completion of these projects, however, the authorities found themselves facing an unexpected problem: the children under school age living in the new housing were running wild while their parents were at work. In Montessori's words, they were becoming "ignorant little vandals, defacing the walls and stairs." Deciding to establish a school in each building, the Association turned for help to Montessori, then a university lecturer on education as well as a physician and psychologist. Convinced that these children were neither being cared for properly nor learning what they should at home, she designed the Casa dei Bambini.

Reading *The Montessori Method* eighty years after Montessori delivered her Inaugural Lecture, I found myself wondering why “Casa dei Bambini” had been translated into English as “The Children's House” or “The House of Childhood.” The more Montessori described her idea of school—the more she talked about the teacher's relationship to the children and the children's relationship to one another and also to their school
environment—the more it sounded to me like a home, not just a house. Montessori’s speech confirmed my hypothesis. On that opening day Montessori said, “We Italians have elevated our word ‘casa’ to the almost sacred significance of the English word ‘home,’ the enclosed temple of domestic affection, accessible only to dear ones.” If any further confirmation was needed, it presented itself when I spied a book by Dorothy Canfield Fisher on the Montessori shelf in one of Harvard University’s libraries. Fisher was one of many pilgrims who traveled to Italy to see Montessori’s schools for themselves. In A Montessori Mother, published in 1912, she wrote: “The phrase Casa dei Bambini is being translated everywhere nowadays by English-speaking people as ‘The House of Childhood,’ whereas its real meaning, both linguistic and spiritual, is, ‘The Children’s Home.’” She added, “I feel like insisting upon this rendering, which gives us so much more idea of the character of the institution.”

With my translation of “casa” verified, the question I still had to answer was whether the mistaken rendering of Casa dei Bambini really mattered. I soon discovered that the accounts Montessori gave of her schools and the published reports of visitors to Rome make sense only when “casa” is read as “home.” But that is the least of it. The misreading of “casa” has effectively cut off generations of Americans from a new and intriguing vision of what school can and should be.

Read “casa” as “house” and your attention is drawn to the child-size furniture in the schools Montessori established, the exercises in dressing and washing, the self-education. Read “casa” as “home” and you perceive a moral and social dimension that transforms your understanding of Montessori’s idea of school. Once I realized that she thought of school on the model of home, the elements of her system took on a different configuration. Where I had seen small individuals busily manipulating materials designed especially for learning, there now emerged a domestic scene with its own special form of social life and education.

Subtract home from Montessori’s idea of school and we have what sounds like a recipe for the open classrooms and integrated days that visitors to Britain’s infant schools observed a generation ago. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, journalists and educators from around the world traveled to England to see an experiment in education, just as in the early part of this century they had gone to Italy. In both instances, captivated by what they beheld, they returned to their own countries intent on introducing to their compatriots the new ideas. Perhaps few open education enthusiasts were aware of the similarities between the schools they inspected and Montessori’s Casa dei Bambini.

Montessori’s emphasis on children learning as opposed to teachers teaching, on the child’s manipulation of concrete materials, on freedom and the absence of compulsion in the schoolroom were characteristic elements of open classrooms. Advocates of open education would doubtless have considered the “didactic” apparatus Montessori developed for learning too confining and would surely have thought that her conceptualization of the child’s activities in school as “exercises” reflected an unfortunate rigidity. She, in turn, would probably have frowned upon the use of a given object in the children’s environment for multiple educational purposes and would certainly have disapproved of what would have seemed to her the haphazard way in which concepts were learned and skills acquired in open classrooms. Still, the infant school teacher, like the Montessori “directress,” was not supposed to take center stage. Nor was that teacher supposed to tell children the answer as opposed to helping them figure things out. Moreover, the distinction between work and play was as blurred in open classrooms as in the Casa dei Bambini and their location in time and place was as fluid.

The open education movement did not share Montessori’s conception of school, however. Rejecting the features of traditional schools that had led critics to characterize them as prisons, open classroom advocates were determined to remove the barriers between school and world. Allowing children to cross the threshold into the out-of-doors, bringing materials
from the "outside" world into the classroom, inviting members of the community into school to demonstrate their skills, they saw school more as a replica in miniature of the world than as a home. Indeed, the very presence in many open classrooms of a "family corner" where the children could lounge on rugs and slouch in easy chairs indicated that whatever the rest of school was seen as, it was not seen as home. Serving as a haven for those who wanted to withdraw temporarily from the hurly-burly of classroom life, a role analogous to the one so often attributed to home itself in society at large, this specially named area paradoxically reinforced a conception of school quite different from Montessori's own.

A homelike area does not transform a school or even a classroom into a home. And it was not the furniture that made the Casa dei Bambini a child's surrogate home. One dwells in a house. One feels safe, secure, loved, at ease—that is, "at home"—in a home, at least in the kind envisioned by Montessori.

Montessori was well aware that not all homes are safe and loving. Thus she did not dream of modeling her school on just any home. Maintaining that the Casa dei Bambini "is not simply a place where the children are kept, not just an asylum, but a true school for their education," she indicated that even in its homeliness it was to be educative. Feeling certain that the "ignorant little vandals" were receiving neither the care nor the education they should at home, Montessori designed the school she had been asked to establish in the renovated tenement for the building's children as the kind of home to which the resident poor should aspire. Making it their school by giving them collective ownership, she modeled it on a version of home with which many of them were not even acquainted.

Montessori's description of what the literal home might one day become captures the spirit of that metaphorical home named school: "It may be said to embrace its inmates with the tender, consoling arms of a woman. It is the giver of moral life, of blessings, it cares for, it educates and feeds the little ones." Her idealized version of home is echoed by the image of a womb she invoked in the talks on education and peace she delivered in Europe in the 1930s.

Calling "the child" a "spiritual embryo," Montessori told European audiences that its promise will be fulfilled only if it is allowed to develop normally. Since its psychic life begins at birth, she said, the problem of peace becomes one of educating young children. Just as the physical embryo derives its nutrients from the womb, the spiritual embryo absorbs them from its surroundings. Put children in the wrong environment and their development will be abnormal and they will become the "deviated" adults we now know. Create the right environment for them and their characters will develop normally. The "second womb" is the way she pictured the young child's proper environment.

Montessori did not refer directly to the Casa dei Bambini in her lectures on peace, but, like a womb, it would provide a safe and secure, supportive and nurturant environment for children. Over and beyond this, the children in the Casa dei Bambini would have a double sense of belonging: they would feel that they belonged to this home and also that it belonged to them.

Commenting in The Montessori Method on the fact that the children worked so incessantly one might think they were repressed were it not "for their lack of timidity, for their bright eyes, for their happy, free, aspect, for the cordiality of their invitations to look at their work, for the way they take visitors about and explain matters to them," Montessori concluded: "These things make us feel that we are in the presence of the masters of the house." After insisting on the importance of the "real" translation of Casa dei Bambini, Fisher said of the Montessori school:

It is, for instance, their very own home not only in the sense that it is a place arranged specially for their comfort and convenience, but furthermore a place for which they feel that steady sense of responsibility which is one of the greatest moral advantages of a home over a boarding-house, a moral advantage of home life which children in ordinary circumstances are rarely allowed to share with their elders.
Deriving not from possessiveness but from attachment—to the school itself, to its physical embodiment, to the people in it—this feeling of responsibility explains the children’s zeal in keeping the schoolrooms neat and clean, their joy in serving one another hot lunches, their pride in showing the school to visitors.

Having verified one implication of my reading of Montessori—that in her eyes the school building was treated as home—I checked out another. Did the inhabitants of school constitute a family? After referring to the children in a Casa dei Bambini as “these little citizens,” Fisher corrected herself: “to call a Montessori school a ‘little republic’ and the children ‘little citizens,’ gives much too formal an idea of the free-and-easy, happily unforced and natural relations of the children with each other.” In Rome the affectionate relationship between the directress and the children was palpable. Montessori noted the fervor with which the children “throw their arms around the teacher’s knees, with which they pull her down to kiss her face.” Fisher saw one teacher looking at her children “with shining eyes...I could have sworn, with mother’s eyes!” The love that bound together the directress and the children of a Casa dei Bambini and also bound the children to one another served as both a precondition of the children’s learning and an end point of their development. In her lectures on peace Montessori spoke of preventing adults from waging war by instilling in them in childhood “a love and respect for all living beings and all the things that human beings have built through the centuries.” Long before those speeches to European audiences at a time when war was imminent, she had inserted family love into school.

Just as Montessori’s model for school is an idealized version of home, an exemplary family serves as her model for the relationship in which those attending school stand to one another. That relationship constitutes a special kind of love. The love permeating the Casa dei Bambini was premised on the recognition and nurturance of individuality. Of the young child just beginning to be active she wrote, “We must respect religiously, reverently, these first intimations of individual-
sonal relationships and social cooperation were not sufficiently emphasized appears credible too. I used to count myself in this group, but once I read “casa” as “home,” the social nature of Montessori’s idea of school became apparent. Instruction in a Casa dei Bambini was definitely individualized: during much of the day, at any given time the directress interacted with the children on a one-to-one basis, the children themselves pursued different activities, and each child proceeded at his or her own pace. However, all of this occurred within a context of domesticity. Like the individual members of the family of Montessori’s imagination, even as the children were treated as individuals and their individuality was allowed to flourish, they felt connected to one another and concerned about one another’s welfare.

Reports of the unselfish behavior of the children in Montessori’s schools and of their genuine concern for their schoolmates abound. After remarking that quarrels in the classroom never arose over the possession of objects, Montessori wrote: “If one accomplishes something especially fine, his achievement is a source of admiration and joy to others: no heart suffers from another’s wealth, but the triumph of one is a delight to all.” Fisher gave a wonderful account of the smiling faces of several children who witnessed a little boy’s long and ultimately successful struggle to tuck his napkin under his chin and of the way one then patted the napkin “as its proud wearer passed.” An English educator described seeing a child “evidently much put out” because the teacher returned a composition to her indicating that it was not well done. Several of the children then “gathered round the girl, read the passages crossed out, found mistakes, and encouraged her to re-write. At last she unfolded her arms and took pen in hand. One of the children remained at her side until the work was started.” The observer commented on this scene: “I had watched moral conduct in the making and it was all so simple, so natural, and so beautiful.” Misread “casa” and observations like these have to be discredited. Yet the very events that cannot be understood—that indeed seem impossible—when

“casa” is translated as “house” make perfect sense, are even to be expected, when the Casa dei Bambini is seen as home and the children in it are seen as bound together by domestic affection.

II

You should do for your children what their parents fail to do for them.

Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, *Leonard and Gertrude*, 1781

As news was spreading of the “miracles” taking place in Montessori’s schools in Rome—the three-year-olds serving soup tureens with aplomb, the four-year-olds learning to write in two months and to read in just a few more days, the small delinquents exhibiting remarkable powers of concentration and self-control—and as Montessori’s name was beginning to be a household word in the United States, William James wrote an essay whose title entered our language. Once I saw the connection between Montessori’s idea of the Casa dei Bambini and the concept of moral equivalency that James introduced into American thought at almost the same time, I was well on my way to answering the question of what to do about the children who are being left behind when both men and women cross the bridge each morning.

James’s “The Moral Equivalent of War” was printed in 1910 in several popular magazines and was also widely distributed at the time in leaflet form. On hearing its title one naturally assumes that James was proposing peace as war’s moral equivalent. In fact, his moral equivalent of war is a war against nature. He told readers that although war-making should be eliminated in modern society, the “martial virtues”—intrepidity, contempt of softness, surrender of private interest, obedience to command—should be preserved. Accordingly, the problem the “peace-party” faced was to detach these militaristic qualities from war but insure their continued existence. The solution he proposed was that the whole youthful popu-
lation, by which he meant all young men, be conscripted into an army and sent out as railroad men and miners, tunnelmakers and fishermen to fight nature.

James was able to call his metaphorical war against nature an *equivalent* because he gave it the same function that he attributed to actual war—preserving the martial virtues and the benefits accruing to society from them. Had he embraced those martial virtues simply to win over the war-party, he could not have offered his substitute for war as a *moral* equivalent. But as it happens, he profoundly admired the "higher" aspects of militarism.

Just as James considered war to foster valuable character traits, Montessori considered home to have an educative function. Just as he insisted that if war were to stop inculcating the martial virtues some other institution would have to take on the task, she believed that insofar as home stopped teaching its lessons, school should step into the breach. Perceiving that for extended periods of time each day the private homes of children in the San Lorenzo Quarter were bereft of adults, Montessori created a radically changed school in which children would receive the affection and experience the intimacy and connection otherwise missing from much of their daily lives. They would also be the beneficiaries of that curriculum whose existence is seldom recognized in discussions of education.

Because home is the hidden partner in the education of our young, we tend to forget how much of who we are, how we act, and what we know was learned there when we were very young. Montessori knew that, as children spend less and less time at home in the company of their families, serious gaps in their learning will begin to emerge. She believed that among the small delinquents of the San Lorenzo Quarter these gaps already were in evidence. To her the remedy was to transplant into school the domestic atmosphere and curriculum she found missing from the children’s private homes. Knowing how to wash and dress oneself, tell time, speak well and listen attentively, be gracious and generous to others, take care of younger children, work collaboratively, see a task through to completion: all this and more became the province of the Casa dei Bambini. Thus, by fulfilling some of the very same functions that home was expected to provide but in the case of the poor increasingly did not, the Casa dei Bambini constituted a *functional* equivalent of home. Serving functions that Montessori believed ought to be preserved for the sake of the children, their parents, and the larger society, it was also a *moral* equivalent.

That James, who had said in his earlier talks to teachers that "things that savor of danger or of blood" are the objects "naturally interesting to childhood, to the exclusion of almost everything else," and who believed it to be inevitable that "most schoolroom work, till it has become habitual and automatic, is repulsive," would have approved of Montessori’s moral equivalent of home is improbable. It is even less likely that she would have condoned his attitude toward nature. James’s concept of a war on nature places the human race apart from the rest of the natural world and in an aggressive relationship to it. Montessori took attachment to the natural world as well as to other humans to be both the beginning and the end point of moral development.

Affirming in *The Montessori Method* that agriculture and animal culture “contain in themselves precious means of moral education,” Montessori made them an integral part of the Casa dei Bambini curriculum. In what relation were the children to stand to the plants and animals in their care? In the same kind of relation as that of the observing teacher to the children themselves. They, like Mcclintock, would come to know individual plants and animals intimately and have absolute respect for them. Then out of their initial observations would grow “zealous care for the living creatures.” A teacher in a Casa dei Bambini in Milan reported to Montessori that “when the children are tranquilly occupied in tasks, each at the work he prefers, one, two, or three, get up silently, and go out to cast a glance at the animals to see if they need care.” Another wrote her a letter describing the day baby pigeons
were hatched: “For the children it was a great festival. They felt themselves to some extent the parents of these little ones.” Once Montessori herself found the children in Rome “seated on the ground, all in a circle, around a splendid red rose which had bloomed in the night; silent and calm, literally immersed in mute contemplation.”

Montessori called the children who from the age of four sowed, hoed, watered, and examined the soil the “possessor of the earth.” Yet in their ownership there was to be no trace of mastery or domination, no hint of a separation between possessor and possessed. Claiming that in the course of work with plants and animals “a sort of correspondence arises between the child’s soul and the lives which are developed under his care,” Montessori described the children’s feeling for living creatures as “a form of love, and of union with the universe.”

Saying in her lectures on peace that the child must be the point of departure for the personal reconstruction she deemed necessary and including girls as well as boys in this category, Montessori construed the problem of abolishing war as one of designing the right education for children. She specifically saw it as one of constructing suitable environments for them. When and only when there was a “harmonious interaction” between individual and environment, she said, would the child develop normally and love flourish. The kind of love Montessori had in mind was neither the romantic love of poetry and novels nor the self-sacrificing kind that Western culture attributes to mothers. Permanent and unconnected to either selfishness or a desire to possess, it was directed to all living creatures, to people, and to objects. This “higher form of love” was in her view a prerequisite for the “human harmony” and the “genuine community of mankind” that had to obtain if positive peace was to be achieved.

Although the “Montessori Method” is renowned for focusing on an individual child who works alone, albeit in a setting in which other children are doing the same, its creator clearly intended the Casa dei Bambini to replace what she termed the “isolation of the individual” with a sense of connection to both nature and society. Responding to those who asked what becomes of social life if the child does everything on his own, she explained the way social qualities in her schools derive from individual work:

The child who concentrates is immensely happy; he ignores his neighbors or the visitors circulating about him. For the time being his spirit is like that of a hermit in the desert: a new consciousness has been born in him, that of his own individuality. When he comes out of his concentration, he seems to perceive the world anew as a boundless field for fresh discoveries. He also becomes aware of his classmates in whom he takes an affectionate interest. Love awakens in him for people and for things. He becomes friendly to everyone, ready to admire all that is beautiful. The spiritual process is plain: he detaches himself from the world in order to attain the power to unite himself with it.

This unity was to take effect outside as well as within the walls of the Casa dei Bambini and was to extend to the world of nature.

To be fair to James, his war on nature was merely a suggestion, just one possible moral substitute for war. If he were alive today he might withdraw his proposal and offer a different means for preserving what he called “absolute and permanent human goods.” Montessori, however, would be telling us that the martial virtues of intrepidity, contempt of softness, obedience to command, and sacrifice of self are really capital vices.

Living in Italy well into the 1930s, she witnessed the military discipline that James so admired being transmitted from one generation to the next quite unconsciously by education. At a time when dictatorialships were thriving—it was the very same time that Woolf was standing on the bridge—her aim was to transform education so that it would extinguish the very obedience to command James called a virtue. Protesting that “the obedience forced upon a child at home and in school, an obedience that does not recognize the rights of reason and
justice, prepares the adult to resign himself to anything and everything,” she charged this martial characteristic with opening the way to mindless idolatry and, ultimately, to slavery.

Montessori would have us replace obedience to command with individual self-determination. “No one can be free unless he is independent,” she wrote in her chapter on discipline in The Montessori Method. After pointing to the dependency of masters on their servants, husbands on their wives, children on their mothers and teachers, she concluded: “We must make of the future generation, powerful men, and by that we mean men who are independent and free.” She actually meant men and women, for in her Inaugural Address she had already said that the “new woman, like the butterfly come forth from the chrysalis, shall be liberated from all those attributes which once made her desirable to man only as the source of the material blessings of existence. She shall be, like man, an individual, a free human being, a social worker.”

Montessori would also substitute for the martial virtue of surrender of private interest a desire to create a better collective life. These are not the same. Essentially negative, surrender of private interest involves the sacrifice of something one wants. Montessori’s desire to create a better collective life consists in a positive concern for the general good. James and Montessori were both psychologists who had been trained as physicians, and the two of them seem to have started from the same dubious assumption: that human beings are at birth unconnected individuals. The difference between the two was that she viewed private interest as a defective character trait while he seemed to think it part of normal adult equipment. Provide the right education for children and selfishness will vanish in the course of normal development, Montessori claimed. But then, the surrender of private interest is no virtue. By the time a proper education enabled an individual to acquire a sufficiently developed will to surrender anything, the public spirit that characterized the “undeviated” adult should already have emerged.

In Montessori’s philosophy the other two martial virtues—intrepidity and contempt of softness—meet the same fate. Reflective apologists for war take it religiously, said James, because it is human nature at its most dynamic. In their eyes war’s horrors “are a cheap price to pay for rescue from the only alternative supposed, of a world of clerks and teachers, of co-education and zo-ophily, of ‘consumer’s leagues’ and ‘associated charities,’ of industrialism unlimited, and feminism unabashed. No scorn, no hardness, no valor any more. Fie upon such a cattleyard of a planet!” No healthy minded person, he continued, can help partaking in the central essence of this feeling. For James, a world without risk and daring, without the possibility of violent death, without a supreme theater of human strenuosity, without heroism revolted the imagination.

Like the “unspeakable” Chautauqua that James visited one summer, the Casa dei Bambini contained as little peril to life and limb as possible. Indeed, he might have been discussing Montessori’s moral equivalent of home when he said of Chautauqua, “there was no potentiality of death in sight anywhere, and no point of the compass visible from which danger might possibly appear.” In the Casa dei Bambini, a place that barred competition and countenanced no violence, intrepidity disappeared and the only contempt that could possibly be encouraged would be of the hardiness James revered, not of the softness he condemned.

In a lecture to students James once said:

Sweat and effort, human nature strained to its uttermost and on the rack, yet getting through alive, and then turning its back on its success to pursue another more rare and arduous still—this is the sort of thing the presence of which inspires us, and the reality of which it seems to be the function of all the higher forms of literature and fine art to bring home to us and suggest. At Chautauqua there were no racks, even in the place’s historical museum; and no sweat, except possibly the gentle moisture on the brow of some lecturer, or on the sides of some player in the ball-field.
Because the hardship James extolled required the rack and Montessori would never have subjected children to pain, there was no place for it in the Casa de Bambini. Without it there could be no place for James’s contempt of softness.

III

Today the social and economic evolution calls the working-woman to take her place among wage-earners.

Maria Montessori, *The Montessori Method*, 1912

The fact that those small vandals in Rome were reading and writing at an early age gives the Casa dei Bambini a claim on our attention. But its kinship to the school under construction on the promontory derives mainly from its being a moral equivalent of home.

“We’ve got kids in the third grade using alcohol and marijuana,” a drug-and-alcohol officer of the Seattle police department told Melissa Ludtke. Carlos Pimental, one of those Seward Park students Jessica Siegel mothered, started on drugs in the fifth grade. Within a year he was getting high three or four times a day. At age twelve, having witnessed a drug killing, he feared for his life. When he was twelve years old Lun Cheung joined a gang that ran protection and gambling and sold women and drugs. When he was in the tenth grade he was beaten up and his best friend was killed.

In June 1989 a teacher wrote the *Boston Globe*: “I used to wonder if my adolescent boys would remember my lessons once they left my classroom; now I wonder if they will live to remember them.” At about that same time a Boston gang member was reminiscing:

When I was 12, I carried a .38 everywhere. I sold drugs in great balls. I was carryin’ the gun just to be carryin’ it. I wanted to be someone big. To me, a gun changes a person. It makes ‘em brave. Sometimes I would go on the roof and shoot in the air. I felt like, let ‘em come up on me. I’d be like Hercules. I even said, “Let a cop come. I’ll get ‘em.”

Prophesying that women of all classes in the United States would one day be working outside their own homes, Fisher foresaw that the future significance of Montessori’s work lay in the fact that most children would be in need of a home away from home. Little did she know how dire that need would become by the end of the century at whose beginning she was writing, or that so many people would be living under conditions that recall the district of Rome in which Montessori’s original schools were located.

Telling her audience about the plight of the inhabitants of the San Lorenzo Quarter, Montessori said that children born there “do not ‘first see the light of day’; they come into a world of gloom... Here, there can be no privacy, no modesty, no gentleness; here, there is often not even light, nor air, nor water!” Describing the Martinique, a once elegant hotel in New York City that in 1987 housed 438 homeless families, Jonathan Kozol wrote in 1988:

It is difficult to do full justice to the sense of hopelessness one feels on entering the building. It is a haunting experience and leaves an imprint on one’s memory that is not easily erased by time or cheerful company. Even the light seems dimmer here, the details harder to make out, the mere geography of twisting corridors and winding stairs and circular passageways a maze that I found indecipherable at first and still find difficult to figure out. After fifty or sixty nights within this building, I have tried but cannot make a floor plan of the place.

Something of Dickens’ halls of chancery comes to my mind whenever I am wandering those floors. It is the knowledge of sorrow, I suppose, and of unbroken dreariness that dulls the vision and impairs one’s faculties of self-location and discernment. If it does this to a visitor, what does it do to those for whom this chancery is home?

Perhaps two million, possibly even three or four million people in the United States, the great majority of whom are families, are homeless. The average homeless family consists of a mother and three children. Living on the streets or in rat-