

Freedom and Discipline: An Integrated Path

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Quotes for Reflection

Contents

<u>by Dr. Maria Montessori</u>	2
<u>The Absorbent Mind</u>	2
<u>The Child, Society and the World</u>	4
<u>Course Lectures</u>	4
<u>The Discovery of the Child</u>	5
<u>To Educate the Human Potential</u>	5
<u>Education and Peace</u>	5
<u>The Formation of Man</u>	7
<u>The Montessori Method</u>	7
<u>Reconstruction in Education</u>	7
<u>What You Should Know About Your Child</u>	7
<u>by Claude A. Claremont</u>	8
<u>by A.M. Joosten</u>	8
<u>by Other Authors</u>	8

Quotes for Reflection

by Dr. Maria Montessori

The Absorbent Mind

“[Children] have shown us that freedom and discipline are two faces of the same medal, because scientific freedom leads to discipline. Coins usually have two faces, one being more beautiful, finely chiseled, bearing a head or allegorical figure, while the other is less ornate, with nothing but a number or some writing. The plain side can be compared to freedom, and the finely chiseled side to discipline.” (250)

“We serve the future by protecting the present.” (169)

“Free choice is one of the highest of all mental processes. Only the child deeply aware of his need for practice and for the development of his spiritual life, can really be said to choose freely.” (237)

“Nothing that is formed in infancy can ever be totally eradicated.” (60)

“It is not possible to speak of free choice when all kinds of external stimuli attract a child at the same time and, having no will power, he responds to every call, passing restlessly from one thing to another.” (237)

“The child who concentrates is immensely happy ... the spiritual process is plain: he detaches himself from the world in order to attain the power to unite himself with it.” (239)

“To let the child do as he likes when he has not yet developed any powers of control, is to betray the idea of freedom.... Real freedom, instead, is a consequence of development; it is the development of latent guides, aided by education. Development is active. It is the construction of the personality, reached by effort and one’s own experiences; it is the long road which every child must travel to attain maturity.” (255–256)

“If freedom is understood as letting the children do as they like, using or more likely misusing, the things available, it is clear that only their ‘deviations’ are free to develop; their abnormalities will increase.” (180)

“Then another thing happened never seen before in a group of children. It was the arrival of ‘discipline,’ which sprang up spontaneously. This, more than anything else, struck the public imagination. Discipline in freedom seemed to solve a problem which had hitherto seemed insoluble. The answer lay in obtaining discipline by giving freedom. These children, who sought their work in freedom, each absorbed in a different kind of task, yet all belonging to the same group, gave the impression of perfect discipline.” (177)

“No sooner has he found his work than his defects disappear. It does not help to reason with children. Something within them seems to break out and fasten itself to the external activity. This attracts the child’s energy which thus becomes held in a constant piece of work actively repeated.” (176)

“The human being is a united whole, but this unity has to be built up and formed by active experiences in the real world, to which it is led by the laws of nature.” (177)

“Our task is to show the way to discipline. Discipline is born when the child concentrates his attention on some object that attracts him and which provides him not only with a useful exercise but with a control of error. Thanks to these exercises, a wonderful integration takes place in the infant soul, as a result of which the child becomes calm, radiantly happy, busy, forgetful of himself and, in consequence, indifferent to prizes or material rewards. These little conquerors of themselves and the world about them are real supermen, who show us the divine worth of a man’s soul.” (230–231)

“But the child of three, when he first comes to school, is a fighter on the verge of being vanquished; he has already adopted a defensive attitude which masks his deeper nature. The higher energies which could guide him to a disciplined peace and a divine wisdom, are asleep. All that remains active is a superficial personality which exhausts itself in clumsy movements, vague ideas, and the effort to resist or avoid adult constraint.” (327)

“... the teacher must remember the powers which lie dormant in these divinely pure and generous souls. She must help these tiny beings, who are scampering downhill towards a precipice, to turn about and climb again. She must call to them, wake them up, by her voice and thought. A vigorous and firm call is the only true act of kindness towards these little minds... Just as we must call a child’s name before he can answer, so we must call the soul vigorously if we wish to awaken it.” (332–333)

“The simplest exercises of practical life will lead the wandering spirits back to the solid earth of real work, and this reclaims them.... Now we see the class calm. The children come into contact with reality, their occupations have a definite aim, such as to dust a table, remove a stain, go to the cupboard, take a piece of the apparatus, use it properly, and so on.... Then, one day, one of these tiny spirits will awaken, the inner ‘self’ of some child will go out to an object which it will temporarily possess, his attention will focus on the repetition of an exercise, the doing of which brings increased skill, and the child’s radiant and contented manner will show that his spirit has been reborn.” (334–336)

“His personality is not being exercised, he is not developing, is not growing stronger.... The child is like a bee flying from flower to flower without finding one on which to stop, from which it can take the nectar and be satisfied. He will not be able to work till he feels the awakening within him of that tremendous instinctive activity which is destined to construct his character and his mind.” (335)

“It is necessary for the teacher to be able to understand the children’s condition. These little spirits are in a transitory phase. The real door to progress is not yet open to them. They are knocking and waiting outside.... We have here a crucial moment in development and the teacher must carry out two different functions: she must supervise the children and also give them individual lessons.... In this period she must take care never to turn her back on the class while she is dealing with a single child. Her presence must be felt by all these spirits, wandering and in search of life.” (336)

“Perfect silence can only be obtained if all those present are willing. A single person can break it. Success therefore depends on conscious and united action. From this comes a sense of social solidarity.” (324)

“It is easy, in fact, to identify obedience as a natural phenomenon of human life; it is a normal human characteristic. In our children we may watch its development as a kind of unfolding. It shows itself spontaneously and unexpectedly at the end of a long process of maturation. Indeed, if the human soul did not possess this quality, if men had never acquired, by some form of evolutionary process, this capacity for obedience, social life would be impossible.” (318)

On the second level of obedience: “... the child can always obey, or rather, when there are no longer any obstacles deriving from his lack of control. His powers are now consolidated and can be directed not only by his own will, but also by the will of another.” (322)

“Normalization comes about through ‘concentration’ on a piece of work.... The essential thing is for the task to arouse such an interest that it engages the child’s whole personality.... Only ‘normalized’ children, aided by their environment, show in their subsequent development those wonderful powers that we describe: spontaneous discipline, continuous and happy work, social sentiments of help and sympathy for others. Activity freely chosen becomes their regular way of living. The healing of their disorders is the doorway to this new kind of life.” (256–257)

“This is the period in which discipline becomes established: a form of active peace, of obedience and love, when work is perfected and multiplied, just as when the flowers in spring get their colors and prepare a distant harvest of sweet and nourishing fruit.” (342)

“This force that we call love is the greatest energy of the universe.” (290)

The Child, Society and the World

“As we observe children, we see the vitality of their spirit, the maximum effort put forth in all they do, the intuition, attention and focus they bring to all life’s events, and the sheer joy they experience in living.” (99)

Course Lectures

“When we carefully study the needs of life, we come to realize that there must be a correspondence of relationship between the quantity of objects in the environment and the

power of development. Thus, an accumulation of useless objects is very disadvantageous to development.” (1921, Lecture 16)

“That which we have said about the preparation of the environment has to do with keeping alive the flame of the soul, because we are preparing for the child a place of peace and harmony ... all this order of the environment has its aims as regards the child’s spirit. We surround the child with things that are beautiful and that are proportioned to his needs, because these affect the life of the spirit within his material life.

“[Consider,] for example, the temples, which have been built and created for their effect upon the spirit. These skyward-pointing forms, which we find in temples, are not used in ordinary buildings for human habitation. For this reason in the temples, there is a profusion of beautiful things.... Why is it that we provide in such profusion in our churches beautiful colours and harmonies, and lines, and music? Because our surroundings – the environment – help something within our spirit. Therefore, if we are trying to help the child to grow rather than to force the child to learn, we must take into consideration these matters ... to provide a place where he can develop, and where his spirit and intelligence can grow.” (1927, Lecture 26)

The Discovery of the Child

“Our duty as teachers in the creation of discipline is to apply the ‘method’ rigorously.... Work cannot be offered in an arbitrary manner; this is the principle embodied in the ‘method’; it must be the work for which man craves in his inmost soul, the work which in some mysterious way is demanded by the latent requirements of life, and towards which the individual ascends step by step.” (306)

“At some given moment it happens that the child becomes deeply interested in a piece of work; we see it in the expression on his face, his intense concentration, the devotion to the exercise. That child has entered upon the path of discipline.” (305)

To Educate the Human Potential

“It may be said that every human being does his most intelligent work in the subconscious where psychic complexes are the construction of engrams. These do much more than create an association of ideas, for they organize themselves to carry out work which we are unable to do consciously. Psychic complexes help a writer to create beautiful ideas, new to his conscious mind and vaguely attributed to inspiration. The working of these complexes is of immense importance in education.” (23)

Education and Peace

“It is not always imperative to see big things, but it is of paramount importance to see the beginning of things. At their origins there are little glimmers that can be recognized as soon as something new is developing.” (101)

“In order to begin the task of reconstructing man’s psyche, we must make the child our point of departure. We must recognize that he is more than just our progeny, more than just a creature who is our greatest responsibility. We must study him not as a dependent creature, but as an independent person.... We must have faith in the child as a messiah, as a savior capable of regenerating the human race and society.” (14)

“The child who has never learned to work by himself, to set goals for his own acts, or to be the master of his own force of will is recognizable in the adult who lets others guide his will and feels a constant need for approval of others.” (20)

“The child thus far has been deprived of the possibility of venturing on moral paths that his latent vital impulses might have sought anxiously in a world that is completely new to him. He never has been able to measure and to test his own creative energies; he never has been able to establish the sort of inner order whose primary consequence is a confident and inviolable sense of discipline.” (21)

“If man were to grow up fully and with a sound psyche, developing a strong character and a clear mind, he would be unable to tolerate the existence of diametrically opposed moral principles within himself or to advocate simultaneously two sorts of justice – one that fosters life and one that destroys it. He would not simultaneously cultivate two moral powers in his heart, love and hatred. Nor would he erect two disciplines, one that marshals human energies to build, another that marshals them to destroy what has been built. A strong man cannot stand a split within his consciousness, much less in two exactly opposite ways.” (21)

“Our principal concern must be to educate humanity – the human beings of all nations – in order to guide it toward seeking common goals. We must turn back and make the child our principal concern. The efforts of science must be concentrated on him, because he is the source of and the key to the riddles of humanity. The child is richly endowed with powers, sensitivities, and constructive instincts that as yet have neither been recognized nor put to use.” (31)

“Education must take advantage of the value of the hidden instincts that guide man as he builds his own life. Powerful among these instincts is the social drive. It has been our experience that if the child and the adolescent do not have a chance to engage in a true social life, they do not develop a sense of discipline and morality.” (36)

“Many times we find ourselves confronted with social questions that involve seemingly insoluble problems. I am convinced that our apparent inability to solve them stems from our failure to take into account one crucial factor – the human being when he is a child. We discuss many important social questions, but they all have to do with the adult; and this adult, who has thought about himself so much, who has tried to make a better life for himself, has forgotten a great part of himself, since no human being is born an adult. (56)

“The only true freedom for an individual is to have the opportunity to act independently ... there is no such thing as an individual until a person can act by himself.” (64)

The Formation of Man

“Obedience developed through successive degrees to a high degree of perfection, reaching finally that stage where ‘obedience was given with joy.’ There was, I might say, an ‘anxiousness’ to obey, which might remind us of that shown by members of a religious community.... No activity on the part of the teacher was needed to obtain this strange phenomenon. It was, in other words, not a direct result of education, because there were no instructions, no admonitions, neither rewards nor punishments, but everything happened spontaneously.

“Yet this unusual fact had to have some cause, it had to be produced by some influence. To those who asked me for an explanation, I could at the time only reply: It is freedom which produces it.” (38–39)

The Montessori Method

“No one can be free unless he is independent: therefore, the first, active manifestation of the child’s individual liberty must be so guided that through his activity he may arrive at independence.... In reality, he who is served is limited in his independence.... We do not stop to think that the child who does not do, does not know how to do.” (95–97)

Reconstruction in Education

“It is always difficult for me to set forth my argument, because this argument is not a simple conception like a line, but is immense, if you will, like a desert or an ocean. This desert or ocean is not a creation of my mind, my soul, my knowledge, my evolution, but it is education – not the education that you know, but an unknown education that is new, that is efficient, that gives help and a new orientation, a new knowledge, a New Wisdom to the World.” (1)

What You Should Know About Your Child

“The emphasis on freedom is for the development of individuality. The emphasis on discipline is for the benefit of the individual and of society.” (107)

“The questions of freedom and discipline are connected with work. Given the necessary freedom, suitable materials and environment, what the child longs for is work. When the environment, as in the Children’s Houses, induces and prompts the required activity, the problem of discipline solves itself.” (109)

“Discipline and freedom are so co-related that if there is some lack of discipline, the cause is to be found in some lack of freedom.” (109)

“It has been found that children can and will obey orders from without. Nature has implanted in the child an urge to obey. For the right ordering of society we have to build on this urge to obey, though mere mechanical obedience does not result in proper discipline. True obedience must elevate a child and not enslave him.” (110)

“There is freedom in the environment. There is discipline, which arises out of the environment. There is joy, which is a sign of healthy growth. The conditions provide for mutual understanding, co-operation and helpfulness which are the roots of morality and character.” (112)

“The steps towards development are the steps of freedom.” (45)

By Claude A. Claremont

“He will also show concentration, and this proceeds always and necessarily from tackling a task felt to be difficult. To produce concentration, each task must offer a challenge perceived and accepted by the child.... when a disorderly child who has no fixed center meets one of these challenges which appeals to him – no matter which – he is forced to concentrate because of the difficulty, and this seems to engender a new experience, something that pulls the personality together.” (“Montessori Education – The Hope for the Future,” *Communications* 1962, #3/4)

By A.M. Joosten

“Freedom is a conquest and not a gift. No one can give freedom to anyone. It has to be conquered and this conquest is based on discipline. But this discipline, in its turn, requires freedom for its further development. We have to cultivate freedom in order that discipline may develop.” (*On Discipline*, 5)

“There is a discipline which exists within the human personality. This discipline is an inborn endowment of all children. It is not taught by any human agency or environment. In fact, this ‘inner’ discipline exists not only in human beings, but is universally found in every part of creation. In human beings we often fail to see it, but in nature we see it very clearly.” (*On Discipline*, 5)

“[Outer and inner discipline] are organically related and cannot contradict each other without serious consequences for man’s mental and physical balance. Outer discipline is and should be a form given to the innate inner discipline. The purpose of outer discipline can, therefore, never be independent of inner discipline.... Human authority, obedience to human beings and the forms of outer discipline should be a help and support towards inner discipline.” (*On Discipline*, 6)

By Other Authors

“No one can whistle a symphony. It takes a whole orchestra to play it.” – H.F. Luccock

“I had always understood that Madame Montessori dispensed with discipline and I wondered how she managed a room full of children.... On sending my little boy of three to spend his mornings in a Montessori school, I found that he quickly became a more disciplined human being.... The pedagogical discoveries involved have required genius, but the teachers who are to apply them do not require genius. They require only the right sort of training, together with a

degree of sympathy and patience, which is by no means unusual. The fundamental idea is simple: that the right discipline consists not in external compulsion, but in habits of the mind, which lead spontaneously to desirable rather than undesirable activities. What is astonishing is the great success in finding technical methods of embodying this idea in education. For this, Madame Montessori deserves the highest praise.” – Bertrand Russell, *On Education*, 1926, cited in *Maria Montessori: A Centenary Anthology*, AMI, 1970

“... there is one thing we do know: that man is here for the sake of other men – above all for those upon whose smiles and well-being our own happiness depends, and also for the countless unknown souls with whose fate we are connected by a bond of sympathy. Many times a day I realize how much my own outer and inner life is built upon the labors of my fellow men, both living and dead, and how earnestly I must exert myself in order to give in return as much as I have received.” – Albert Einstein, “What I Believe,” 1930

“Bad habits are like a comfortable bed: easy to get into, but hard to get out of.” – Proverb

“Habits are cobwebs at first, cables at last.” – Chinese Proverb

“We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence is not an act, but a habit.” – Aristotle

“It does not matter how slowly you go, so long as you do not stop.” – Confucius

“Rewards and punishment are the lowest form of education.” – Chuang-tzu

“In times of change, learners inherit the earth, while the learned find themselves beautifully equipped to deal with a world that no longer exists.” – Eric Hoffer, American philosopher

“Smiles have an edge over all other emotional expressions: the human brain prefers happy faces, recognizing them more readily and quickly than those with negative expressions – an effect known as the ‘happy face advantage.’” – Daniel Goleman, *Social Intelligence*, 2007

“Human smiles are designed to captivate. We see smiles, distinguish those that are genuine from those that are not, and move toward the former. All this happens in a split second and typically out of conscious awareness. Smiles are consequential – they affect what others feel and do.” – Marianne LaFrance, *Why Smile*, 2011

“Whether you’re a rider, a parent, a teacher or a manager, the ability to calm and focus others automatically puts you in a leadership role when others are panicking.” – Linda Kohanov, “The Way of Horses,” *The Intelligent Optimist*, 2013

“How parents and teachers talk tells a child how they feel about him. Their statements affect his self-esteem and self-worth. To a large extent, their language determines his destiny.”
– Haim Ginott

“Turtle buries its thoughts, like eggs, in the sand, and allows the sun to hatch the little ones. This teaches you to develop your ideas before bringing them out in the light. Look at the old

fable of the tortoise and the hare, and decide for yourself whether or not you would like to align with the Turtle. Bigger, stronger, and faster are not always the best way to get a goal.”
– Jamie Sams and David Carson, “Turtle: Mother Earth,” *Medicine Cards*, 1999

Be pliable
When a man is living,
He is soft and pliable;
When he is dead,
He becomes rigid.
Pliability is life;
Rigidity is death,
Whether one speaks
Of man’s body,
Mind or his spirit.

– Bruce Lee, *Wisdom for the Way*, 2013

“Oh, I’ve had my moments, and if I had to do it over again, I’d have more of them. In fact, I’d try to have nothing else. Just moments, one after another, instead of living so many years ahead of each day.” – Nadine Stair, 85 years old, Louisville, Kentucky, quoted by Jon Zinn-Kabat, *Full Catastrophe Living*, 1990