The Five Great Lessons of the Elementary Curriculum

The Great Lessons are an important and unique part of the Montessori curriculum. These lessons are bold, exciting, and are designed to awaken a child's imagination and curiosity. The child should be struck with the wonder of creation, thrilled with new ideas, and awed by the inventiveness and innovation that is part of the human spirit.

The Five Great Lessons are traditionally presented in lower elementary (grades 1-3), and are presented every year so that children see them more than one time. Unlike the 3-6 environment, where the child is introduced first to "small" ideas that gradually widen into larger concepts, the elementary child is introduced right away to large concepts - the largest of all being the beginning of the universe. Then they can be shown how all the smaller ideas fit into the larger framework.

Traditionally, there are Five Great Lessons that are used to paint a broad picture before moving to more specific study. They consist of:

- First Great Lesson - Coming of the Universe and the Earth
- Second Great Lesson - Coming of Life
- Third Great Lesson - Coming of Human Beings
- Fourth Great Lesson - Communication in Signs
- Fifth Great Lesson - The Story of Numbers

First Great Lesson - Coming of the Universe and the Earth

The First Great Lesson is the most memorable and is often done on the very first day of school. It involves the use of a balloon and gold stars to tell the story of the beginning of the universe. This lesson also includes some demonstrations using solids and liquids to show how the continents and oceans first came together.

This lesson leads to the study of:

- Astronomy: solar system, stars, galaxies, comets, constellations
- Meteorology: wind, currents, weather, fronts, erosion, water cycle, clouds, glaciers
- Chemistry: states of matter, changes, mixtures, reactions, elements, atoms, periodic table, compounds, molecules, chemical formulas, equations, lab work, experimentation
- Physics: magnetism, electricity, gravity, energy, light, sound, heat, friction, motion, experimentation

- Geology: types of rocks, minerals, land forms, volcanoes, earthquakes, plate tectonics, ice ages, eras of the earth
- Geography: maps, globes, latitude/longitude, climates, land/water form names, continent and country researchOrigins of the Universe pic

Maria Montessori was devoutly religious, and brought many of her beliefs into the Great Lessons. These lessons came about back when religious beliefs were an accepted, natural part of everyday life (including schools). Things are different today, and if you are teaching at a school, you'll probably want to stick to a factual account of the beginning of the universe (see the end of this post for some resources); if you're at home, you can feel free to tailor the lesson to your own family's religious beliefs. The story is inspirational to children no matter which version they hear. *(See photo: origins of the universe)*

The Second Great Lesson: Coming of Life

The Second Great Lesson involves the coming of life. This lesson revolves around the Timeline of Life, a long chart with pictures and information about microorganisms, plants, and animals that have lived (or now live) on the earth. The great diversity of life is emphasized, and special care is paid to the "jobs" that each living thing does to contribute to life on earth.

This lesson leads to the study of:

- Biology: cells, organized groups, five kingdoms, specimens, dissection, observation, use of microscope
- Botany: study of plants, classification, functions, parts of plants (seed, fruit, leaf, stem, root, flower), types of plants
- Habitats: location, characteristics, food chains/webs, symbiosis, adaptation, ecosystems, conservation
- Ancient Life: eras of the earth, evolution, extinction, fossil records, excavation
- Animals: classification, needs, similarities/differences, human systems, nutrition, hygiene
- Monera, Protista, and Fungi Kingdoms: what they are, classification, observation

The Third Great Lesson: Coming of Human Beings

The next Great Lesson is the Coming of Human Beings. This lesson involves a timeline with a tool and a human hand to talk about the three gifts that make humans special: a mind to imagine, a hand to do work, and a heart that can love. This lesson will lead children to study the beginning of civilizations and the needs of early humans.

This lesson leads to the study of:

- History: timelines, prehistory, ancient civilizations, world history, history of specific countries and continents
- Culture: art, artists, music, composers, dance, drama, architecture, design, philosophy, religion, grace and courtesy
- Social Studies: current events, government, economics, commerce, volunteering & charity
- Discovery & Invention: scientists, inventors, scientific method, inventions, simple machines

The Fourth Great Lesson: The Story of Writing

The Fourth Great Lesson is the Story of Writing, sometimes called Communication in Signs. In this lesson, the story of the development of the written alphabet is told, with an emphasis on the incredible ability that humans have of committing their thoughts to paper. Included in the story are pictographs, symbols, hieroglyphs, early alphabets, and the invention of the printing press. *(See photo: ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics)*

Ancient Egyptian HieroglyphicsThis lesson leads to the study of:

- Reading: literature, poetry, non-fiction, myths and folk tales, authors, reading comprehension, reading analysis, literary terms
- Writing: elements of style, function, voice, composition, letter writing, research, study skills
- Language: origins of spoken language, foreign languages, history of languages, speech, drama
- Structure: alphabets, bookmaking, grammar, punctuation, sentence analysis, word study, figures of speech

The Fifth Great Lesson: The Story of Numbers

The last of the lessons is the Fifth Great Lesson: The Story of Numbers, also called the History of Mathematics. This lesson begins with the earliest civilizations, who often only had "one", "two", and "more than two" as their numeric system. It continues with a look at different numbering systems throughout the centuries, culminating in the decimal system that we use today.

This lesson leads to the study of:

- Mathematics: operations, fractions, decimals, multiples, squares, cubes, percentages, ratio, probability, intro to algebra

- Numbers: origins of numbers and systems, bases, types of numbers, scientific notation, mathematicians
- Geometry: congruency, similarity, nomenclature of lines, angles, shapes, solids, measurement, theorems
- Application: story problems, measurement, estimation, graphs, patterning, rounding, money concepts

The Great Lessons as a Unifying Theme

Clearly, these five stories encompass an enormous amount of information about the origins of the world around us. When each story is shared, it should never be left alone - there should always be further study open to the children so that the story becomes the springboard but not the focus. The stories can be referred to throughout the year when new topics are introduced, as a way of providing unity and cohesion to such a wide variety of studies.

The best source of further information on the Great Lessons can be found at The Montessori Great Lessons Page, created and run by Barbara Dubinsky. There you'll find detailed lesson plans for each Great Lesson, as well as background information and classroom activities. This site uses slightly different terminology for the names of the Great Lessons than I have used (there's some variety within the Montessori method), but the concepts remain the same.