

## The Educational Philosophy of Charlotte Mason

### 2. RECOGNISING REALITY

THERE is a great deal of wastage in modern education. We are becoming increasingly alive to it as far as the children are concerned and the various curriculum reforms are aimed at stopping it but there is not the concern there should be about the wastage of teachers.

Too many of them are trained, teach for a short time and then drift away. The girls who marry and leave to bring up their own children are not the worry. They are not lost to education; mothers are the most important educators since the development of the pre-school child is in their hands and it is at this stage that the foundation of all education is laid. Those who thought that teaching was a job for layabouts and very soon found out their mistake are no cause for concern either. The educational field is well rid of them and everyone knows it. The serious matter is the number of idealistic young people who choose teaching, maybe in preference to a more lucrative career, and then find that classroom practice is worlds apart from the theory they have learned. Try how they will, they cannot bring the theory to life. Some of them leave the profession convinced that the failure is in themselves. Others stay on, shrug away their early ideals as illusions and make the best of a bad job.

A philosophy of education is not a luxury, but a necessity, for anyone connected with teaching and it must take into account the whole educational scene. Teachers cannot do a good job unless they know what they are doing and why. They must have a clear understanding of what they aim to produce or they will dither around uselessly.

It has been suggested that, though this is true of ordinary work where a craftsman is making something to use, teaching is more like the work of the creative artist, who does not know what he will produce until he has produced it. This is nonsense. The creative artist knows very well what he is doing. He is trying to give his ideas form and substance so that they can live apart from him, and he does so because he thinks they matter. The philosophy is there, containing everything else within it. If it were not, he would give up and take to designing labels for dog-food tins or writing publicity for cornflakes.

There are those teachers who attempt to give their own ideas life through the children they deal with, and call the result creative, just as there are parents who try to live in and through their children, but this leads to a very unhappy situation. It is permissible to try to pass on our ideas to someone else just so long as we keep in mind that the other person has a perfect right to reject them. Everyone is an individual, with a God-given right to make his own choices. If his Creator will not violate that freedom it is the height of arrogance for another human being to try to do so.

Each of us is different yet we all have the same basic needs. An educational philosophy, if it is to be anything more than a fine-sounding theory in a book, must take both of these truths into account and show how they can be harmonised.

It is the whole person, not just

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one side of him, that must be educated and this will not be done until teachers see clearly what they are doing. Goodwill is not enough; if it were enough all educational problems would have been solved long ago. There has been goodwill in abundance but it has all too often been

accompanied by muddled thinking, and the result has been a bewilderment of conflicting ideas.

One suggestion after another is bandied about as fashions come and go. Discovery Method, Programmed Learning, Environmental Studies, Creativity with Lateral Thinking hard on its heels: each of them takes the floor in turn. Each of them is excellent in its right place but the propagandists make claims for them that are out of all proportion to their importance. When they do not live up to these claims they fall out of favour and the next fad is born.

Charlotte Mason warned more than half a century ago: 'We do not sufficiently realize the need for unity of principle in education. We have no captain idea which shall marshal for us the fighting host of educational ideas which throng the air; so, in default of a guiding principle, a leading idea, we feel ourselves at liberty to pick and choose ...

Let it be our negative purpose to discourage in every way we can the educational faddist, that is, the person who accepts a one-sided notion in place of a universal idea as his educational guide. Our positive purpose is to present, in season and out of season, one such universal idea; that is, education is the science of relations.

A child should be brought up to have relations of force with earth and water, should run and ride, swim and skate, lift and carry; should know texture and work in material; should know by name, and where and how they live at any rate, the things of the earth about him, its birds and beasts and creeping things, its herbs and trees; should be in touch with the literature, art and thought of the past and present. I do not mean that he should *know* all these things; but he should feel, when he reads of it in the newspapers, the thrill which stirred the Cretan peasants when the frescoes in the palace of King Minos were disclosed to the labour of their spades. He should feel the thrill, not from mere contiguity, but because he has with the past the relationship of living, pulsing thought, and if blood be thicker than water, thought is more quickening than blood. He must have a living relationship with the present, its historic movement, its science, literature, art, social needs and aspirations. In fact he must have a wide outlook, intimate relations all round; and force, *virtue*, must pass out to him, whether of hand, will or sympathy, wherever he touches.'

The aim then is to put a child in touch with life as completely as possible, to make him fully at home in the family of mankind. Its traditions and memories become his and he is involved in the present situation. He knows the world he lives in and appreciates its beauty—and the dangers menacing it.

Children are not to be regarded as flowers growing in some walled garden where they must be protected until they are able to face the winds of life. They are something much more valuable and dangerous. From the very first they are people with the power of making their own choices, of turning towards life and becoming fully mature or refusing to do this and shrivelling away.

This idea is basic to everything else in the Masonian philosophy.

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The child is far more than an I.Q. and a name on the school register. Each child is born a person, with a certain physical and mental make-up influenced by heredity and environment, and a soul with infinite possibilities.

Anyone who does not accept this will never understand Charlotte Mason's ideas on teaching, but more and more people are coming to see that it is true. Perhaps, because of their upbringing, they are inclined to shy away from the word *soul*, but they admit that something

more than bodily activity and intelligence makes up the human person. Intelligence is only the ability to see relationships. It is the whole person who decides whether this power will be used for good or ill.

Elizabeth Lawrence says in *The Origin and Growth of Modern Education*: 'Schools take their colour from the society in which they exist. They are forced to worship the national gods; and the national god of the twentieth century is intellect. Brains take the glory and the crown, and the whole educational system is organised, like some vast factory, to sift out the brains and pass them along the assembly line, shaking out, in the process, three out of four who fall through the intellectual mesh, taking with them some of the finest qualities of rectitude, integrity and sheer solid goodness, which are not necessarily to be found in the most highly intelligent. The ancient belief in the soul of man has been swept away in the worship of his brain.'

Fortunately this 'ancient belief' is still held as strongly as ever by numbers of people and its truth is sensed by many who do not know what name to give to whatever it is that makes a man human and causes him to reach out to the goodness he knows to be an objective reality.

Goodness and truth are not subjective. The human family did not make them up as it went along the ages. They exist independently of us. As C. S. Lewis puts it: 'The good is uncreated: it never could have been otherwise. It has in it no shadow of contingency: it lies, as Plato said, on the other side of existence. It is the Rita of the Hindus by which the gods themselves are divine: it is the Tao of the Chinese from which all realities proceed. But we, favoured beyond the wisest pagans, know that what lies beyond existence, what admits no contingency, what lends divinity to all else, what is the ground of all existence, is not simply a law but also a begetting love, a love begotten and the love which, being between these two, is also immanent in all those who are caught up to share the unity of their self-caused life. God is not merely good, but goodness: goodness is not merely divine, but God.'

All goodness and truth come to us from God and, for Charlotte Mason, this idea was wonderfully expressed in some medieval frescoes she saw in a Florentine church, depicting the Descent of the Holy Spirit. She never tired of studying this representation and helping others to see the force of it. The Holy Spirit is shown in the form of a dove. Within His light are the Apostles and the prophets and below, centrally enthroned, is St. Thomas Aquinas. Above him float the figures of the seven virtues. In a row at the front of the picture, beautiful in dignity and alertness, sit the fourteen 'knowledges' or sciences, accompanied by their greatest experts—many of them pagans.

The impression given is of the human family as one organic whole, with the grace of God resting on it at every level. Natural knowledge

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has its place just as the knowledge that comes to us by divine revelation has its place. There can be no opposition between them because they are aspects of the same truth.

'Our nature', Charlotte Mason said, 'craves after unity. The travail of thought, which is going on today and has gone on as long as we have any record of men's thoughts, has been with a view to establishing some principle for the unification of life. Here we have the scheme of a magnificent unity.'

This unity of life was one of the things she stressed in training students. Her biographer tells us: 'A reproduction of the frescoes had its place in a central position for all to live with. The

students called it the 'creed picture' coming slowly to understand how not only every increase in knowledge and power comes by the Divine Spirit, but also the way of using the things and the opportunities of daily life—the way to handle a microscope, the moment to choose for a word of praise or rebuke in school.'

Once the wholeness of life is seen in this way then everything matters; there are no irrelevant details. The smallest thing is worthwhile and should be done to the best of our abilities, not for the sake of being fussy and perfectionist, but because it is part of God's plan.

Everything is worthwhile, so the curriculum is to be rich with variety for as long as possible to give the child the opportunity of establishing many relations with the living world. This happy state of affairs will not be continued throughout his education because he will need to specialise. That is the way of things now and it is logical enough. A great mass of knowledge has been discovered in recent years and no-one can hope to master all of it. There is no sense in casting backward glances to the time when children sat with the elders learning how to make the stone axes and listening to all the lore of the tribe. The world has altered; there are more of us, we can exchange thoughts at great speed and it is not surprising that knowledge increases rapidly. But the narrowest specialisation will not harm somebody who lives his humanity to the full and remembers that there are many other branches of knowledge just as vital as his own.

Elizabeth Lawrence, in her book already referred to, suggests that if 'the curriculum were thought of not so much as a shopping list of the knowledge that we believe children should possess but as a way of releasing their energies, of helping them to come alive and to find themselves, there would be fewer problems of backwardness and delinquency, and we might have to reconsider, quite drastically, our views on the apparent limitations of intelligence.'

In the school run on Masonian lines the curriculum has never been thought of as a shopping list of the knowledge children ought to have. As to the limitations of intelligence, Charlotte Mason never tired of asserting that children are all too often under-estimated. Books are written down 'to their level' doing nothing but damage in the process. Boredom, not difficulty, is the enemy to be guarded against.

Slow-learning children can benefit greatly from the Masonian way of using books. Their lack of reading skill handicaps them in every subject. When their books are read aloud to them and they have the satisfaction of narrating successfully they are not only gaining knowledge but their confidence is being built up. Behaviour problems that arise out of boredom and frustration are

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avoided and genuine progress is made.

The boredom and frustration of the gifted child can cause equally serious behaviour problems. These will occur when the child's special needs go unnoticed. In a school run on the Masonian principle this is very unlikely to happen. Too much interest is taken in the individual child for the personality of such a one to be so misunderstood. This is not to say that he would be given the idea that he was a special case and need not try to adjust to the others but as a person with some particular talent he would be given every opportunity to develop it to the full.

Whatever a child's mental capacity, a wide and varied curriculum gives the opportunity for the development of personality. Some aspect of knowledge, or some branch of the arts, will

appeal to us far more than others. We rarely know why, but the urge to establish closer relations with this subject that attracts us so much can be powerful enough to guide us to a career or a life-long interest. The more subjects we deal with the more chance there is of developing these natural affinities and this matters enormously to our growth as a person. They might be described as the raw material of personality. It is a thousand pities if they are left unused because we just did not realise they were there.

This development does not cease when we are no longer children unless we allow ourselves to become so immersed in day to day living that we have no time for our real selves. This can be a danger in any demanding work and teaching is no exception.

It is necessary to stress that the child is a person but it has to be remembered that the teacher is a person too, with a physical make-up of flesh and bone not steel or polystyrene.

The modern curriculum reformers tend to toss off the remark in passing that of course their particular reform will make life harder for the teacher but the children will benefit. It is open to question whether if life is continuously made harder for the teacher the children will not suffer. One of Charlotte Mason's inflexible rules was that her students on teaching practice must not sit up late at night working. She held that a tired teacher was a bad teacher and it would do no harm for this to be said much oftener than it is.

The teacher needs time to be herself, and not just in the holidays. If she has no time for reading anything but text books and the odd thriller her work is bound to suffer. The young teacher who has not yet mastered the 'tricks of the trade' in the way of discipline and organisation has great need of enthusiasm. Charlotte Mason warned a group of her students that 'enthusiasm is a fire that throws out light and heat at a cost of constant waste of fuel. ... Every day new 'thoughts that burn' must be supplied or the fire will go out and present the dreariest of all spectacles, a desolate hearth.'

Reading, listening to music and having leisure to talk to friends are as necessary as food and sleep. It is not selfish to be very firm about this and refuse to let school-work and thoughts of school devour the evenings and the weekends.

That teachers should teach less and pupils should learn more is the state of affairs to be aimed at. How this is to be done is explained as, one by one, what Charlotte Mason called the 'three, valid educational instruments' are analysed for their use in the modern world.