

## The Educational Philosophy of Charlotte Mason

### 4. FREEDOM AND RESPONSIBILITY

'If we ask ourselves, what is the most inalienable and sacred right of a person *qua* person? I suppose the answer is liberty. Children are persons; *ergo* children must have liberty. Parents have suspected as much for a generation or two and have been at pains not 'to interfere' with their children; but our loose habits of thinking come in our way, and in the very act of giving their freedom to children we impose fetters which will keep them enslaved all their lives. That is because we confound liberty with licence and do not perceive that the two cannot co-exist.'

These words of Charlotte Mason show her belief in freedom and her equally firm belief that *the discipline of habit* is an essential tool in education. These are not opposites as is sometimes imagined but two different aspects of the same thing.

To understand this we must be very clear about what we mean by freedom. It is a word that is used very loosely because the concept is all too often not fully grasped. If someone is asked what is really meant by freedom the answer might be 'being able to do whatever you like' or 'feeling that nothing is hemming you in or frustrating you'. But doing whatever you like, regardless of the consequences, is licence not freedom, and feeling free is not at all the same thing as acting freely.

To *feel* free is one of the easiest things in the world. Drink or drugs can produce the feeling of being as free as air but it is just at such moments that there is no freedom at all, because the person is no longer in command of himself and able to make his own choices.

Freedom is the ability to choose, to say yes or no to the opportunities that present themselves, and the more we are in control of this ability to choose the freer we are.

To act instinctively as the animals do is not freedom. As Chesterton puts it in his book *Orthodoxy* a human being is the only really wild animal. All the others are tame; their behaviour runs to a pattern which they must follow. Man is the only one who has been given the gift of liberty, with all the glorious danger of responsibility for his every action.

A human action should involve the whole person; the more we are aware of what we are doing the more human we are. The tendency to drift through life without ever being fully alive is destructive of the human personality. But accepting this—and there are very few who would not accept it—it might be argued that habit, which Charlotte Mason praises as a discipline, is more likely to strengthen the tendency towards sleep-walking our way through life.

The answer to this objection is very short and simple. It is true of bad habits but not of good ones. The value is in 'the discipline of habits formed definitely and thoughtfully, whether habits of mind or of body'. It goes without saying that these must be good habits because we do not form bad habits in that

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way unless our humanity has been twisted out of all recognition. With normal people bad habits form themselves just because some aspect of living is not being given due thought and concern. In much the same way weeds spring up in that part of the garden that is left untended.

It is very easy to tell a good habit from a bad one. A good habit gives us more liberty and a bad one enslaves us.

The slavery of a bad habit is obvious to anyone but nowadays there are those who would argue that a good habit is a form of conditioning and therefore something we should be wary of praising. Good habits, whether of mind or of body, are attacked as behaviour patterns that are used as a substitute for making the choice or the response demanded by the occasion. But people who think this way do not seem to have looked at human nature at all.

All too often we know in our hearts what is the right choice or response to make in a certain situation but we are not able to make it. It is this weakness rather than deliberate malice that causes most human trouble.

Objectively it may be seen that a certain action is the right one or a certain decision must be taken but if our feelings or inclinations are pulling in the other direction it is extremely difficult not to be influenced by them.

Any of our natural tendencies can be so strong that our actions are no longer human in the true sense of the word: no longer the expression of the whole human person, a rational creature with emotions and imagination.

Habit can be of immense value here. It is not only habits of cleanliness and good social manners that make life run smoothly; good habits of thinking and feeling can greatly increase facility in living. Our whole attitude to life is to a great extent a question of habit: the habit of making negative criticisms or the habit of seeing that problems are meant for solving.

Good habits do not turn us into robots who make choices without knowing what is happening. They simply correct the bias in our nature. We are over-influenced by our feelings and imagination so that by nature we lurch to one side. Good habits of feeling and thinking can keep us to the central position—the right balance between reason and feeling—so that the will can make its choices without impossible strain.

It is best if these habits can be formed in childhood. A child has a great capacity for learning and it is a pity not to use this to the full. Being truly human will always be a struggle and it is folly not to take advantage of every opportunity there is for making things easier. It is true that a child who was never taught to discipline his thoughts and manage his feelings can learn to do so in adult life but the learning will be painful and difficult and, above all, time-consuming. When he is an adult he should be busy living his life not wasting time learning how to set about it.

The *discipline of habit* is such a vital educational tool that it is worthwhile considering in some detail how it is used in the Masonian method and precisely how it furthers the freedom of the child.

First there is the practice of narration. It is obvious that this is forming the habit of attention and from the intellectual point of view nothing could be more valuable, but [p 156]

properly practised it is doing much more than this. Self-expression is an integral part of narration. Not only the thought of the author is given expression when the narration takes place. The idea has either become part of the child's way of thinking or it has been rejected. Whichever is the reaction the spoken or written narration embodies the child's own thoughts.

The ability to communicate thought and feeling brings a great liberation. There are few things more frustrating than to be full of eagerness to communicate some experience or some idea but to fail to find the words that will make it real for the other person. The notion seems to be current that such communication is the most difficult thing in the world; even

the creative artists cannot really be expected to master it. If they cannot they should give up creative activity since they certainly have not been called to it. Communication is a matter of habit and practice and hard work, but as with all habits the hardest work is at the beginning.

To begin, while still a child, trying to express oneself to others is to have an advantage over those who begin, stumblingly, as adults. In a very real sense it means learning a language and this is always simpler for a child. It may not be a matter of declensions and tenses but it is a language all the same: an international language of imagery and symbol as old as humanity and as up-to-date as the youngest child learning it afresh for his own needs. To master this language by allowing poetry and music and story to teach one the words is to be made free of the whole world of the mind.

Still with narration we find the growth of the habit of thinking: of considering before reaching a conclusion. Thinking is too important an activity to be treated carelessly. A decision sensibly taken sets us free for action and it is good to have enough time, but not too much, for the necessary consideration.

The habit of goodwill grows up as a child learns how to approach the books he narrates from. He is ready to give his attention and join in a real dialogue with the writer. He may not be convinced, but he is ready to give serious consideration to the other person's point of view before coming to a decision. Such a lack of prejudice enlarges freedom. It is not vagueness or lack of personal opinions but rather a readiness to believe that other people's ideas deserve respect.

In a school run on Masonian principles the time-table is another vital part of this *discipline of habit*. The advantages of an integrated school day are felt to be outweighed by its disadvantages. The ideal of those advocating this method is expressed by Leonard Sealey, a former Leicestershire Schools' Inspector:

'An Integrated Day is one in which there are no class lessons as such. Instead, each child makes a unique synthesis of his learning experience. The classroom is subdivided into specially-equipped working areas. Normally, one area is associated with science and mathematics, another with reading and the language arts, a third with work in the visual arts; and a fourth serves as a general purpose area. Occasionally, teachers may work in pairs, accepting dual responsibility for two classes. This arrangement allows teachers to give some specialist attention to work relating to their own interests or particular abilities. There

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are many possible variations on this theme.'

This sounds like complete freedom for the child but, of course, things are not quite so simple. A Leicestershire head teacher points out:

'Contrary to popular belief, the Integrated Day does not mean 'we can do anything we like all day'. It involves a choice of subject and not necessarily a complete choice of subject content, so I have found it essential to have work planned to prevent time-wasting questions such as 'I finished that. What do I do now?'

The same teacher describes advantages of the method.

‘The flow of work is no longer interrupted by the division of the day as on a fixed timetable ... the mood of the class is livelier ... personal attention is easier ... the amount of work produced on any one assignment on any one day is not limited—other than by the child’s own capacity ... the children help one another ... few children are “lost” in this type of situation, though some prefer to be directed.’

The flaw in this approach is that the child’s interest in a subject is the basis of choice and it is not a sufficiently sound basis. Interest is a flickering, unreliable sensation. ‘We take the child as we find him’, Charlotte Mason explains, ‘a person with many healthy affinities and potential attachments, and we try to give him a chance to make the largest possible number of these attachments valid.’ This involves much more than encouraging a child to follow up his interests.

Most of these affinities and attachments are latent in the child. Neither he nor the teacher knows that they are there. For all practical purposes it can be said they do not exist until something causes them to spring up. A child may have an interest, more or less vague, in this subject or that topic but it is much more vital to his development that he is the person he is, with a certain heredity and a certain physical and mental make-up. Because he is that person there are a number of relationships that are necessary for his full flowering as an individual and as a member of society and the wider his experience of life the better are his chances of establishing these relationships. If we never meet some people or some situations how are we to get to know them? Interest is not at all the same as the sensation of home-coming, of finding oneself, that comes when one of the natural affinities leaps into sudden life.

How is a time-table any help here? The answer is that only a certain kind of time-table is meant. The Masonian philosophy sees the time-table not as a restriction but as a feast spread out: an abundance of riches which is sure to be the means of bringing a child joy. The greatest possible variety is to be provided so that there can be many chances of discovering the wonders of the mind and the heart. There is to be no picking and choosing; everything is to be sampled.

There should be no divorce between the present and the past. For a long time the danger was that educationalists would undervalue the literature, art and thought of the present and lay too much stress on that of the past. Now the reverse is true. There is a strong tendency to overvalue the work of the present and dismiss that of the past as lacking relevance to this present age.

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Both attitudes are cramping to the mind. A child should be introduced to all that is worthwhile in the present and in the past. There is no reason why affinities should be restricted by time and space; ideas are timeless and two minds can meet across the centuries with no trouble at all if there is a common visual or written language. It is a great pity if a child is given the impression that only the thought of the present day matters to him. This produces the narrowest of parochial outlooks when what we need so much is universality and breadth of vision.

But a time-table, however wide, does impose restrictions on a pupil. He is not free to spend as many hours as he likes on a particular assignment. The flow of his work may be interrupted because it is time to begin considering some other and completely different topic. This will certainly happen but it does not follow that any damage will be done to a child’s basic freedom as a person.

It is of immense importance that a child should learn the value of time. The old saying that if we waste bread we waste life can be adapted with equal validity to say that if we waste time we waste life. Nothing is more precious; it is the very beating of our life's pulse. A child who has been taught the right use of time has a flair for living and the ability to get things done.

This is not another way of saying we must all join in the rat-race for success. The right use of time makes for hard work and serenity of outlook because things are done when they ought to be done. Parkinson's 'law' that work expands to fill the time available for it has an element of truth in it. If we have more time than is necessary for some piece of work it is all too easy to waste some of it. Charlotte Mason was always alert to this danger. Her biographer, who had been a student in Scale How, the college Miss Mason set up and directed, remembers how she learned to value time during her student days:

'... To many of us life was overfull. We would not be hurried; we liked to say, "I will do it in my own time". But at Scale How time was to be respected, given to the thing or person claiming it rightfully. Then there would always be time, without over-pressure or distraction. This sense of time value was hard to achieve but it bore the test of experience during the two years' training. What an effort of faith it all was to one so slow to read, to write and to think. It did not seem possible to find a moment for everything, yet if no time was wasted there was plenty of it and no hurry.'

A pupil's time-table, like that of those students in training, will be very full and hard work will be necessary but it will not be work that drags on too long. This is what really tires a child—or indeed an adult—not a short concentrated time of study. Work is done in school time, not during those hours that should be used for other activities. Home-work is something the Masonian method does not consider at all. A child must have time for his hobbies and games, his leisure reading and his own thoughts. These are every bit as essential to his development as his more formal studies. This freedom of leisure is denied to many children nowadays and plays a part in making study a burden rather than an adventure.

Unnecessary burdens are not to  
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be laid on a child in this, as in other aspects of school life. The kind of harsh regime that cramps the spirit is out of favour nowadays. It is seen that those administering it make too many choices that the child ought to make for himself and so stifle freedom. It is not clearly seen that an over-indulgent teacher is an enemy of freedom too.

There can be no freedom if we are the captive of our whims and fancies. A genuine education produces a young person able to stand on his own feet and make his own decisions: someone who can give his whole willed attention to the matter in hand and who sees the relation and proportion of things, at the same time caring deeply for what he sees. This means someone who has learned to exercise discipline over himself so that he never expects to have things done for him if he is able to do them for himself and whatever he begins he finishes fully and properly. This is a difficult art to practise, possibly one of the most difficult of all but its value in life is tremendous. Not only does it mean more perfectly finished work is produced but more energy is released in the person himself. Something unfinished nags at the mind and wastes its power whereas a well-finished job gives the one

who has done it the joy of the good craftsman; the thrill of looking at something and seeing that it is good.

Indulging a child and making endless excuses for him will not help him to learn the self-control he needs for freedom. He must get used to making an effort. The teacher who really loves children knows that genuine love is made up of sympathy with severity, patience with intransigence and understanding with firmness. The teacher who does not love children in this way, which means wanting only what is good for them, had much better find something else to do for a living.

If all this sounds rather a grim business it must be remembered that although the three educational tools—atmosphere, the discipline of habit and the impact of living ideas—are being treated separately, in practice they cannot be separated from one another. The whole atmosphere of the school will be conducive to good habits. The child learns far more from example and the power of ideas than from exhortation.

Growing up in Christian environment he learns the habit of humility, a virtue that sees things as they are and therefore very often sees their funny side first. Without it so much would be left undone in the world. Pride—like Julius Caesar—is not inclined to embark on anything unless it will be able to excel. Humility knows it will very likely make a fool of itself but as there is nobody else available and the job needs to be done it must be tackled somehow or other.

It is essential that the attitude to the formation of good habits should be light-hearted. Without this the many failures that are bound to occur will assume an importance they do not really have. The purpose of the whole exercise is to increase freedom and this end should never be lost sight of by the teacher. It is not easy to do this without sliding over into the over-indulgence of condoning failures but it is possible, with a little tact and with respect for the child's personality. Failures are failures and should not be described as anything else but there is no need to waste time analysing them. It is more profitable to look ahead to the next time and give whatever help and advice may be needed. Negative criticism is worth-

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less and recrimination can be downright harmful because it rouses resentment. As they say in Ireland, the words 'I told you so' have spilt more blood than vengeance.

Two of the education tools have been treated now. We see how, in the atmosphere of reality, the child learns how to be a free human being able to make his own choices. In considering living ideas it will be seen how these choices are made and how a child, whatever his background, is capable of growing in knowledge and real understanding.