

## The Educational Philosophy of Charlotte Mason

### 5. LIVING IDEAS

'IT is our temptation', Charlotte Mason wrote, 'to make too personal a matter of education, to lose sight of the fact that education is a world business, that the lessons of the ages have been duly set and that each age is concerned, not only with its own particular page, but with every preceding page. For who has mastered a book if he is familiar with only the last page of it!'

She is stressing the point that children have the right to be put in touch with the great ideas of the past because without this they have no criterion for judging the ideas of the present. It is narrow-minded and parochial in the extreme to fancy we have nothing to learn from the past ages, to imagine that because a poet or a philosopher is dead his glimpse of the truth behind the appearances we see has no value any more. It lives on and can exert tremendous influence over those who discover it. This realisation of the importance of living ideas accounts for the Masonian concern for children to be at home in the world of books.

A human being is a social animal and does not develop properly in isolation. It is impossible for him to learn how to live unless he has plenty of contact with other people but if we interpret this in Rousseau's fashion and call for all the books to be closed except the book of life we are living in a dream. We cannot close up all the books any more than we can empty all the cities and go back to the land. Books are superfluous only where there is a living oral tradition and this presupposes small, tightly-knit communities that are now the exception rather than the rule.

Where there are great crowds of people we need the mass media for communication and especially the oldest form, the printed word. A book, for someone who reads easily and quickly, is in many ways more efficient than either radio or television. It is genuinely portable and not subject to technical interference or failure and it is easy for a reader to enter into a real dialogue with an author. It is possible to pause, take one of the ideas away and consider it for a few hours and then go back to the exact place and pick up the thread of meaning. Theoretically the same thing is possible with radio and television by the use of recording techniques but the process is far more cumbersome.

Books are necessary if we are to be in touch with the past and put the present in perspective and we are under-developed if we are cut off from the past or if we do not understand the many dimensions of the present moment. This explains Charlotte Mason's warning against making education too personal a matter and it is not a warning that is out-dated. There is a very real danger of this result when the educational approach is by environmental work. It is a fine experience to handle and feed the school pets and make a study of the local pond or the nearest building site but this approach on its own is not sufficiently out-going to nourish the mind.

Children need ideas from the very

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first. This means as soon as they begin to think and they begin to think long before they can use the faculty of reasoning efficiently. They constantly draw wrong conclusions not because they cannot reason but because they have not enough data to arrive at the right conclusion.

We are stunting the mental growth of children if we will not accept this fact. Up to about the age of three coherent thought is rare but, from then on, the brain is constantly trying to make sense of the messages reaching it from all sides. In other words the child has begun to think.

Modern research on the brain does not come down on the side of those who claim that the thinking of a child differs radically from that of an adult, that it is a different *kind* of thought. For a time it did seem that research provided evidence of this because it was found that the alpha rhythms, considered to be the rhythms of adult life, were very rare in children before the age of eight. With the improvement of analytical techniques a greater number and variety of rhythms were identified. It is now found that there are no records of children below the age of three which contain normal adult rhythms but from three onwards the rhythms of a normal adult appear more and more frequently.

Johnson and Medinnus say in their book *Child Psychology* that thinking 'is a form of complex learning that is considered unique to humans. The most comprehensive theory concerning the development of the thought process is that of Piaget, who believes that qualitative differences in thinking occur with age. Piaget to the contrary, we believe that evidence suggests that children probably think much the same way as adults do, although children's thought processes are handicapped chiefly by their smaller stores of information.'

Piaget's long, patient experimentation and the learned presentation of his findings in book after book have earned him a respect amounting almost to reverence but this should not prevent us from disagreeing with him in his conclusions if our own experience drives us to do so. Johnson and Medinnus remark that the view that children think in the same way as adults, but on the basis of less adequate information, is expressed less often than the Piagetan view. This is not surprising, considering the position Piaget holds in the educational field, but a dominant idea is not necessarily correct.

A child has a capacity for forming vivid mental pictures which is usually lost as he grows older but this does not mean that a young child is living some sort of sub-human life mentally and abstract thinking is quite foreign to him. Those who accept the Piagetan view would hold that abstract concepts cannot be formed until about the age of twelve. Yet we know that children can and do form such concepts much earlier. Indeed we know it so well and take it so much for granted that we may not even see it for what it is. For example, a three-year-old can have a concept of 'life'. Adults judge that the content of his concept is wrong if he attributes life to his teddy bear or an imaginary playmate but to be wrong in terms of concept content is not at all the same as being unable to deal with an abstract concept at all. Studies that appear to support the Piagetan position are in fact simply showing that as a child gets older the ability to deal with abstract problems increases because he has had an increasing experience of such problems and he is gaining more knowledge all the time.

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The Masonian philosophy of education holds that children need living ideas from the very first. Before they can read or reason with accuracy they are forming concepts and not just of material things. It is being increasingly realised that the basic attitude to life is formed in very early childhood and it is the duty of an educator to do everything possible to help this basic attitude to be an open-handed and welcoming one.

Children who cannot yet read but are surrounded by the complexities of our civilisation

might be compared to a people with no written literature. Such people would have a living oral literature and we should provide this by reading aloud the traditional myths and fairy tales using the words of some first-rate storyteller. This is more valuable than telling a halting, badly expressed story in our own words. Where literature is transmitted orally the storyteller is always a skilled professional and not some bumbling amateur.

The traditional stories have lived on because they were felt to be valuable and through them a child can form his concepts of justice and courage; his sense of the fundamental goodness of life however harsh or grim is [sic] may be at times. He will realise, without being able to put it into words, that life is an unexplained gift and the material appearances are not all there is to reality—indeed they may completely mask it.

In the present climate of opinion when the work of the past is being increasingly undervalued—except by the antique dealers—the folk and and [sic] fairy tales are tolerated for the very young but the choice of Homer's world for the child who is beginning to read is liable to be attacked as lacking relevance to the present day. Those who take this attitude would confine a child much to [sic] narrowly. It makes for excellent balance to have one foot in the Bronze Age and the other in the Twentieth Century so long as both feet are planted with an equal firmness.

It is constantly being said nowadays that children should be taught to think for themselves. Edward de Bono, the exponent of 'lateral thinking' suggests 'Might there come a time when thinking is taught throughout education for one hour—once a week?' But we can no more think without ideas than we can make clothes without material. If we have plenty of living ideas there will be no need to make Thinking a subject on the school time-table; we will think because we cannot help it.

A child who is accustomed to narrating the substance of what has been read realises that it is the ideas that matter. It is these that he either accepts or rejects. The beauty of the language or the originality of the artistic form must not be confused with the ideas being communicated. This is a vitally important lesson to learn. In the words of the Irish dramatist J. M. Synge: 'We are told it is absurd to say a work of art is unwholesome if it is good art. There are beautiful and interesting plants which are deadly and others that are kindly. It is absurd to say a flower is not beautiful nor admire its beauty because it is deadly but it is absurd also to deny its deadliness.' A play by Beckett can be praised because he uses words like music while at the same time his idea of the complete futility of life should be utterly rejected.

The erosion of human values in modern literature and the arts in general is something that cannot be passed over in any consideration of the life of the mind. Charlotte Mason [p 201]

does not take it into account because it had not in her time gone so far as to be noteworthy. If she were writing today she could not avoid dealing with it. It is something that anyone connected with education must think out clearly because it is a very strange phenomenon deserving of much more attention than it gets.

In considering it there is a certain advantage in taking the stance already described, that of having one foot in the Bronze Age and the other in the present day. Someone so placed can see that a period of human development when life was harsh and uncertain, if not downright dangerous, produced the calm strength of epic poetry while our own age, which has perhaps more care for social justice and more compassion for people than we find in any previous time,

has the cancer of sadness eating into all the arts.

This sadness is very different from the normal human grief for some loss or other. Such grief is a natural part of human life at various times and it gradually dies away as the memory of the loss fades. But the sadness referred to grows by what is [sic] feeds on and is destructive of human nature. We do not need the Book of Proverbs to tell us that 'like the worm in the wood and the moth in the garment the sadness of a man eats away the heart'. Perhaps despair is a better name for it than sadness; despair that is a voluntary apathy towards attaining happiness, a withdrawal of the will from making any effort towards meaning, as it is judged there is none to be found. It is an absolute turning away from life and must be understood as such. Respect for an artist's prestige or power over his means of expression must not be allowed to blur our view of him and our realisation that this despair is a matter of choice. For an artist to make such a choice there must be a betrayal of his deepest self; he was intended to be a maker not a destroyer.

An artist, whether he expresses himself in words or in the handling of material, has not only the faculty of sensing the reality behind the appearances of everyday life—we all have this now and again in flashes—but he has the drive, to give his ideas a very real life of their own so that they continue to be vibrant with power as long as the form that contains them remains in being.

It might be objected that we delude ourselves in condemning the artist who passes on his idea of the futility of everything. If an artist despairs is it not because he has really seen the senselessness of being alive on a decaying planet in a hostile, frightening universe? But in fact despair is an internal choice, a decision to turn away from life, that is not much influenced by thoughts of the possible heat-death of the earth or the hostility or otherwise of outer space.

Bertrand Russell stated once in a radio programme: 'So far as scientific evidence goes the universe has crawled by slow stages to a somewhat pitiful result on this earth, and is going to crawl by still more pitiful stages to a condition of universal death. If this is to be taken as evidence of purpose I can only say that the purpose is one that does not appeal to me.' But believing this he was ready to nail his flag to the mast and go down—still fighting—with the sinking universe.

It would seem that it is not his view of the cosmos but his view of his own inner world that makes a man despair.

There is no doubt a certain relief in despair, because being fully human

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is never easy, but it is the false relief of the escaped prisoner who gives himself up because he is weary of being hunted. There is certainly pride in it—the pride of having seen through the pathetic little dreams and hopes of the other people. It is no more use than lying down to sleep in the snow would be to someone trying to find his way in a blizzard; it cuts off the possibility of ever finding warmth and light and hospitality.

It has been suggested that too easy a life is destructive in that it saps the vitality and produces a vague melancholy which undervalues human effort. Probably a case could be made out for this. Solzhenitsyn's Ivan Denisovich is very much a man as he tries to survive in the labour camp. Perhaps a spell in a labour camp or a couple of seasons working on a trawler in the Iceland fishing grounds should be part of the apprenticeship of any aspiring writer in the affluent society. Perhaps it was a good knowledge of human reactions that was responsible for

the methods used in training the poets in ancient Ireland. They were shut up in a dark room with no windows for a night and a day during which time they were to compose a poem on whatever subject had been given to them. It was said by the master poet who was in charge that light would be a distraction but maybe he was taking into account the contrariness of human nature that so often does not properly value anything until it suddenly goes missing. The mind starved of light in this way would hunger after it and look on the flames of the candles when they were brought in at last with some of the wonder of those who first saw fire.

All this may seem a very long way from the education of children but it is important for a teacher to have clear ideas about the intellectual climate of our time.

We should give children living ideas just as we should give them wholesome food. Adults can be assumed to have learned some self-preservation but children are very vulnerable. They have to trust in the goodwill of those around them to provide what they need. There is no life, and therefore no sustenance, in the idea that everything is futile and since we cannot hope for meaning we must make do with sensation.

A teacher who inclines to this view would be better employed breaking stones than educating the young but since a teacher needs such vast amounts of energy the life-haters are rare in the profession. The impatient and the exasperated are less rare but they are less dangerous though they can be inconvenient, to say the least of it, to children and fellow-teachers alike.

Something that a teacher needs to guard against is the temptation to be up-to-date against her better judgement. If she is a good teacher she should trust her judgement and remember that today's latest fashion may be tomorrow's old hat. In the area of facts and objective truth she should be as up-to-the-minute as she can. If the maps of the moon have been amended or there has been a break-through in the knowledge of the structure of the living cell she should know about it if she can but if she is told by the so-called experts that the polarisation of right/wrong or good/evil is too simple for this stage of human development she has every right to ask who appointed them to be experts.

Not to recognise and try to understand the loss of identity in twentieth-century life and literature is to be separated from much of the age  
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we live in but there is no sense in losing one's own sense of identity out of a misguided notion of human solidarity. If someone is drowning in a river that is rushing headlong towards a waterfall the size of Niagara an onlooker will do little good by jumping in and being swept away too. He might do some good if he has such a firm grip on the bank he is able to grab the unfortunate and haul him out of the river.

In a world increasingly wired for sound a teacher needs to make the best use of radio and television herself and show the children in her care how to do the same. A school working on Masonian principles should not be content with narrating the substance of books. Radio and television programmes should be used for narration especially by the older children. With radio the technique would be very little different from that used with a book that is read aloud but television needs a rather special approach. The image is—or should be if it is good television—as important as the sound and it would be necessary to give the substance of both. For example if a documentary programme claimed to be aiming at impartiality but the photography was loaded with emotional content favouring one side of the question this would be an important

point to make. To notice such a use of the pictorial element is not always easy if the programme is fast-moving and well produced, but it is vital that children should know how to analyse in this way.

Of course the traffic of living ideas should be a two-way one. This means that children must have practice in getting their ideas across to others. Because of their training in narration children in a PNEU school find themselves at an advantage but the school should not be content with this.

It is sometimes lamented that conversation is a dying art but this is surely to take a false view of conversation. If we examine one of those past worthies whose conversation was so sparkling we find that he talked—at great length and no doubt brilliantly—and everyone else listened. No doubt it was stimulating and thought-provoking but was it conversation at all?

Ordinary conversation does not need to be brilliant. It should be comfortable as an old shoe and it does not matter if some of the expressions used would make a grammarian blench.

But if we are talking in order to exchange ideas and not just to make companionable noises this is something requiring skill and certainly should have a place in the school time-table for the older pupils. They should learn how to use the voice for communication. This does not mean elocution classes but practice in saying just what is meant as crisply as possible. Class discussions often defeat their purpose because the pupils become incoherent with enthusiasm or indignation or some other emotion that impairs clarity. It can be useful to have discussions where the viewpoints are drawn by lot and personal feelings do not cloud the mind. This is not training in insincerity since everyone knows another character is being assumed for the purposes of the debate. It can be the means of leading a teenager to ponder seriously a viewpoint never considered before.

Simplicity is to be aimed at in this type of exercise and any other that trains the facility to speak. Rhetoric does not suit this age; we tend to be either amused or embarrassed by it.

Clarity is what should be aimed at

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because if we are not clear we will not be understood and there is a failure of communication.

Our aim must be to provide enough living ideas to make a child a person who is resilient, who sees difficulties but at the same moment begins to look for solutions to them. The synthesis each child makes of his own ideas and those of others will be a personal matter because we are all different and that is the way it should be. The more we are truly ourselves the more we have to contribute to the people round us.