

The Educational Philosophy of Charlotte Mason

6. SYNTHESIS

THE whole of Charlotte Mason's educational philosophy is an affirmation of the great value of human personality. This underlies everything else and when she was stating her philosophy the first sentence was always: 'Children are born persons.' It is this idea that unites everything she held and taught.

It can be said without exaggeration that the Masonian philosophy recognises the *sacredness* of the person. It is constantly reminding educators that there are limits beyond which they must not go and this reminder is never out-dated. The boy scout who had such difficulty helping the old lady across the road because she did not want to go is no doubt fictional. Yet the story amuses us just because we recognise in him the deep-rooted tendency in all of us to mind other people's business instead of our own.

When the other people are children this meddling and prying may be given rather grand names. It may be called character formation or, perhaps, development of the creative potential but, whatever its name, it remains an impertinence to say the least.

This does not mean that freedom is to be confused with licence. Moral values do not change. If fashion decrees that certain moral values are out of date it is the business of the educator to point out that the fashion is out of line with reality, but large areas of human life do not involve choices between good and evil, but between various kinds of good. It is only our tastes and inclinations that are involved: those natural affinities that cause us to form relationships with certain people and places and things rather than with others. In this area of life there must be freedom if there is to be development of personality, and, all too often, educators interfere with this freedom because they find it hard to believe that the affinities that are natural to them can be completely alien to another person.

When this kind of thing happens we are back to the sorry situation of the person who lives for others, and we can easily pick out the others by their hunted expression.

The teacher, like the parent, has a part to play in helping a child to reach maturity, but it is only a part. A child is under authority but that authority has limits. In Charlotte Mason's words: 'The principles of authority on the one hand and of obedience on the other, are natural, necessary and fundamental but these principles are limited by the respect due to the personality of children which must not be encroached upon, whether by the direct use of fear or love, suggestion or influence, or by undue play upon any one natural desire.'

Nowadays, when people are muddled about the place of authority in their lives it is necessary to spend some time on the fact of the authority before dealing with its limits.

Children must be under authority or they will be stunted in growth or simply will not survive at all. Just because the human brain is such a wonderful instrument, and the

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skills the human hand is capable of are so many and varied, the young human being is a long time coming to maturity. There is much that has to be learned for sheer survival, and much to be learned for giving richness to life, before he reaches the stage of taking his place in society and really giving usefully to others. It is a complicated process of growth and if some people fail to achieve it the fault very often lies in the authority they had a right to expect, but were

deprived of, in their growing time. An authority that abdicates and refuses to take responsibility is just as much a monstrosity as an authority that forgets its purpose and is twisted into tyranny.

Authority must be there but it must realise its limits. Its work is not character formation.

In saying this it is necessary to be clear about what is meant. The outlines of the words 'character' and 'personality' have become rather blurred so it will be best to attempt a definition. A person's character is taken to be that particular blend of physical, mental and spiritual strengths and weaknesses peculiar to him, while his personality is taken to be the impact of that character on others and the realisation by himself of his own personal identity.

We cannot *form* someone's character without doing violence to the personality and encountering a very natural and proper resistance. Other people are not fruit trees for us to prune, or shapeless blocks of wood out of which we can carve a likeness we happen to admire—a likeness that will almost certainly be an idealised projection of ourselves. Other people have heights and depths we cannot know. We tend to think that because they look out on the same world as ourselves they see just what we see, but what we see is coloured by what we think, and no two of us think alike. No research is needed to come to this conclusion. It is common sense. We cannot imitate someone else's way of thinking because we only see the results, not the process itself. We are forced to think in our own way and it is bound to be peculiar to us, as our character is peculiar to us.

The character formation that aims at producing a certain type attempts to violate the freedom of the person. It does not signify whether it is the type, fashionable in the last century, with the heart well hidden from public view on all occasions or the more fashionable type with the heart on the sleeve. Both will produce falsity and unreality, the first because it leads to a denial of very real feelings, and the second because it leads to a pretence of feelings that do not exist in that individual but are felt to be socially desirable.

The character formation that aims at producing a good Christian is in great danger of producing the Pharisee who is in command of himself and knows it, and, secure in this knowledge, sits in judgement on the rest of men who cannot keep the law, either because they do not know it or because they have not achieved his self-control. In other words it is in great danger of producing a person who is eaten up with pride.

It is worth remembering that Christ did not say 'I have come to form characters' but 'I have come so that they may have life and have it to the full'. It is only when we have mastered this that we are able to go on to 'If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross and follow me', and the equally firm reminder that a seed cannot produce fruit unless it is prepared to die as

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a seed. Here it is worth quoting C. S. Lewis with his wise comment: 'You don't teach a seed how to die into treehood by throwing it into the fire: and it has to become a good seed before it's worth burying.'

To a Christian, character formation makes little sense. God has a plan for each of us whereby we will become fully human: the person we were intended to be. Other people will often be instrumental in bringing this about but it would be crass folly for one of them to imagine that he had access to the blueprint and could envisage the end-product and work towards it.

Meddling under another name is more fashionable nowadays. This is the so-called development of creative potential, referred to earlier. It is simply another way of claiming access to the blueprint. 'Creative' is a vogue word just now and like all vogue words is being worked to death. Creativity in the true sense is rare and it cannot be forced. On the other hand, where it does exist it has as little need of assistance as a laser beam. Whether it destroys the person possessing it, or whether he uses it to cut a new road through solid rock, is again something that only the person concerned can decide.

To attempt to set creativity up as some sort of educational status symbol is dangerous, not to those who possess it, or more accurately are possessed by it, but to those who are talented in other ways. They are tempted to undervalue the basics of good work and craftsmanship, where there can be great contentment, and make themselves miserable chasing after a creativity they fancy is necessary. It is no more necessary in day to day living than an earthquake or a flood, and its counterfeit, that is passed off in its place, is just about as necessary as waste plastic. Again to quote C. S. Lewis: 'While we believe that good is something to be invented we demand of our rulers such qualities as "vision", "dynamism", "creativity". If we returned to the objective view we should demand qualities much rarer and more beneficial—virtue, knowledge, diligence and skill. "Vision" is for sale, or claims to be for sale, everywhere but give me a man who will do a day's work for a day's pay, who will refuse bribes, who will not make up his facts and who has learned his job.'

We cannot invent the good and we cannot invent a character it would be suitable for a child to have and then try to form him into that shape. He is already a person with a person's right to be respected and therefore the Masonian philosophy restricts the educational instruments to the three that have been dealt with in previous articles—the atmosphere of environment, the discipline of habit and the presentation of living ideas.

The atmosphere is to be that of reality so that a child learns how to deal with people and things. Too many young people fail to do what they might have done for want of that elementary wisdom that is called 'getting on well with people'. When this happens parents and teachers are largely to blame, because it is a skill that has to be taught like any other skill. It has to be practised too, like any other skill, before there can be any facility in it.

In an atmosphere that is real and not artificially produced a child learns that there is a time for being with other people and a time for being alone. The right ratio between them differs for each person but both are essential. We need to be able to live with ourselves and to [p 245]

live with other people. Insight usually comes in solitude and we need silence to think things through but we are not meant to work in isolation. There has to be contact with other people. We have to know people as persons in their own right, not as lay figures in some theory we hold about life.

This is a need for everyone but it is a vital necessity for those who deal in thought. There is always the danger that people will become puppets the thinker plays with in his mind. They will become less and less like the awkward, difficult, likeable individuals who could help him to correct his economic or political theory and make it useful and workable.

The discipline of habit sets us free to get on with the business of living. A child can be helped to form good habits without any invasion of his personal privacy. Having been exposed to the atmosphere of reality he knows that life is a struggle. If we leave things alone they do not

stay the same; they degenerate. It does not matter whether he learns this from Virgil in the *Georgics* or from noticing a white painted door that is gradually turning grey. What matters is that he learns it early and knows how to apply the remedy as he meets example after example of this law of life.

He is going to spend a lifetime coping with problems, either by solving them himself or waiting for someone else to come and do it for him. If he can get into the habit of taking the first way rather than the second he will find it very useful, and often great fun. It is immensely encouraging to find that there are more and more things he can do if he tries.

Living ideas will help him to cope with these problems and to see other people as separate persons each with his own identity, rather than those who can, or cannot, be used as stepping-stones to get where he wants to be. If we are trying to deal with someone else's ideas we are not in much danger of seeing that someone else only as an extension of ourself. Once it has come home to us that other people cannot be treated as extensions or projections of ourselves we are well on the way to showing justice towards them.

Living ideas are needed if a child is to stay a young and supple person all his life, not young in body because this is bound to wear out, but young in mind. It is the duty of an educator to help a child towards maturity but it is nobody's duty to put years on him mentally. To be young in mind is to enjoy painting the greying door white, without wasting energy lamenting that the new brightness will not last.

We grow by what we feed on and the mind grows by the ideas that have become part of it. Education, as Charlotte Mason says, is the science of relations. We cannot know all about everything but we can form more and more relationships and become more and more fully human. One subject lights up another, truths connect up, and the sudden stimulus of seeing them come together sets the mind racing off in some other direction never explored before. 'To him who has will be given, and from him who has not even the little he has will be taken away' is not a threat or a hard, spiritual saying. It is simply a statement of the human condition. That is the way we function. It is only another way of saying we are under the same laws as the things around us; if we are just left to ourselves we do not stay the same, we degenerate.

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While the child is at school plenty of knowledge should be made available to him. Facts are not enough. Many facts will interest him and some of them will be important but they need ideas to give them life and transform them into real knowledge. Variety of this knowledge will give variety of opportunity for chancing on the ideas that will matter to him as a person.

The knowledge is best communicated in well chosen language. In practice this means by the use of well-written books because the mind attends naturally to words that are well used and it would be folly not to make use of this natural tendency. There is no profit to anyone in struggling through a book that does nothing but stimulate tedium—if stimulate is the word for such a grinding process.

Charlotte Mason is emphatic that all books used must be living books. Something of the writer must have gone into them so that the reader is put in touch directly with the writer's mind.

'A book may be long or short, old or new, easy or hard, written by a great man or a lesser man, and yet be the *living* book which finds its way to the mind of a young reader. The expert is not the person to choose, the children themselves are the experts in this case. A single

page will elicit a verdict; but the unhappy thing is, this verdict is not betrayed; it is acted upon in the opening or closing of the door of the mind. Many excellent and admirable school books appreciated by masters are on the Index Expurgatorium of the schoolboy; and that is why he takes nothing in and gives nothing out. The master must have it in him to distinguish between twaddle and simplicity, and between vivacity and life. For the rest, he must experiment or test the experiments of others, being assured of one thing—that a book serves the ends of education only as it is vital.'

The single reading and the narration afterwards is the place where teachers are inclined to raise their eyebrows. They will agree about the need for living books but a single reading seems a far too risky way of acquiring knowledge. Someone is sure to come up with the objection that in teaching 'you tell them what you're going to tell them; you tell them; then you tell them what you've told them'. This is usually followed by 'and, even then, by next day they've forgotten'. Who could blame them? Certainly not anyone who has ever sat through a lecture given on the 'tell them three times' principle. Like Dr. Johnson you withdraw your attention and consider Tom Thumb, in sheer self defense against the boredom.

Here Charlotte Mason shows her belief again in the dignity of the person. If an adult is bored to death by the 'tell them once, tell them twice and tell them you've told them' torment why should a child's reaction be any different? Because he is young? But a young mind has stronger powers of attention. His reactions are not any different but he is used to adults being odd in many ways and, no doubt, accepts this as yet another instance of adult insanity.

The single reading with a narration afterwards demands full attention, but a demand for full attention is far more to the point educationally than repeated attempts to call back the mind to attend to something it has lost interest in and will certainly hear again anyway. The human mind behaves in a certain way in order to conserve its energy; if it

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knows something is going to be repeated it pays little attention. It is rather like those children who are called three times in the morning by an over-zealous parent, who grumbles that the first two calls are ignored and only the third is taken seriously.

In this use of narration after a single reading or hearing children are trained to give their full, willed attention to the subject and the Masonian philosophy takes this a stage further. It holds that children should be taught to distinguish between wanting and willing. This means explaining how to withdraw attention from what is desired against one's will and one's better judgement. To try *not* to think about this appealing distraction only causes it to loom larger. It is useful for a child to realise what is happening when the mind gives its attention to something. There is a strength of attachment which is very hard to break. The best way of breaking it—if it needs to be broken—is to turn the attention to something else that interests or attracts the mind.

This understanding of one's mental processes helps to develop the personality: the realisation of personal identity. With this realisation of identity and of the freedom of human action comes the sense of responsibility.

The Masonian philosophy teaches that children as soon as they are mature enough should be brought to see that the 'chief responsibility which rests on them as persons is the acceptance or rejection of ideas'. Nobody can do our thinking for us. We are born persons with possibilities for good and evil. Other people can help or hinder us but the choices that make us

or destroy us have to be personal choices. Either we turn towards life or we turn away from it, and as long as our heart beats we have opportunities to turn in the right direction.

'It would seem', Charlotte Mason remarks, 'that human nature needs the discipline of failure as well as success.' Some people need it more than others. 'Success' as the Irishman said 'has not spoiled me. But then, of course, I've had no success and that has helped greatly.'

He was an exceptional case. Most of us are all the better for a measure of success and the confidence it builds up. But failure can occur at any time and must be kept in its place. To go into some venture with a shrug, expecting or half-expecting to fail is not a sign of maturity but of laziness or timidity. If we approach things in this half-hearted way we deserve to fail because not enough energy is generated. If we tackle things whole-heartedly, with a determination to succeed, we will sometimes succeed and sometimes fail and this is as it should be. We can be grateful for the successes and learn from the failures, and continue to be the same person with the same aims and ideals.

The sacredness of the person is something that carries other responsibilities besides the acceptance or rejection of ideas. It carries the obligation of being honest with ourselves and others. Our life is a unity no matter how many different networks we are caught up in. Work, social life, love, friendships, interests: whatever the points of contact with other people it should be the same person acting all the time. It is one thing to adapt our approach to each group or individual. It is another, and wholly pernicious, thing to deny our deepest self, or to project a different image according to our surroundings and lose contact with what we really are in this

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bewilderment of images. A personality can have many facets but it must be basically sound and whole.

Each of us is born a person and with a child's simplicity. Charlotte Mason's educational philosophy might be summed up by saying that we should live—and die—that same person, and with that same simplicity, strengthened and deepened by our contact with life.

We should live, and die, able to say with Chesterton:

'Life is not void or stuff for scorners;
We have lived long and kept our love.
We have heard singers in the tavern corners
And not forgotten the stars above.
We have known smiters and sons of thunder
And not unworthily walked with them.
We have kept laughter and lost not wonder:
And we have seen Jerusalem.'