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Growing Time: Thoughts on Charlotte Mason and Teaching a More Natural Science

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When Keats praised the mellow fruitfulness of autumn, he was describing the changes of the natural world around us. But as students return this fall to a new school year, I cannot but meditate on the inward maturing and ripening that must accompany the labor of learning. For many of the youngest students, however, the expectations of early academic preparedness have become an oppressive regime. Certainly, there are schools where “high mental discipline” may be found combined with “conscientious development of character,” and with “such spiritual insight and teaching as help the child into a better life,” but of course, there are schools and there are schools.[1] Discerning the difference is essential, but difficult. Happily, the earnest parent who desires a better life for his child may find help and inspiration in an unlikely place—the writings of a late-19th-century British educator of whom most will have never heard: Charlotte Mason.

Mason gave her life to education. She founded the House of Education in Ambleside, England, and developed a “working and philosophic theory of education.”[2] Her years of teaching, administration, and reflection yielded a series of six volumes, produced over the course of her life: *Home Education*, *Parents and Children*, *School Education*, *Ourselves*, *Formation of Character*, and *A Philosophy of Education*. In the first of these volumes, Mason suggests a remedial course for what she describes as a time of extraordinary social and educational pressure:

perhaps a mother’s first duty to her children is to secure for them a quiet growing time, a full six years of passive receptive life, the waking part of it spent for the most part out in the fresh air. And this, not for the gain in bodily health alone—body and soul, heart and mind, are nourished with food convenient for them when the children are let alone, let to live without friction and without stimulus amongst happy influences which incline them to be good.[3]

In contrast to the pervasive method of educating the very youngest children through

instructional lessons over many hours at school, Mason's approach is to nourish the child's physical, mental, and spiritual needs on long hours in the open air of the countryside, left mostly to himself—his mother's quiet, interested presence (what Mason termed "masterly inactivity") is all that is required. There he communes directly with the things of the created world. The business of the educator is simply to bring the child into a relationship with as many things and thoughts as possible—not the *signs* of things, as presented in abstract lessons, but the vital things themselves.[4] Her contention is that this period of "fieldwork" for the young child is the necessary preliminary labor which establishes habits of life and learning that lay the foundation for later scientific, "laboratory" work. As a more mature student, the child will be able to abstract, dissect, and argue fruitfully, but in the early years he must first wonder and delight in nature and love its Creator. It is precisely this quiet growing time which produces the child who fits Irenaeus' maxim: *the glory of God is man fully alive*.

Mason believed that the physical and intellectual needs of young children are intertwined: what the body requires for health (ample air, movement, and sustenance), so too does the mind (mental rest, mental work, and ideas from observing nature and from worthy stories). The child that spends "twenty-two of the twenty-four hours ...pent within the four walls of a house" suffers not only from bodily atrophy, but also mental. The mind must be fed and worked in order to be vigorous, and Mason believed that the "eager, active, curious, hungry mind" of a child requires the "name and look and behavior *in situ* of every natural object he can get at." [5] The child of today faces even greater dangers of bodily and mental inanition than those of Mason's day, but the real danger lies not in giving the child too much mental work, but in giving him the wrong kind:

there is no sort of knowledge to be got in these early years so valuable to children as that which they get for themselves of the world they live in. Let them once get touch with Nature, and a habit is formed which will be a source of delight through life. We were all meant to be naturalists, each in his degree, and it is inexcusable to live in a world so full of the marvels of plant and animal life and to care for none of these things.[6]

To first observe the natural world, then to delight in it, and finally to care for it are the hallmarks of Mason's method of education for the young child. If the ultimate aim of education, as she claims, is to "give a full life," then to ask, "How much does he care" is tantamount to asking, "How full is the life he has before him?" [7]

The child's engagement with the created world engenders reverence for life as a "wonderful and awful gift" of the Creator even as it establishes the groundwork for a scientific education. The child acquires such invaluable scientific habits of mind as attention, accuracy, truthfulness, training in noticing differences and resemblances, and the power to classify.[8]

Of the teaching of *Natural Philosophy*, I will only remind the reader...that there is no part of a child's education more important than that he should lay, by his own observation, a wide basis of *facts* towards scientific knowledge in the future. He must live hours daily in the open air...must look and touch and listen; must be quick to note, *consciously*, every peculiarity of habit or structure, in beast, bird, or insect; the manner of growth and fructification of every plant. He must be accustomed to ask *why*—Why does the wind blow? Why does the river flow? Why is a leaf-bud sticky? And do not hurry to answer his questions for him; let him think his difficulties out so far as his small experience will carry him. Above all, when you come to the rescue, let it not be in the 'cut and

dried' formula of some miserable little text-book; let him have all the insight available and you will find that on many scientific questions the child may be brought at once to the level of modern thought. Do not embarrass him with too much scientific nomenclature. If he discover for himself (helped, perhaps, by a leading question or two), by comparing an oyster and his cat, that some animals have backbones and some have not, it is less important that he should learn the terms vertebrate and invertebrate than that he should class the animals he meets with according to this difference.[9]

Throughout the early sections of *Home Education*, Mason describes the most enchanting scenes of children making discoveries of the world around them, taking in what they can “of the beauty of earth and heavens.”[10] I recommend to the reader the sections “How to See” and “The Educational Uses of Sight-Seeing” for examples of the liveliness of the science lesson derived from an “exploring expedition.” The scene that plays out shows both the vitality and spontaneous delight of the children’s lessons in nature, but also enumerates the kinds of intellectual habits they are forming all the while. Once they have had their romp of vigorous play in the open air, the children turn to a number of pursuits which form the backbone of Mason’s approach to teaching a “more natural science.” These pursuits include lessons like “picture-painting” and “sight-seeing,” keeping a calendar of firsts and a nature diary with brush-drawings of the flowers and fruits—the whole plant, when possible—that interest them.

And while Volume 1 provides a description of the kind of scientific work a young child (under the age of 9) is doing in their out-of-door life, it should be understood that this is not where scientific learning ends; only where it begins. The later volumes indicate how the early work of the child comes to fruition. In the sixth and final volume, *A Philosophy of Education*, Mason uses Huxley’s axiom that science teaching in school should be of the nature of “common information” and afford children “a wide syllabus introducing them...to those branches of science of which every normal person should have some knowledge.[11] She also takes the words of British scientist Sir Richard Gregory, deprecating the trend of specialization in scientific studies prior to university, as confirmation of her methods. She quotes from Sir Gregory’s Presidential Address in the Education Science Section of the British Association to show how “the teaching of science in our schools has lost much of its educative value through a fatal and quite unnecessary divorce between science and the ‘humanities’”:

The essential mission of school science [should be] to prepare pupils for civilised citizenship by revealing to them something of the beauty and the power of the world in which they live, as well as introducing them to the methods by which the boundaries of natural knowledge ha[ve] been extended. School science, therefore, [is] not intended to prepare for vocations, but to equip pupils for life.[12]

Mason recognizes that the inexperience and ignorance of children in no way detracts from their personhood, but dictates the physical, mental, and spiritual food proper to them. The child cannot be fed on exactly the same food as the adult (“I have fed you with milk, and not with meat: for hitherto ye were not able *to bear it*, neither yet now are ye able” [1 Corinthians 3:2]; “When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known” [1 Cor 13:11–12]), but its child-diet, when furnished, will allow for the proper maturation of the child whose flowering is adulthood.

The sign that the child is receiving proper nourishment is easy to spot “in the field,” as it were, and Mason beautifully describes the “bright eyes” and “body full of spring even in repose” which are among the attributes “we delight to see in a child.”

this is what bringing-up may, with some limitations, effect: —The child is born with certain natural tendencies...each such tendency may run into a blemish of person or character, or into a cognate grace...the bright eyes, the open regard, the springing step; the tones, clear as a bell; the agile, graceful movements that characterize the well-brought-up child, are the result, not of bodily well being only, but of ‘mind and soul according well,’ of a quick, trained intelligence, and of a moral nature habituated to the ‘joy of self control.’[13]

This vision, which should inspire all parents when they consider what they hope for in “a well-brought-up child,” is at the root of what Mason means when she says, “Education is the Science of Relations.” As such, she writes in the preface:

we must train [the child] upon physical exercises, nature, handicrafts, science and art, and upon *many living books*; for we know that our business is, not to teach him all about anything, but to help him make valid, as many as may be of

‘Those first born affinities,

‘That fit our new existence to existing things.’

These lines, which Mason quotes from Wordsworth’s *Prelude*, make for a fitting conclusion because they are evocative of the quiet growing time in which the child gains the knowledge *that* which is the necessary precursor to the knowledge *how*. Science, Mason says, “is the preoccupation of our age,” but our manner of studying it requires that it be “divested to the bone”:

history expires in the process, poetry cannot come to birth, religion faints; we sit down to the dry bones of science and say, Here is knowledge, all the knowledge there is to know. “I think that is very wonderful,” a little girl wrote in an examination paper after trying to explain why a leaf is green. That little girl had found the principle—admiration, wonder—which makes science vital, and without wonder her highest value is, not spiritual, but utilitarian.[14]

Following Matthew Arnold, Mason grouped all knowledge according to three categories: Knowledge of God, Knowledge of Man, and Knowledge of the Universe. In the final chapter of *Home Education* Mason evokes Augustine’s axiom: “the soul has one appetite, for the things of God...has one desire, for the knowledge of God; one only joy, in the face of God.”[15] Mason bemoaned the utilitarian specialization of academic discipline in her time, which left knowledge “a thing of shreds and patches...with yawning gaps between.”[16] A true humanist, she argued for the integrated but hierarchical conception of knowledge possessed by the medieval mind and typified in the 14th-century fresco called the “Triumph of St. Thomas and the Allegory of the Sciences.” Mason believed, with the medieval Florentines, in “the teaching power of the Spirit of God”: not only did the seven Liberal Arts come from a direct outpouring of the Holy Ghost, but “every fruitful idea, every original conception, be it in geometry, or grammar, or music, was directly derived from a Divine source.”[17] This great recognition

should, she said, inspire in us nothing less than the *sursum corda*. [18] And here we return to Wordsworth, who captures this lifting up of our hearts in joy to God with the words:

even then,
A Child, I held unconscious intercourse
With the eternal Beauty,

...

for in all things I saw one life and felt that it was joy.

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Keep reading! Next we feature Elisabeth Sullivan's article on "reclaiming a more human pedagogy."

[1] Charlotte Mason, *Formation of Character*, vol. 5 of *The Original Home Schooling Series* (Tyndale House, 1989 [1st ed.: London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co, Ltd., 1935]), 190.

[2] From the Preface to *The Original Home Schooling Series*.

[3] Charlotte Mason, *Home Education*, vol. 1 of *The Original Home Schooling Series*, 42.

[4] *Ibid.*, 56.

[5] *Ibid.*, 32.

[6] *Ibid.*, 61.

[7] *School Education*, vol. 3 of *The Original Home Schooling Series*, 171.

[8] *Home Education*, 62–64.

[9] *Home Education*, 264–65.

[10] *Ibid.*, 45.

[11] *A Philosophy of Education*, vol. 6 of *The Original Home Schooling Series*, 223.

[12] *Ibid.*

[13] *Home Education*, 94–95.

[14] *A Philosophy of Education*, 318.

[15] *Home Education.*, 342.

[16] *A Philosophy of Education*, 322.

[17] *Ibid.*, 324.

[18] *Ibid.*, 231.

