## ***Personhood: Children are persons:***

By Bruce McNeice

Hello- I’m Bruce McNeice – a former school Principal, Homeschool Dad, and education consultant. My passion is to impart courage to parents, and to equip and support parents in their God-given role of teaching and training their children to reach their full potential, and live an abundant life.

PART A:

Today, I want to discuss one of the foundational principles of the Charlotte Mason method – and that is, that children are persons.

In a Charlotte Mason program, there is a list of specific suggested books for the parent or teacher to use. The program contains a scope and sequence of topics, skills and knowledge to be explored with your child; but a CM program is not primarily about particular topics & skills. There is much value in having a well-balanced curriculum as a starting-point. However, a Charlotte Mason education is not limited to particular books or content; and when the emphasis is on these, we can miss the whole point of education. A Charlotte Mason education is more a philosophy of life based on the Judeo-Christian tradition. It will help your child to learn how to live well, and to experience a fruitful abundant life.

A Charlotte Mason education is a method which is the outworking of a clear coherent philosophy of education coming from a profound and proven understanding of the nature of a child, and how he or she learns best. As such, you could have a wonderful set of books and resources, and yet, if you don't implement Charlotte Mason's 'Method', you could miss out on having a rich and enjoyable learning journey with your children or students. We cannot emphasise enough, the importance of taking the time to learn the method. This will be a journey for you and your family. You won't perfect the method instantly, so be patient with yourself and your children. One success secret is in how we view our children for how we treat our children is an outcome of how we view our children.

Charlotte Mason was concerned that we should not view the child as simply a 'tabula rassa', that is a blank slate for us to write on, an empty sac to be filled, as though the child had a funnel shaped head that we needed to pour this body of knowledge into. She said the child's mind is more like a living organism that needs mental and spiritual food, just as the physical body needs food and exercise to grow strong. She observed that many children are disengaged from learning because they are simply starving of mind-food. Much of what we serve up to children in traditional school settings, is unpalatable or not nourishing for the mind of the child. She was also concerned that many teachers predigest food for the child. They lecture too much and explain everything so the child's mind becomes lazy. She described this as verbal diluent or 'twaddle', and suggested the teacher not get in the way of great literature and artworks. Let the child have direct access to it and the child will naturally feed on the ideas that are vital for them. The same goes for experiencing the world. Don't just talk about nature. Get the children out into nature and train them to observe for themselves; and also give them time to play. She was a great believer in the educative value of real-life experience; learning through observing, experimenting, and play with real things in real life situations.

No educator can 'make' a child learn and grow intellectually and spiritually, any more than one can make a person digest food and grow physically. Digestion and the resulting growth are things the child does because he or she is designed to process physical food. So too, a child's mind naturally feeds on ideas – that is how they are created. The food fit for the mind is ideas.

Talking about the effect of ideas, Charlotte Mason herself, said emphatically: *“Anyone who wants to teach children needs to decide whether man is just physical, or something more. It can’t be both ways, and even the most trivial detail of the school day will line up with one or the other of these two fundamental perspectives.”*

In her book ‘Teaching Children’, Dianne Lopez suggests:

*“The aim of such education is to prepare children to live in contemporary society by developing their relationship with God, His world and people; and by cultivating an appreciation of culture and ideas. This includes the necessity of students being able to ask questions, to draw their own conclusions, and to become independent thinkers.”*

She goes on: *“We view education as a means of stimulating a child's growth in knowledge and developing a love for learning. It is not viewed as utilitarian, where children are taught to parrot responses or where they are viewed as a blank slate to be programmed to take their places as cogs in the wheels of society.”* Instead, education is the training of habits of mind and heart, a means of presenting a broad feast of informing ideas, for the child to mull over and create their own intellectual connections.

Mason encouraged her teachers to train children to take responsibility for their own learning. She said:

*“self-education is the only possible education; the rest is mere veneer laid on the surface of a child's nature...The humane teacher realises that the lesson itself isn't the end. The lesson is merely a scrap of raw material that a child uses to help him speculate about the world. Because of that, a lesson is successful only if it lends itself to reflection and imagination.”*

You see- if we don't facilitate a child to do their own thinking, then they will not learn; and we are just getting in the way. The real art of education is not in lecturing, explaining, and the teaching of knowledge, but in the training of the child to care about learning for themselves.

Mason said it this way:

*“The question is not, -- how much does the youth know? when he has finished his education -- but how much does he care? and about how many orders of things does he care? In fact, how large is the room in which he finds his feet set? and, therefore, how full is the life he has before him?”*

When you think about it – Who is the child who writes neatly? It is the child who cares about their writing. And who is the child that does well with Mathematics? It is the child who cares about maths.

Recently, my wife Karen was helping a class of disengaged teenagers. At the start of the year, one of the lads at 18 years old, had totally illegible writing, and admitted that he had never read a book. However, through encouraging him to care about his handwriting, and through daily training a new habit of neatness, by the end of the year, he had beautiful handwriting. Through the habit-discipline of reading and narration, this student also found a new joy in reading.

So, it was, that we provided the aesthetic learning environment, the positive encouraging atmosphere, the discipline of daily habit-training, provided a feast of living ideas and experiences. Then gradually over time, he had come to care about his handwriting and to care about learning. After having never read a book by 18 years old, a year later, he was now reading and enjoying literature. He admitted that he had wasted so many years, but was now beginning to learn. This was because he finally cared about his education.

How is it that a child can go through 12 years of schooling, 'flying under the radar' (so to speak) and the teachers have not been able to teach the child to read and write - yet on the other hand, we achieve this in one year?

There is one central idea that makes all the difference, and it is all about how we view the child. In a Charlotte Mason education, children are seen as persons created in God's image and therefore of great worth and value. Each child has been given talents and abilities by the Creator, and education should aid them in developing these. A child should not simply move through a system which causes him or her to become that which society thinks is important and meaningful. (Lopez, 1988)

Mason's Statement that “children are born 'persons'” may seem obvious, but it is not obvious to everyone. Various secular humanists such as Singer (in Oppenheimer, 2002) are throwing doubt on whether a young child can always be considered to be a 'person'. Other philosophers such as Carl Sagan (The Cosmos) suggest people are no more than stardust; and animal rights activist Ingrid Newkirk has said *“...a rat is a pig is a dog is a boy”* (Smith, 2010). These are some of the ideas that are coming to the fore in contemporary schooling systems. Teachers wonder why children are becoming more difficult and have no respect for authority – but why should they be surprised when they teach them that they come from apes, and life is just survival of the fittest. Ideas have consequences.

Not only is the concept of respecting the personhood of the child not obvious to everyone, but even when it seems almost too obvious, you may be missing a depth of understanding about it.

The child is firstly a person who has significance because they are made in the image of God and destined for a divine purpose; and so, we have a sacred trust to treat the child with dignity and respect. It is because we are training them for a high purpose that we cannot run roughshod over them or crush their spirit; but also because of this high purpose, we must train them to have a proper response to authority. In our family, we always had in the back of our minds the concept that we were training our children for royalty – as heirs of the King and His Kingdom. We parents were mere stewards of this sacred trust, given to us for a short time.

You will need to meditate on this concept of the ‘personhood’ of the child, so that you don’t trample over your child’s dignity and personality – while at the same time, maintaining a proper relationship of authority and obedience – where the children learn to do what is right, not for reward, but simply because it is right to do so. If you can find this balance, it will positively transform your education.

PART B

So how do we practically apply the principle of the child being a person?

One simple way is to take time to listen to your child, and to talk with them. Maintaining a personable atmosphere means we need to think carefully about the quality of the relationship between parent or teacher and the child. Practice talking with friendly conversation as though you are honestly interested in what the child thinks. By this I don't mean the child should direct the education process. The parent must provide the smorgasbord of what Charlotte Mason called 'living books' – well written literature in which informing ideas are presented, not merely facts. But in the end, it is the child who must do the work of thinking, and this is greatly helped by interesting discussion (not lecturing). Encourage the child (and wait for the child) to tell back and explain what they have learnt. Then after they have contributed some, draw them out with further open questions that lead them to talk more. Charlotte Mason called this process 'narration', and it is vitally important, because children will only learn and remember what they have asked themselves questions about. To retell a story, the child must organise their thoughts by asking themselves questions, arrange the information into a logical format, then puts the ideas into words. If they do this process, the new information will more likely become long term memory that they can use later.

Getting back to the importance of the humane personable-ness of the atmosphere - Many parents fall into the trap of expecting the school system or the curriculum to solve their problems: they say *“This resource hasn't worked, and the children don't like that resource. If only I could find the perfect curriculum, or school system.”* However, these parents often miss the fundamental revelation, that it is not about finding the right curriculum or school system. What the children need is **relationship** with you (parent, mentor, and friend). A relaxed, loving, fun and productive time of learning together; enjoying exploring God's Creation (the world), reading quality interesting literature, being swept away in a far-away time and place, the child retelling the story, discussing characters and how life works.

However, a quality relaxed relationship, also involves knowing when to leave the child to themselves. Charlotte Mason talked about *“not being too much with the child”*. She was concerned about the kind of parent that we would call a 'helicopter parent', always standing over or next to the child to make sure they get it right and don't fall into trouble. Instead, Mason had a concept of 'masterly inactivity', of primarily allowing the child the space to discover, experience and learn for themselves; and knowing when is the appropriate time to contribute a guiding hand or piece of information (or better still, just asking the right question that helps them think for themselves.)

Charlotte Mason warned that the teacher or parent does not have to be the 'showman of the universe', the all-knowing teacher and walking encyclopaedia. She warned that the parent should not get too much in the way of the text/topic, over-explaining or moralising about everything. Allow the children to use their own minds to make connections and build their own personal relationships with the character, artist, musician, idea, or thing being studied. If anything, arm yourself with a few choice open-ended questions....

*“So, what was happening in the story, from our previous session?”*  
*“Remember how last time, we were discussing (such-and-such). Can you tell me all about that?”*  
*“So, tell me – what happened in this last chapter we’ve just read?”*  
*“Mmm. That’s a good question. What do you think?”*  
*“That’s interesting. If you were in that situation, what could you do to get a better outcome?”*

It is very helpful to keep routine, regularity, and order in the home; however, don't stress about *'getting all the stuff done'* or *'memorising all the facts'* or even *'covering all the assigned topics'*. Rather, focus on building a healthy relationship with your child, where learning is enjoyable and the child is making connections or deep relationships with many things and ideas, people, places, and events. In this way, we keep the 'wonder' alive.

Certainly, spend a regular time each day to develop reading, writing, and arithmetic skills; but keep these sessions short, while encouraging neat and accurate work, the children fully focussed and doing their very best work for the short time allocated. Train them in these good work habits; but even this can be accomplished within a friendly encouraging atmosphere. If children are in an environment of threats and harsh discipline, they won't be able to relax enough to truly learn anything. The atmosphere in your home is absolutely vital. It is as indispensable as the air we breathe – and it is primarily the parent who is responsible for keeping the atmosphere positive.

Another aspect of respecting a child's personhood comes into your interactions with them when they fail to perform a skill, or they get an answer wrong. Try to remember 'it is not a sin to make a mistake'. Don't get frustrated with the child's failure. It is a good thing. A person who never fails has never attempted anything outside their comfort zone and so will never grow and develop. We actually want the child to make lots of mistakes, as that means they are trying new things. Thomas Edison, one of the most prolific inventors, was quoted as saying: *“I have not failed. I have just discovered ten thousand ways that won't work”*.

Remember also- education is not about completing the page, the book or the test. We are not teaching a book; we are helping a child to learn for themselves.

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In the upcoming sessions, we look forward to sharing with you how this foundational concept of respecting the child as a person, has very practical implications in regard to the atmosphere of the home, the discipline of habit formation, and the implementation of the curriculum.

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Before you go – I would like to briefly pray a blessing over you.

Lord God - awesome creator of the universe, you came to set the captives free; and to give us abundant life. So, I ask your blessing over these dear folk as they launch out on their learning journey. Help them to comprehend the breadth and depth of your love for them, and open their eyes to this amazing learning journey in pursuit of all goodness, truth and beauty. Bless them, in Jesus name amen.