

## Charlotte Mason

A classical education advances through three stages (grammar, logic, rhetoric) to impart basic knowledge of core subjects, to train students to think critically, to instill in them a lifelong love of learning, and to equip them with the learning tools which can be applied to any field of study. While having adopted the classical model of education, The Classical Academy desires to integrate the teachings of Charlotte Mason to help bring us to that end.

Charlotte Mason was a turn of the century British educationalist, philosopher, founder of a teachers college, and the originator of a curriculum upon which the famous "Parents National Education Schools" were based. Her views were shaped by her belief that children are persons born thirsty for knowledge with a need to feed on the best in great books, great paintings, great music, and on the wonders and beauty of the natural world. These are a few of her ideas which we seek to adopt at TCA:

1. "Living books:" Charlotte Mason believed in using timeless literature (Classics) rather than textbooks. She promoted books which draw children into the life of people in history rather than factual recitations and outlines, wanting them to use their hands and feet in learning as well as their minds.
2. Developing Attentiveness/ Comprehension: Charlotte Mason believed teachers should alternate the types of learning activities "so as not to tire out the brain." She also used methods such as "narration" (telling or writing back what has been read to or by them) and "picture studies" (telling or drawing what they observed in a piece of artwork).
3. The importance of Observation: Along with regular trips out of doors, she believed in the keeping of a "Nature Notebook", where the child records accurately what they see in nature. This tool was used to seek to train the powers of observation, helping the child to see fully and in detail.
4. The importance of Discipline: She believed that while children are born naturally curious, they need help to develop good habits such as responsibility, attentiveness, and discipline.

A Charlotte Mason education resolves to lead a child to a love of learning. This is one of TCA's goals as well. We're continuing to fine tune our curriculum and methodologies as we blend Core Knowledge® and the Classical philosophy. TCA has worked hard to implement a more hands-on approach focusing on observation and handwritten expression, while minimizing worksheets. As parents, your help in researching, collecting materials, and in supporting your teachers is invaluable.

*"Education is a life. That life is sustained on ideas...we must sustain a child's inner life with idea as we sustain his body with food." ~ Charlotte Mason*

## Charlotte Mason and Living Books

The last article gave an overview of Charlotte Mason and her influence on TCA's Classical perspective. We focus now on what she called "living books." Charlotte Mason, a turn of the century educator, recommended using "living books" as the primary resource for teaching content. But what is a "living book"? In a "living book:"

1. The author has a special interest in the subject
2. Accurate facts are presented in a story format
3. Literary character is evident (well-written with vivid descriptions)
4. The mind is engaged when reading or hearing (everyone wants to hear more)
5. Noble values are respected

Can you think of "living books" for history, geography and science? Gerald Durrell, Annie Dillard, Farley Mowat, Patrick O'Brien and John Muir have all written in this style. An excellent example of a "living book" for children is The Greek News. Here is an excerpt from its newspaper-like writing style:

*"The greatest newspaper in civilization. Alexander Wins! How a bold young man from Macedonia, in the far north of Greece, won and then lost an empire."*

This series covers ancient civilizations with a creativity that holds students' attention.

Charlotte Mason recommends using "living books" as the main diet of learning children, especially in the elementary years. Textbooks in a classical school become the supplement for answering questions and presenting an overview. She also encouraged students to narrate what they had listened to or read. After a time of narration, the students creatively express their newly acquired knowledge by drawing, painting, drama presentations, etc. This hands-on interaction with the content naturally produces a passion for learning.

In summary, "living books" will touch the intellect by bringing us truth, the spirit or soul by instilling noble ideals, and the artistic by touching our emotions and imaginations.

Happy reading!

For more information:

1. Ask a teacher for suggestions of "living books" for reading aloud or silent reading
2. Describe a "living book" to your librarian and ask for suggestions
3. See A Charlotte Mason Companion, by Karen Andreola

## Charlotte Mason and Attentiveness

In the previous articles, we gave you a brief review of Charlotte Mason's philosophy and how we adopt her belief about the use of "living books" in our curriculum at TCA. In this article we will focus on Charlotte Mason's ideas about a child's attentiveness and comprehension. Charlotte Mason believed that capturing children's attention was a key to their retaining knowledge. Her teaching principles fostered activities which would teach and improve attentiveness; she believed that this was "a power of the mind to be developed." Charlotte Mason said that children were born naturally curious, but that we must help them develop "helpful habits" like concentration and attentiveness vs. wandering, restless minds. We will begin with something called "narration," an activity which was taught by Charlotte Mason and is used at The Classical Academy.

The traditional mode of testing a child's comprehension tends to expose what a child doesn't know. Charlotte Mason's emphasis on what she called "narration" exposes what the child **DOES** know. This is simply having children retell or write down, in their own words and in as great a detail as they can, what they have read or what has been read to them. In narration, several powers of the mind (social, creative and reasoning) are put into play, and, with practice, a child's ability to retell a story can improve. Charlotte Mason said:

*"the child...should be trained from the first to think that one reading of any lesson is enough to enable him to narrate what he has read, and will thus get the habit of slow, careful reading, intelligent even when it is silent, because he reads with an eye to the full meaning of every clause."*

While younger children tell back or draw pictures of what they have heard after concentrated listening, older children (Charlotte Mason believed this transition to come at about age 9) can practice both oral and written narration. In either case, if children know they'll have to retell the story or lesson, they will pay much closer attention to it! Narration can also occur in other areas of study such as with the visual arts. At TCA, students do "picture studies," where a certain work of art is viewed silently, with no interruptions, and observed by the students for several minutes. This is followed by a time of "telling back" or "drawing back" exactly what they saw and observed.

In schools that Charlotte Mason started, students looked forward to the time at the end of the term when they would be "tested" on their knowledge by narrating or writing (essays) about the subject they had studied. The child would either dictate (if young) or write a long, factual and detailed account of the book or subject. This is something we have talked about doing more of at The Classical Academy. The idea of Narration is something that can be used at home as well, after your times of reading to your child or after your child has read something on their own.

Charlotte Mason's belief that the powers of attentiveness and memory can be improved are tied closely with her beliefs about observation.