

John Piper on writing:

I know not how the light is shed,
nor understand this lens.
I only know that there are eyes
In pencils and in pens.

I. Intro

A. Pre-K Writing Focus

As I mulled over the Faculty Meeting theme of “Writing” and related that theme to my content level, I thought perhaps that we could work on a few handwriting worksheets during our meeting – maybe practice our capital and little Q’s. Those can be a bit tricky. But unfortunately, I did not possess a large enough supply of worksheets to successfully tackle that project, so I decided to address the predetermined topic of this faculty meeting, “Charlotte Mason on Writing.” However, you may turn over your handouts and practice your handwriting should you feel so inclined.

B. My Introduction to CM

My first conscious introduction to CM, as the Charlotte Mason fan club dubs her, was in my sophomore year of college. While I was learning the International Phonetic Alphabet in “Diction for Singers” and writing lengthy research papers for “Teaching in a Pluralistic Society,” I was intrigued and slightly jealous to see my friends drawing watercolors and collecting nature samples. “It’s for our CM class,” they explained. I kind of wondered who this CM was and why she wanted people to color instead of memorize and research.

When I told my mama about the class, she knew exactly who CM was and revealed that much of my literature-based, homeschooled education had been CM influenced.

One of those fortunate students, Jane Ellen, who had taken that CM class became one of my best friends, and her mama, Mrs. Tammy, is a CM expert, having homeschooled four girls in the CM tradition. As I have become an educator, I have become more interested in CM. I read *Consider This* over the summer and went down to visit JE and attend a book club discussion on the book, hosted by Mrs. Tammy. I started talking more with her about CM and bought several of CM’s books, which I have yet to read, but from my amateur opinion and exposure to CM, I believe she is a wise counselor from whom we should receive instruction as we seek to educate children excellently AND for the glory of God.

II. Background

A. The Life of CM

CM was born in 1842 in Bangor (Baenger), Wales. CM was an only child, mostly educated by her parents. CM received an excellent education; she was extremely well-read and consequently very eloquent, as her writings later demonstrated. Both parents died when CM was a teenager, and she soon after began training to become a teacher. During the first ten years of her teaching career in Worthing, England, CM began to develop her own philosophy of education, built on the conviction that all children should have access to an excellent liberal education. In nineteenth century Britain, education was tailored to social class. Children from wealthy families would receive a liberal arts education and further training in their future occupations, while children from poorer families would receive vocational training, sometimes with a basic, elementary education, sometimes without it.

After 10 years of teaching, CM moved to Chichester, England, to teach at a teachers’ training school. While there, CM continued to develop her philosophy of education and taught her students that parents needed to understand and be involved in students’ education. This was the impetus for the formation of the Parents’ Education Union, a group of parents dedicated to CM’s educational principles, and for a network of schools that applied her educational philosophy. CM founded the House of Education, a school for governesses and other teachers of the young, in England’s Lake District, specifically in Ambleside, England, in 1891.

CM continued to speak and write, publishing a number of books in her lifetime, and oversaw the CM schools for the remainder of her life. After 63 years of involvement in education, CM died in 1923 in Ambleside.

Note: The college was in operation until 2010. It's part of Cumbria College but not involved in teacher training.

B. The Philosophy of CM

One of CM's qualities that I admire was her view of the big picture, both in her philosophy and pedagogy. She wanted to give students what she called a banquet of knowledge – she wanted them to love, savor, receive, sample, enjoy learning in a HOLISTIC manner. But she wanted to do this because she identified and joined in the great conversation of the ages – the wisdom that has come before and that applies just as fully now as it did when it was penned.

This is not an exhaustive explication of CM's educational philosophy, but here is a synopsis highlighting key aspects of CM's philosophy. If you are interested in reading further on CM's educational philosophy, and specifically a comparison with classical education, I highly recommend *Consider This* by Karen Glass. CM believed in holistic, liberal arts education for all. She believed the three important components of education were atmosphere, discipline, and life. Atmosphere – children learn from their environment. Discipline – good habits, especially character, must be cultivated in children. Life – children should be taught through living ideas.

CM did not like textbooks but used living books – narratives teaching a subject – and assessed students by narration, which we'll highlight later. For handwriting and spelling, CM had children copy and study meaningful classics. CM emphasized time outdoors, exposure to excellent music and art. In all these methods, CM provided a wide variety of sources so that students could enjoy choice and meaning in learning.

1. Rooted in the classics – Reading “widely, but with discernment” (Glass), CM frequently referenced and quoted classic literature and ancient philosophers, desiring to be guided by past wisdom. In this, as in many other areas, her philosophy resembles the modern classical education movement.

CM met with many of the issues modern classical educators face, including the application of ancient, well-tried educational methods to a different time and culture from that in which they were formulated.

2. Formed by a Christian worldview – As a Christian, CM supported and propagated principles of a Christian worldview. CM composed a set of educational principles answering the fundamental question, “What is man?” Since there are twenty principles, I will just cover the first two here.

First, “Children are born persons.” The age's evolutionary theory argued the contrary, suggesting that children develop into persons. CM begged to differ.

Second, “[Children] are not born either good or bad but with possibilities for good and for evil.” This second principle requires explanation. CM is not denying the depravity of man but combating a common presupposition of her age called “hereditary determinism.” This theory posited that children are born either good OR bad and that education cannot change his nature. We know that children are born sinners and that education in God's ways can assist the God-wrought transformation of the human soul.

III. Writing

A. CM's Writings

CM's Six Volume set, in which her educational philosophy is contained, is widely available on the internet.

B. CM on Writing

Regarding content, CM believed that children should write about what is familiar and valuable to them.

Concerning assignments, CM imbedded writing in every area of her students' education. Hers was truly an integrated writing curriculum tailored to each grade level.

How did she achieve this? The main answer is narrations.

1. Narrations

Narrations are the process of students reading or listening to the reading of a meaningful passage of literature, summarizing the passage, and repeating it in their own words, being careful to highlight the main ideas. In the primary grades (1st – 3rd), students would narrate orally.

In the older elementary grades (4th-6th), gradually move to written narrations and allow the child to write freely. Tackle grammatical conventions a little at a time as you work through narrations.

In the middle school grades, require all narrations in a written form and begin varying the form (requiring poetry, for example).

In the high school grades, continue to vary form to all types of writing – narrative, expository, descriptive, and persuasive – and to various forms within these genres – poetry, letters, scripts, dialogue, diary entries, and more. Provide instruction in conventions, but CM warned not to overdo or squelch the child's voice.

For grammar/punctuation/conventions, CM advocated mini lessons. I disagree. [A lot should be explicit.]

But I like several aspects of CM's methodology: I like the continuity, the content (quality literature, children's interests, varied forms), and I like the reading-writing-thinking link.

2. Copywork

Students would copy excellent literature passages. This would exercise handwriting abilities, attention to detail, diligence, spelling, and other skills.

(This excerpt is from *Famous Men of the Middle Ages*.)

3. Book of Centuries

Oral explanation

4. Enquire Within Book

"This was a notebook wherein a student might narrate a new practical skill...how to sew on a button, or plant a row of beans, change a tire or take up a crochet hook. I actually keep a separate book for recipes and one for gardening and another for handwork...but the principle is the same: I learn to do something and then narrate it so I really know it and can repeat it. (sometimes this is harder than it sounds...really working the brain to use words for a thing it would be so much simpler to show you!)."

From:

<http://www.bookofcenturies.com/in-my-notebook/enquire-within-beaded-bookmarks>

5. Reflections/Nature Studies Descriptions

Oral

IV. Conclusion

Whether teaching the Bible or disciplining my kids, I will often emphasize how crucial is obedience. I repeat over and over that we MUST obey God and the authorities He has placed over us, even when we don't understand [the CHOICE of obedience]. And I'll say, "If you can't obey Ms. Hooker now, how will you obey God when He asks you to do something?" And the answer is you can't. "He who is faithful in little is faithful in much" – if you can't obey in what seems little to you, you are not prepared to obey God in the "big" things. One day I was giving Gary this talk, and I was saying, "Gary, if you can't obey Ms. Hooker now, will you be able to obey God in whatever He calls you to do in the future? God has great things for you, and He is preparing you for them. He might want you to be a doctor or missionary or...." And Gary pipes up, "Or a ninja?"

While I don't think that God is preparing any of us to be a ninja, it is important to prepare our kids now for what God has for them in the future. I believe CM held the right perspective on this, in writing and in other areas. So let's work to prepare our kids well, teaching them to write and live in a way that Christ will be magnified.

Sources:

<https://simplycharlottesmason.com/what-is-the-charlotte-mason-method/>

<https://simplycharlottesmason.com/what-is-the-charlotte-mason-method/who-was-charlotte-mason/>

<https://simplycharlottesmason.com/blog/teaching-writing-subject-by-subject-part-11/>

<https://simplycharlottesmason.com/blog/composition-the-charlotte-mason-way-language-arts-part-5/>

<http://www.bookofcenturies.com/in-my-notebook/enquire-within-beaded-bookmarks>