

A Charlotte Mason Education with Catherine Levison

Teri Lucas

Recently, I was asked by *The Old Schoolhouse® Magazine* if I knew of anyone who had written about Miss Mason's work and her philosophy. I thought of Mrs. Catherine Levison, who wrote *A Charlotte Mason Education* and *More Charlotte Mason Education*. Mrs. Levison has just released a third book, *A Literary Education*.

TOS: Will you briefly explain the Charlotte Mason philosophy for some of our new readers who may not be familiar with her work?

Mrs. Levison: The philosophy, or method, revolves around at least thirty key aspects. The most important factor: Charlotte Mason wanted children to develop a love for learning, and that can permeate every decision and action a person can take. If a mother looks at every book or educational game and tries to analyze whether this is helping or impeding the child's love of learning, her choices will improve.

TOS: What aspect of Miss Mason's work did you find most intriguing?

Mrs. Levison: All of the ideas intrigued me greatly, but my approach was to take one at a time. The first I actually tried with my kids was the art study. I got a piece of artwork, sat them down, and it worked. I kept on trying one technique at a time, and this proved to me that her methods worked. Narration and nature sketching also worked well. I could see that all of us were enjoying homeschool a lot more and looking forward to it rather than dreading it.

TOS: After reading your newest book, *A Literary Education*, I know that you are also quite fond of good literature. Would you say that this is generally the type of parent/educator who is initially drawn to Miss Mason's work?

Mrs. Levison: Charlotte wanted a book-filled education for children, but her distinction is that they need to be the most interesting books available. Jane Austen, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Charles Dickens, and the poetry can keep anyone busy for years.

I highly approve of Charlotte Mason's methods when it comes to history. It works; it's interesting. You really do get retention. It doesn't matter what you cover if you can't remember the material. Self-education is another goal in the Charlotte Mason method. It's rewarding when you see your children reach that level.

TOS: Initially, I was quite drawn to the Charlotte Mason method, but then I found myself also looking at the classical and unit study approaches as well. If someone is doing research on the various methods of homeschooling, what advice would you give them concerning the Charlotte Mason method? Is it necessary to take the "plunge" and

implement all of her ideas at once?

Mrs. Levison: You need to choose the products, books, and methods that suit you. Personally, I believe in prayer. Answered prayers that have led you to the "right" method or combination of methods for your home are the best. When choosing a method, keep Charlotte Mason in mind. Keep the love for learning foremost in your mind. As to your other question, no, it is not necessary to "plunge" into and apply every Charlotte Mason thing at one time. I know from experience that you can pick and choose which techniques to apply and morph them, so to speak, into whatever method you're already using.

TOS: Charlotte Mason students carry a "full load." They study all the basics (the three Rs), Bible, history, science, geography, music, the arts, a foreign language, and even handicrafts! How does one ever fit all of these lessons into a workable schedule?

Mrs. Levison: We use "Short Lessons" in Charlotte Mason; we cover more subjects in a week than most homeschoolers normally could because we use small increments of time for each one. We try to change the type of subject, too, along with its activity level. It might be something passive, quiet, or easy because it's simply practice. Next, something more invigorating, active, or a new teaching that really makes the children think. The schedule is set at 15- to 20-minute intervals for most subjects at the grade school level. It increases to 35 to 45 minutes for junior and senior high. Short lessons are designed to end around lunch so children have all afternoon, all evening, all weekend to follow their own interests, hobbies, and reading material. That's why I believe Charlotte Mason is the best balance I've found for the structured versus the relaxed, "unschooling" dilemma we all face. It makes time for algebra, spelling, grammar, and for the arts - Shakespeare, the nature walks and music.

TOS: I really do enjoy doing crafts and sewing. Even with the short lessons, as a mother of two young children, I have trouble fitting handicrafts into my day. You have five children. When they were all at home, how did you handle this part of your studies?

Mrs. Levison: Well, the youngest toddlers or babies would nap and the rest of us would take the baby monitor out in the yard while doing nature sketching almost every afternoon. Setting the example for my kids worked for me. I sewed and quilted, painted and read. Also, I usually had one class outside the home that I would pay for at a time. We hired artists, seamstresses, musicians, and gym teachers, and that was the way we would learn a new "free time" skill.

TOS: Obviously, you have been homeschooling for a number of years and have shared Miss Mason's ideas with many others. In retrospect, is there anything that you would do differently?

Mrs. Levison: Yes, I would have started a "Book of the Centuries" of my own right at the beginning. Because we covered so much history, from all over the world, my book

would be quite full by now. My one regret is that I didn't keep one myself all those years.

TOS: Well, many of us have heard about Nature Notebooks, Narration, and Living Books, but I was never quite sure about utilizing a "Book of the Centuries" until I read over some of your work. Just what exactly is a "Book of the Centuries" and what is its purpose?

Mrs. Levison: You need one blank sketchbook or three-ring binder filled with blank paper for each child. You title every two pages with the name of the century. It helps to start at the back and to double-name them. The last two pages would say 21st Century/2000s, then going backward the next two pages would say 20th Century/1900s. Use all of your reading material and field trips to make entries on the blank pages. Keep them handy. Set the example. Once when I was reading to the kids about the planet Pluto being discovered, I pulled out my "Book of the Centuries" and made a tiny entry on the page titled with the appropriate century. All the kids got their books out and made an entry too. The idea is to have the pages fill up with written or sketched entries. All of these events on one page tell a story. They all have one thing in common—they happened within the same hundred years. It gives kids a tangible thing they can hold in their hands, to make sense of time. It's also meant to be a lifelong habit, so you don't really outgrow it.

TOS: So, it really is a "lifetime of learning". Charlotte Mason also said, "Education is discipline". Can you share with our readers your thoughts on this?

Mrs. Levison: I think that's my favorite question because so many things are about discipline. Homeschooling fathers go to work daily to provide the opportunity for their wives and children to be home together; that takes discipline. Exercise and eating habits are also a matter of discipline. If people apply themselves, there will be rewards. If they don't, there will be consequences. Housework and parenting also involve discipline, so why wouldn't education? That responsibility itself calls for discipline, mainly from the parents. That's why the teaching on habits is so important. We already are creatures of habit, like the way we drive the car to the grocery store. Why not use that built-in feature to our advantage? The key is to choose one good habit at a time, like making the bed. Get that cemented into the daily routine, and combine it with interesting school subjects that even Mom finds fascinating.

TOS: A huge trend in the homeschool market right now is the movement toward, or should I say back to, a "classical education." How does the Charlotte Mason method compare with this method? Are there any similarities and differences?

Mrs. Levison: Classical is a good education; it's very rigorous. People who choose it probably want a superior education for their children. My bit of advice for people looking into it is to really get to know its methodology thoroughly. It is very systematic. Grammar, logic, and rhetoric are used in that order; grammar for elementary grades, logic for junior high grades, and rhetoric for high school level. Many schools and individuals

have combined Charlotte Mason and classical together, proving time and again that it works. Charlotte Mason was fully aware of the classical style, and she took what she liked from it and incorporated it into what became her method. The biggest difference between the two, in my opinion, is the laying down of facts during the grammar stage of classical. Charlotte Mason is different in this area. She wrote that children are not receptacles in which to pour facts. Remember, she wants them to love to learn. As I've said previously, the two have been successfully combined before. Parents could be completely committed to classical and still assume a Charlotte Mason technique or two, just to add some fun to the day.

TOS: Having said all this, the Charlotte Mason method is definitely not what most of us experienced educationally. The trend in the "professional" marketplace today is to specialize. In your opinion, how can such a broad and liberal education prepare students for work in the real world?

Mrs. Levison: Basically, it is better to be liberally educated in all fields, and by this we mean "a generous education" first. After covering all of the sciences, arts, mathematics, then a person could specialize in one field. They will always know where their specialty fits in with all of the others. There's nothing wrong with specialties, technical skills, and job training after, at least, an introduction to all other fields. Charlotte Mason says the educator is helping to create a whole person, and the more of a person we make, the better the worker he or she will be, regardless of the field. These are "our" children and they each have one childhood; I say let's enjoy it with them. It takes some effort, but someone once said, "whatever you work the hardest at, that's what you'll be the proudest of".

TOS: Thank you, Mrs. Levison, for your comments and time. Could you give us your website address and some of your favorite products that will enhance our understanding of the Charlotte Mason method?

Mrs. Levison: I personally have never had a website, but many people have created them for me. The best one of those is at www.christianity.com/cmason. People can enter my name on search engines and go to many different articles I've written, or they can search for *Champion Press*, which published my work, to find out about ordering. As far as products are concerned, I have too many favorites, but I have included those in my books, particularly the third, *A Literary Education*. It is a listing of books mostly including author, descriptive paragraph, age level, etc. I wrote that book to be the "what should I use" tool, whereas I wrote the first books to be the "how do I do this" of the Charlotte Mason method. Thank you for interviewing me - it's been fun.

TOS: It has been my pleasure. I wish you much continued success.

Biographical Information

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Catherine Levison, mother of five, began homeschooling in the late eighties using the Charlotte Mason method. She teaches others to happily home educate by giving practical advice, while encouraging parents to develop a style that personally suits them. She currently resides in Seattle, Washington. Her latest book is A Literary Education: An Annotated Book List.