

Karen Andreola: A Lovely Method and a Lovely Lady

Gena Suarez

Karen Andreola is a recognized name in every homeschool household. Why? Is it because of a homeschool methodology that has become increasingly popular? Is it because of what her family did to help secure America's understanding of it? Perhaps. But more so, and simply put, it's because Karen is a lovely person who possesses great grace and peacefulness, a lady with an uncanny ability to speak into parents' lives, a mother herself who enjoys helping others find balance and joy in their homeschooling endeavors. Karen has done much over the years for the homeschooling community, encouraging us in the "gentle art of learning." It's time to honor her here, in The Old Schoolhouse Assembly Hall. Welcome, Karen!

TOS: Karen, so happy you could join us this issue! The Charlotte Mason method has really caught fire. You hear of CM groups springing up all over the country now. Why is this?

Karen: New Eyes. When many people hear the term "education" they think of classrooms with rows of desks, a big blackboard, a lecturing teacher, stacks of textbooks, spelling lists, etc. Charlotte Mason gives us new eyes. Her very practical philosophy lets us see something refreshingly different, something deeper. Her method is so sensible, wholesome, and exceedingly simple that thousands of homeschool parents have adopted it as a base. This new perspective of education is what I call "the gentle art of learning." It brings families freedom, joy and a love of learning.

TOS: What makes the CM method so appealing?

Karen: Living Books. At a time when there were far fewer children's books available, Miss Mason was an advocate for using real books within the curriculum - the kinds of books that "open the door of a child's mind." She experimented. She observed how readily children took to real books whether of fact or fiction. A committee typically writes textbooks. There they tend to have a dry as dust style of writing that Miss Mason called, "journalese." A living book, however, has more of a human touch as it is usually written by one author. The author shares his favorite subject with us. We pick up his enthusiasm for his subject as he writes affectionately about what he knows. Therefore she eschewed the typical textbooks of her day and replaced them with real books on a variety of subjects. It is the delving into the wonderful world of children's books that makes her method so appealing.

Telling. Another appealing (and I should say) *distinguishing* feature of Miss Mason's practical philosophy is her use of narration. She believed narration was the best way for a child to gain knowledge from books. With narration the child simply tells a selected reading back in his own words. Sometimes a request or question focuses the narrator to

tell about a certain aspect of the reading. Such as: describe your favorite scene from this chapter of *A Christmas Carol*, or explain how a bee builds a honeycomb, or why is the Magna Carta such an important historical document in the Western World? Telling can replace multiple choice, fill in the blank, true or false quizzes commonly associated with classrooms.

Miss Mason's students narrated copiously. A touch of originality came forth in the narrations as each child spoke about what impressed them most. Often the children would borrow an author's phrase of words or any interesting new vocabulary that struck them. Telling gives opportunity for a child to develop a train of thought. Telling also facilitates writing. Multiple choice, fill-in-the-blank, and true or false tests do neither.

Worthy Aspects. These worthy aspects of a Charlotte Mason education - living books and narration - have become intrinsic to many homeschools. Miss Mason said, "Here on the very surface is the key to that attention, interest, literary style, wide vocabulary, love of books and readiness in speaking, which we all feel should belong to an education that is only begun at school and continued throughout life."

TOS: I keep hearing of homeschool families working in 'nature notebooks.' Oftentimes, you discover that these families are aware of and implement the CM method. *I really love the idea.* Kids beg to be outdoors, and if they are like our four children, anything having to do with art and science is a big "YES!" Keeping nature notebooks allows for all three fun activities at once. Was this something Miss Mason considered a 'must' for children?

Karen: Nature Study. In my book, *A Charlotte Mason Companion*, I have a chapter on Nature Study. I begin the chapter with this advice from Miss Mason. If we give our children regular opportunities to get in touch with God's creation, a habit is formed which will be a source of delight throughout their lives. Every student of Miss Mason's was required to keep a yearly Nature Notebook. These Notebooks were assiduously inscribed with fine prose, poetry and illustrated in delicate watercolors. Children these days might find it more convenient to begin drawing with colored pencils. Each entry may include the date the specimen was observed, the Latin name, if it's available, as well as its familiar name. Although keeping a Nature Notebook will be a school assignment, we can consider it part of "living the educational life." The good things we learn in homeschool should spill over into our leisure. That's what education is about, isn't it?

Attitude of Appreciation. Both mother and children can have a relationship with nature where an attitude of appreciation is present as all admire God's work in creation. I still "oo and ahh" over new things we find. Just the other day we held a red salamander in our hand. One child commented that it walked like an alligator. I was glad to discover, while my children were still quite young, how important Nature Study was in Miss Mason's curriculum because I've always liked being outdoors with them. Nature is not secretive

but will reveal things only to those who look. Once our senses are on the alert, nature yields treasure after treasure.

Joy of Discovery. Children take a special joy in their little discoveries. After a nature walk, you find their pockets filled with acorns, pinecones, snail shells, pebbles, even empty exoskeletons of insects. A mother quickly learns to turn all pockets inside-out at the washing machine. You can carry a sketchbook with you on a nature walk to draw what you find. Or, bring the specimen indoors to draw. "Just draw what you see," is what I've always told my children when it comes to drawing. The pictures they didn't like were crumpled up and thrown away. "Never mind. Try again," I'd say.

Lasting Memories. To provide an inside look at how to do Nature study I wrote a story. The main character, Carol, attempts to follow Miss Mason's advice with her children. My prayer all during the writing of *Pocketful of Pinecones* was that God would use it to encourage my fellow homeschool mom toward the confidence she seeks and to offer a certain peaceful calm to any mom who might be approaching burnout.

TOS: *Pocketful of Pinecones* is a beautiful book. In fact, our review of it appears in this issue of the magazine. Our readers also have a chance to win one of two available copies. How did you come up with the title for that book? *It's darling!*

Karen: How It Happened. That's kind of you to say. I was so hoping it would be a delightful read, a treat for the hard-working homeschool mom. Actually it was Dean who came up with the title of the story. Here is how it happened. I had been moaning about what to call my story because I was more than a year into writing it and still no title seemed to stick. One day, as we were about to take a nature hike, Dean put on a vest jacket and blurted out one word. "Pinecones," he said with a puzzled expression.

"What did you say?" I responded.

"There are pinecones in these pockets," he further explained, opening a palm full of the little things.

"Oh, you're wearing *my* vest," I told him. He had been given two tan vests at Christmas (one from my mom, one from his) and I had started wearing the slightly smaller one over a bulky sweater. I added, "I couldn't resist collecting them when we passed under those hemlock trees on our last hike."

"I've got it."

"What?"

"I've got the name of your book: *Pocketful of Pinecones*."

"It's pretty corny but I like it. It fits. Brilliant!"

TOS: I love it! Sometimes, what seems so difficult turns out to be brilliantly simple! The title of the story certainly draws one in. *It does fit!* I wanted to discuss further just who Miss Mason was and to talk more about how she was received in her day. As space does not permit, we encourage our readers to contact you for further information on her

methodology and life's work (contact information is included at the end of this article). From the research I have done thus far, it is evident she was a graceful woman who understood children, was well respected during the time and had quite a life story - *being homeschooled herself!* Charlotte Mason was British. This method was of another country's origin. It's all over American home schools, however! How did this method transfer itself from England to America?

Karen: One Story. I think I have an explanation for it. In 1984 the American publisher Crossway Books released *For the Children's Sake* by Susan Schaeffer Macaulay. Susan is daughter of missionaries Edith and Dr. Francis Schaeffer who founded L'ABRI Fellowship in Switzerland. Susan was born in America but has spent most of her life overseas. She and her British husband Randal Macaulay live in Cambridge, England but for many years were directors at L'ABRI. In the mid-70s Susan's children attended a lovely little private school in London. The school's founder was Charlotte Mason. "Who is Charlotte Mason?" Susan wondered. After finding Miss Mason's old books and reading about how similar her practical educational philosophy was to that of her father's, Susan was motivated to write a book. I was fascinated with *For the Children's Sake*, (my copy is autographed) and asked Dean to find me copies of Miss Mason's original writings.

Original Writings. After Dean obtained copies from the president of Charlotte Mason College he was able, eventually, to find an American publisher to reprint them. (This is a story in itself.) I began trying to implement what I was reading with my young children and started a home discussion group. In 1991, I started a magazine for those who were also intrigued with Miss Mason. Although I first read *For the Children's Sake* while living in London, I have been writing and speaking here in America on Charlotte Mason for more than a twelve years. Others share, too. But Susan was the first to speak of her at L'ABRI conferences.

TOS: What is "Mother Culture?" That term sounds so inviting ... who coined it? When you hear it, you automatically think 'Charlotte Mason' - Why?

Karen: Mother Culture. Billy Graham, said, "A mother must cultivate her soul so that in turn she can cultivate the souls of her children." To partake in Mother Culture is to keep growing into the person God is making us to be. We must feed ourselves spiritually, mentally, and keep fit physically for our task. This is a duty and a pleasure. It is not a selfish thing to do because the advantages do not end with ourselves. A mother can easily tell when her cup is empty. She is sullen or frazzled - at her rope's end. Take heart. Fifteen minutes a day of quiet time can begin to remedy the situation. Then a mother can say, "My cup runneth over." It will runneth over into the family circle. In a chapter of my book, *A Charlotte Mason Companion*, I give suggestions on how a busy mother can take a little time for Mother Culture. I revived and popularized this obscure term from the past to bring hope to a new generation of mothers. It has become my trademark because it so clearly identifies this unique facet of my ministry.

Two Halves. Most everywhere I am asked to speak I give a talk on The Gentle Art of Learning, and Mother Culture. They are two halves of a picture. The practical philosophy of Miss Mason and mothering blend beautifully. They are complimentary parts of a lifestyle of learning that I encourage the mom to apply with her own personality. The strength of this blend safeguards a mother from burnout and depression. It keeps a mom fresh for her task of serving, teaching, loving, and ushers her into a rewarding, fruitful life with her children.

TOS: Do Charlotte Mason families 'do homework?' This is something you hear discussed, but I can never really understand what is implied in the *asking* of the question itself. I mean, if you are already homeschooling, are you not already 'doing' homework? What are your thoughts on the subject?

Karen: No Homework. The term homework does sound silly in the ears of the homeschooler, doesn't it? In Miss Mason's day homework was referred to as, "evening preparation." In Victorian England, children had to memorize their lesson and be prepared to recite it (while standing) when called upon in the classroom (see early chapters of Dickens' *David Copperfield*, *Nicholas Nickleby*, and Bronte's *Jane Eyre*). Miss Mason's reforms were contrary to the tradition of her day. She thought it to the child's best advantage to deal promptly with the literature at hand. Narrations were given immediately following the reading. The children took turns narrating aloud or on paper. Therefore lessons were not memorized. And they were not *put off* to be learned overnight. Rather, they were *put in* a child's own words. Narration does involve memory but it also stimulates a range of thinking. Through narration a child acquires the ability to concentrate, recall, reason, analyze, and finally evaluate what he has read or what you have read aloud.

No Cramming. During examination time the students were to narrate their answers without the necessity of any horrid cramming the night before. They need never be concerned about which bits would be on the test because there were no disconnected "bits." They put their version of what they knew to a few essay-type questions. (Younger students narrated orally.) This essay style of testing emphasized knowledge, not the parroting back of memorized information. Miss Mason believed knowledge and information to be two different things. In her day she observed that children "crammed to pass, but failed to know." Sadly this is still the case in some schools. Many of us who were thus educated are now offering our children something very different within our homeschools, something better - and it stems from the idea of "no homework." Oh, pardon me, I mean, "evening preparation."

TOS: What advice would you give to a homeschool family utilizing one methodology or another who may desire to move to a more Charlotte Mason Style?

Karen: Living Book Plunge. More and more mothers are willing to take the living book plunge. It takes daring to dive into cool water on a warm day but once you are in, the

water is wonderful. And you are so glad you jumped in. This is the exhilarating experience many have who leave the textbook-workbook-grind and dive into living books. It is fearful for some. It takes courage or daring to do something differently. But once the reform falls into place you are so glad you stepped forward in faith.

I've always been the kind of timid person who likes getting her feet wet first. Since I was already in the habit of holding chubby hands, walking to the library (in England) with my little girls (age 5 and 2) to borrow various picture books, my feet, in a sense, were already wet. Therefore it was easy to get in all the way with living books. The water has always been wonderful for us. Formation is easier than reformation so I've heard it said. But you can start anytime.

Dreaded Holes. May I wipe away insecure feelings that can arise when straying from an elementary school textbook? I understand the anxiety of drifting away from the lifeline of a scope and sequence. When you put your trust in living books and narration you can stop worrying about the dreaded "holes." Consider this for a start. Textbooks pride themselves in what they cover. They are used for teaching masses of children. But it isn't how much a child covers that matters most, but how much a child cares. If he is learning a smattering of this and smattering of that he is getting a shallow introduction to this and that, an overview. I have come to realize that the very opposite is true. The child who only "gets through" his textbook like many of us "get through" a long winter, will have holes in his education.

Juicy Detail. Living books go into more detail. They fill in the holes with their juicy detail as they take more pages in which to stroll along. And by way of their lovely literary character (of a writing-style), we (mom and child together) become better acquainted with a subject. To top it off we "want" to know more. "Read me more, Mommy," is so delightful to hear even when you have read aloud for the third time that day.

"We will read more about it tomorrow," says Mommy finally, "You need to get to your numbers, now." And the child (and mom) looks forward to the next reading.

While my children were in their early elementary years we enjoyed the freedom to pick (at random) some science books off the shelves of our local library. About twice a month we'd briskly make our way to the library with a light-of-step that arises out of anticipation. While I was leafing through books on the higher shelves my youngsters pulled off books from the lower shelves that interested them. It would be wonderful if all homeschool families would share the same sentiment of Robert Lewis Stevenson when he proclaimed in his little verse for children: "The world is full of a number of things / I am sure we shall be as happy as kings."

Strange advice. If your husband strongly prefers that you to stick with a subscribed scope and sequence, you may use the table of contents of a science textbook for a list of what to study. Look for books off the shelf of the local library that match its list topics. I must

add another piece of advice here. That is, look for books *backwards* from what is listed in the table of contents. Strange advice, I know. Let me explain.

I've learned from experience that other moms (and whole classrooms) will be doing the same thing (following the sequence of topics) and therefore when you want to study the solar system, for example, few if any books on that topic will be available. (This happened to me the year I tried it.) It is best to start with rocks and gems. For some reason, geology is placed near the back of a science textbook so there will be plenty of books about rocks at the start of the school year. Botany typically begins a year so it may be best to wait until later to read up about plants or start in August when plants in your neighborhood are thriving. What makes the order of the table of contents of different textbook companies so similar? I haven't put any effort into figuring out this curiosity. If you know the answer, write me please.

With history, if you are starting early American History in September don't be surprised when books on Columbus and the Pilgrims are hard to find. Since I am particular about my history books anyway, I get most of what I need from homeschool catalogs or dusty used-book shops. There are quantities of biographies, historical fiction novels and other materials available, to teach history.

TOS: What advice would you give young parents? Many moms who have just *recently* had their *first baby* have, with their husbands, made the decision to home educate when their children begin school. What do you tell them?

Karen: Enjoy Your Children. Ask yourself regularly, what it is you'd like to teach your children before what you have to teach begins to dominate. For getting started with little ones Miss Mason offers excellent advice in her book, Home Education. It was written in 1886 with long Victorian sentences and longer chapters. I took my time with Miss Mason's original writings, agreeing with Mary Pride who said over ten years ago that Miss Mason's books should be "sipped like tea." There is plenty of nourishment in a few pages. Victorians lived in a more verbal society. Anyone who has read the first paragraph of *Anne of Green Gables* knows what I am talking about. It is comprised of two, very detailed, long sentences. (I love it.) Victorian writers had a wonderful way of "rounding out" their thoughts and bringing them to a conclusion gradually. To do this today and be grammatically correct is an achievement. (My Microsoft Word grammar check rebels against it.) Anyway, the person who reads an old book (like Miss Mason's) and sticks with it will be rewarded.

TOS: You are a book reviewer for Christian Book Distributors, an excellent catalog resource for homeschoolers. I have to admit that one of the main reasons I regularly crack open their catalogs, other than needing to see the newest available books by my favorite authors, is to read yours, Dean's and the children's reviews! *I really enjoy that!* Your family certainly adds 'persona' to their catalog. How long have you been with CBD and how did you get started in your relationship with them?

Karen: Thank you. With nearly 20 years of Dean's experience in the world of publishing, along with our family's somewhat visible and trusted name in the homeschool community, CBD invited us to become their homeschool reviewers and consultant. Our whole family had enjoyed the opportunity of shedding a little more light on some of our favorite homeschool materials.

TOS: Any newly-authored books in the works? I would think they fly off the shelves as they are released! What are you working on now?

Karen: First Things. I like to write. (And I love getting letters.) Two books are in the messy-notebook creative stage. Two more dance in the back recesses of my mind. But as I am a busy homeschool mom it will be a while before they are typed out and properly polished. My book, *A Charlotte Mason Companion* was a compilation of eight years of research and writing designed to offer practical advice while interpreting Miss Mason's ideas for the modern reader. I write by inches in my spare time, still. I was brought up to follow, "First things first," and in my life, family is a first thing. There is a time and place for everything.

TOS: At one time you published a magazine for families, "Parents' Reviews." Is this still being produced? How can our readers purchase issues?

Karen: Home Training and Culture. I have fond memories of my *Parents' Review* days. Letters to the editor enabled me to meet other Charlotte Mason-minded moms, which was a great encouragement to me. Can you believe that some of us have kept in touch for over ten years! The Parent's Review has a humble beginning. In 1991, the issues were created on the floor of my bedroom by cut and paste. I stapled pages together and hand addressed the envelopes. We published the Parents' Review until 1997. All 24 back issues are kept in print and readily available. Each issue brought fresh ideas, old-fashioned wisdom, a touch of culture, introductions to inspiring works and lives of great people. It is astonishing to me that we receive back-issue orders weekly. An order form is provided on our website. Its advertisement-free pages are still stapled together. Because it provided such varied reading - a combination of old articles from Miss Mason's original magazine and new contributions - it seems to have held its place in the homeschool world.

TOS: Karen, your time here with us today is so appreciated. We'll close with a final question about one of my favorite grammar resources. I was thrilled to have come across your Simply Grammar. I love how it's presented: *easy*. Will you be coming out with any other curriculum such as this?

Karen: Some day, I hope. What they used to say about the ingredients in tomato sauce, my Italian husband says about the books in my head. "It's in there!"

Biographical Information

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Karen and Dean Andreola were married in 1979. They have three children whom they have been exclusively homeschooling by way of the "gentle art of learning." Since 1989, they have been serving the homeschool community with their home business, Charlotte Mason Research & Supply. They are sought-after motivational speakers at state conferences and special events. You probably have seen their product reviews for Christian Book Distributors. Karen's Charlotte Mason Companion is a best selling book in the homeschool world. Her new book, Pocketful of Pinecones, is now in its second printing! She and Dean have published a number of other books including Karen's special revision of the classic Beautiful Girlhood. They presently live in the snowy woods of Maine.

Write to Karen at: Charlotte Mason R & S Co., P.O. Box 758, Union, Maine 04862
For more information, see her website at www.charlottesmason.com.