

The Liberty of Children¹

If we ask ourselves, what is the most inalienable and sacred right of a person *quâ* person? I suppose the answer is liberty. Children are persons; *ergo*, children must have liberty. Parents have suspected as much for a generation or two, and have been at pains not “to interfere” with their children; but our loose habits of thinking come in our way, and in the very act of giving their freedom to children we impose fetters which will keep them enslaved all their lives.

That is because we confound liberty with license and do not perceive that the two cannot co-exist. We all know that the anarchist, the man who claims to live without rule, to be a law unto himself, is in reality the slave to certain illogical *formulae*, which he holds binding upon him as laws of life and death. In like manner, the mother does not always perceive that, when she gives her child *leave* to do things forbidden, to sit up half an hour beyond his bed-time, not to do geography or Latin because he hates that subject, to have a second or third helping because he likes the pudding, she is taking from the child the wide liberty of impersonal law and imposing upon him her own ordering, which is, in the last resort, the *child's* will. It is he who is bending his mother as that proverbial twig is bent, and he is not at all deluded by the oracular “we’ll see,” with which the mother tries to cover her retreat. The child who has learned that, by persistent demands, he can get leave to do what he will, and have what he likes, whether he do so by means of stormy outcries or by his bewitching, wheedling ways, becomes the most pitiable of all slaves, the slave to chance desires; he will live to say with the poet:

Me this unchartered freedom tires, I feel the weight of chance desires.

Indeed, he already feels this weight, and that is why he is fretful and discontented and finds so little that is delightful in his life. Let him learn that “do as you’re bid” is a child’s first duty; that the life of his home is organized on a few such injunctions as “be true,” “be kind,” “be courteous,” “be punctual,” and that to fail in any of these respects is unworthy and unbecoming; more, let him be assured that such failures are of the nature of sin and are displeasing to God, and he will grow up to find pleasure in obedience, and will gradually gather the principles which should guide his life.

But the first duty of the parent is to teach children the meaning of *must*; and the reason why some persons in authority fail to obtain prompt and cheerful obedience from their children is that they do not recognize “must” in their own lives. They *elect* to do this and that, *choose* to go here and there, have kindly instincts and benevolent emotions, but are unaware of the constraining *must*, which should direct their speech and control their actions. They allow themselves to do what they choose; there may be little harm in what they do; the harm is that they feel free to allow themselves.

¹ Charlotte Mason, “Concerning Children as Persons.”

Now the parent who is not aware that he is living in a law-ordered world, that he has to “eat the fruit of this thoughts” as well as that of his words and actions, is unable to get obedience from his child. He believes that it rests with him to say what the child *may* do or leave undone; and as he does not claim papal infallibility, his children find out soon enough that the ordering of their lives is in their own hands, and that a little persistence will get them ‘leave’ to do what is good in their own eyes. People discuss the value of corporal punishment and think they see in it the way to get obedient children. It may be so, because obedience must be learned in the first three or four years of life, when the smart of a little slap arrests the child’s attention, brings tears and changes his thoughts. As a matter of fact, it is hardly possible to punish some children unless while they are quite young, because the pleasure of displaying bravado under the excitement of the punishment occupies the child’s attention to the exclusion of the fault for which he is punished. But the whole discussion is outside the question. The parent, the mother especially, who holds that her children’s rule of life must be, “children obey your parents for it is *right*,” certainly secures obedience, as she secures personal cleanliness, or proper habits at table, because she has a strong sense of the importance of these things. As her reward, she gains for her child the liberty of a free man, who is not under bondage to his own willfulness nor the victim of his own chance desires.

The liberty of the person who can make himself do what he ought is the first of the rights that children claim as *persons*. The next article in the child’s Bill of Rights is that liberty which we call innocence, and which we find described in the Gospels as humility. When we come to think of it, we do not see how a little child is humble; he is neither proud nor humble, we say; he does not think of himself at all; here we have hit unconsciously upon the solution of the problem. Humility, that childish quality which is so infinitely attractive, consists in not thinking of oneself at all. That is how children come, and how in some homes they grow up; but do we do nothing to make them self-conscious, do we never admire pretty curls or pretty frocks? Do we never even *look* our admiration at the lovely creatures, who read us intuitively before they can speak? Poor little souls, it is sad how soon they may be made to lose the beauty of their primal state, and learn to manifest the vulgarity of display.

Our system of education [as experienced in most schools] fosters self-consciousness. We are proud that our boy distinguishes himself, but it would be well for the young scholar if the winning of distinctions for *himself* were not put before him as a definite object. But “where’s the harm after all?” we ask; “this sort of self-consciousness is a venial fault and almost universal amongst the young.” We can only see the seriousness of this failing from two points of view – that of Him who has said, “it is not the will of the Father that one of these little ones should perish,” and that, I take it, means that it is not the divine will that children should lose their distinctive quality, innocence or humility, or what we sometimes call simplicity of character. We know there are people who do not lose it, who remain simple and direct in thought, and young in heart, throughout life; but we let ourselves off easily and say, “Ah, yes, these are happily constituted people, who do not seem to feel the anxieties of life.” The fact is, these take their times as they come, without undue self-occupation. To approach the question from a second point of view, the havoc wrought on nerves is largely due to this self-consciousness, more often distressing than pleasing, and the fertile cause of depression, morbidity, melancholia, the whole wretched train which make shipwreck of many a promising life.