

## Narration and the Method of a Lesson

### *The Art of Narrating*

One of the essential practices that sets apart Charlotte Mason's pedagogy is the consistent use of narration. Narration, as Charlotte Mason uses the term, is *a retelling of the story, description or argument* that one has read, heard, or seen.

1. Narrating occurs after a single reading or hearing of the text. Thus, students are asked to turn over or close their books after each reading; lest any be tempted to look back.
2. Narrations retell a story (what happened first, then second, then third, etc.), give vivid descriptions (the first quality, the second, then the third, etc.) or state the argument (the first point, the second, then the third, etc.) They are not simply summaries of the main ideas.

3. Narrations include many concrete details.
4. Narrations make natural use of the author's language.
5. Finally, narrations bear the unique style of the narrator. They are not merely a "feat of memory," not a word-for-word recitation. Persons act as narrators retelling the author's story or argument, with as much accuracy as possible.

Consider what Charlotte Mason tells us about narration:

Narrating is an *art*, like poetry-making or painting, because it is *there*, in every child's mind, waiting to be discovered, and is not the result of any process of disciplinary education. A creative fiat (decree) calls it forth. 'Let him narrate'; and the child narrates, fluently, copiously, in ordered sequence, with fit and graphic details, with a just choice of words... so soon as he can speak with ease. [Tragically] this amazing gift with which normal children are born is allowed to lie fallow in their education. Bobbie will come home with a heroic narrative of a fight he has seen between 'Duke' and a dog in the street. It is wonderful! He has seen everything, and he tells everything with splendid vigor in the true epic vein; but so ingrained is our contempt for children that we see nothing in this but Bobbie's foolish childish way! Whereas here, if we have eyes to see and grace to build, is the ground-plan of his education.<sup>21</sup>

### *Charlotte Mason's Method of a Lesson*

The application of these divine laws leads to a specific method of instruction. If a teacher wishes to fulfill her duties well, given human nature and the structure of knowledge, there are certain things she must do and many things she may not do. Not all means are open to us. We are very much constrained, but we are also liberated to provide for our students that which they most need. In the act of waltzing or dancing the Texas Two-Step, one is constrained. One is not free to move in any manner desired. One must pay attention to the music, to one's partner, and to the required steps. This does not imply that great dancers are cookie-cutter replicas of each other.

<sup>21</sup> Mason, Charlotte. *Home Education*. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1989. 231.

Quite to the contrary, each has a unique style. But each must methodically attend to music, partner, and steps. This is very much the case with Ambleside teachers. Each has a unique style. Yet each is carefully following the same method.

In the following passage, Charlotte Mason provides a good summary of her method, particularly as applied to "inspirational subjects," those subjects focused on ideas communicated through "living" texts.<sup>22</sup> Ambleside teachers speak of being "on method" or "off method." While reading the passage below, pay attention to the five aspects of an "on method" lesson, as indicated by the words in italics.

In every case the reading should be consecutive from a *well-chosen book*. Before the reading for the day begins, the *teacher should talk a little (and get the children to talk)* about the last lesson, with a few words about what is to be read, in order that the children may be animated by expectation; but she should beware of explanation and, especially, of forestalling the narrative. Then, she may *read two or three pages, enough to include an episode*; after that, let her call upon the *children to narrate*; in turns if there be several of them. They not only narrate with spirit and accuracy but succeed in catching the style of their author. It is not wise to tease them with corrections... The book should always be deeply interesting, and when the narration is over, there should be *a little talk in which moral points are brought out, pictures shown to illustrate the lesson, or diagrams drawn on the blackboard*.