

The Power of Habit

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Over the last few weeks, I've been reading through some of Charlotte Mason's *Original Homeschooling Series*. Miss Mason has a lot to say about habit, and I've had several "ahh-hah!" moments! ☺ I realized as I read that what was being explained can be applied not only to teaching our children, but also to transforming ourselves! If we could only understand and absorb this information, then apply it to our own lives, we would have won 90% of the battle in saying goodbye to chaos and hello to peace!!

From Volume 1, Part III, pg 97:

"Habit the Instrument by which Parents Work.-- 'Habit is TEN natures!' If I could but make others see with my eyes how much this saying should mean to the educator! How habit, in the hands of the mother, is as his wheel to the potter, his knife to the carver--the instrument by means of which she turns out the design she has already conceived in her brain. Observe, the material is there to begin with; his wheel will not enable the potter to produce a porcelain cup out of coarse clay; but the instrument is as necessary as the material or the design"

In this analogy, the child is like the clay, a substance that is already made of certain elements, has it's own basic structure and "personality", but may be molded and shaped in the hands of the potter. The wheel is essential - without it the potter can still mold the clay to a certain extent, but without the smoothness or quality in the finished product. The wheel is a tool which enables the potter to easily transform the clay, providing the surface and structure on which to work. Likewise, good habits provides the structure and surface on which we can carry out the great work of bringing up our children in the way they should go. In our own lives too, if we want to succeed, then understanding and using the power of habit is vital!

Often we get to a point in our lives where we resolve that we want to change; want things to be different. We determine to "get organized", or lose weight, or start exercising, or whatever it is that we feel needs to be "fixed". There is a warm glow of goodness or righteous determination in our hearts. And yet, sooner or later, we fail, and things go back to just how they

were. We try different methods, programs, checklists. We join groups for accountability, or sign up with a friend for mutual encouragement. All of these efforts have value, but on their own none will last! We seem incapable of maintaining steady efforts, of making ourselves do what we know we ought.

All mankind - men, women and children, from every race and nation, possess what is known as "human nature". That is, we are all born with the same primary desires, affections and passions, and also conscience (or a sense of duty). We also all have hereditary - attributes, abilities and tendencies that have been passed down the family line. Add to that our physical conditions - whether weak or strong, well or sick. All together, these elements make up the nature of a person, and that nature is very strong.

It can be easy to think that there is little that can be done in the face of a person's nature - that "this way" is just how a person IS. But that is not so. Just as we must not leave our child to follow his own nature, we also do not need to, in fact **MUST NOT**, abandon ourselves to our natural desires and inclinations!

Habit! Habit is the tool and lever to lift us above our human nature and set us in the right way. If nature is strong, then habit is ten times as strong! (This is what Charlotte Mason means by "Habit is ten natures.") Let us consider for a moment what habit IS and what habit DOES.

According to Webster's 1828 dictionary, habit is:

"A disposition or condition of the mind or body acquired by custom or a frequent repetition of the same act."

We are all a bundle of habits. We form habits all the time, whether consciously or unconsciously. And once they are formed, we follow them relentlessly. We think as we are accustomed to think, act as we are accustomed to act. Some 90-99% of everything we think and do is governed by our habits!!

Consider this information on how the brain works: The brain contains billions of nerve cells, which are connected by synapses. These synapses are the pathways along which signals are transmitted between cells. Every time you

say something, make a decision, or take an action, certain synapses are activated. Billions of synapses, working together, bring about a thought then action.

Certain synapses are stronger than others, and some thoughts or actions require more synapses than others. Each time you make a decision, new synapses are formed and old ones are reinforced. The next time you make the same decision, it will come more naturally, because the brain is prepared for it. The brain had a tendency to utilize existing, strong connections rather than build new ones. But new connections can be formed!

Using Charlotte Mason's preferred analogy, habit is like the rails along which our "train" (lives) run smoothly. When we lay down new habits, we build new rails, quite literally. The habits that we have are strong pathways in our brains, along which the electrical signals that produce our thoughts and actions easily run. The more we repeat those thoughts and actions, the stronger the pathways, the more natural the connections. It's like we're creating a rut in our brains that our wheels tend to always run along.

Now, remember that we have been forming habits all of our lives! We didn't just arrive at where we are now. Our parents shaped habits in us, just as we are doing in our children, either by conscious design, or unconsciously. The things we have experienced, the ways we have reacted, all have caused the formation of certain habits of thought or action. We are a bundle of habits!! Truly, most of what we do is governed by habit! If you stop and think about the details of your life, the times and order in which you do things, the way you say or do things, the decisions you make, you will see that nearly all of it is habit. And that's a good thing - it's much easier to do things by habit than to be constantly faced with new decisions about every detail!

But, what if the habits we have are not good ones? How do we overcome that? There is really only one way:

To overcome a bad habit, replace it with a good one! Once established, the new, good habit will simply over-ride the old, bad one. For this to work, the new and old habits must be mutually-exclusive. Ie, you can't keep doing the old thing, because now you are doing this new thing which replaces it. In other words, if you have habitually got up late, you can over-ride that with a new habit of getting up on time.

It is true that forming a new habit is hard work! It takes purpose, determination, and guarding against allowing yourself to slip back. But the pay-off is huge!! For the cost of 3-4 weeks of diligent effort, followed by the less strenuous but just as important act of ongoing surveillance against falling back into old habits, you will reap the benefit of the new habits, which if maintained will serve you for a lifetime! These new habits can enable you to place your life on smooth paths, keeping daily life flowing with minimal resistance or fuss! Well established habits require minimal effort to maintain - they just flow. ☺

Think about it - if you had, say, 20 good habits established in your life, how much more peaceful and easy would your daily life be? Here is a list of some good habits - imagine they were in place in your life:

- Always getting up early
- Having an effective time of daily devotions
- Always being dressed and ready to face the world by a certain time
- Knowing what meals you have planned, and having all the ingredients to hand
- Always speaking gently and graciously
- Always picking up after yourself, and putting things away in their proper place as soon as you have finished with them
- The habit of effectively using a calendar - writing up and checking for appointments and deadlines
- Habitually keeping a running balance on your bank account
- Setting aside regular time to plan the coming week
- Leaving your kitchen clean every night
- Doing laundry every day, and always having it under control
- Using a timer and never going over you allotted computer time
- Picking up and vacuuming the living areas daily
- Making your bed first thing every morning
- Taking 2 mins to clean the bathroom each morning
- Making yourself presentable just before your husband comes home
- Regularly taking care of paperwork once each week
- Don't put it down - put it away!
- Drinking 2 glasses of water first thing in the morning and half an hour before every meal
- Dealing with mail and papers the minute they come in the house.
- Checking library books for those that need returning/renewing

BEFORE they are overdue

- Going to bed at a decent hour every night.

These are just a selection off the top of my head. But do you see how nearly every thing which you need to do regularly in your life is governed by habit? Either by bad habits or good ones. And you can choose!! You can choose to drift along just how things are, or to take positive action and change your habits!! But remember, forming a new habit, especially one contrary to an old habit, takes effort. For this reason, it is highly recommended that you only concentrate on forming one, or at most two, new habits at any given time. As you work on a habit, you will be first forming, then strengthening, new pathways in your brain. The more you use them, the stronger they will get, until it becomes natural for the brain to run signals along those pathways. A habit has been formed!

When you have a series of good habits in place, your life will be so much easier; you will no longer have to consciously think about every detail, but be able to free your mind to think about things of much greater importance. Most of your life will run smoothly on the rails of habit. And THAT is the power of habit!

For more reading, I recommend "Habit is ten natures" - Part III of Volume 1 "Home Education" by Charlotte Mason. You can read this online here: http://amblesideonline.org/CM/1_3.html.