

## Chapter Five: Masterly Inactivity<sup>1</sup>

Increased Sense of Responsibility. —It would be an interesting task for a literary expert to trace the stages of ethical thought marked by the uses, within living memory, of the word *responsibility*. People, and even children, were highly responsible in the (eighteen) fifties and (eighteen) sixties, but then it was for their own character, conduct, and demeanor. It is not at all certain that we hold ourselves responsible in this matter to the same degree. We are inclined to accept ourselves as inevitable, to make kindly allowance for our own little ways and peccadilloes,...

Parental Responsibility—If we all feel ourselves responsible for the distressed, the suffering, the sick, the feeble in body or mind, the deficient, the ignorant, and—would that we all felt this particular burden more—for the heathen, there is one kind of responsibility which is felt by thoughtful people with almost undue acuteness. Parental responsibility is, no doubt, the educational note of the day. People feel that they can bring up their children to be something more than themselves, that they *ought* to do so, and that they *must*....

Anxiety the Note of a Transition Stage—Every new power, whether mechanical or spiritual, requires adjustment before it can be used to the full. In the scientific world there is always a long pause between the first dawn of a great discovery—as the Röntgen rays for example—and the moment when it is applied to the affairs of everyday life with full effect and without the displacement of other powers whose functions are just as important and as necessary. We should regard with suspicion any attempt to make the Röntgen rays supply the place of stethoscope, thermometer, and all other clinical apparatus. Just so is it in the moral sphere. Our

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<sup>1</sup> Charlotte Mason, *School Education*

keener sense of responsibility arises from a new development of altruistic feeling—we have greater power of loving and wider scope for our love; we are more leavened by the Spirit of Christ, even when we do not recognize the source of our fuller life. But to perceive that there is much which we ought to do and not to know exactly what it is, nor how to do it, does not add to the pleasure of life or to ease in living. We become worried, restless, anxious; and in the transition stage between the development of this new power and the adjustment which comes with time and experience, the fuller life, which is certainly ours, fails to make us either happier or more useful.

A Fussy and Restless Habit—It is by way of an effort towards this adjustment of power that I wish to bring before parents and teachers the subject of 'masterly inactivity.' We ought to do so much for our children, and are able to do so much for them, that we begin to think everything rests with us and that we should never intermit for a moment our conscious action on the young minds and hearts about us. Our endeavours become fussy and restless. We are too much with our children, 'late and soon.' We try to dominate them too much, even when we fail to govern, and we are unable to perceive that wise and purposeful letting alone is the best part of education. But this form of error arises from a defect of our qualities. We may take heart. We *have* the qualities, and all that is wanted is adjustment; to this we must give our time and attention.

'Masterly Inactivity.' —A blessed thing in our mental constitution is, that once we receive an idea, it will work itself out, in thought and act, without much after-effort on our part; and, if we admit the idea of 'masterly inactivity' as a factor in education, we shall find ourselves framing our dealings with children from this standpoint, without much conscious effort. But we must get clearly into our heads what we mean by masterly inactivity. Carlyle's happy phrase has nothing in common with the *laissez aller* (letting go) attitude that comes of thinking 'what's

the good?' and still further is it removed from the sheer indolence of mind that lets things go their way rather than take the trouble to lead them to any issue. It indicates a fine healthy moral pose, which it is worthwhile for us to analyze. Perhaps the idea is nearly that conveyed in Wordsworth's even more happy phrase, 'wise passiveness'. It indicates the power to act, the desire to act, and the insight and self-restraint which forbid action. But there is, from our point of view at any rate, a further idea conveyed in 'masterly inactivity.' The mastery is not over ourselves only; there is also a sense of authority, which our children should be as much aware of when it is inactive as when they are doing our bidding. The sense of authority is the *sine qua non* (a necessary condition without which something is not possible) of the parental relationship, and I am not sure that without that our activities or our inactivity will produce any great results. This element of strength is the backbone of our position. 'We could an' if we would' and the children know it—They are free under authority, which is liberty; to be free without authority is license.

The Element of Good Humor (temperament, disposition). —The next element in the attitude of masterly inactivity is good humor—frank, cordial, natural, good humor. This is quite a different thing from overmuch complacency, and a general giving-in to all the children's whims. The one is the outcome of strength, the other of weakness, and children are very quick to see the difference. 'Oh, mother, may we go blackberrying this afternoon, instead of lessons?' The masterly and the abject 'yes' are quite different notes. The first makes the holiday doubly a delight; the second produces a restless desire to gain some other easy victory.

Self-confidence. —The next element is confidence. Parents should trust themselves more. Everything is not done by restless endeavor. The mere blessed fact of the parental relationship and of that authority which belongs to it, by right and by nature, acts upon the children as do sunshine and shower on a seed in good soil.

But the fussy parent, the anxious parent, the parent who explains overmuch, who commands overmuch, who excuses overmuch, who restrains overmuch, who interferes overmuch, even the parent who is with the children overmuch, does away with dignity and simplicity of that relationship which, like all the best and most delicate things in life, suffer by being asserted or defended.

The fine, easy way of Fathers. —Fathers are, sometimes, more happy than mothers in assuming that fine easy way with their children which belongs of right to their relationship, but this is only because the father is occupied with many things, and the mother is apt to be too much engrossed with her children. It is a little humiliating to the best of us to see a careless, rather a selfish mother, whose children are her born slaves and run to do her bidding with delight. The moral is, not that all mothers should be careless and selfish, but that they should give their children the ease of a good deal of letting alone, and should not oppress the young people with their own anxious care. The small person of ten who wishes to know if her attainments are up to the average for her age, or he who discusses his bad habits with you and the best way of curing them, is displeasing, because one feels instinctively that the child is occupied with cares which belong to the parent only. The burden of their children's training must be borne by the parents alone. But let them bear it with easy grace and an erect carriage, as the Spanish peasant bears her water-jar.

Omniscience of Parents and Teachers. —Parents and teachers must, of course, be omniscient; their children expect this of them, and a mother or father who can be hoodwinked is a person easy to reckon with in the mind of even the best child. For children are always playing a game—half of chance, half of skill; they are trying how far they can go, how much of the management of their own lives they can get for the taking, and how much they must leave in the hands of the stronger powers. Therefore the mother who is not up to children is at their mercy, and need expect

no quarter. But she must see without watching, know without telling, be on the alert always, yet never obviously, fussily, so. This open-eyed attitude must be sphinx-like in its repose. The children must know themselves to be let alone, whether to do their own duty or to seek their own pleasure. The constraining power should be present, but passive, so that the child may not feel himself hemmed in without choice. That free-will of man, which has for ages exercised faithful souls who would prefer to be compelled into all righteousness and obedience, is after all a pattern for parents. The child who is good because he must be so, loses in power of initiative more than he gains in seemly behavior. Every time a child feels that he chooses to obey of his own accord, his power of initiative is strengthened. The bearing-rein may not be used. When it occurs to a child to reflect on his behavior, he should have that sense of liberty, which makes good behavior, appear to him a matter of his preference and choice.

'Fate' and 'Freewill'—This is the freedom which a child enjoys who has the confidence of his parents as to his comings and goings and childish doings, and who is all the time aware of their authority. He is brought up in the school proper for a being whose life is conditioned by 'fate' and 'freewill.' He has liberty, that is, with a sense of must behind it to relieve him of that unrest which comes with the constant effort of decision. He is free to do as he ought, but knows quite well in his secret heart that he is not free to do that which he ought not. The child who, on the contrary, grows up with no strong sense of authority behind all his actions, but who receives many exhortations to be good and obedient and what not, is aware that he may choose either good or evil, he may obey or not obey, he may tell the truth or tell a lie; and, even when he chooses aright, he does so at the cost of a great deal of nervous wear and tear. His parents have removed from him the support of their authority in the difficult choice of right-doing, and he is left alone to make that most trying of all efforts, the effort of decision. Is the distinction between being

free to choose the right at one's own option, and not free to do the wrong, too subtle to be grasped, too elusive to be practical? It may be so, but it is precisely the distinction which we are aware of in our own lives so far as we keep ourselves consciously under the divine governance. We are free to go in the ways of right living, and have the happy sense of liberty of choice, but the ways of transgressors are hard. We are aware of a restraining hand in the present, and of sure and certain retribution in the future. Just this delicate poise is to be aimed at for the child. He must be treated with full confidence, and must feel that right-doing is his own free choice, which his parents trust him to make; but he must also be very well aware of the deterrent force in the background, watchful to hinder him when he would do wrong.

The Component Parts of Masterly Inactivity. —We have seen that authority, good humor (temperament or disposition), confidence, both self-confidence and confidence in the children, are all contained in masterly inactivity, but these are not all the parts of that whole. A sound mind in a sound body is another factor. If the sound body is unattainable, anyway, get the sound mind. Let not the nervous, anxious, worried mother think this easy, happy relation with her children is for her. She may be the best mother in the world, but the thing that her children will get from her in these moods is a touch of her nervousness—most catching of complaints. She will find them fractious, rebellious, unmanageable, and will be slow to realize that it is her fault; not the fault of her act but of her state.

Serenity of a Madonna. —It is not for nothing that the old painters, however diverse their ideas in other matters, all fixed upon one quality as proper to the pattern Mother. The Madonna, no matter out of whose canvas she looks at you, is always serene. This is a great truth, and we should do well to hang our walls with the Madonnas of all the early Masters if the lesson, taught through the eye, would reach with calming influence to the heart. Is this a hard saying for mothers in these

anxious and troubled days? It may be hard, but it is not unsympathetic. If mothers could learn to do for themselves what they do for their children when these are overdone, we should have happier households. Let the mother go out to play! If she would only have courage to let everything go when life becomes too tense, and just take a day, or half a day, out in the fields, or with a favorite book, or in a picture gallery looking long and well at just two or three pictures, or in bed, *without the children*, life would go on far more happily for both children and parents. The mother would be able to hold herself in 'wise passiveness,' and would not fret her children by continual interference, even of hand or eye—she would let them be.

### Questions and Thoughts to Consider

1. What did it look like for people to be responsible for their own character, thought and demeanor? How and why has the change occurred for children to have less responsibility for themselves?
2. What is parental responsibility?
3. What is the effect of anxiety on parents? On children?
4. Give examples of “doing too much for our children” at the various stages of their lives. How does anxiety provoke these actions?
5. Contrast *laissez aller* (letting go) and a wise passiveness. How do license and liberty relate with these ideas?
6. Describe what masterly inactivity looks like at four, fourteen, twenty-four.
7. Describe how the component parts of masterly inactivity are used in relating with children.
8. How do the examples of the father, the sphinx and the Madonna give way to more understanding of masterly inactivity?