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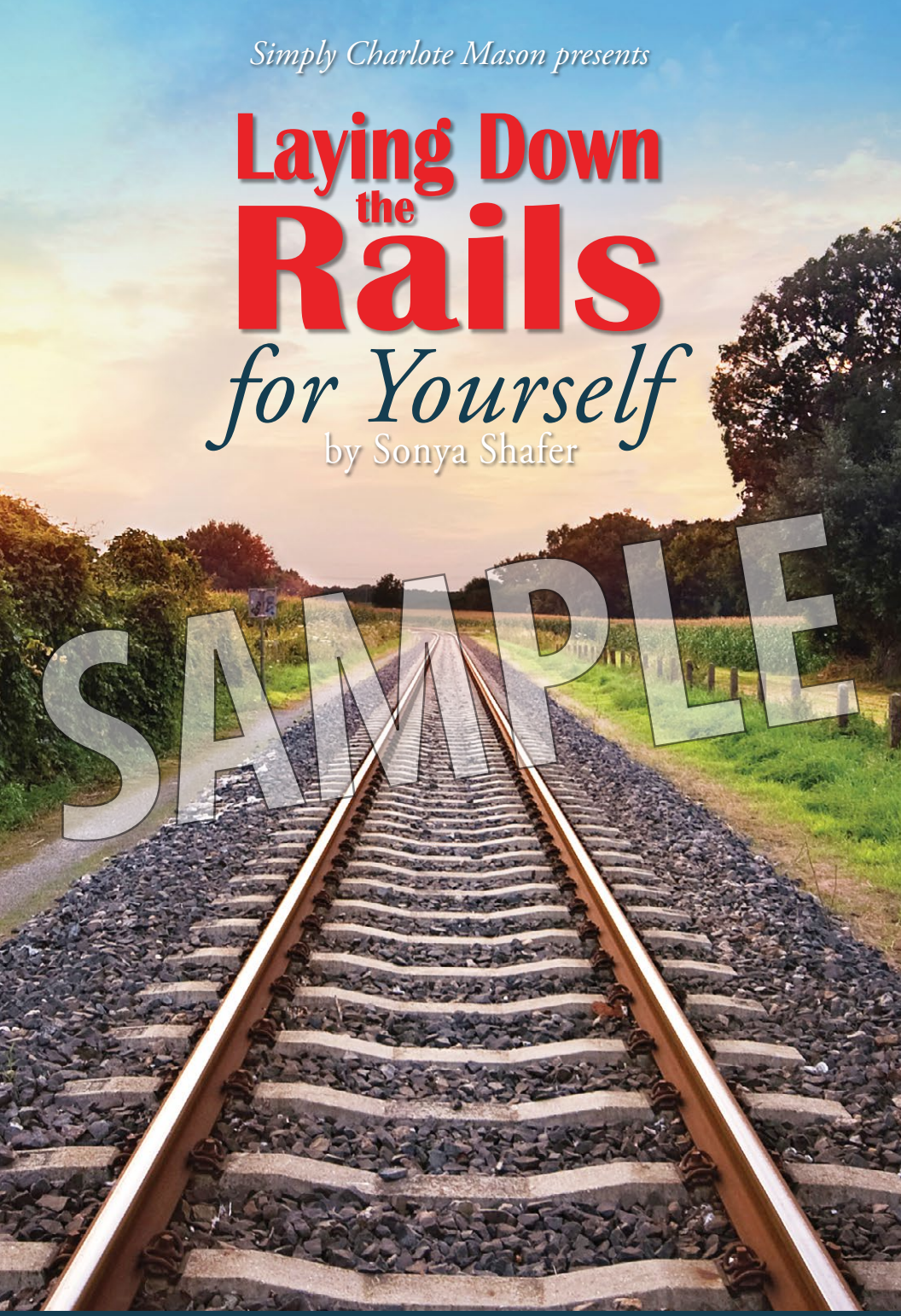
Laying Down the Rails *for Yourself*

by Sonya Shafer



SAMPLE

Good Habits Are Not Just for Kids

*You can successfully instill good habits in **your own life!***

It's never too late to cultivate good habits! This compelling combination of vivid word pictures and descriptions from Charlotte Mason, helpful insights from modern research, and practical ideas from life experience will show you how you can successfully instill habits in your own life.

Discover how habits are

- like railroad tracks, making your days run smoother and easier.
- a powerful lever, enabling you to do things you never thought you could.
- like a well-trained horse, helping you overcome your natural tendencies.
- the result of conflict, teaching you the secrets of strengthening your will power.
- a parent's business, pointing out how habit-training yourself is different from habit-training your child.
- little hammers, shaping and molding who you are becoming.
- a thing of now, encouraging you to start today!

"Many adults face daily struggles because no one took the time and effort to help instill good habits in their lives when they were young. If you are one of those struggling adults, or if you simply want to keep growing by laying down new rails toward other good ends in your life, this book is for you." — Sonya Shafer

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Laying Down the Rails for Yourself

Good Habits Are Not Just for Kids

by Sonya Shafer

Excerpts from Charlotte Mason's books are surrounded by quotation marks and accompanied by a reference to which book in the series they came from.
Vol. 1: Home Education
Vol. 2: Parents and Children
Vol. 3: School Education
Vol. 4: Ourselves
Vol. 5: Formation of Character
Vol. 6: A Philosophy of Education

Laying Down the Rails for Yourself: Good Habits Are Not Just for Kids
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"It is pleasant to know that, even in mature life, it is possible by a little persistent effort to acquire a desirable habit" (Vol. 1, p. 135).

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Chapter 1

Laying Down the Rails

"Well, do you think we should turn around?"

"I'm not sure; either that or keep going."

"It is supposed to be right here."

"But that's an empty field."

My husband and I were attempting to navigate the back roads of Alabama with a truck and a trailer. We were trying to locate a farm where we were scheduled to pick up a weaving loom that had been advertised for sale. The e-mailed directions said to go past the white church, past the flag pole, and past the Road Closed sign for one mile. (I know. I wondered about that too.)

But I had tucked those printed directions away in the depths of my purse and opted to use the mapping app on my phone instead. There's something appealing about simply driving along, listening to music or chatting about this and that, and hearing a polite British voice apologetically interject whenever you need to turn. We had tuned in to that unobtrusive voice for years. It had guided us over thousands of miles across multiple states. It had always gotten us exactly where we needed to go.

Until now.

"Is there a place to turn around?"

"I'm looking for one."

I could feel my stress level rising as I dug the directions out of my purse and unfolded the piece of paper. So much for a carefree trip. We were actually going to have to make decisions on our own now!

The Effort of Decision

There's something about the effort of making new decisions that is wearing. It is so much easier to continue to do the things we continually do than to consider whether and how and when and where to make a change. It is so much easier to let something or someone else make the decisions for us than to expend the energy required to make those decisions ourselves.

Charlotte Mason recognized that fact more than a hundred years ago.

> "We are all mere creatures of habit. We think our accustomed thoughts, make our usual small talk, go through the trivial round, the common task, without any self-determining effort of will at all. If it were not so—if we had to think, to deliberate, about each operation of the bath or the table—life would not be worth having; the perpetually repeated effort of decision would wear us out" (Vol. 1, p. 110).

Habit is a powerful factor in daily life. It saves us from all of that effort of decision.

Habits Are Like Railroad Tracks

Charlotte likened habits to railroad tracks. Railroads were new in her day. Everyone was amazed at how much easier it was to hop on a train than to navigate your own way over the roads. With a railroad the navigating was already done; the

train had only to follow the rails that had been laid down in the right direction. No decisions required.

It's the same with habits. Once habits are laid down in a certain direction, we can run on those rails with little to no effort of decision. Charlotte believed that laying down those rails of good habits comprised one-third of a person's education. She spoke and wrote at length about the importance of habits in a child's life and how parents and teachers should seek to help children cultivate good habits.

> "This relation of habit to human life—as the rails on which it runs to a locomotive—is perhaps the most suggestive and helpful to the educator; for just as it is on the whole easier for the locomotive to pursue its way on the rails than to take a disastrous run off them, so it is easier for the child to follow lines of habit carefully laid down than to run off these lines at his peril. It follows that this business of laying down lines towards the unexplored country of the child's future is a very serious and responsible one for the parent" (Vol. 1, p. 109).

The books *Laying Down the Rails: A Charlotte Mason Habits Handbook* and *Laying Down the Rails for Children: A Habit-Training Companion* are designed to help you instill good habits in your child's life.

Struggling Adults

But what if you didn't have that advantage when you were a child yourself? Many adults face daily struggles because no one took the time and effort to help instill good habits in their lives when they were young.

Maybe you struggle with keeping things tidy and in their places; you waste too much time searching for lost items and it frustrates you. Maybe you struggle with paying full

attention to the person at hand; you want to listen with your whole heart but your mind won't cooperate.

One parent put it this way: "I have a hard time finishing or even sticking to the task at hand. I want to cultivate good habits in my children, but how can I do that when I don't have the necessary good habits myself?"

If you are one of those struggling adults, or if you simply want to keep growing by laying down new rails toward other good ends in your life, this book is for you. Throughout its chapters we will take a look at some powerful word pictures that Charlotte used to communicate many different aspects of habit-training. Though the wording may relate to children, the principles are timeless. So we will focus on the main principles behind the word pictures and pull from them helpful and practical tips for instilling good habits in our own lives as adults.

Let's start with a closer look at how habits are like railroad tracks.

Minimize Joltings and Delays

We've already looked at how habits, like the rails that a train runs on, can save us from the effort and stress of decisions every day; but there are more benefits to habits. Read what else Charlotte had to say:

> "We have lost sight of the fact that habit is to life what rails are to transport cars. It follows that lines of habit must be laid down towards given ends and after careful survey, or the joltings and delays of life become insupportable" (Vol. 6, p. 101).

Not only do good habits minimize stress from decisions, they also reduce the amount of bumps in your day. When we think of roads, it's easy to picture the paved highways and

smooth stretches of interstate that we enjoy today. But back in Charlotte's day, many of their roads were more like paths in the dirt. Taking a trip in a carriage meant that the wheels would often drop into well-worn holes in the road or bump over tree roots that sat on its surface. A carriage ride was not usually smooth. The rough road conditions caused a lot of jolting and wear and tear on the passengers.

Such trips were also accompanied by frequent delays. Sheep may be crossing the road or even walking down the road at a leisurely pace. Horses may need to be exchanged at inns along the way. Wheels may break after dropping into those nasty ruts and holes, requiring time for repairs. Travel—especially a long journey—meant delays more often than not. You could count on it.

But riding on the railroad minimized those joltings and delays. The tracks provided a much smoother ride with less chance of inconvenient interruptions.

That's what good habits can do for you. They can minimize what Charlotte called "the joltings and delays of life."

It is jolting to have an unexpected guest drop in and the house is filthy. It is jolting to discover that your cell phone accidentally called a friend and he could hear you yelling at your kids. It is jolting to suddenly realize that you forgot to pay the electric bill that was due last week.

And what about delays? Supper is delayed while you run to the grocery store to get that one ingredient you don't have because you didn't plan ahead again. Your weight loss is delayed because you didn't eat healthy food or do your exercises all week. Leaving for that appointment is delayed because you don't know where you put your car keys.

Yes, these things happen. Life happens. But if you find that the same joltings and delays are happening over and over again in the long journey of life, they can cause a lot of

wear and tear on your mind and emotions. The good news is that they can be minimized by laying down the rails of good habits.

Let's take the first step.

Identify the Goal

Charlotte mentioned two practical steps toward laying down the rails:

> "Lines of habit must be laid down towards given ends and after careful survey" (Vol. 6, p. 101).

The first step toward installing railroad tracks is to identify which town you want to reach. What is the destination, the "given end"? Likewise, the first step toward installing good habits in your life is to identify which habit you want to reach. What is the goal?

Notice I said "which habit," singular. A key principle of habit-training is to focus on one habit at a time. Just as you cannot successfully build a single railroad track toward five towns in five different directions, so you cannot successfully build into your life the rails to reach five different habits all at once. Your efforts will be scattered and your emotions overwhelmed.

Rather, choose the one habit you are going to work on first. Get that habit up and running well, then focus on another one.

It can be a tough decision to identify the one habit that will be your first goal. Or maybe you already have one in mind! Either way, page 149 will show you the habits that Charlotte wrote about. That list should give you some good possibilities.

Think about which one would smooth out the most joltings and delays of life for you. It may be hard to narrow it down

to just one, but don't worry, you're not throwing any of them out. You are simply putting them in a queue. One will start at the front of the line; the others will have their turns.

Survey the Path

Charlotte counseled her readers to lay down the rails toward the chosen destination "after careful survey." When a railroad is to be built, a surveyor first takes some time to look over the ground and make note of hills and valleys, possible challenges, and smaller towns along the way. He then plots out the path he thinks would be best, taking into account all of those variables.

You will be wise to do the same. After you identify the one habit you want to reach, take some time to plot out how you might best get there. What specific challenges do you anticipate along the way? Are there any hills or valleys you expect to encounter? Sometimes challenges aren't as discouraging if you expect them and are mentally prepared for them.

Also take some time to think of some smaller destinations that you can route through as you work toward your larger goal.

This book is the result of my walking through a health habit in my own life. I've known I should make changes for years but never wanted to put forth the effort. Until this past year. I'll be sharing key components from my own journey with habit-training myself as we walk through the ideas in this book.

Many of the examples from my life experience will be related to the habit of health (which I suspect is something many of us struggle with), but the ideas will be applicable to any habit you want to work on. For example, this idea of identifying smaller destinations along the way. My ultimate

goal was a habit of good health, so here are the smaller goals I identified along that path:

- Drink a glass of water in the morning and one at night.
- Don't eat after supper.
- Avoid second helpings.
- Do my exercises every evening.

You can do the same with your goal habit. Write out some smaller goals that will help you along the way to reach your "given end." You could work on your first smaller goal for a couple of weeks, then add the second smaller goal for two more weeks, then the third and fourth as you continue to progress toward the larger habit destination.

Another way to look at it is to think about various applications of your selected habit. For example, if your goal is a habit of attention, you might identify some different situations in which you want to increase your attention. Make those different applications be the smaller goals along the path:

- Take my hands off the computer and turn my whole body toward the person who is speaking.
- Narrate the sermon to myself or my spouse on Sunday afternoon.
- Listen to my spouse with a goal of understanding rather than composing my response.
- Read smaller portions of my book and narrate them to myself.

Charlotte suggested that we work on one habit for six to eight weeks. I often get asked whether that means spending six to eight weeks on the large habit—like health or attention,

for example—or spending six to eight weeks on each of the smaller goals toward that larger habit. The answer is, You decide.

For some people or with some habits, each smaller application clicks into place readily and they have no trouble arriving at the larger destination habit in a couple of months. For other people or habits, it might take all eight weeks to get the track laid for one of the smaller goals.

The point is, speed is secondary when habit-training. Do you know how long it took to build the transcontinental railroad? Neither do I. The important thing is that it was completed and it served its purpose well.

The important thing about habits is to keep the end destination in mind and to map out how you plan to get there. It may take longer than you expect or it may go faster than you anticipate. Don't get your heart and mind stuck on a self-imposed deadline. No matter how long or short it takes to lay those rails, once they are laid you will reap the wonderful benefits of running on their smooth path.

Take heart! It is never too late to cultivate a new good habit. We'll discuss more of the how to's in upcoming chapters. I hope this fresh look at Charlotte's writings will encourage and equip you to lay down the rails for yourself!