

Wall Frank's

OUR LIBERAL HERITAGE

No. 48

“Teaching Children to Know Themselves”



Bronson Alcott, showing his self-confident and idealistic character

Bronson Alcott, a Unitarian Transcendentalist who hovered over his daughters, including Louisa May Alcott, to draw out their latent perfection, believed very deeply in the innate wisdom and goodness of every child. He rejected the accepted notion of Unitarian John Locke that the mind of every child as born is a blank slate that is written upon by experience, and substituted the radical idea that every newborn child possesses a divine moral essence that education should aid the child to discern and nourish. Nature is the end, and nurture the means. “I have often been taught by what very small children have said; and astonished at their answers,” Alcott wrote. “Has truth any age? ... Is it not immortal? All wisdom is not in grown-up people.” The aim of education, as in life, is self-consciousness so that eternal principles drawn out from one’s inner being might guide one’s life.

Alcott, born in 1799 to a New England farm family, was self-educated. He absorbed philosophy and devoured the writings of mind-opening writers, such as Milton, Bunyan, Plato and Coleridge, but could not get the hang of mathematics or foreign languages. He early rebelled against rote learning. At 19 he sailed to Norfolk, Virginia, searching in vain for a teaching situation in which he could exercise new teaching methods. At 26 he did secure a teaching position, and then another, in Connecticut, in which he emphasized new modes of education to draw the best from his pupils – nature walks, storytelling,

physical exercise, teaching through questioning rather than giving answers.

With increasing renown, Alcott in 1834 at age 35 opened a “School for Human Culture” in the spacious top floor of Boston’s Masonic Temple. The most renowned Unitarians of the time, such as William Ellery Channing, were his sponsors. His school soon filled with the children of the Boston elite. He took as his assistant the bright Unitarian linguist and Transcendentalist, Elizabeth Palmer Peabody. Dedicated to finding unity in all disparate diversities, Peabody had the greater natural right to head the school. However, she saw Alcott as a natural genius, and long days with the children exhausted her, but energized Alcott. Peabody was content to work under the tutelage of Alcott.



Elizabeth Palmer Peabody in later years. She and Bronson Alcott were lifelong friends



The Temple School on the top floor of the Masonic Temple in Boston. Here Alcott put his educational theories into practice.

In the Temple School, Alcott set the desks of pupils facing the walls outside of a large open space, so to separate individual exercises from group activities. The room abounded with busts of philosophers and religious figures. Students wrote daily in their personal journals. Alcott depicted timeless principles in metaphors and symbols. Learning focused on mind-expanding conversations.

Alcott, however, did instill his own ideas in the pupils, as Peabody noted, by an “autocratic” inflexibility for desired outcomes masquerading as a free exchange of views. Alcott taught that every life was sacred, and therefore ordinary people were as divine as Jesus. Many parents, at a time when Transcendentalism seemed a threat to prevailing Biblical Unitarianism, charged Alcott with imposing his own radical ideas on the children. Ralph Waldo Emerson esteemed Alcott’s “extraordinary soul,” but most Unitarian parents feared that Transcendentalists were pushing revered Biblical Unitarianism over the cliff. They removed their children from the Temple School, which closed in 1837. Yet Alcott’s educational philosophy and methods came back stronger than ever in the 20th century.

References

Ref: John Matteson, *Eden’s Outcasts: The Story of Louisa May Alcott and Her Father* (New York: Norton, 2007), pp. 55-80; Philip F. Gura, *American Transcendentalism: A History* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2007), pp. 84-90; Leslie Perrin Wilson, “Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, Transcendentalist Activist,” at <http://www.concordma.com/magazine/junjuly99/peabody.html>