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Bronson Alcott: Pioneer in Spiritual Education

"To teach, with reference to Eternity"

In his Pulitzer prize winning history of antebellum America, *What hath God Wrought*, Daniel Walker Howe refers to the American Renaissance that was characterized by "extraordinary outburst of genius." (2009, 618). Howe is referring to writers and thinkers that lived in Concord and Boston before the Civil War; he compares their creativity to sixteenth century Florence and Athens in fifth century before Christ. These thinkers included Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Elizabeth Peabody, Louisa May Alcott and her father, Bronson Alcott. Emerson and Thoreau have had a continuing impact in two areas: the environmental movement and non-violent action. In his book *Blessed Unrest* Paul Hawken argues that Emerson's ideas formed a seed that grew through the work of Thoreau, Gandhi and Martin Luther King. Emerson "planted seeds that would develop into what were, and continue to be, two disparate concepts that animate our daily existence: how we treat nature and how we treat one another-the foundations of environmental and social justice."(73)

In this paper I argue that we also need to examine their ideas in education as well, since many of these ideas are relevant today. Gruenewald (2002) in an article in *The Harvard Educational Review* on “Teaching and Learning with Thoreau” writes:

I believe that the troubled profession of teaching could benefit greatly from taking seriously the kind of dissent, experimentation, and holistic living-in-place that Thoreau’s legacy embodies. We may need him today more than ever before. So let us consider the ways in which we spend our lives, and let that reflection shape the kind of education we make possible for ourselves, and our students. (539)

It is my thesis that four individuals from this period: Alcott, Emerson, Fuller, and Thoreau developed a vision of holistic education and spirituality in education that is a powerful alternative to the economically based models of education that are so prevalent today. Of all the individuals that we call Transcendentalists, Alcott was the most devoted to education and nourishing children’s spirituality in that context. Bronson Alcott believed that education was the highest calling and devoted most of his life to different forms of teaching. As a young man, he began schools in Philadelphia and Boston. He was also intensely interested in the development of his own children and, like Piaget, kept extensive notes on their growth and behavior. These records totaled thousands of pages. As a mature man, he began giving “conversations” which were forums for adult learning and these were so popular that he was invited to give them in Ohio and Missouri. In his later years he was appointed Superintendent of Schools in Concord. Finally, towards the end of his life he started the Concord School of Philosophy. With all these achievements there were almost as many failures. The

Temple School in Boston had to be closed due the outrage in Boston over the some of topics for discussions in the school. His commune experiment at Fruitlands was a disaster that led to his withdrawal and depression.

The first part of this paper describes Alcott's work as an educator with an emphasis on the Temple School and the second part discusses how his ideas are relevant to today's educators working in the field of spirituality in education.

Alcott's Early Career

John Matteson (2007) in his Pulitzer Prize winning biography of Bronson Alcott and his daughter Louisa May describes Alcott's journey with compassion. The journey begins in Connecticut where he was born in 1799. As a boy he loved to play outdoors and recalled that "Nature was my parent and from her . . . I learned divine wisdom, even when a child" (17) As a young boy, he and his friends witnessed a total solar eclipse in 1806 and he was so excited that he fell and injured his shoulder while throwing stones at the sun. Almost sixty years later, he was to recall the incident in metaphoric manner that characterized his life as "tilting at the sun but always catching the fall. . . I suppose I am to toy with the sunbeams as long as I am dazzled by them." (15) Alcott did not take to the formal lessons offered in school. Yet he loved to read and was always on the lookout for books to read from the library or neighbors. One book that continued to influence him throughout his life was *Pilgrim's Progress*. *Pilgrim's Progress* is a moral tale that warns the reader not to follow the seductive path of acquiring wealth or seeking success; instead, one should focus on the spiritual path. Although Alcott accepts this larger message he does not hold to Christian doctrines espoused in *Pilgrim's Progress*. Jesus' teachings were worthy of being followed but Bronson did not accept him as the Son of

God. Like Emerson and Thoreau, he was more ecumenical and believed that Hinduism and Confucianism were also valuable sources of spiritual wisdom. Like most Transcendentalists his own intuitive mind was the final reference point rather than the teachings of others. Matteson (2007) comments “his criterion for an idea was neither whether it was practical or probable, but whether it resonated with his spirit”.(22)

Alcott's first teaching job was in 1823, when he began his work at school in the town of Cheshire Connecticut. He was convinced that teaching was the most important vocation a person could choose. He was influenced by the work of the Swiss educator, Johann Pestalozzi, who believed in the inherent goodness of the child. In a contribution to a biography of Pestalozzi, de Guimps (1889) identifies some of the key principles of his pedagogy which Alcott adopted.

- Intuition is the basis of instruction.
- In every branch, teaching should begin with the simplest elements and proceed gradually according to the development of the child, that is, in psychologically connected order
- The time for learning is not the time for judgment and criticism.
- Teaching should aim at development and not dogmatic exposition.
- The educator should respect the individuality of the pupil.
- The relations between the master and the pupil, especially as to discipline, should be based upon and ruled by love. (108)

The last point is very important, as both Pestalozzi and Alcott believed that the classroom should model itself on the loving family. In his first classroom Alcott brought

flowers to create a warm atmosphere. He built individual desks for the students rather than use the long tables and hard benches that were there. Alcott rejected corporal punishment and established a classroom court where students would discipline each other.

Observations on the Principles and Methods of Infant Instruction.

Alcott entered an essay contest sponsored by a Philadelphia paper with an essay entitled *Observations on the Principles and Methods of Infant Instruction*.

He proposed a holistic approach to education as the teaching should address ‘the whole being of the child’. Alcott (1830) argued that there were four major faculties within the child: “the animal nature, the affections, the conscience [and] the intellect”. By animal nature Alcott is referring to the physical development of the child, which is extremely important in the very young. Like Rudolf Steiner, Alcott argued that the physical development should be nourished which will provide a foundation for later intellectual growth. Instruction should contain “interest, certainty, and love.” (4-6)

Alcott believed in the use of Socratic dialogue to stimulate the conscience and the intellect. Conversation with the children was fundamental to all of Alcott’s teaching. Referring to how Jesus taught, he liked using parables and stories as a way to engage the children

Alcott’s essay did not win the prize but it motivated one of its readers, Reuben Haines, to ask Alcott to open a school in Germantown, Pennsylvania based on the principles described in *Observations*. Shortly after arriving in Germantown Alcott’s wife gave birth to their first daughter, Anna. With Anna’s arrival, Alcott began taking notes regarding the development of the child, which continued with the next two children. This

resulted in a total of 2500 pages of observations and reflections. The ultimate goal in this process was to nourish the happiness and independence of his children.

Around this time Alcott read *Aids to Reflection* by Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Along with *Pilgrim's Progress*, Coleridge's ideas had a powerful impact on Alcott's thinking. Coleridge argued that human beings have the capacity to directly intuit divine truth through what he called Reason. In contrast, Understanding depended on the senses. Implicit in Coleridge's view was that the spiritual was seen as the primary reality and the physical world an imperfect mirror of this reality. Reading Coleridge changed the focus on Alcott's observations of his children; he now focused more on their spiritual development rather than just recording their behaviors. However, he did not develop a stage theory of spiritual development such as James Fowler's.

The school in Germantown got off to a promising start, but the sponsor died and thus there was no more financial support for the Alcott's and the school. The school had to be closed. The Alcott's moved to Philadelphia where he started another school but this too failed, as his unconventional teaching methods seemed to scare off the parents. Alcott was convinced that a school could succeed in Boston and moved there in 1834.

The Temple School

With the help of Elizabeth Peabody Alcott opened the Temple School in Boston. Elizabeth Peabody, who later started the kindergarten movement in the U.S, was instrumental to the opening of the Temple School. Well known in Boston, she had been planning on opening her own school when she met Alcott. He showed her some of the conversations that he had with students in his school in Philadelphia and she was very impressed. She wrote to her sister Mary that Bronson was "like an embodiment of

intellectual light” and was “destined . . .to make a new era in society.” Elizabeth knew ten languages as well as philosophy, history and literature. She agreed to help Bronson in the school by teaching and, most importantly, recording the conversations that Bronson conducted with the children.

The setting for the school was the Masonic Temple on Tremont Street. The building was a center of Boston cultural life with concerts and lectures. The school was on the top two floors and the main classroom was a large spacious room which Peabody and Bronson furnished with plants, paintings and busts of Socrates, Plato, Jesus, and Shakespeare. Special desks were handmade for the students.

Reading was taught by using phonics and word recognition. Bronson asked the students to see the word in their mind’s eye. Like Montessori and Ashton Warner, he also encouraged students to begin writing and not to wait till they were proficient in reading. Students were encouraged to express their ideas. Although self-expression was encouraged, there was a structure to the day and unruly behavior was not tolerated.

Bronson rarely used corporal punishment, and instead he would remove a student from the classes and have the child sit alone. He experimented with different disciplining procedures and once he asked two students who had misbehaved to hit him because he wanted to demonstrate how painful it is to punish another person.

By the winter the enrollment had doubled. Elizabeth Peabody, who had first contracted to work just two hours a day, now stayed for the entire school day and began to keep her record of the school. According to Bedell, “*The Record of a School* remains today probably the best exploration of Bronson Alcott’s theories on education.”(102) Published in 1835, the book was part of larger movement of social change that included women’s rights and antislavery activities. Bedell suggests that *Record of a School*

became a “symbol of a whole new era in American thought.”(103) Alcott himself had never been happier or felt more fulfilled. He wrote that had had found “a unity and a fullness” in his existence.

The most unusual feature of the school was the conversations that Bronson held with students regarding spiritual matters. Elizabeth Peabody wrote once that “Education depends on its attitude toward soul.” Alice Howell (1991)) writes how Bronson was able to incorporate this attitude into his teaching:

That the child is not a *tabula rasa* Alcott proves without a doubt. As we read we rediscover that children are far more capable of philosophical insights and intuitions than we usually think, that indeed they take delight in being taken seriously as individuals whose opinions are worthy of respect. . . .Alcott’s secret, and I believe, his success consisted in his approach to children; he worked from his own innermost center toward the same one he knew existed in each of them. A bond of trust mutual respect, and affection was established at that level, so that the usual ego-to-ego tussle between teacher and student was avoided. (xxxii)

The second year of the school opened with 40 students. It was during the period when the abolition movement in New England was growing so there was sense of unrest. Alcott was now in his thirties and most biographers including Matteson and Bedell suggest that at this age he tended to become self-absorbed, even narcissistic in his behavior. The conversations at the school began to explore areas that Elizabeth Peabody was uncomfortable with. As noted above, Alcott believed that within every child there was an inner wisdom and this is what he wanted to draw out through the conversations.

At the same time, he seemed to have an “agenda” and Peabody found that Bronson would change the wording of what was said to confirm his own view. These conversations were originally published as *Conversations with Children on the Gospels* and today have been published as *How Like An Angel Came I Down*.

Matteson states that this book may have been Bronson’s “most exquisite work.” (76) However, there were a few passages that led to a very hostile reaction in the Boston community. Peabody asked him to remove the material where one child referred to conception and birth as “naughtiness” but Alcott only moved this material to end of the book.

Alcott would have been wise to have followed Peabody’s advice about the conversations, because when the book was published it was called “radically false” in an editorial in one of the Boston papers; another Boston paper called the book “obscene.” Emerson and Fuller defended Alcott, but the damage was done. Enrollment declined, and Alcott had to auction off much of the furniture and books. The school moved downstairs into a smaller room. Enrollment dwindled down to a few students. One of the few remaining students who had recently enrolled in 1839, was Susan Robinson, who was black. When parents of the remaining students heard this, they sent Alcott an ultimatum: Susan must go or they would withdraw their children. To his great credit, Alcott ignored the ultimatum. After the students were withdrawn there were only five students, including three of his own children. He was forced to close the school but as Matteson states, the end of the school was not “under a cloud of disgrace but in a small significant blaze of courage.” (85)

With the closing of the Temple School, one is reminded of the failure of some the free schools in the 60’s and 70’s because the leaders of these schools became self-

absorbed in their own educational ideologies. Alcott's refusal to listen to Elizabeth Peabody has likewise been attributed to self-absorption. Despite the problems, the Temple School provides many inspiring examples of holistic learning and spirituality in education. These will be discussed in the second half of the paper.

Conversations

In 1848, Bronson began public conversations. Alcott was never a good public speaker, but in a smaller setting he enjoyed engaging the audience in dialogue. Alcott (1872) believed that "Debate is angular, conversation circular and radiant of the underlying unity. . . Conversation presupposes a common sympathy in the subject, a great equality in the speakers; absence of egotism, a tender criticism of what is spoken.. . . Conversation with plain people proves more agreeable and profitable, usually, than with companies more pretentious and critical." (73- 76)

. The theme of the conversations would focus on an individual such as Dante and how that person represented a certain ideal. This theme provided the beginning, but Matteson compares Alcott's performance at these conversations to a jazz soloist, as he would shift the focus of the conversation as he listened to the concerns of the audience. Over time Bronson was increasingly asked to do the conversations in different settings. In 1852 students at Harvard Divinity School asked him to lead discussions on "Modern Life." In the fall of 1853 he was invited to give his conversations in what was then called "the West" which included Syracuse, Rochester, Buffalo, Cincinnati and Cleveland

During the Civil War, Alcott focused his conversations on people that he knew. For example, he discussed "Nature" with extensive references to Thoreau and a conversation on "Letters" that included a discussion of his friends Emerson and

Hawthorne. Alcott was 62 years old now, and Matteson notes that his conversations more and more began to revolve around his life long friends. The discussion became more personal and concrete and much less abstract than his talks and writing when he was younger. In short, he saw how a person was just as important as an idea; the conversations tended to more biography and narrative than exploring abstract ideas. His conversations received positive reviews in the newspapers. As his daughter, Louisa became famous with the publication of *Little Women* he was often asked to speak about his daughter after he had discussed “Hawthorne the Novelist, Thoreau the Naturalist, and Emerson the Rhapsodist”. He now referred to his conversations as “the popular conversation.” He wrote “I am introduced as the father of Little Women, and I am riding in the Chariot of Glory where I go.” (cited in Matteson, 364)

Alcott’s Contributions to Teaching and Learning.

Bronson Alcott’s main contribution to education was in his view of the child. He believed that all children held an inner spiritual core that could be drawn out through questioning. The goal of this work was self-knowledge. In *The Record of the School* Peabody writes that Alcott “was glad to hear that one of the scholars had said out of school, that it was impossible to remain in Mr. Alcott’s school and not learn to know one’s self.”(85) Since the self was closely connected to the soul, the development of the soul was also a goal. Alcott accepted a Platonic view of the soul that it contained a inner wisdom that needed to be drawn out.

Again Peabody quotes Alcott:

We need schools not for the inculcation of knowledge, merely, but the development of genius. Genius is the peculiar attribute of the soul. It is the soul, indeed, in full and harmonious play; and no instruction deserves the name, that does not quicken this its essential life, and fit it for representation in literature, art or philosophy. (17)

In the last two decades, we have seen educators write about the importance of the soul in education.(Kessler 2000, Miller 2000, Moore 1992) Alcott and the other Transcendentalists developed a non-sectarian language about the soul that is helpful today. Soul is often connected to religion but Alcott and Emerson used the term in a manner that allows for an inclusive approach to spiritual education.

Another goal for the Alcott was *happiness*. Peabody writes:

The realization of Happiness, involves the second principle of education; for it promotes the action of Love. When we lead a child to see the happiness within and around him, we are giving him a true perception of our love and leading himself through an experience of it.(183)

The goal of happiness has been echoed in the work of Nel Noddings (2003) who has argued that happiness should be a central goal of education. Happiness is one of the main goals of the education system in Bhutan. Recently that country invited 24 educators from around the world to align their education system with the country's goal of Gross National Happiness (Miller 2010).

As I mentioned at the beginning of this paper, Alcott's vision of education along with other Transcendentalists is much more inspiring than the one we hear today that schools should prepare students to compete in the global economy. The Transcendentalist's vision can help us rethink the ultimate aims of our education system.

Alcott's teaching methods can provide a blueprint for holistic learning that nurtures happiness. These methods include Socratic questioning, journals and autobiography, classroom circles, inquiry, imagery and that elusive quality of presence in teaching.

Socratic Questioning

One element of this blueprint was Socratic questioning to draw out the inner wisdom of the students. Below are examples of his questioning from the Temple School, which took place within Alcott's Transcendental/Christian perspective. Alcott and the other Transcendentalists believed that the Christ spirit existed within each individual. Howell (1991) notes that "Alcott was far more universalist in his outlook-he felt that his method of education (*ex-ducere*-leading forth) transcended all sects."(xxii)

Below are excerpts from the conversations with children (ages 5-12) selected by Stephen Mitchell in the forward to *How Like an Angel Came I Down*. Mitchell comments that the students in the Temple School "recognize him [Alcott] as one of those rare adults, perhaps the *only* one, who speaks to them with complete sincerity and respect, not as mere children, but as equals" (xiii)

MR. ALCOTT: *Now, does our spirit differ in any sense from God's spirit?*

Each may answer.

CHARLES. (10-12 years old). *God made our spirits.*

MR. ALCOTT. *They differ from His then in being derived?*

GEORGE K. (7-10). *They are not so good.*

WILLIAM B. (10-12). *They have not so much power.*

AUGUSTINE. (7-10). *I don't think our spirit does differ much.*

CHARLES. *God is spirit, we are spirit and body.*

JOSIAH. (5 years old). *He differs from us, as a king's body differs from ours. A king's body is arrayed with more goodness than ours.*

EDWARD B. (10-12). *God's spirit is a million times larger than ours, and we come out of him as the drops of the ocean.*

* * *

MR. ALCOTT. *Jesus said he was the son-the child of God. Are we also God's sons?*

WILLIAM B. *Oh! before I was born – I think I was part of God himself.*

MANY OTHERS. *So do I.*

MR. ALCOTT. *Who thinks his own spirit is the child of God? (All held up hands). Now, is God your Father in the same sense that he is the Father of Jesus? (Most held up hands.)*

* * *

MR. ALCOTT. *Do you think that were you to use all that is in your spirit, you might also be prophets?*

SEVERAL. *If we had faith enough.*

WILLIAM B. *If we had love enough.*

CHARLES. *A prophet first has a little love, and that gives the impulse to more, and so on, until he becomes so full of love, he knows everything.*

* * *

ELLEN (10-12) [mentions "*Judgment Day*"]

MR. ALCOTT. *What do you mean by Judgment Day?*

ELLEN. *The last day, the day when the world is to be destroyed.*

CHARLES. *The day of Judgment is not any more at the end of the world than now. It is the Judgment of conscience at every moment.*

* * *

MR. ALCOTT. *Where did Jesus get his knowledge?*

MARTHA (7-10). *He went into own soul.*

* * *

JOSIAH (age 5). *Mr. Alcott, we think too much about clay. We should think of spirit. I think we should love spirit, not clay. I should think a mother now would love her baby's spirit; and suppose it should die, that is only the spirit bursting away out of the body. It is alive; it is happy. I really do not know*

why people mourn when their friends die. I think it should be a matter of rejoicing. For instance, now, if we should go into the street and find a box, an old dusty box, and should put into it some very fine pearls. And by and by the box should grow old and break, why, we should not even think about the box; but if the pearls were safe, we should think of them and nothing else. So it is with the soul and body. I cannot see why people mourn for bodies.

* * *

MR. ALCOTT. *Do think these conversations are of any use to you?*

CHARLES. *Yes, they teach us a great deal.*

MR. ALCOTT. *What do they teach you?*

GEORGE K. *To know ourselves.*

(Cited in Alcott, xiii-xvi)

Alcott held these conversations once a week. He would start with story or passage from the Bible as starting point for the discussions. These examples demonstrate Alcott's belief that wisdom lies within and can be drawn out from the student. Most religious education at time involved indoctrination rather than the kind of questioning that Alcott employed. It is clear that Alcott was able to create a safe learning environment where children could express their thoughts and feelings. In short he created what David Hay (2006) refers to as compassionate concern and Barbara Myers calls 'hospitable space.' (154).

David Hay has also argued that there is universal quality to children's spiritual experience, which he calls relational consciousness. He describes four different types of

relational consciousness: child-God, child-people, child-world, and child-self. Alcott's conversations support Hay's theory as these different aspects can be seen in the examples above. For example, in the last one George refers to self-knowledge while several of the conversations demonstrate child-God consciousness. There is also a conversation on love that is an example of child-other consciousness.

Both Alcott and Hay show a deep respect for the child's intelligence. Matteson identified the qualities that made in Alcott a great teacher—"his patience, his love of trying new methods, and his fascination with the slow mysterious progress of children" (249). These qualities are still relevant today for teachers attempting to nurture children's spiritual development.

Journal Writing. Just as Transcendentalists such as Thoreau and Alcott kept journals, they encouraged their students to do the same. At the Temple School, the first task in the morning was for the students to write in their journals. Peabody (1845) records one morning when Alcott was talking to one student.

Mr. Alcott, who was walking around as usual, was saying to one of the journalists: You are engaged in recording what happens *out of you*; its advantage is to make you feel and remember what *effect* all outward events, and your action on what is outward, may have on your inward state of mind. You write down the picture made on your mind by things. I hope you will soon write the thoughts and feelings that come from your soul about these things. These thoughts and feelings are your inward life. (25)

Alcott encouraged the students not to just record events but how these events relate to their inner life. Together with the Socratic questioning the journals allowed the children to become aware of their soul life.

Autobiography/biography. Closely connected to journal writing was narrative and autobiography. In the *Record of a School*, Peabody writes about how Alcott saw autobiography as a way for the more mature student to reflect on the development of the soul.(193) Alcott also saw autobiography as a better way to develop writing skills. Peabody writes about this approach:

Everyone knows that a technical memory of words, and of rules of composition, gives very little command of language; while a rich consciousness, a quick imagination and force of feeling, seem to unlock the treasury; and even so vulgar passion as anger, produces eloquence, and quickens the perception. (193)

This is a holistic approach to acquiring writing skills as Alcott wants to engage the whole student in the process.

Inquiry based learning. Alcott rarely lectured to the students but led them through a series of questions.. Peabody records many examples in *Record of a School*. Sometimes this would involve extended questioning of one pupil or just presenting a general question to the entire class such as “what is the imagination.”(165) Sometimes the questions were very leading so that Peabody once wrote that he “unconsciously led them

to his views” (158) Bickman (1999) writes about this same tendency: “Alcott’s conduct of the classroom and the discussion was sometimes unconsciously manipulative, but he was also much of the time a good listener and provocative questioner.” (xxiii)

Classroom circles. Alcott had the students sit in a semi circle rather than in rows, which was very unusual for that time. The semi-circle supported the discussion amongst the students since they could see each other’s faces. The use of the circle as a vehicle for meeting and discussion can be traced back to indigenous peoples. For example, some First Nations people form a circle and pass the talking stick around to give each person a chance to share their thoughts and feelings. Black Elk said this about circles:

Everything the Power of the World does is done in a circle.

The sky is round, and I have heard that the earth is round like a ball, and so are all the stars. The wind, in its greatest power, whirls. Birds make their nests in circles, for theirs is the same religion as ours. . . The life (of a person) is a circle from childhood to childhood, and it is in everything where power moves. (as cited in Baldwin, 80)

Emerson’s (1990) essay on “Circles” confirms their importance in the universe as he wrote “the natural world may be conceived of as a system of concentric circles.” (320)

Images/visualization. Alcott used pictures and images to teach language. Peabody describes his approach in the *Record of a School*.

When children are committed to his charge very young the first discipline to which he puts them, is of the eye; by making them familiar with pictures. The art of drawing has been well called the art of learning to seeIt is from considerations of this kind that Mr. Alcott very early presents to children pictured forms of things; and he selects them in the confidence that the general character of these forms will do much towards setting the direction of the current activity. (4-5)

The image can help the student to develop their own inner images which is important in the development of imagination. Steiner and other educators (Gaylean 1983, Murdock 1982) have argued that elementary school children need to develop their imagination and that stories, fairy tales and myths are helpful in this process because they trigger the inner life of the child.

Alcott believed that learning to read and write was facilitated by having children have direct sense experiences. He felt that sight was particularly important and he showed pictures of words and encouraged the students to draw. Peabody (1845) describes the importance of drawing and writing at a very early age. “To aid the practice of the eye, in looking at forms, the practice of the hand in imitating them should soon follow. Mr. Alcott thinks the slate and pencil, or the chalk and black board, can hardly be given too early. The latter is even better than the former; for children should have free scope, as we find that their first shapings are almost gigantic.”(5) The idea that writing should proceed or go hand in hand with reading has also been advocated by Montessori, Steiner and Asthon-Warner. For example, Ashton-Warner (1964) encouraged Maori children in New Zealand to make pictures of their stories.

The Presence of the Teacher.

. Like Montessori, Alcott saw the teacher as a guide. Matteson (2007) summarizes the role when he writes, “the role of the teacher was neither to drive nor to lead the child; it was to accompany him.”(42) Most of all, teachers make a difference through their presence. Alcott (1830) wrote this in his Observations:

The teachers should unite an amiableness of temper, a simplicity of manner, and devotion to his work, which shall associate with it his happiness and duty. . . .He should possess the power of reaching the infant understanding in the simplest and happiest forms. . . .Free from prejudices and particularities, he should impart instructions from the pure fountain of truth and love alone. Taking a benevolent view of the works of nature and the ways of Providence, his piety should diffuse itself through all his teachings. (.8)

Today Parker Palmer (1998) and Rachael Kessler (n.d.) have argued for the importance of teacher presence. Palmer emphasizes identity and integrity in the teacher. Kessler wrote “We celebrate those precious moments when we embody a “presence” that carries the class to place a where minds and hearts are move and genuine connections occur.”

(1) David Nay (2006) suggests awareness exercises such as eating an apple as ways of enhancing presence.(156) To enhance the teacher’s presence Alcott encouraged self-reflection. Peabody, in the last chapter of her book, argues that teachers and parents must also embark on the path of self-knowledge if the students are to know themselves.

“The parent or teacher should make it his first business to know himself; for most surely he will transmit his moral character by inspiration to his child in just such proportion as circumstances allow to have any influence, and the child has any sensibility.”(187)

Adult Education With his conversations and the Concord School of Philosophy Alcott focused on adult education toward the end of his life. He realized that adults did not want to be just lectured to but engaged in dialogue and discussion. Along with Margaret Fuller who held similar conversations with women in Boston, Alcott explored how adults could be engaged in learning through this process.

Alcott has left an important educational legacy. Along with the other Transcendentalists he developed an inspiring vision of education that provides a humane alternative to the narrow economic vision of education today. We can also learn from Alcott’s pedagogy. As I have argued, he was a forerunner of Montessori, Steiner, and Ashton-Warner. Central to his vision was the child’s inner spiritual core; Montessori called this core the spiritual embryo. Alcott’s teaching methods such as Socratic questioning, the use of journals and autobiography, and seating the children in a circle were just some of the tools he experimented with to nourish the embryo. Alcott’s pedagogy was not limited to spiritual education as he had many interesting ideas regarding how children learn to read and write. We could also benefit from his willingness to experiment and to try various teaching methods to engage children. Most of all, we need to see children as he did- human beings with a mysterious inner life that should be witnessed and nourished.

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