



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK
Spirituality · Community · Justice

**The Story Behind *Little Women*:
How the Life of Louisa May Alcott
Is Interwoven with Transcendentalism**

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14 May 2018

frederickuu.org

This morning's sermon is the fifth in a series of annual Mother's Day sermons on "Founding Mothers of Unitarian Universalism":

- We began with **Margaret Fuller** (1810-1850), who along with Emerson and Thoreau is one of our three most important Transcendentalist forebears. Her 1845 pamphlet *Women in the Nineteenth Century* was "the first significant work to take the liberal side in the question of Women's Rights since Mary Wollstonecraft," who wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* fifty years earlier.
- Next, we moved to the three **Peabody Sisters**: Mary Peabody (1806 - 1887), an important educator who married the politician and educational reformer Horace Mann; Sophia Peabody (1809-1871), a talented painter who married Nathaniel Hawthorne, the novelist whose best-known work is *The Scarlet Letter*; and Elizabeth Peabody (1804 - 1894), the author or translator of a half-dozen books, who also became the publisher of many Transcendentalists under her own imprint. She was also the celebrated founder of kindergartens in America.
- Then we explored the life of **Julia Ward Howe** (1819-1910) about whom it is said that she "had six children, learned six languages, and published six books." She was most famous for writing the lyrics to the "Battle Hymn of the Republic." She was also President of the New England Woman Suffrage Association, and helped found Mother's Day itself through her famous Mother's Day Proclamation for Peace.

- Last year, our focus was on **Mary Moody Emerson** (1774-1863), Ralph Waldo Emerson’s aunt, whom he called his “earliest and best teacher.”
- In future years, I look forward to telling you about some of our other founding mothers, such as:
 - **Judith Sargent Murray**, an early American advocate for women's rights, who was married to John Murray, the founder of the Universalist half of our movement;
 - **Olympia Brown**, another Universalist who in 1863 became the first woman to be ordained with full denominational recognition; and
 - **Sophia Lyon Fahs** who revolutionized twentieth-century UU Religious Education.

In these history-based sermons, my intent is not to overwhelm you with names and dates. Rather, my hope is that your takeaway will be that as Unitarian Universalists, “We stand on the shoulders of giants,” many of whom were pathbreaking women. Retelling these stories helps us further inscribe them into our sense of who we are—and who we might become, individually and collectively—through allowing the lives of our ancestors to inspire us to live with more courage, freedom, and compassion in our time.

Our focus this year is **Louisa May Alcott** (1832-1888), best known as the author of the 1868 novel *Little Women*. An influential person in her own right, her life also intersected in fascinating ways with many of our other Unitarian forebears. This sermon is inspired in particular by two biographies related to her parents: Marmee & Louisa: The Untold Story of Louisa May Alcott and Her Mother (Simon & Schuster, 2013) by Eve LaPlante, and Eden's Outcasts: The Story of Louisa May Alcott and Her Father by John Matteson (W. W. Norton, 2008).

Louisa was the second of four daughters born to Abigail and Bronson Alcott. She was born on November 29, 1832—which also happened to be her father’s 33rd birthday. Bronson was a brilliant and innovative educational reformer—although he had a tragic flaw of being financially irresponsible. Louisa’s story has often been told in a way that links her success to his influence.

However, in recent years, as scholars have explored Abigail’s previously neglected letters and journals, it has become clear that:

Abigail was a vibrant writer, brilliant teacher, and passionate reformer, who spent decades working to abolish slavery, ameliorate urban poverty, and allow women to be educated, vote, and engage in public life. She nurtured and fostered Louisa's career as a writer...encouraging her daughter, rejection after rejection, to persist. Louisa in turn dedicated all her early work, starting with her first novel at age sixteen to her mother.

The evidence now seems clear that her mother's influence was equal to or greater than her father's (LaPlante 2-3).

On the one hand, it is the case that Louisa, "was taught by her father and also introduced to men of great influence, including Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Henry David Thoreau." On the other hand, it is also the case that Louisa, "was taught by her mother and also introduced to women of great influence, include Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, Lydia Maria Child, and Margaret Fuller" (3-4). And on this point, her famous novel is a fascinating case study.

Little Women, although fictional, seems to reflect Louisa's personal experience. The most obvious parallel is that the March family in *Little Women* includes four sisters —precisely the situation of the Alcott family. And in the book, the fictional mother Marmee (clearly based on Louisa's actual mother), plays a major role (2). In contrast, the fictional father is mostly absent. Indeed, the text itself subtly comments on this absence: "When Mr. March at last makes his grand entrance in Chapter 22 of the novel, almost the first words devoted to him are, 'Mr. March became invisible...'" (7). The absentee nature of the fictional father is related to the fact that her real father was often either physically or emotionally distant as he repeatedly tried (and usually failed) with some new utopian scheme, leaving his wife and children at home to make do with little money (104).

Due to the variety of Bronson's experimental schemes, during the first twenty-five years of Louisa's life, "**the Alcott family changed residence an average of more than once every two years**" (Matteson 232). Indeed, there were points at which they moved so often that the sisters wouldn't bother to unpack their trunks (LaPlante 152). And although this itinerant lifestyle was destabilizing in many ways, there were also ways that it forced Louisa to be self-reliant, resourceful, and resilient (84-85).

Louisa was too young to attend the Temple School, her father's most famous experiment in education (Matteson 10). But there are some fascinating stories of Abigail and Bronson's parenting choices. Two of the most unforgettable, to me, include allowing:

three-year-old Louisa and four-year-old Anna to wander freely in Boston, as only boys could do a generation before.... One night after dark Louisa, the little explorer, unable to find her way home, sobbed herself to sleep on a doorstep on Boston's Bedford Street. The town crier found her there with her head 'pillowed on a big Newfoundland dog, who was with difficulty persuaded to release' Louisa.... Also, at age three, before she could swim, Louisa wandered into the common and fell into the pond." An African-American boy saw her struggling in the water, jumped in, and rescued her.... Her mother often said to her, "You were an abolitionist at the age of three." (LaPlante 75)

In the spirit of full disclosure, I think that generally the shift from extreme "helicopter parenting" toward "free-range parenting" is a good thing. But at least from my point of view, age three seems on the young side for wandering unsupervised in a large city, even if it was mid-nineteenth century Boston. But what do I know? She not only survived, but also grew up to be brave and adventurous. It was said that Louisa could "run like a gazelle...and that she could leap a fence or climb a tree as well as any boy" (133).

And while she was not old enough to attend her father's famous (but short lived) academy at the Temple School, she was old enough at age ten to live at Fruitlands, her father's ill-fated attempt to create a "back-to-the-land" utopian community along with a few other families. There were around 16 members total (Matteson 126). Although Bronson's intentions were noble, he did not have the necessary pragmatic follow-through skills. In the words of one critic: the prospects are not good for "The farmer who spends the spring months discussing philosophy in fashionable people's parlors" (117).

Bronson hoped his family would find the austere lifestyle of Fruitlands ennobling. But that was often not Louisa's experience. To give just one example:

Louisa heard her father arguing with serene confidence for the rights of all living beings, but when worm-eaten apples arrived at the dinner table or the autumn wind blew through her linen tunic, this generosity on all sides did not appear generous to her. Inevitably, **she wondered whether earthly comforts were so terrible as her father made them out to be.** (148)

At that time, she privately wrote in her diary, “I wish I was rich, I wish I was good, and we were all a happy family to this day” (154). Such childhood experiences later became fodder for her fiction writing, such as this passage from Chapter 14 of her novel *Little Men*: “Money is the root of all evil, and yet it is such a useful root that we cannot get on without it any more than we can without potatoes” (196).

I would be remiss, however, if I were to give you the impression that young Louisa’s life was all hardship and toil. It was more complicated than that. There were years in which:

A typical day for Louisa began with a trip to Emerson’s house [where she had free access to his library] and might continue with a nature walk with Thoreau, only to end with a homeward trudge to a cottage where there was sometimes insufficient food, where her father wore the mantle of a social outcast, and where her mother tried to bear up under the weight of mounting debt and disappointments. Louisa’s life was in one sense lavishly wealthy. In another, it was perilously poor. (90, 181)

As is often the case with life, the reality of it was messy and complex.

And although there is much more to say about the life and legacy of Louisa May Alcott—as well as about her mother and father—I would be remiss if I didn’t take at least a few moments to tell the story of **how a moderately successful writer stumbled into writing one of the most beloved novels of all time.**

The initial idea for the book was not Louisa’s. Her editor was interested in the potential new market from increasing numbers of women being taught to read, and he offered to pay Louisa “to write a girls’ book” (LePlante 223). Louisa was neither particularly excited about the idea, nor was she confident that she was the best candidate for the job. She always preferred hanging out with boys more than girls. She

wasn't sure she knew much about what girls generally were like, and felt she only really knew the experience of her three sisters and herself (LePlante 224). So she trusted that old adage, "Write what you know!" Still, the sour mood she was in about this book project is reflected in the opening line of the novel: "'Christmas won't be Christmas without any presents,' grumbled Jo, lying on the rug." Jo, of course, was the character Louisa styled after herself (Matteson 332-333).

Despite her skepticism, Louisa worked hard on the book, writing 402 pages in a mere nine weeks. And when she delivered it to the publisher, she made perhaps the most impactful decision of entire life. Her editor offered either "an advance of \$1,000 and no royalties; or a smaller advance of \$300 and royalties on each copy sold." She asked his advice, and although there is no way of knowing the counterfactual of what would have happened if he had recommended a different choice, we do know that "Years later **she credited the 'honest publisher' for suggesting she take royalties which 'made her fortune'"** (LaPlante 228).

The success of *Little Women* was astounding:

At her death she was the country's most popular author, and had earned more from writing than any male author of her time. In the decade after *Little Women* was published, she sold more than half a million books in America alone. Ten years later, her publisher had printed nearly two million copies of her books. By the mid-twentieth century, more than two million copies of *Little Women* alone were in print, and the most circulated books at the New York City Public Library were *Little Women* and Anne Frank's diary. Louisa's novel has been translated into scores of languages, including Flemish, Arabic, Portuguese, Urdu, Persian, and Japanese.
(278)

Quite impressive for a book she wrote begrudgingly and skeptically.

And although in the last two decades of her life she did get to live out her childhood dream of being rich, there were still struggles. In particular, she suffered debilitating symptoms from an auto-immune disorder, which twenty-first century physicians speculate was likely lupus (273). And while she used her wealth to support both people in need and social justice causes, there were many ways in which her

health prevented her from being as much of an activist as she would have liked otherwise (271-272). But she remained a lifelong advocate for, in particular, racial justice and gender equality.

Typically, I would leave the last word to Louisa, but since this is Mother's Day, I will leave the final words to the influence Louisa's mother had on all four of her daughters:

A woman can accomplish as much as a man, Abigail had told her daughters so often they came to believe her. Educate yourself up to your senses. Be something in yourself. Let the world know you are alive. Push boldly off. Wait for no man. Have heads full of new and larger ideas. And proceed to the great work [given] humanity. (282)