"Transcendental Wild Oats"

Loveable but exasperating. Reverential yet ridiculous. Tender father and neglectful parent. An old fashioned patriarch always dependent on women. Extravagant dreamer living in the most pinched circumstances: Bronson Alcott was a study in contradictions. He was both a progressive and a throwback. Behold a man whose purse was as empty as his imagination was rich.

Bronson was born in the little Connecticut town of Wolcott in 1799, of an undistinguished and largely uneducated family. The house where he matured was dark and squat, just three rooms for elders and eight children. His father was a farmer who could neither read nor write, but his mother introduced him to letters by helping him trace the alphabet with a stick on the newly sanded kitchen floor and awakened in the boy inklings of an intellectual and interior life that far surpassed the crudity of his physical surroundings.

Early on, he began to cultivate that inward world. His first journals were primitive, written late at night in the loft where he slept by the light of a tallow candle stuck into a potato, using a feather plucked from the barnyard goose and ink made from vinegar and soot to record his thoughts and moods and feelings. Intuitions of the divine, whisperings of the infinite and the invisible–these were the realities that riveted Bronson–the kingdoms of the mind and spirit. Who cared if those first diaries were spliced from odd bits of scrap paper stitched between thin boards? Those were mere accidents of substance, the dross of a material world, of little concern compared to the elevated ideals and deep ponderings scratched onto the rough pages that each month grew in volume.

But it was characteristic that the first purchase Bronson ever made was a pack of elegant notepaper. And in later years, even when his family was nearly destitute, he would continue to buy the very finest leather to bind and preserve his collected musings, sixty-one volumes in all containing over five million words before he reached his end.

Most of those jottings are tedious in the extreme. He was always better as a conversationalist than as an author. Vivacious, charming, with flowing blond hair and azure eyes, he captivated listeners with endlessly inventive theories of metaphysics and social reform. So Bronson is better known from other's descriptions than from his own writings and is certainly best known from the works of his daughter Louisa May. *Little Women* is one fictionalized account of the Alcott's family life, but father hardly appears there. For an honest portrait of Bronson, look to Louisa May's hilarious and rather heart-breaking short story "Transcendental Wild Oats."

Here's how the story begins:

"On the first day of June, 184-, a large wagon, drawn by a small horse and containing a motley load, went lumbering over certain New England hills, with the pleasing accompaniments of wind, rain and hail. A serene man with a serene child upon his knee was driving, or rather being driven, for the small horse had it all his own way. A brown boy with a William Pen style of countenance sat beside him, firmly embracing a bust of Socrates. Behind them was an energetic-looking woman, with a benevolent brow, satirical mouth, and eyes brimful of hope and courage. A baby reposed upon her lap, a mirror leaned against her knee, and a basket of provisions danced about at her feet, as

she struggled with a large, unruly umbrella. Two blue-eyed little girls, with hands full of childish treasures, sat under one old shawl, chatting happily together."

These pilgrims and a few others were trudging through the mud toward a promised wonderland. Together they had purchased a small farm near Harvard, Massachusetts, where they proposed to create a society dedicated to the moral uplift of the race. Utopia was their goal. Paradise restored. So it made a certain poetical sense that one of the communards was a nudist, another an inmate from an insane asylum. Almost half the members of this little Consociate Family, as they called themselves, were under the age of thirteen, hardly much help in scratching a living from the ground. But that was no obstacle for such hardy pioneers. "Ordinary secular farming is not our object," they announced to the world in that literary trumpet *The Transcendental Tripod*. "Fruit, grain, pulse, herbs, flax and other vegetable products, receiving assiduous attention, will afford ample manual occupation, and chaste supplies for the bodily needs. Consecrated to human freedom, the land awaits the sober culture of devoted men."

Unfortunately, none of them knew a thing about farming. Draft animals were forbidden out of respect for God's dumb creatures. Manure was too unmentionable to be employed as a fertilizer. And root crops like potatoes that grew in the earth were considered dirty, contaminated by too much contact with the soil. All the settlers were vegetarians and tea-totalers. No sugar or cotton was allowed, since these were products of slave labor. And no cash crops were to be raised, either. Only subsistence crops and bartered produce would grace the dinner table, since money was the root of all evil. Because there was no orchard to speak of, but only the idea of one, the place was naturally christened "Fruitlands."

Ralph Waldo Emerson had his doubts about the enterprise from the very beginning. He'd known and admired Bronson for years, sensing genius in his work with the Temple School in Boston. It was an avant garde academy where children were liberated from rote memorization and corporal punishment and freed to learn through their own innate curiosity about the world. Conventional schools in those days taught geography out of books. Bronson taught it by inviting youngsters to make maps of their own neighborhoods. Others taught the alphabet by endlessly copying abc's. Bronson had his pupils form letters by assuming the shapes with their own bodies, slinky s's and arrogant i's, a device winningly described in *Little Women* when Jo's suitor, a dignified German professor, makes an unexpected house call.

Mr. Bhaer came in one evening to pause on the threshold of the study, astonished by the spectacle that met his eye. Prone on the floor lay Mr. March (*i.e. Bronson*) with his respectable legs in the air, and beside him, likewise prone, was Demi, trying to imitate the attitude with his own short, scarlet-stocked legs, both grovelers so seriously absorbed that they were unconscious of spectators, till Mr. Bhaer laughed his sonorous laugh, and Jo cried out with a scandalized face, --

"Father, father! Here's the professor!"

A Teutonic instructor like Professor Bhaer would have doubtless demanded relentless study from his students. But Bronson encouraged them to play at least four hours each day. And above all, he drew them out with questions and dialogues intended to make them think and wonder and explore. Well over a hundred and fifty years ago, he

recognized the existence of multiple intelligences and pioneered child-centered education. But Alcott's methods were too novel, subversive even, and the Temple School folded. Poor Bronson was bankrupt, not for the first or last time. Emerson assisted his friend with financial aid, and even offered to share his roof. But when Alcott sought monetary help with the Fruitlands project, even the kind-hearted Emerson balked. Bronson might be "a god-made priest," he intoned, but for the "founder of a family or institution, I would as soon exert myself to collect money for a madman." The commune might flourish in the summer, he predicted, but December would tell the tale.

By winter, indeed, most of the company had deserted Fruitlands, while those who remained were sick, vitamin-deprived and close to starvation. It was Mrs. Alcott, Abby, who forced the issue, informing her husband that he might remain in Eden if he liked, but she was escorting the girls back to Boston and taking the furniture with her. Abby had always been the practical one in the marriage, reminding her high-minded mate that she could not pay the baker or butcher with "aphorisms or hypotheses" and even taking in sewing when she had to keep the wolf from the door. It was a come down in life for the proud daughter of a prosperous Boston merchant.

Unlike Bronson, Abby's family connections were old and distinguished and included at least one president of Harvard and several Unitarian ministers. She married him out of love, despite her father's misgivings and her chosen beau's almost preternatural bashfulness in courting the opposite sex. Bronson delayed, dallied, detoured. He never could scrape together enough savings to assure his betrothed a proper home. And at age twenty-nine, Abby was close to becoming a spinster. Finally, she took her otherworldly lover to the altar for richer or poorer, but mostly for poorer, wed in a ceremony at the Unitarian King's Chapel on Tremont Street where she was a member and where the children would attend Sunday School each week while Bronson communed with the ultimate in solitary splendor. Louisa May described her as the tether to his balloon.

It was the happiest of marriages and the most troubled, stretched to the breaking point between lofty principles and hard necessities. Their union embodied contradictions that remain with us today. The tension between the romantic ideals of marriage and family and the financial facts of running a household. The tension between education as the epitome of play and free inquiry versus schools as organizations that require buildings and budgets. The tension between spirituality as individual quest and religion as congregational commitment. The tension between living and surviving. The tension between dreams and money.

It takes balance to exist in this material world, a careful calibration of spirit and substance. And expecting a religious community like ours to operate on hope and good intentions is rather like Bronson Alcott expecting a bounteous harvest of fruit to appear on trees that had never been planted. Our beloved Transcendental heritage has given us a rich legacy ... the memory of individuals like Elizabeth Peabody who helped teach in Alcott's Temple School and went on to found the kindergarten movement in the United States, the example of iconoclasts like Henry Thoreau who inspired Gandhi and Martin Luther King with his great essay on "Civil Disobedience," and of course the courageous example of Alcott himself who shocked his neighbors in 1839 when he admitted a child named Susan Robinson to the classes he was conducting. Susan was

black. But along with this rich inheritance, our Transcendental forefathers and foremothers have passed along some fairly dysfunctional attitudes. A disregard for fund raising, for institution-building, for the non-utopian and dirty hands work of paying the bills that's as essential to thriving churches as it is to successful farms.

Yet even Ralph Waldo Emerson, the sage of Concord and as Transcendental as they come, had his shrewd, savvy side when it came to dollars and cents. In an essay titled "Wealth," he praised the entrepreneurs who were linking America with railroads and canals and telegraphs in the years before the Civil War. The Spartan existence of Walden and Brook Farm had no appeal for him. "Wealth requires, besides the crust of bread and the roof, the freedom of the city," Emerson proclaimed, "traveling, machinery, the benefits of science, music, and fine arts." He was careful with his own investments, a good manager, which enabled him to be open-handed in his philanthropy. With a gift of $500, he helped the Alcotts recover from the Fruitlands fiasco, buying them a house in Concord, just as he'd helped Thoreau financially on other occasions. He wasn't born wealthy. Waldo's father, a clergyman, had died when he was just a child, leaving the family without resources. But somehow Emerson managed to accumulate assets just as quickly as Alcott squandered them. When he wrote that "if a St. Michael's pear sells for a shilling, it costs a shilling to raise it," he spoke from experience. He himself had more than a hundred trees behind his graceful home that actually bore fruit: Gravensteins, Jonathans and Baldwins among the apples, Green Gage plums, and Bartlett pears, along with peaches and quince. He had respect for the husbandman and merchant. *"Money,"* Emerson said, *"which represents the prose of life, and which is hardly spoken of in parlors without an apology, is, in its effects and laws, as beautiful as roses."*

Words for us to ponder as we reflect upon our own financial and spiritual goals. What is it that we want to sow, and what harvest do we expect to reap, with our life's investment of time and treasure? Transcendental wild oats? Or a bouquet as lovely as roses? How we answer those questions will determine the nature of the stories that our children write about us. And whether we appear as cranks or visionaries will depend not just on the nobility of our aspirations, but also on our ability to fund them.