SCHOOL MATTERS

Brooks and Ditches

A Transcendental Look at Education

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Imagine the reaction if developers in your area took all of the natural streams and brooks, drained and dredged each one, and created ditches designed for a specific purpose that someone, somewhere, had decided would be for "the greater good." In a journal entry for October 1850, Henry David Thoreau recorded this thought about schooling in America: *What does education often do? It makes a straight-cut ditch of a free, meandering brook.* When I shared this nugget with organizational development expert Peter Senge, he wryly noted, "Well, that just about says it all, doesn't it?"

How did Thoreau safeguard the meandering spirits in his care? How were his friends and neighbors approaching education, particularly Bronson Alcott, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Elizabeth Peabody, and the members of Brook Farm, the 19th-century intentional community frequented by the Transcendentalists? Where did their ideas come from, and, more pertinently, do these century-and-a-half-old approaches have anything to offer schools today?

Education was of great interest to Emerson, Thoreau, Alcott, Peabody, and other Transcendentalists. They were energized by the classic dynamic of how to best integrate the individual and society, of how to create the ideal grounds for both to grow while simultaneously honoring both. Although there was much that the group did not agree on, at the heart of their approach lay two key principles: (1) a deep respect for one's self and the other; and (2) the adoption of core human values that led to efforts to build communities and/or shape society with those values as guideposts. To embrace these two required a perspective shift best achieved through stepping outside of one's ordinary "self." As Emerson noted late in his life, the entire era was a time when "the mind became aware of itself."[1] From Emerson's perspective, this was a necessity for a young republic built on the premise that the people could govern themselves, for to govern oneself one first had to know one's self.

In 1834, Bronson Alcott opened an experimental school designed to help children know themselves. Alcott's Temple School was housed in the Masonic Temple on Tremont Street in downtown Boston. At the outset, the school was a radical departure from the typical New England educational experience. Like his fellow Transcendentalists, Alcott believed in the innate goodness of the child. He was fond of quoting Romantic poet William Wordsworth's conviction that since we come into this world "trailing clouds of glory" it is only natural that "heaven lies about us in our infancy."[2] Alcott's method of helping students recognize their own "goodness" relied on gentle guidance in aesthetically pleasant surroundings and a praxis built on conversations: questions and answers on a variety of topics (some of which later were viewed as too adult for mid-19th-century children). *Parley's Magazine*, a popular children's magazine of the day, offered young readers and their parents a snapshot of the Temple School with its carpeted floors, decorated walls, and comfortable chairs and sofas — a welcome contrast to the typically austere school of its day. "But what renders the school quite different," the magazine editor writes, "is that the pupils are taught to think and reason; and to talk about their thinking and feeling and reasoning. There are some little boys and girls there, scarcely six years old, who know how to think and reason about things as well as most men and women." Not surprisingly, the editor also notes that most of the boys and girls "appear very happy."[3]

Not only were Alcott's students taught to "think and reason" but they were taught to *talk about* their own mental and emotional processes. This is exactly the kind of self-reflective process that led Emerson to describe the era as one of self-awareness.

Caught up in the success of an educational environment that allowed children free rein to discuss a variety of topics, Alcott reasoned that the general public would embrace his approach. He asked his assistant (and classroom recorder) Elizabeth Peabody to prepare transcripts of the daily conversations for publication, but she warned against it, suggesting that Boston was not that enlightened yet. Alcott forged ahead. When the public opened Alcott's *Conversations on the Gospels* and discovered comments such as young Josiah Quincy's that children are born owing to

people's "naughtiness put together to make a body for the child…" roars of outrage came from pulpit and press. Under societal pressure, parents removed their children, and when Alcott admitted a black child, most of those who had remained also withdrew. Peabody was right. Boston, the Athens of America, was not ready to support a progressive educational venture, so Alcott closed the school. Thirty years later, after he had completed a successful stint as the superintendent of schools in Concord, Massachusetts, Alcott felt some vindication for his early vision when his star pupil from long ago, Josiah Quincy, remarked that the Temple School had been "the best thing attempted in modern times for a properly human culture."

Without the benefit of the Harvard education acquired by his friends Emerson and Thoreau, Bronson Alcott did much to create himself. After a brief stint in a clock factory and an aborted effort to gain entrance to Yale, he prepared for his career as an educator by taking to the road as a Yankee peddler, making several trips up and down the coast. As a northerner in the Deep South, Alcott was surprised when genteel homeowners opened their sitting rooms and libraries to him. He was an avid reader, hungry for knowledge. In his travels, he also connected with Quakers, whose simple message of inner light — every individual has a natural right to have a personal relationship with the Divine — resonated deeply.

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It struck Alcott that children are born with that same inner light, not steeped in the "total depravity" preached by Calvinists. Alcott observed that children are playful by nature, having within themselves what they need to learn and grow, and are not empty vessels into which knowledge must be poured. If the child already has it within, the job of instructors is to facilitate the unfolding. As Alcott's good friend and fellow educator William Russell stated, a truly human education should be based on the "great" principle that "every infant is already in possession of the faculties and apparatus required for his instruction." Since the child "uses these to a great extent himself" (by law of his constitution) the role of the teacher is "chiefly to facilitate this process of education, and to accompany the child in his progress, rather than to drive or even to lead him."[4]

While Bronson Alcott was open to influences, and well versed in the educational system developed by Johann Pestalozzi (1746–1827), he mostly relied on his own study of human nature and how to nurture it. This is apparent in a review of Pestalozzi's method that Alcott wrote for the 1829 *Journal of American Education*. After identifying who might have influenced Pestalozzi, Alcott noted that the Swiss educator may have come to these things on his own: "Whether he caught the ancient modes from the study of these great men's principles, or invented them anew, is not of so much moment as the truths by which his principles are governed." This is a perfect synopsis of Alcott himself. As a teenager and young man, he worked hard at self-improvement and read widely, gravitating toward material that connected with what he already perceived. His varied menu of Plato, Rousseau, the *Bhagavad Gita*, Coleridge, and John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* did not so much open up new vistas as reinforce his growing commitment to the divine goodness within each child. His meeting with Ralph Waldo Emerson only strengthened this vision.

In the latter half of the 1830s, Ralph Waldo Emerson provided a call to arms for the young American psyche. *Nature*, a small volume published in 1836, was a passionate invitation to the country to develop its own identity rather than rely on Europe. Emerson asked his readers, "Why should we not also enjoy an original relationship with the universe? Have our own poetry? Why should we grope among the dry bones of the past? The sun shines today also.... There are new lands, new men, new thoughts. Let us demand our own works and laws and worship."[5]

Emerson followed *Nature* with the "The American Scholar," the *Phi Beta Kappa* address given at Harvard on August 31, 1837 and printed for distribution soon after. The charge to develop individual genius continued: "Meek young men grow up in libraries, believing it is their duty to accept the views which Cicero, which Locke, which Bacon have given, forgetful that Cicero, Locke, and Bacon were only young men in libraries when they wrote these books." Before long, the *Phi Beta Kappa* address was hailed as America's "Intellectual Declaration of Independence," inspiring many around him, including the extraordinary Peabody sisters of Salem, Massachusetts: Elizabeth, Mary, and Sophia.

Elizabeth Peabody, the eldest sister, was instrumental in a number of Transcendental undertakings, active in many reforms, and spearheaded the kindergarten movement in the United States. Middle sister Mary wed Horace Mann, the great advocate for public education and the first president of Antioch College. Sophia, the youngest, was an accomplished artist who married Nathaniel Hawthorne. Both Elizabeth and Sophia had been teaching assistants with

Bronson Alcott at the Temple School, and both were close to Ralph Waldo Emerson.

One month before Sophia Peabody met her future husband, she devoured Emerson's *Phi Beta Kappa* address, and was filled with enthusiasm for the writer and his message. On October 1, 1837, she sat amidst the gravestones directly outside her home at 53 Charter Street in Salem and composed a lengthy letter to her brother George in New Orleans. Emerson, she wrote, keeps waking us up; he is our elder brother in spirit who, sitting in the "Tower of Thought," sees the vision of the new dawn with his "far reaching eye." We, the "sluggards," fold our hands and want more sleep, but Emerson "the Watchman" says, "No! No! The morning cometh."

What Emerson saw from the heights of his Tower was that every individual has a divine spark within and that it is every person's birthright to connect with the internal divine, without the need for a broker of any type. In the words of the most recent Emerson biographers, "Emerson's belief was that a god slumbers within the breast of every mechanic, farmer, engineer, poet, teacher — every human being. The process of awakening occurs first in thought as the Self becomes conscious of its own thinking and then seeks expression by shaping its surroundings according to its own thoughts."[6] As Emerson noted in a journal entry for April 7, 1840, "In all my lectures I have taught one doctrine, namely the infinitude of the private man."[7] By which he also means women.

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The core principles of the "infinitude" of every person and of the "mind becoming aware of itself" were implicit in Sophia Peabody's description of the time her sister spent with both Emerson and the Unitarian minister, Frederick Hedge. Again to her brother George, she wrote, "Elizabeth has replenished her horn at the fountain of his [Emerson's] overflowing Dawn — You know her own is never empty. She has found out what she has herself, rather than received anything new, I suspect. Her faith in herself is freshened. I believe she never had such a splendid time in her life as she did last summer, first with Mr. Hedge & then with Mr. Emerson. One re-illumined her heart & the other her Reason. Long live both for making her so happy. She says she is going to lead an Emersonian life this winter…"[8]

Sophia captured the essence of Transcendental educational praxis: Elizabeth "has found out what she has herself, rather than received anything new." A worldview that presumes the innate worth of each individual is built upon the foundation that everyone comes into this world with inherent value. An educational system in harmony with this worldview would honor every student, understanding that in each child there is something of equal value to what lies in the teacher.[9]

Henry Thoreau was one who embraced the notion that a school should be a community of learners. After a brief teaching experience at age 20, Thoreau wrote to a mentor, "We should seek to be fellow students with the pupil, and should learn of, as well as with him, if we would be most helpful to him."[10] Thoreau realized at an early age that individuals had access to different types of knowledge from sources other than ratiocination, which meant that "book-learnèd" instructors were not the sole keepers of the flame. As an adolescent, Thoreau had had a number of mystical experiences that were of "indescribable, infinite, all-absorbing, divine, heavenly pleasure, a sense of elevation and expansion," that left him "daily intoxicated... aloof from the society of men."[11] As he was transported outside of his normal consciousness, he sought help understanding the nature of these ecstatic times, but it was not until he discovered the sacred texts of the East — for example, the *Sankhya Karika* outlines the three ways of knowing: perception, inference, and revelation — that he fully grasped what had happened.[12] Thoreau understood, as Emerson had emphasized, that revelation was not a closed door, but open to all, including children. Access to this inner knowledge could be gained through meditative practices such as those outlined in the *Bhagavad Gita*, a favorite book of Thoreau, Emerson, and Alcott. The wisdom gained from this perspective put flesh on the spirits of the Wordsworthian beings that came into this world "trailing clouds of glory."

It is not that Thoreau, Emerson, and Alcott were teaching children how to access divine wisdom, but that they operated on the principle that each child had a noble center that unfolded best through encouragement and gentle guidance rather than through reconstruction. They recognized that each child was a meandering brook, sacred and free by nature, rather than a raw resource to be converted to a straight-cut ditch for societal ends. The Transcendental commitment to "the mind becoming aware of itself," to a classroom where children are taught to "talk about their thinking and feeling and reasoning," was a commitment to the core principle of honoring the essential value of the other

as well as of your self (as that which is of value in you is also within me). The best example of this principle in action was the school at Brook Farm, the intentional community founded by the Transcendentalists.

In 1841, the Unitarian minister George Ripley resigned from his church and, with his wife Sophia and a small circle of friends, bought a farm in West Roxbury, Massachusetts, to create a model society built on the premise of equality for all. This most interesting experiment lasted until 1847, and attracted almost all of the brilliant minds of the day. Emerson, Thoreau, Alcott, Elizabeth Peabody, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Margaret Fuller: all came to visit if they did not actually join. It was a lively environment for music, drama, the arts, philosophy, politics, and the spirit, as well as farming and industry, and was a sincere effort to bridge social and economic gaps.[13]

From the beginning, there were a number of good educators associated with Brook Farm, and the school they established on the land was successful financially as well as pedagogically. British social reformer Charles Lane[14] left a vivid account of the school at Brook Farm in the January 1842 edition of the Transcendentalist magazine, *The Dial*, in which he argues that the school "appears to present greater mental freedom than most other institutions." He describes the instruction as more "heart-rendered" and "heart-stirring," and concludes, "Brook Farm is a much improved model for the oft-praised schools of New England. It is time that the imitative and book-learned systems of the latter should be superseded or liberalized by some plan, better calculated to excite originality of thought, and the native energies of the mind.

A recent biographer of Brook Farm's co-founder, Sophia Ripley, provides more details on the experiential nature of the school. "The lessons in astronomy under the clear winter sky, the plays and masquerades in the woods, the Dante class in which Charles Dana and Mrs. Ripley and others read Dante in the original without an instructor, the trips into Boston to hear concerts of music by Beethoven, the singing of Mozart masses, the boat trips on the Charles River make Brook Farm sound like a school to dream about. For any child accustomed to the usual school of the 19th century it must have been a wonderful experience."[15]

This is not a description of a straight-cut ditch, but of a school that honors the individual qualities of all members even as it celebrates practical and cultural achievements.

Thoreau's statement about ditches and brooks really does "just about say it all." The next time you are in front of a class, working hard to find and honor what is unique in each student, imagine the lineup of New England luminaries who are in your corner. Here are the Peabody sisters, the Ripleys, Bronson Alcott, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and, perhaps a little off by himself, Henry David Thoreau, all nodding and smiling in approval. Follow the course of that winding stream and you and your class may help create, in the words of Josiah Quincy, "the best thing attempted in modern times for a properly human culture."

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Notes

1. Ralph Waldo Emerson in "Historic Notes of Life and Letters in New England" — his hundredth lecture before the Concord Lyceum, in 1880. From *The Transcendentalists: the Classic Anthology*, Perry Miller, Editor (1950, renewed 1978, MJF Books, New York), p. 494.
2. William Wordsworth, "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood" (1807).
3. An excerpt from the much longer, "About Mr. Alcott's School," *Parley's Magazine*, November 1839 issue (Part XXVIII), pp. 131–132 (from the collection of the author).
4. From William Russell's review of "Essays on the Philosophy of Instruction…" in the 1829 *American Journal of Education*, p. 161.
5. Ralph Waldo Emerson in the Introduction to *Nature* (1836).
6. *Ralph Waldo Emerson: the Infinitude of the Private Man* (2008), Maurice York & Rick Spaulding, p. iv.
7. *The Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson* edited by Edward W. Emerson, Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1911, Vol. V, 1838–1841, pp. 380–381, April 7, 1840.
8. Sophia Peabody to George Peabody, October 1, 1837. Unpublished letter in the collection of the author.
9. *Cf* the statement of the Sant Bani School's founder, H.H. Kirpal Singh, *"Each one of us is unique in his own way. There is a divine purpose behind the life of everyone who comes into the world; no one has been created for nothing. We have something to learn from everyone. This is the mystery of humility."*
10. Henry David Thoreau to Orestes Brownson, December 30, 1837.
11. Henry David Thoreau, Journal, July 16, 1851.

12. See Sutra VI, *The Sankhya Karika or Memorial Verses on the Sankhya Philosophy by Iswara Krishna, translated by Henry Thomas Colebrooke combined with The Bhashya or Commentary of Guarapada*, translated by Horace Hayman Wilson, London, 1837.
13. For excellent recent studies of Brook Farm, see Sterling Delano, *Brook Farm: the Dark Side of Utopia* (2004); and Richard Francis, *Transcendental Utopias: Individual and Community at Brook Farm, Fruitlands, and Walden* (1997).
14. Charles Lane was an austere social activist who accompanied Bronson Alcott back from England and helped him found the short-lived (June 1843 to January 1844) vegetarian community, Fruitlands, in Harvard, Massachusetts.
15. Henrietta Dana Raymond, *Sophia Willard Dana Ripley: Co-founder of Brook Farm* (1994), p. 39.

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