

## **Transcendental Learning: The Educational Legacy of Alcott, Emerson, Fuller, Peabody and Thoreau**

*We shall one day learn to supersede politics by education. What we call our root-and-branch reforms of slavery, war, gambling, intemperance, is only medicating the symptoms. We must begin higher up, namely, in Education.*

**-Emerson**

In antebellum America, a group of individuals living mostly in Concord Massachusetts, have had a continuing influence on our lives. Daniel Walker Howe in his Pulitzer Prize winning history of the antebellum period in America, *What Hath God Wrought*, writes about the “extraordinary outburst of genius” which was comparable to fifth century Athens or sixteenth century Florence. He (2007) also writes of their continuing impact:

The writings of the Transcendentalists affirm some of the best qualities characteristic of American civilization: self-reliance, willingness to question authority, a quest for spiritual nourishment. Their writings, even today, urge us to independent reflection in the face of fads, conformity, blind partisanship, and mindless consumerism. (p.626)

It is somewhat ironic that a movement that focused on the individual could impact social and political movements including the independence of India and the civil rights movement in the United States. In *Blessed Unrest* Paul Hawken argues that

Emerson's ideas formed a seed that grew through the work of Thoreau, Gandhi and Martin Luther King. Hawken writes that when Emerson came to France in 1832, he was moved by his visits to the Jardin des Plantes and the Cabinet of Natural History in Paris. Walking in the Jardin des Plantes and seeing how animals and nature were connected led Emerson to his insight of how life was deeply interconnected. He wrote later, "Nature is intricate, overlapped, interweaved, and endless." (2003, p. 433) Hawken (2007) writes, "It was Emerson's first encounter with the web of life." (p.73) This insight led Emerson to write his essay *Nature* which became one of the key works in Transcendentalism. 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." (p.73)

Thoreau picked up these two strands which bore fruit in *Walden* a book that continues to inspire the environmental movement and *Civil Disobedience* which Gandhi read in 1906. When Gandhi was first arrested in South Africa in 1908, he took Thoreau's writings with him so he "could find arguments in favor of our fight." (p.79) It was Thoreau's integration of ideas and practice that appealed to Gandhi. For Gandhi, Thoreau was someone who "taught nothing he was not prepared to practice himself." (Gandhi, p. 113) This was something that Gandhi took to heart and when asked once about giving some words of wisdom he said that "my life is my message."

In 1956 during the Montgomery bus boycott a colleague gave Martin Luther King three books: Gandhi's *Autobiography*, Thoreau's *Civil Disobedience*, and Richard Gregg's *The Power of Non Violence*. When the boycott was finished and King was asked what books influenced him the most he mentioned all three of these works. Today the

Dalai Lama and Aung San Suu Kyi in Burma continue to echo the original message of Emerson and Thoreau with their non-violent ethic.

As Paul Hawken (2007) has so ably documented, this vision has continued today particularly through the non-violence ethic but also through what he refers to as the “movement without a name”. This is a movement that includes perhaps two million grass roots groups around the world working for constructive change. The core ethic that unites these groups is rooted in the ethic of non-violence and a sense of the sacred.

In education, this movement includes a diverse group including Waldorf, Montessori, Reggio Emilia schools, home schooling, democratic schools, and variety of alternative approaches to education. These educators tend to embrace a vision of educating the whole child and reject the mechanistic models that currently dominate the educational scene. In Toronto, for example, a group of parents, community members, and teachers have come together to initiate a school for the whole child within the Toronto District School Board ([www.wholechildschool.ca](http://www.wholechildschool.ca)) that started in September 2009. (Miller, 2010) This school is now called Equinox Holistic Alternative School and incorporates some of the features of Transcendental Learning.

### **Transcendental Learning**

The Transcendentalists were interested in education but unlike the work I have just discussed, we have ignored their vision of learning. It is high time that we looked more closely at their view of teaching and learning. Alcott and Peabody devoted their lives to teaching and learning but Emerson, Fuller, and Thoreau also taught and shared many thoughts on education. The thesis of this paper is that they left an important legacy

that can help us move beyond today's narrow view of education that focuses on preparing students so that they can compete in the global economy. What we have today is education that centers on job creation and high stakes testing that is part of a corporate view of schooling. Emerson's (1966) critique of education still holds today. He wrote about what we fail to give students.

We do not give them a training as if we believed in their noble nature. We scarce educate their bodies. We do not train the eye and the hand. We exercise their understandings to the apprehension and comparison of some facts, to a skill in numbers in words; we aim to make accountants, attorneys, engineers, but not to make able, earnest, great-hearted men.  
(p.211)

For the past 25 years educational reform has focused on testing as the way to improve student achievement. No Child Left Behind has been the culminating legislation of this movement in the United States. Education systems have reinforced fragmentation rather than connectedness. They have become part of a world where there is corporate corruption, deep distrust of politicians and the political process, environmental destruction, and an empty lifestyle based on materialism and consumption. The obsession with test results rather than a sensible approach to accountability has only led to deeper and more pervasive forms of fragmentation and alienation. In 2011 we learned of wide spread cheating and false reporting in the Atlanta schools.

In contrast to the current vision schooling, the Transcendentalists offer an inspiring vision of education that focuses on wholeness and wisdom. Its aim, as Emerson states, is to produce “great-hearted” individuals. It does not deny the spiritual and provides a language and approach to spirituality that is inclusive. The Transcendentalists offer a redemptive vision of education that includes:

*-educating the whole child-body, mind, and soul,*

*-happiness as a goal of education,*

*-educating students so they see the interconnectedness in nature,*

*-recognizing the inner wisdom of the child as something to be honored and nurtured,*

*- a blueprint for environmental education through the work of Thoreau,*

*-an inspiring vision for educating women of all ages through the work of Fuller,*

*-an experimental approach to pedagogy that continually seeks for more effective ways of educating children,*

*-a recognition of the importance of the presence of teacher and encouraging teachers to be aware and conscious of their own behavior.*

*- a vision of multicultural and bilingual education through the work of Elizabeth Peabody.*

The Transcendentalists challenge us to provide an education that inspires or, in Emerson’s words, sets “the hearts of youth on flame”. Transcendental education recognizes what Thoreau (2002) said that “ Surely joy is the condition of life.” (p.5) Transcendental learning engages the child fully; of course, not every moment in a Transcendental classroom is an epiphany but ultimately students look forward to coming to schools that employ the principles outlined by the Transcendentalists.

## **TRANSCENDENTAL EDUCATORS**

I have chosen to describe the work of the following five individuals because they all taught at one time and held a view of education that was essentially holistic.

### **Ralph Waldo Emerson**

Ralph Waldo Emerson was the intellectual leader of the Transcendentalists and mentor to the others described in this book. His lectures and essays inspired many individuals connected with Transcendentalism. Buell comments that for the Transcendentalists it was more important to “inspire than explain.” (p. xxiii) Emerson did not lay out a systematic philosophy but wrote and spoke in a manner that moved the reader and the listener. James Russell Lowell wrote “I have heard some great speakers and some accomplished orators, but never any that so moved and persuaded me as he.” (Cited in McAleer, p. 493) Many of Emerson’s ideas resonate with a holistic perspective. He wrote (1990), “Nothing is quite beautiful alone, nothing but is beautiful in the whole. A single object is only so far beautiful as it suggests this universal grace.” (p.26)

### **Henry David Thoreau**

Henry David Thoreau lived in Concord and would stay in Emerson’s home while Emerson was away lecturing. Thoreau was the earthy face of Transcendentalism. He loved nature and could be viewed as the father of the American environmental movement

with his book *Walden* as one of its seminal texts. Thoreau was also a teacher; he and his brother, John, started and ran their own school that incorporated principles of holistic learning.

### **Margaret Fuller**

Margaret Fuller can be viewed not only as one of the foremost Transcendentalists but as one of the most important women in 19<sup>th</sup> Century America. Her book, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, explored the intellectual and social position of women and argued against women's second class status. She also was the first editor of the journal of Transcendentalism, *The Dial*. Fuller was also an elementary school teacher but is most known for the "Conversations" that she ran for women in Boston. She led discussions with women that covered a wide range of topics that were designed to intellectually engage the women who participated. Howe (2007) writes that "From our standpoint in twenty-first century, the Transcendentalist who looks the most "modern" is Margaret Fuller. Versatile and passionate, she made her impact felt on journalism, feminism, criticism (literary, music, and art) and revolution." (p. 621) I would add education as well to this list.

### **Bronson Alcott**

Bronson Alcott was interested in education throughout his life. He founded the Temple School in Boston where he engaged the students in discussions and inquiry that differed radically from the recitation and drill approach so common in most schools at that time. Alcott believed children held an inner wisdom that could be drawn out through

Socratic questioning.

### **Elizabeth Peabody**

Like Bronson Alcott, Elizabeth Peabody devoted her life to education. Bruce Ronda (1999) in his biography of Peabody states that “education was her great calling and her grand passion.” (p.7) She taught in several schools and helped Alcott in the Temple School, which she wrote about in *Record of a School*. Her crowning achievement was being an advocate for kindergarten. Influenced by the work of Freidrich Froebel, Peabody argued that emphasis in kindergarten should be on play rather than academic work United States. She also developed vision of bilingual education with her work with native Americans.

Gruenewald (2002) in an article 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. (p.539)

I would argue that not just Thoreau but the Transcendentalists discussed in this paper deserve a more detailed exploration of their views on education. In our day of factory-like models of schooling and it would be wise to reflect and re-imagine education



from their ideas. This could help us today develop a broader view of education that focuses on the development of whole human beings that can think, feel and act.

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