

Beyond Little Women, the Life of Louisa Mae Alcott.

Sermon by Lone Jensen

How do you want to be remembered? Does it matter to you? Some fifteen years ago, entirely by chance, on a beautiful spring day, surrounded by live oaks and pink azalea flowers, I saw my own name, all of it, Lone Jensen Broussard on a gravestone in a most unexpected place for a Dane, the Cathedral Churchyard in Lafayette, Louisiana. It gave me a funny and slightly spooked feeling to see my name carved in white marble, even though I knew I could not possibly have died in 1939. To add to the twilight zone effect, we took a photograph of that grave and that one shot did not develop when we took the film into the shop. The experience gave me pause and made me wonder. So for the moment and purely as an exercise, think about what you would want people to say about you once you are gone? Would it be things like: he was brave, smart, kind, good, a real dreamer, a fabulous writer, a world explorer or the more important things like he was a good dad, a kind and loving spouse and he helped others? Somehow I don't think words like "the world's richest man" or "he died with the most toys" offer much in the way of comfort. But we do not usually write our own epitaphs and have little control over what others will remember about us. Louisa May Alcott will forever be remembered for her classic children's book *Little Women* but I doubt it is an epitaph she herself would have chosen. Jo, her alter ego, the spirited sister, who pushed

against the limits set upon her by society and by her family, at one point cries out: *Oh, I do think families are the most beautiful things in all the world.* When you read her book you might think that for the fictional March family, this is true. These four sisters face poverty, illness, a father away at the bloody Civil War and the death of Beth, their sister with honesty, trust and caring. The ideal of unselfish love runs through the book and the focus is on the struggles of those girls to overcome their natural tendencies to think of themselves first. What makes the book real is their struggle. Jo March dreams of doing something splendid: *I do not know what, but I will watch for it.*

Louisa Mae Alcott did not find that kind of splendid greatness in her own life. That is the sad part, that the creator of such a spirited heroine was herself limited by women's role at the time and her family's lack of money. She was born at a time when New England was blossoming with new ideas, where even a liberal and scholarly reasoned Unitarianism, was soon to be severely challenged by younger men of the spirit, like Ralph Waldo Emerson. Where the joke goes that Unitarians believed in *at most One God and in the neighborhood of Boston*, these young men wanted instead to look inward and not outward, for their own transcendent truth. *Louisa was the second daughter of Bronson Alcott and Abigail May. Abigail fell in love with the handsome young schoolteacher with his radical ideas.* Her family feared *that Bronson had little notion of how to support a family. But the couple persisted*

and were married on May 23, 1830, at King's Chapel, Boston. (This quote and some of the following quotes in italics are from a posted internet article about notable UU's) Bronson Alcott, Louisa's father was a fascinating and utterly impractical idealist. Throughout his life he would start new projects such as the unconventional Temple School and find a circle of admiring intellectual friends, but he would never make enough money to support his family. When Louisa was ten the family moved to Harvard, Massachusetts where they planned to establish a utopia, a model farm community called Fruitlands. The family subsisted on apples, grains and plants. They used no animal products or labor *except, as Abigail Alcott observed, for that of women.* Since they refused to use even manure as fertilizer, an animal product after all, the plants did not do much better than the women and the noble experiment failed. Louisa' later wrote about these "Transcendental Wild Oats."

The family returned to Concord and lived across the road from Ralph Waldo Emerson. Louisa's first book, *Flower Fables* was written for Ellen Emerson, whose father she idolized. *"I wrote letters to him, but never sent them; sat in a tall cherry tree at midnight, singing to the moon till the owls scared me to bed; left wild flowers on the doorstep of my 'Master,' and sung Mignon's song under his window in very bad German."*

It was in these years that Louisa "got religion." She was running in the Concord woods, one bright fall morning and stopped to see the sunshine over the meadows. *"A very strange and solemn feeling came over me as I stood there," she wrote in her journal, "with no sound but the rustle of the pines, no one near me, and the sun so glorious, as for me alone. It seemed as if I felt God as I never did before, and I prayed in my heart that I might keep that happy sense of nearness all my life."*

That nearness to God that she found in nature and her conviction that God was love constituted the core of her faith. She writes of her heroine in *Little Women: Jo felt the blessed solace of a belief in the immortality of love*. But it also seems to me that for the real Louisa, the ideal of family was her religion, as the human expression of that divine love.

Louisa was a restless soul. She would fall in love from a distance with men who were, like her father, idealistic to a fault and then would see nothing but virtues in their flaws. When she met Thoreau she did find him marvelous and would describe even his occasionally rudeness as "examples of self reliance". She never let any of the men she loved close enough to be more than friends. Perhaps as she saw her mother struggle, stretched thin with the demands of marriage and the need to feed a family, Louisa feared losing her independence. When Bronson Alcott started his School of Philosophy, his daughters fed and housed the lecturers and their audiences. Louisa Alcott's definition of philosophy explains a lot. She said: *"My definition is of a man up in a*

balloon, with his family and friends pulling the ropes which confine him to earth and trying to haul him down."

Bronson's older daughters had to work to help support the family. They did this within the limits society set for what a decent woman could do: be companions for older ladies, teach, take in sewing and in Louisa's case write. She turned her *unhappy weeks in service with a Dedham family* into an essay. The publisher rejected it with these words: "Stick to your teaching, Miss Alcott. You can't write." But she continued to write what we would call pulp fiction under the name "A. M. Barnard". "Pauline's Passion and Punishment" won its author a \$100 prize. She also wrote two serious novels, *Moods*, and "*Success*". Louisa found release and joy in writing and even her "thunder and blood" novels gave her a freedom that her real life lacked. In these stories her heroines did not have to be good.

Louisa felt hemmed in by circumstances. Her unconventional upbringing gave her more of a sense of self than many women (or men) of her time, but she it also taught her that duty to the family came first. She was inspired by great men with strong ideals, like the Unitarian Minister Theodore Parker, the ardent abolitionist. He wrote his sermon with a loaded gun in his desk, just in case bounty hunters of escaped slaves should come to try to take some of his congregants away. "Go to hear Parker," she wrote in her journal, "and he does me good." But though

she might imagine doing what Parker did, there was her mother, father and sisters at home who needed clothes and food on the table.

As I researched this sermon I kept wondering what sustained her. How could this strong spirit willingly give up so much? I wanted her to run away to Europe or at least have a torrid affair. Jo got to dream but what of Louisa? She was living among Unitarian luminaries but where was her bright hope? I wanted her to live and love and not just do it vicariously through others. Her father taught her to be his ideal of goodness and though it was hard for her strong spirit to do, she took that in as gospel. God as love was deeply ingrained in her soul but it seems to me that she failed to extend that love to herself. Love thy neighbor as yourself, only works if you also love yourself.

When I read her book as a young girl I loved it. I preferred the March family to my own flawed and to my young eyes, much more imperfect family. The longing for the right family, for acceptance and belonging is so strong that people will put up with incredible hardships to sustain it. Even as a myth it holds power. But what is family? A place where they will take you in no matter what? Maybe it is that some of the time but not always. There are actions for which a family member has to leave for the safety of the others. Sometimes a member has to leave to save themselves. Love defines a family but so does responsibility. Duty is such an old fashioned word, right in there with

covenant and commitment. To be a family is a sacred trust. It is a covenant we make with each other to become family. In Louisa's case the roles were reversed. We give to our children and help them grow up. Louisa became the parent for both her sisters and her parents long before they grew old. Someone had to be the adult and she was.

A strong spirit contained in a small vessel, corseted in conventions, stifled in her scope, Louisa did what she could. Her spirit breathed through her writing and gave it the life we enjoy today. I celebrate that spirit, admire her sense of duty and hope that she herself found some of the joy she gave to so many others.

We humans love what death can take. Families will change, separate and grow apart. Louisa's family was shattered by her sister Elizabeth's death. As Beth did in *Little Women*, Elizabeth went out to help a poor family, caught scarlet fever and died. Death back then was intimate, close up and ever present. Louisa's older sister Anna's married and Louisa felt her absence. Her youngest sister May, like Amy March went off to Europe.

When the Civil War began Louisa May Alcott was not content to sit at home, wrap bandages and sew clothes. *"I became an Abolitionist at an early age," she wrote, "but have never been able to decide whether I was made so by seeing the portrait of George Thompson [the British abolitionist] hidden under a bed in our house during the Garrison riot*

or because I was saved from drowning in the Frog Pond some years later by a colored boy. However that may be, the conversion was genuine; and my greatest pride is in the fact that I lived to know the brave men and women who did so much for the cause, and that I had a very small share in the war which put an end to a great wrong."

Louisa served as a nurse during the winter of 1862-63 at the Union Hotel Hospital in Georgetown, Virginia. The conditions were horrific. Wounded soldiers were brought in from the battlefields in carts. They were so caked with mud and dirt that it took several washings to discover the full extent of their wounds. Louisa worked hard and contracted typhoid pneumonia. Her health was permanently damaged by the treatments of calomel (miraculous chloride) with which she was dosed. The rest of her life she would suffer from this mercury poisoning, which caused hair loss, bleeding gums and nightmares. She wrote about her experiences in "*Hospital Sketches*,"

It was in September, 1867 that her publisher asked her to write a book for girls that became *Little Women*. It remains a best seller some hundred and fifty years later. For her it meant getting her family out of debt. She wrote: *At forty, that is done. Debts all paid, and we have enough to be comfortable. It has cost me my health, perhaps; but as I still live, there is more for me to do, I suppose."*

There was. Louisa May Alcott turned her attention to the fight for women's right to vote. She contributed to Lucy Stone's *Woman's Journal* and organized the Concord women to vote in the school election, the only election they could vote in. *"Was the first woman to register my name as a voter," she wrote. "Drove about and drummed up women to my suffrage meeting. So hard to move people out of the old ruts."*

Her sister May had married and settled in Paris but died after she gave birth to a daughter named after Louisa. In her will she left the baby to Alcott. In September, 1880, "Lulu" arrived in Boston and Louisa adored her.

But her health grew worse. Her father had a stroke and she gathered the remnants of her family together in Boston, her father, her sister Anna, her sister's sons and little Lulu. Louisa was restless, searching for a cure and for a peaceful place to write. *On March 1, 1888, Louisa visited her father for the last time. "I am going up," he said. "Come with me." "Oh, I wish I could," she replied. Bronson Alcott died on March 4, and Louisa May Alcott died two days later on March 6. She is buried in Sleepy Hollow cemetery in Concord and her grave bears a Civil War veteran's marker.*

Her gift to us and the message I draw today from her life is that the human spirit is so strong that it will find a way to express itself. Our

religion, Unitarian Universalism, ideally takes us as we are and let us find that spirit within us. If God is love then surely that love extends to all of us. Being your true self is being who we were meant to be.

Meister Eickhart, a medieval mystic, understood God to be the true essence of all beings. God could be seen as a horse running at full gallop across a green field, its mane blowing in the wind, an image of freedom, power and beauty. The essence of a horse. What is the essence of a human being? If we say that God is the essence of love then we must extend that love to our own selves also. So that our spirits may receive the joy that is our birthright, becoming our own true selves.

Thus we may become a grace and a blessing upon the world and upon our own souls.