

## ENRICHING OUR CONCEPTION OF TEACHING

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As Susan Laird indicates in her stimulating paper, “Teaching in a Different Sense: Alcott’s Marmee,” we have for too long relied upon a narrow, rationally-based conception of teaching, a conception that neglects human beings’ need for love, connection, and survival. By offering teaching models from non-traditional sources such as novels, Laird seeks to expand our understanding of the defining characteristics of teaching and thus influence how we think about and, in turn, prepare teachers.<sup>1</sup> Parents, siblings, aunts, and friends can all be teachers, who, as Laird tells us, intend that their “pupils” “learn something about living well through honestly felt efforts at self-definition, efforts which without [their] intervention they might not have undertaken on their own.”<sup>2</sup> By focusing specifically on Alcott’s Marmee, Laird is able to underscore how impoverished our traditional view of teaching has been, and how badly we need teaching exemplars who, like Marmee, love their pupils and instill in them love for others, while also striving to impart the skills and attitudes needed to thrive in an often heartless world.

I will not comment on Laird’s persuasive account of Marmee’s teaching and the curriculum she employs to achieve her goals. Most readers of *Little Women* will agree that Marmee’s efforts to teach her children love and survival are explicit and conscious, and that her affective and reproductive orientation toward teaching have much to instruct practicing and prospective teachers who focus exclusively on narrow academic goals. What concerns me about Marmee (and simultaneously reminds me of the qualities that make Jo such a memorable character) is her one-sidedness and apparent lack of complexity. She appears to be a loving and talented mother and woman, but she is so good and unflawed, so perfect, that it is hard to see her as more than some maternal ideal-type. Furthermore, she does not question the restrictive conventions upon which she bases the rearing of her four impressionable girls.

Jo, on the other hand, who learns her mother’s lessons about love and survival quite well, leaves a far greater impression upon the reader because of her mixture of feminine and masculine qualities and her ambivalence about her own identity. She cherishes her independence, but no one cares more deeply for her sister Beth. She is quick to become angry and overly excited (at least according to the conventions of the time), but she is just as quick to forgive and forget. She seeks fame and fortune, but bears no sign of arrogance and frequently acts quite self-effacingly. She lives to closet herself away in her room, wearing her “scribbling suit” and furiously penning her stories, but she also relishes holidays and special occasions in which she feels entirely connected to her family and neighbors. She is well-read and has acquired and continues to go on acquiring a fairly traditional liberal education, but she also retains and imparts the lessons she has learned from her mother about love and survival. Finally, she questions her society’s views about the proper roles of men and women and can be frequently seen in *Little Women* disagreeing with someone, usually her sister Meg, about the behavioral expectations of young ladies. She is in short a person of many parts, endlessly fascinating, and thus by far the most memorable figure from the novel. Furthermore, it is because of this complexity and many-sidedness, this questioning and adventurous spirit, that characters like Jo help us even more than characters like Marmee in augmenting and enriching our conception of teaching.

It follows, then, that this project of expanding our understanding of the practices and achievements of good teachers demands that we seek out complex and multifaceted models, people who, at least in some sense, have already begun to integrate the goals of care and cognition. I have two such models in mind, one of whom Jane Roland Martin herself has written about.<sup>3</sup> I refer here to Jessica Siegel, a former New York City English teacher portrayed in Samuel Freedman's book *Small Victories*. The second model is Mike Rose, a dedicated teacher of writing, who writes autobiographically in his 1989 work, *Lives on the Boundary*. In both of these books, the lives of two atypical teachers are told, teachers who are haunted by doubts and burdens, but who expend enormous amounts of energy widening their students' intellectual horizons, even as they assure these students of their genuine and abiding regard for them as human beings.

There is not enough space here to relate Jessica Siegel's firm grasp of American literature or her talent in making this material come alive for the beleaguered students of New York's Inner City. Freedman shows in great detail that Siegel knows her content and teaches it with passion and love.<sup>4</sup> But he also demonstrates just as concretely and extensively that Siegel loves and cares for her students in ways that go far beyond our traditional notions of teaching. Each commencement she brings with her boxes of tissues in anticipation of those moved to tears by this rite of passage (including herself), and, more matter of factly but just as thoughtfully, she remembers bobby pins for those students who have no idea how to keep their mortar boards on top of their heads.<sup>5</sup> In other ways, she shows her concern by hounding her students to get their work done, or insisting that her journalism students write and revise until they meet her high standard for publication. While grading papers, she painstakingly reads and comments on what her students have written so that each student can receive individual attention from her. Finally, she shows she cares by doing everything short of filling out the application form itself to get her students into college. At one point, she drives three of her borderline students some 180 miles round trip to the SUNY-New Paltz campus for personal interviews so that these students may enjoy a slight advantage during the admissions process.<sup>6</sup> It is especially in this last way that Siegel expresses not only her concern, but also how much she attends to her students' survival, to increasing their opportunities for something better.

Mike Rose combines commitments to care and cognition in ways that are more subtle than Jessica Siegel but no less important. Unlike Siegel, he is a product of a working-class family in which education was not particularly valued. At best an average student as he proceeded through school, his records are mixed up with another boy named Rose when he enters high school and he lands in the vocational track for two years.<sup>7</sup> Here he wallows in a completely unchallenging and uncaring environment until rescued by an alert biology instructor who finds the error in his file. He goes on to enjoy a very successful academic career, first as a graduate student in English and later as a teacher of writing, but attributes his success to a series of instructors who not only knew their subject but took the time to get to know him as a person as well. Because of this history, Rose develops a deep empathy for students who are ignored, shunted aside, or labeled defective. He decides to devote his life to teaching writing to students who frequently have been written off as incapable, but who exhibit remarkable ability when simultaneously challenged and cared for.

If *Lives on the Boundary* has a single thesis, it is that "if you set up the right conditions, try as best you can to cross class and cultural boundaries, figure out what's needed to encourage performance, that if you watch and listen, again and again there will emerge evidence of ability that escapes those who dwell on differences."<sup>8</sup> This is a rich conception of teaching that takes as its starting point a deep faith in human ability and an equal commitment to helping children to realize their potential as thoughtful and caring human beings. We must seek out far more portraits of teachers who share this dual commitment to thoughtfulness and caring. Imaginative literature is one rich source for such portraits; non-fictional essays, biographies and autobiographies are others. But wherever we find these teaching exemplars, we must increasingly look for complex, multifaceted figures who view teaching as a complex, multifaceted task. Susan Laird's work here and elsewhere has made an important contribution to this project. Her essay on Louisa May Alcott's Marmee helps us to see that teaching is far more than engaging the student's intellect; it is a practice that must increasingly be

viewed as a shaper of character, carried out with affection and love and seeking to instill care and concern, as well as the judgment needed to insure survival of self and others. As philosophers and educators we must keep this conversation going about teaching, and we must remain open to the vast array of sources, however unorthodox, that may inform this important discussion.

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<sup>1</sup> See Susan Laird, “The Ideal of the Educated Teacher — ‘Reclaiming a Conversation’ with Louisa May Alcott,” *Curriculum Inquiry* 21, no. 3 (Fall 1991).

<sup>2</sup> Susan Laird, “Teaching a Different Sense: Alcott’s Marmee,” in *Philosophy of Education 1993*, ed. Audrey Thompson (Urbana, Illinois: Philosophy of Education Society, 1994).

<sup>3</sup> Jane Roland Martin, *Schoolhome: Rethinking Schools for Changing Families* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 5-6, 209-10.

<sup>4</sup> Samuel Freedman, *Small Victories* (New York: Harper and Row, 1990). See especially the lesson on slavery in chapter 7 and the lesson on *The Great Gatsby* in chapter 11.

<sup>5</sup> Freedman, Prologue.

<sup>6</sup> Freedman, ch. 15.

<sup>7</sup> Mike Rose, *Lives on the Boundary* (New York: Free Press, 1989), 24-32.

<sup>8</sup> Rose, 222.

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