

**Integrity and the Real World**  
**Schuyler Vogel**  
**January 18, 2015**

Once, many years ago, there was a man named Bronson Alcott. He lived in Massachusetts during the early 1800s. Today, he is best remembered as the father of Louisa May Alcott, who wrote the classic, *Little Women*. But Bronson was notable in his own right. He was a Transcendentalist, close friends with people like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. Together, they were a group of people who had started thinking about the world a bit differently, beginning to ask questions and challenge the status quo. They were good Unitarians, after all.

Bronson's niche amongst this group of free thinkers was as an educator. When he looked out and saw the classrooms of his day, he was uninspired: rote memorization, drill and recitation style testing, a strict emphasis on harsh discipline. It was a system based on the belief that children were inherently devious and corrupt and that a teacher's job was to control and subvert that bad nature, whether through punishment, shame or fear. All this deeply troubled Bronson, and he began to experiment with new ways of teaching and in 1834 founded the Boston Temple School.

It was revolutionary place. Bronson threw out the conventions of his day. Learning centered around discussion, questions, and critical thinking. Children were encouraged to follow their intuition, to feel and think for themselves, engaging not only their minds but their hearts and their character. Perhaps most radical of all, corporeal punishment and fear-based learning was banned. Students were even involved in deciding rules

and consequences for when they were broken. His daughter Louisa May would write that her father taught "in the wise way which unfolds what lies in the child's nature, as a flower blooms." It was one of the first experiments in liberal arts education.

The school was so progressive that it caught everyone's attention. Some loved what he was doing, seeing it as a promising model to be copied across America. And some were appalled, believing it encouraged immorality and planted seeds of heresy and disbelief. A few months in, Bronson published a book to explain his ideas and principles of the school.

His book was well intentioned. And it hit a nerve with his critics. Most controversial was a section on the benefits of honest conversation with students, specifically around issues of childbirth and circumcision. Bronson was hinting at a kind of 19<sup>th</sup> century sex education. Not an easy conversation in our time, it caused an uproar then. One prominent Unitarian and Harvard professor called the book "one third blasphemy, one third obscenity, and the rest nonsense;" another writer derided Bronson as either being "insane or half witted." The negative press sunk the book. It sold so poorly that one Boston lawyer bought 750 copies to use just as waste paper.

And Bronson should have seen it coming. Several of his close friends, and even teachers in his school, warned him against publishing it, and especially to remove the more controversial sections. They thought he was going too far too fast and that his work would be discredited. But Bronson refused, believing that his ideas were important and that he shouldn't be bullied from expressing them. There was too much at stake, he thought, for these ideas to take a back seat to political

expediency. He trusted in the goodness of the children in his class, and the righteousness of his cause, and thought it would be better for people to wrestle with the truth than to remain stuck in backwards thinking. For Bronson, it was simply the right thing to do.

Bronson's friends were right, at least, in predicting trouble. Beyond the myriad of criticism he received in the press, many parents of his students were appalled. They began pulling their children out, taking with them much of the school's funding. Bronson remained unbowed. Classes continued with fewer students, the school carried along.

But soon again he caused waves. Bronson had the opportunity to admit a child of color. Like before, his friends and fellow educators warned him against such a provocative move. But Bronson was steadfast in his principles and welcomed the student anyways. He argued he could do nothing else, if he really believed in the inherent goodness of all children, and that quality education should be available to everyone. This time there was an even louder uproar, more angry than the first. The last of his families withdrew their children. With his reputation tarnished and the school out of money and students, Bronson closed down. His grand experiment was over.

What do we make of the story of Bronson and his school? It's hard not to admire Alcott for his passion and his courage. He was a man who remained steadfast in his principles, who did what was right even when nobody else supported it. No one could bully or intimidate him.

But at the same time, we see how those same wonderful qualities got him into trouble and ended his dream. We

can imagine how this felt. Grief, and the hurt from being attacked so meanly in the press. Abandonment by the people and parents who had previously believed in him. Disappointment at watching his dream fall apart.

Doing the right thing, living with integrity, can be painful. We make decisions that we know will hurt us, because we feel that our hearts, our convictions, allow us no other option.

What makes Alcott's story so difficult is that the failure he experienced was not simply personal. It was a failure for his cause, for those very values he cared so much about. And it was brought on because he acted with integrity. In doing the right thing, in writing about talking honestly with children and integrating his school, he ultimately undermined his own noble purposes.

The question I struggle with is this: Did Bronson do the right thing? On one hand, he acted on his values, on the other hand, those actions undercut his vitally important work. Was his sacrifice worth it?

We can all agree, from where we are today, that Bronson was a man of deep principle and character and that the virtues he stood for were good ones. And we can imagine his dilemma: to take the safe path, but do what feels morally questionable, even cowardly, or go ahead anyways, and take the risk and hope for the best. Of course, he didn't know what would happen. But his friends seemed pretty sure. They were not unreasonable people either, many were radicals in their own right, committed to causes of equality and human dignity, upending the status quo. Many were women, themselves engaged in a fierce battle for inclusion, dignity, and respect. Certainty sympathetic.

If we could interview them today, I wonder how they would explain their advice to Bronson. Maybe they were simply more politically savvy than he was and saw him as naive. Maybe they worried for their friend and didn't want him to suffer and fail. Or maybe they would say they held a different understanding of integrity than Bronson.

Despite my deep admiration for Bronson, I can see the wisdom in the words of his friends. Sometimes, when we are engaged with full hearts and passions for something we believe in, it appears we only face two paths, and two choices. One means doing the right thing, the other the wrong thing. And given those choices, no matter what the consequences, we feel that we must choose the right one.

It's easy to see our choices in this way, but life is rarely full of either-or, black-and-white choices. Our world is too complicated for that. Did Bronson do right or wrong? I'm not sure. But I do worry that his view of integrity, of what it meant to do right and wrong, was too narrow. It was almost as if he believed that either you go ahead full force, or you aren't going ahead at all. That one battle wins the war. And that's not true and it's too simplistic.

It is one thing to do the right thing. Life is full of opportunities for that. Alcott certainly had the right values. But if we want to change the world as well, if we want to succeed instead of fail, we need something else. We need wisdom. We need to be smart about how we change the world.

This is the week in which we celebrate Martin Luther King Jr. Day, a holiday designed to honor the civil rights movement and its leaders. And what made folks like MLK

and Rosa Parks special was not simply their values or their awareness of the deep social injustices of their day. Lots of people shared those values, knew about the problems they faced, and had been working on them for years. What made MLK and Rosa Parks special was that they figured out a way of expressing those values that actually made change. They were smart about it. They engineered a movement not only based on the right thing, but on what got the job done. They chose their battles. They implemented a strategy. That's why Rosa Parks didn't protest every time she took the bus. She did it when it really mattered. She took the wider view. It was about being deliberate and effective and wise. It paid off and they changed the world.

This is not easy, because wisdom and thoughtfulness and intentionality take work, and even sacrifice. They force us to face morally nebulous situations, or to refrain from doing some act of good so that the larger good is preserved. Real integrity means accepting with courage the responsibility of facing these complexities and difficult choices. It means going beyond just right intentions. It's about making sure your intentions and actions actually make a difference. That's harder. But that's real integrity. It's right intention plus wisdom. You need both.

In the Christian New Testament, even Jesus himself sees this. Recognizing the messed up nature of the world, he tells his disciples, "behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves." But these virtuous sheep are not helpless, and Jesus suggests that to be doers of good and speakers of truth, they must be two things: "Be as shrewd as serpents and as innocent as doves." It's Jesus' way of telling his followers to keep their values, but be wise about them. Stay true to who you are, but think. That's how we make a difference.

I think that's a worthy goal for us as Unitarian Universalists, because there is still a lot of work to do. We only need to read the paper, go online, to witness the need for more people to act on their values, but to act wisely. And churches like ours have a big part to play.

When I was in divinity school, I worked at our denominational headquarters, with a department called the Office of Congregational Advocacy and Witness. I was just a lowly intern, crammed into a tiny little office which was actually a storage room. But my job was to talk with congregations all over the country about how they were changing their communities. And I got to speak with those folks who were really doing good work. I found real and consistent patterns that made these congregations successful. You could write a book on each one of these best practices: They formed strong community partnerships. They focused attention and energy on only one or two projects. Their justice work was about the whole congregation, not just a committee. They always stayed hopeful and believed they could make a difference.

Most of our congregations don't practice social justice this way. That's too bad, because that's the smart way. That's the way to actually change the world. Most are led by a few dedicated individuals who work on a committee isolated from the heart of the church. Committed people have their particular passions and projects that they run well, but are unconnected. Charity is emphasized instead of systematic change.

So here's my challenge to you. Follow Jesus' advice about snakes and doves. Find in your heart the spirit of innocence, but don't use it as excuse to be reckless or to

duck responsibility for hard, sometimes even painful, work. Admire Bronson's passion, know what causes your heart to sing, but remember MLK and Rosa Parks too, and what made them different.

Unitarian Universalism, this congregation, needs your wisdom and smarts. And the world does too, all you good-hearted, caring, lovely people. It's the only way anything will actually change for the better: when people plant seeds of kindness and hope, and then do the hard work to care for them tenderly, not stopping until they bloom.

This love, this courage, our shared hearts, make all the difference. So get out your rake and your gardening gloves. Bring out your water bucket and shovel. Let's see what we can grow. Amen.