

Introduction

Why Louisa? Why Now?

Life always was a puzzle to me, & gets more mysterious as I go on.

Louisa May Alcott, 1874, age forty-two

Never have time to go slowly & do my best.

Louisa May Alcott, 1877, age forty-five

I was home alone, that rare treat for the working mother, when it occurred to me to write to her. To Louisa May Alcott. Why not?

Life, I think, requires more than simply showing up. Not that I expect a normal, ordinary person like me to move the tectonic plates of human history. But I can't help thinking that it's not quite enough just being in a family, making another family, earning one's keep and then exiting stage left.

Now in my mid-fifties, I have already lived longer than most humans in any century ever have. Being a healthy white American woman in 2005, the statistics say I'm likely to carry on for another twenty or thirty years. My personal genes agree: my grandmother lived to one-hundred-and-four-and-a-half. So I may be barely half done. What can I usefully do with all that future? I've already been in a family (mom, dad, two brothers); I've already made a family (mom, dad, two daughters); I've already earned a lot of keep (pediatric nurse, hospital manager, high-paid consultant). Now what? Where's the action? The freedom and fear, the fun and fight?

Sitting on our slightly dilapidated department-store sofa, Louisa May Alcott came rather suddenly to mind. I was reading, and had just looked up at our Chinese ink drawing of trees in a terrible winter windstorm. The bamboo is whipped horizontal by the wind, and the pine next to it is jaggedly, cruelly broken. My husband and I bought the picture from an earnest art student who explained that his picture celebrates the virtues and victories of flexible persistence over brute strength.

I look back at the book on my lap, a biography of Jane Austen. I had been on an English literature jag for years, reading piles of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Englishwomen's letters, journals, novels, autobiographies, and biographies. Early twentieth-century Edwardian was as modern as I wanted to venture (although I did make an exception for the Bloomsbury set). I loved the elegant sentences of those days, the women's long, sweeping skirts, their tall French windows opening out onto terraces, and all those relaxed afternoon teas in the garden – such a welcome fantasy after a day of work, traffic, NPR news, and spaghetti dinners at the kitchen table.

But after September 11, 2001, I started thinking American more than European. Odd, because my husband and I were in Europe that September, treating his parents to a month in Siena, Sorrento, and Paris for their fiftieth anniversary. By the time we arrived in Paris in early October, my mind must have been secretly gearing up for the swivel from Miss Austen to Miss Alcott. I was unconsciously turning a mental corner as neatly as our Seine *bateaux mouches* were spinning around the scale model of the Statue of Liberty at the end of our tourist dinner cruise. The French crew played “America the Beautiful” on the loudspeakers, and we all cried together.

Back home, I picked up a book of Louisa May Alcott's letters. Then her journal. Then a biography. I watched the George Cukor-Katharine Hepburn film of *Little Women*.¹ Then I visited the Alcott house in Concord, Massachusetts. Nathaniel Hawthorne lived right next door. Ralph Waldo Emerson lived across the road. Henry David Thoreau flitted in and out of the Alcotts' woods, taking Louisa and her sisters on nature walks. John Brown's grieving wife and family came for tea after his execution for masterminding and leading the Harpers Ferry raid. When the Civil War started, Louisa signed up to be a nurse in an army hospital. After the war, she chaired her local American Woman Suffrage Association chapter and was the first woman in Concord to register to vote.

Louisa's abolitionist zeal, her women's rights advocacy, her hospital work, her crazy commune days, her exceedingly eccentric father, her heartfelt desire to leave the world a better place, her industrious work habits, her humor, and her energy all materialized in full battle regalia in my living room. Louisa made her life, she didn't just live it. She wore her heart, as well as her brain, on her sleeve – always in the open, unprotected and brave.

“Being born on the birthday of Columbus² I seem to have something of my patron saint's spirit of adventure, and running away was one of the delights of my childhood,” she once wrote about herself for a children's magazine. After visiting her sister Anna (Meg in *Little Women*) shortly after Anna's marriage to John Pratt, Louisa confided to

¹ Which I didn't much like. The sisters were all too old and Katharine Hepburn was trying too hard.

² I cannot corroborate this. We do not today seem to know when Columbus's birthday was – probably between August 25 and October 31, 1451, a span which does not include Louisa's birthdate of November 29.

her journal, “Very sweet & pretty, but I’d rather be a free spinster & paddle my own canoe.”

Louisa was fifty-five when she died, about my age when I wrote the first letter. She suffered from chronic mercury (called calomel in her day) poisoning as a result of treatment she had received for typhoid twenty-five years earlier. She was not surprised that her life, unlike what I expect of mine, was winding down.

I had been through some of the same adventures as Louisa, but by my late thirties I had leveled out at ordinary personhood, indistinguishable from many other middle-aged, middle-class post-World War II babies. My revolutionary days in the passionate and violent Weather Underground were like the ruins of Pompeii, the sharp edges slowly silted over by the ash of graduate school, marriage, kids in college, professional career, husband with ditto, vacations, gardening, dinners in nice restaurants. Years of layered sediment had buried those volcanic days of the 1960s and ’70s, when I lived in an unsubtle world of black and white values and overheated schemes for building the perfect society. Remember Eldridge Cleaver’s simple and menacing, “You’re either part of the problem or you’re part of the solution”? Today, though, with the exception of financial donations and volunteer hours here and there, the personal and the private rule.

Louisa, on the other hand, never buried her scrapes, never laid aside her ideals, but mined them her whole life to create wealth (“I turn my adventures into bread & butter”), fame, and a string of good works. Plus she did it all husbandless in a time when the odds for female success were infinitesimal.

Her life, surely, would give me impetus and ideas for thinking about the rest of mine.

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By the time my first letter reached her, she was the best-selling author of her century. “Fame is an expensive luxury,” she wrote, “I can do without it. This is my worst scrape, I think. I asked for bread, & got a stone – in the shape of a pedestal.” *Little Women* had earned her a celebrity she didn’t like, although she loved the money. She loved earning it, keeping track of it, and spending it – but mostly not on herself. She was the primary financial support for her parents, her sisters, and her sisters’ children. She liked it that way.

She also could look back and know she had thrown her best energy into the two most important struggles of the American century – the abolition of slavery and the rights of women to be educated, to vote, to work, and to receive equal pay. Americans in the 1700s fought for independence; in Louisa’s 1800s, the battle was for equal opportunity – and a more difficult and protracted struggle that has turned out to be.

Louisa May Alcott was not the first author to receive a letter from me. Once I made the mistake of mailing a short story I had written while I was in nursing school to a contemporary writer whom I much admired. Silly me. I liked this author’s stories so much I thought for sure she’d love mine. She did write back, kindly but firmly, telling me that writers were very busy people and that I should never bother any of them ever again.

Presumably, though, dead authors would not be so busy. I couldn’t resist Louisa’s strong and opinionated personality, coming through so clearly in her letters, journals, and novels. The similarities between her life and mine – the nursing, the political activism – as well as the telling differences tempted me (a grown and otherwise rational woman) to send her an e-mail.

Given the mysteries of the universe, I caught her not dead, but in the last six months of her life, in the winter of 1887–88. Not so long ago, really. Just a hop, skip, and a jump from today – a time almost spanned by my own grandmother, a feisty redhead who was born on a southern Indiana farm, just eight years after Louisa’s too-early death, and who lived to ring in the third millennium.

Over the course of several letters, Louisa and I gradually got our bearings. I explained, in words I hoped would make sense to a nineteenth-century mind, that I was a self-appointed spokeswoman for myself and some of my friends. We were all in our fifties, I explained, and were beginning to get our heads above water with the kids leaving home and the corporate climb cooling down. We were starting to think about the rest of our lives, and we were asking for her help.

Together, Louisa and I devised a mutually agreeable project. I would read everything I could find about or by her. I would then write short histories about all the interesting things she had done, the argumentative and creative people she had known, and how she had made her life work. I would send them to her for her correction and comment. In return for her editorial efforts, Louisa would have a chance to speak out one more time (an opportunity few can resist) *and* she could learn the twenty-first century fate of her own most heartfelt causes.

Through it all, I hoped to pick up some clues for my friends and myself about how better to live the thirty or so years that might remain to us. And besides, we would be giving Louisa a treat that couldn’t be beat – a peek into the future. I thought it would be a wonderful way to thank an author who had brought such pleasure to so many.

You may ask why she bothered to write that first letter back to me at all, but like many in her day, she was a compulsive correspondent. She wrote thousands of letters in her life. She routinely responded personally to fans, neophyte writers, and supplicants of various sorts. Once she received a request from a stranger who said she had no money to buy Christmas presents for her children. Could Miss Alcott help out? Louisa put together a box of useful goodies and mailed it on to the stranger, enjoying the role of secret Santa. Perhaps she saw this project as a similar gift.

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I wish I could explain more about the mechanics of our correspondence, but I can't, because, other than frying six surge protectors, I don't know how it worked either. I sent my letters and chapter drafts to Louisa by e-mail from my Seattle living room, and she received them as handwritten ink on paper in her rooms in Dr. Lawrence's house in Roxbury, Massachusetts. She once told me my handwriting was neat and extremely legible, so there was definitely something odd going on. She wrote to me, using well-worn ink pens and paper, and they showed up in Bodini MT font in my Outlook inbox. I was grateful for the technology transfer, as her own handwriting was also less than copperplate.

It's one of those Internet Effects, I guess. Or a Heisenberg thing, or Brownian motion gone amok. I didn't want to inquire too closely for fear the magic might vanish.

Her last letter to me was dated Leap Day, February 29, 1888, about a week before she died. Her last journal entry is from a few days later, on March 2, four days before her death:

Fine. Better in mind but food a little uneasy. Write letters. Pay Ropes [her coal supplier] \$30, Notman [photographer] 4. Write a little. L to come. [Lulu was her dead sister May's almost nine-year-old daughter, named after her aunt Louisa, whom Louisa was raising]

Louisa May Alcott died in Boston on March 6, 1888, a scant two days after the death of her difficult, omnipresent father, Bronson Alcott. Louisa and Bronson shared the same birthday, November 29; in her case, November 29, 1832.

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I have included, along with the results of our project, most of our letters, deleting only a few repetitions and minor irrelevancies. The chapters are arranged roughly in the order of Louisa's life. Each chapter contains my introductory letter to her, the essay I sent to her, and her letter in response.

We begin with her first letter back to me.