

“Live Fuller, Burn Brighter, Like Margaret Our Mother”
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No matter who we are, we stand in some way on the shoulders of those who have come before. Today is Mother’s Day, a day to honor the women who have come before us who have contributed to who we are.

It seems fitting on Mother’s Day to honor a Unitarian or Universalist foremother, someone who has added to the stream of vitality of those in her time and those who came later, and to the faith that we have today.

It was 200 years ago this month that Margaret Fuller was born. For us Unitarian Universalists as we look back, it was a very exciting time in a new, optimistic country. Reason was beginning to have sway over unexamined belief. It was the threshold of our own American flowering – in art, literature, philosophy, religion and music. The seeds of the Transcendentalism yet to come, that time of awareness of individual interior consciousness rather than simply identified bodies of knowledge, were being planted. Whole new ways of thinking and being were percolating. The ideas of Unitarianism and Universalism were already afoot throughout the land. Yes, this was an exciting time – especially if you were white and male and had access to some education in this relatively new United States of America. Boston was a particularly frothy area, with debates – not always friendly – over religion, philosophy and politics being particularly vehement.

Margaret Fuller was born into a Unitarian family – at least Unitarian by affirmation as there was not yet an organized association of congregations. But congregations, especially in her New England, were struggling with their theological beliefs and some openly declaring their Unitarian identities.

For Margaret Fuller, the wonders of new ideas were a blessing and a curse, a reminder of the limited opportunity for women.

It did not take long for her family to notice that Margaret was precocious. Her father, a lawyer and senator, was a stern man with high expectations. Because of her clear abilities, he began her education early, and with subjects unlike most girls of her time were exposed to. Margaret was instructed in the classics, studying Latin before she was six, adding before long French and German and the literature of those cultures. Others of what we would consider more normal childhood pursuits were blocked from her so she could maintain the rigid schedule of study her father insisted upon. One biographer wrote that “Her intellect was so highly stimulated that she suffered from nightmares and felt stifled in other areas of her development . . . Through the early

years of her life, her soul felt buried beneath the surface.” (Andrews) She herself wrote, “I look back on these glooms and terrors and perceive that I had no natural childhood.”

Part of what was within her, though, was an irrepressible wish to grow more, to learn more. A hero throughout her life was Goethe, from whom she very early learned one of his phrases – in German, of course – “extraordinary generous seeking.” She was a seeker all her life – resonating with our own UU holy grail of ongoing seeking for truth and deeper understanding. In this she was diligent and applied it to the many tasks she pursued as an adult, including her own self-creation, her own inner life.

But life choices, the mother of so much human potential, were very often restricted.

She was given access to education in a way that was unusual for a girl. But she also grew up continually tripping over the expectations for her gender, while still feeling the unceasingly unmet demands of her fine mind and her wish to nourish the inner need to grow her own identity. Here are a few reflections on what it might have been like to be Margaret Fuller:

Imagine you are walking on a balance beam. On one side are all the things people want you to do and the feelings people expect you to have. On the other side are your own feelings and thoughts that are different from what others expect. As you walk, sometimes you feel the pull of what people want you to do, and sometimes you feel the pull of doing what you think is right. You have to be careful – if you are pulled too hard either way, you might fall off.

This was Margaret Fuller’s life – a constant balancing act between being part of the world in which she lived and being her own true self.

Margaret was a loyal friend who needed to talk out her ideas, yet she regularly turned people off because she was so smart and self-confident [not what women were “supposed” to be in much of the 19th century.—S.A.]. Margaret’s life was filled with challenges – times when she was pulled clear off the beam and had to hop back on and regain her balance.”(Williams)

When she was an adult the culture of her times continued to try to corral her as it did other women or to criticize her as a woman while praising her mind. This happened even among those Unitarians and Transcendentalists who so often extolled the possibility of the human mind, capacity and soul. Looking back it is hard not to be angry on her behalf at all the ways she was derided. She had a long and deep friendship with Emerson, and yet in his journal we find these words: “An intelligent woman who makes a public show of her intelligence becomes less of a woman than one who holds her tongue.” (Blanchard)

Such were the times. And yet, in the course of her prematurely shortened lifetime, in the face of a disapproving culture, Margaret Fuller was:

- Literary critic and linguist.
- Editor and contributor to that famous mouthpiece of the Transcendentalists, the Dial.

- Author of five books and 350 articles, essays and poems.
- 1st literary editor of a major US newspaper.
- 1st woman to *enter* and then to use Harvard's library.
- She preached for the freeing of slaves, for the economic rights of the poor, the federal rights for Native Americans, and the civil rights for all women (Thandeka) and was, as well, an active opponent of capital punishment and advocate for the reform of prison conditions for women.
- First American (of any gender) to become a foreign newspaper correspondent.
- Close friend with many famous Transcendentalists/Unitarians.
- Active in Italy's Republican revolution, as a nurse, as a director of a hospital.
- Finally, she also briefly had her own family, with one of those Italian revolutionaries.

Each of these could be a book unto itself, but this morning I want to lift up especially just one of her amazing accomplishments.

The art of conversation mattered deeply to Margaret Fuller. No, she didn't just enjoy a good chat. She understood conversation as a way of self-improvement and personal growth for herself and for others, especially for women for whom these experiences were by and large not encouraged.

Over the years, this notion of the importance of conversation in education became the norm in many schools of educational philosophy. Remember Alex's chalice lighting ("Education is not a destination but a journey"). Certainly, conversation is what we encourage in our UU congregations, to wit our own Forum, adult programs and children's religious education. But such a notion was just beginning back in Fuller's time. Many of us may have studied the Transcendental Club, where people – many emerging from our Unitarian roots, like Emerson and Thoreau -- gathered for conversation to stimulate their own thinking. Margaret Fuller was the only regular female participant in that group. But she sought to make that kind of experience open more widely to women, truly a new idea. Between 1839 and 1842 she offered for women what she called "The Conversations" in Elizabeth Peabody's bookstore.

For her earliest Conversations she included an invitation to Lydia Parker, wife of the Unitarian firebrand minister Theodore Parker. The male Parker wrote back "No" on his wife's behalf because of "the reluctance she feels at conversing at all," (Marshall) a sentiment about women that the culture of decades if not centuries had put into place in the minds of both men and women.

Nonetheless, Margaret proceeded: You could get 24 lessons/session, 2/wk, for \$15; required discussion of all.

She began with some of the great questions facing women, ones which she had asked herself at an early age: What were we born to do? How shall we do it? Interior questions! She also had

conversations about Greek mythology as representations of qualities in human nature and other challenging subjects. She encouraged those gathered to turn impressions to thoughts, to systematize thinking.

Men were excluded only because Margaret's purpose included changing the status of women, to alter the images of themselves. At this time individual women "found it difficult to believe that their minds were equal to men's." (Marshall) She wanted the Conversations to free them from self-doubt and censure from others to believe inadequacies were not innate but from little education and the custom of self-deprecation.

She hoped for a small revolution in Boston.

The Conversations were a hit. One biographer wrote "Her reputation as a conversationalist rested equally in her brilliance as a speaker and her gift for sensing what others were thinking and tossing the ball to each of them at just the right moment, so the slightest of them had no choice but to catch it." (Blanchard) For me, for many educators today, a worthy aspiration!

Among many men of her time the Conversations continued to be held against her as vehement argument was thought to be unwomanly.

But the Conversations had begun to change lives for the participants.

Margaret Fuller stood up relentlessly, through her teaching, through her Conversations, through her writings – considered some of the earliest American feminist exposition– with the premise that all souls are equal before God – African Americans, Native Americans, including all women.

There are many other chapters of her life: her relationship with various of the Transcendentalists at Brooke Farm, at Concord and in Boston, but probably deepest of all with Emerson; her teaching of children; her travels to the frontiers of Wisconsin; amazing experiences as a journalist and traveler in Europe, and especially in Italy, her adopted home, where she met her love, had a son and helped the revolutionary cause. The three of them lost their lives in a shipwreck off the coast of Long Island on their way back to America.

After her sad death, what came to be known as Fuller Clubs emerged across the country, taking their cues from her Conversations.

"If you had been a part of such clubs and if you happened to be walking down the street and saw someone wearing a golden bow on their lapel, you might raise your hand and say, 'Live Fuller, Burn brighter, like Margaret, Our Sister, Our Mother.'" (Tracey) The bow was the symbol, the words the motto, of the Fuller Clubs, in honor of Fuller and the conversations she stirred among all people, but especially among women, who learned they could have their own thoughts, feelings and spirit, always growing and stretching out to meet the future.

Whether woman or man, child or adult, may we each live fuller, burn brighter, like Margaret our sister, our mother.

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