

Remembering Margaret Fuller

By Pat Smith, April 18, 2010

Note: Some references are list at the end. Some are embedded in the text.

This information in on the cover of the Order of Service, underneath her picture

Margaret Fuller

1810-1850

Unitarian, Transcendentalist, Social Activist

Five weeks from today, on May 23, Margaret Fuller would have celebrated her 200th birthday, if she had not died in a shipwreck when she was just 40 years old.

Born in Cambridge, MA, she was a social activist. Part of a group of Unitarians and Transcendentalists in the early 1800's who raised a big ruckus. Actually, several ruckuses.

“Edgar Allan Poe divided humanity into three classes: men, women, and Margaret Fuller”
(*Watson, David. Margaret Fuller: An American Romantic. NY: Berg Publishers Ltd., 1988. p109.*)

Some people thought she was brilliant. Most people have never heard of her.

In her short life, Margaret Fuller made a difference in the world.

The small world of those around her. The world beyond her friends. The world even after her death.

Are we making a difference in the world?

Look at the insert in your order of service. One side has a list of “firsts”. And these are not all her accomplishments. Just the “firsts”. But it gives you an idea of the breadth of her influence.

Insert in the Order of Service

List of Firsts...

- *First American to write a book about equality for women*
- *First woman foreign correspondent and war correspondent to serve under combat conditions*
- *First woman journalist on Horace Greeley's New York Daily Tribune*
- *First editor of The Dial, foremost Transcendentalist journal, appointed by Ralph Waldo Emerson*
- *First woman literary critic who also set literary standards*

- *First woman to enter Harvard Library to pursue research*

In addition, Margaret Fuller served as director of an Italian hospital that treated the war wounded during the Italian Revolution of 1848-9. This predates the work of Florence Nightingale and Clara Barton.

(<http://www.margaretfuller.org/>)

FLIP CHART 1

She was...

- Educator, teacher
 - Author, literary critic, editor
 - War correspondent, director of a hospital treating war wounded in Italy
 - Champion of women's rights
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It would be quite logical for me to talk about these aspects of her life separately and sequentially. That's how my brain works. But each of these so-called categories and "firsts" interweaves with the others. All of them together formed and directed her life. So there's a piece over here that connects with and influences another piece over there. Just as different aspects of our own lives develop and interact with each other. But to provide a framework, I've also included in the Order of Service a brief biosketch.

Insert in the Order of Service

Fuller's life in a nutshell.....

- *Oldest of nine children, three of whom died before the age of 2* (<http://www.csustan.edu/english/reuben/pal/chap4/fuller.html>.)
- *Educated at home by her father. Her father died when she was 15, and she took over the education of her siblings. Three of her brothers graduated from Harvard* (<http://www.csustan.edu/english/reuben/pal/chap4/fuller.html>).
- *Taught school for three years to support herself and her family. She quit to focus on her writing.*
- *Joined the Transcendentalists discussions and was the first editor of their Periodical The Dial. "...[in] her longest piece for The Dial, 'The Great Lawsuit: Man vs Men, Woman vs Women,' Fuller examined the knotty problems of women's rights and sexual roles." (Allen, Margaret Vanderhaar. The Achievement of Margaret Fuller. U Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1979, p8.) This article was the basis for her most famous work, the book entitled "Woman in the Nineteenth Century". It had "an important and lasting effect on the empowerment of women and became a sort of 'bible' for the [budding] movement for women's rights" (p6 ref 4)*
- *Initiated what she called "Conversations". These were informal discussions where women were encouraged to express themselves.*

- *Became a literary critic, along with Edgar Allen Poe, for Horace Greeley's New York Tribune, and later a foreign correspondent and war correspondent in Italy.*
- *Authored the books "Woman in the Nineteenth Century" and "Summer on the Lakes". "Summer on the Lakes" was the result of a trip she took to the midwest that preserves a picture of the destitute survivors of the native tribes that were displaced by the newly arrived European and Yankee settlers (p 27 ref 1). So here we see her sensitivity to those considered subordinate, not just women.*
- *Had a son by an Italian nobleman.*
- *Shipwrecked and killed off Fire Island, NY. The "manuscript she prepared on the history of the Italian revolution" was lost in this wreck when returning from Italy (Watson, David. Margaret Fuller: An American Romantic. NY: Berg Publishers Ltd., 1988, p 46).*

-----*My perspective*-----

Even though I'm not a history buff, I *do* enjoy reading biographies and historical treatises. I feel like I'm filling in gaps in my formal education. And what I've figured out, is that so many things in the past relate to *Now*. Wow! What a revelation, huh?

And so much of what Margaret Fuller was interested in 200 hundred years ago, I'm interested in *now*. I read that she was a champion of women's rights. And my first reaction was, "Well, that's nice. But *that* fight is over." Then I started thinking back to my own childhood, way back in the last century.

- I was not allowed play Little League baseball. That was just for boys. And I was good, too.
- My high school volleyball team had to practice in the elementary school gym, because the boys basketball team got first dibs on the high school gym.

Three of Margaret Fuller's brothers graduated from Harvard (<http://www.csustan.edu/english/reuben/pal/chap4/fuller.html>).

When I read that, I thought back. Did anything like that happen during *my* lifetime? Yes! Here are two examples. In the 1960s, Texas A&M University did not admit women undergraduates. Neither did the University of Virginia. These were public universities. AND, they were not just exclusively for males, but for white males. With the women's movement and the civil rights movements, those prohibitions fell.

My mother used to tell me that she was smart until she got married. Then she became an idiot. It took me years to understand what she meant. As an unmarried adult woman, she could own property. She could make financial decisions without anyone else's permission. As soon as she got married, she could no long do those things. She needed the consent of her husband. In effect, she became an idiot.

Today, while we no longer have *those* particular problems, women still lag behind in many ways. For example, women's pay is not on par with men's. This is true in academics, government, and business.

So what Margaret Fuller fought for 200 years ago, is not over.

***But she did make a difference in the world.
Are we making a difference in the world?***

-----Unitarian and women's rights-----

Margaret Fuller believed in the inherent worth and dignity of every person, even though that UU principle was not formulated and formally adopted until just over 20 years ago. This UU principle provided a foundation for her view that women should have the same rights and privileges as men. And this view was reinforced by her Unitarian and Transcendentalists colleagues.

Let's look at the Unitarian side of Margaret Fuller. Why was she a Unitarian? Well, her parents were Unitarians. And like most people, like us, we *adopt* the religion of our parents, at least until we decide to *reject* it!

In addition to being a Unitarian, or perhaps because of it, "Her father was a liberal politician and a supporter of equality for women." He educated his daughter at home for several years and had a big impact on her, instilling independent thought and moral courage (p 27 ref 1). That Unitarian beginning and Unitarian streak lasted her entire life.

That's why educating our own children in UUism is so important. It affects a person's entire life.

Her father died when Fuller was just 15 years old, and left her "largely responsible for the emotional and economic welfare of her family" (p 4 ref 4). This experience helped shape her views that "women needed the freedom to grow and develop through education, reading, conversation, and friendship" (p 4 ref 4).

In her book (ref 2, p 26), "Woman in the Nineteenth Century", published in 1845, Fuller talks about Dr. William Ellery Channing. Channing was a prominent Unitarian minister in his later life, and also a Transcendentalist. She says, "The late Dr. Channing...was greatly interested in these expectations for women. ... His own treatment of them was absolutely and thoroughly religious. He regarded them as souls, each of which had a destiny of its own."

In support of Channing's view, Fuller writes (ref 2, p 26), "If you ask me what office [women] may fill, I reply—any, I do not care what case you put; let them be sea-captains, if you will. I do not doubt there are women well fitted for such an office, and if so, I should be...glad to see them in it. I think women need, especially at this juncture, a much greater range of occupation than they have."

Today, while we have seen women become sea captains, there are still areas where women are not seen. The office of President of the United States is one of them, even though women in

other countries have been the top leader: Great Britain, Germany, Israel, India, Pakistan, to name a few.

Fuller had dreams for women. Some of those dreams have been realized. Others have not.

***But she did make a difference.
Are we making a difference?***

-- Connecting the dots – Connection of women’s rights to the rights of blacks ----

In the last few years, there has been a lot of talk about “connecting the dots”. As if it’s easy. Well, I don’t think it’s so easy.

People don’t always make connections from one context to another.

Here’s a personal example. I was in line at the grocery store and saw a man who looked familiar. I kept racking my brain to try to make the connection, to connect the dots. Where do I know him from? Finally it dawned on me. I had seen him playing tennis. And because I remembered him in that context, I even remembered his name. I said hello and he greeted me by name. I confessed to him that at first I did not recognize him with his clothes on. Then I had to back peddle and say that what I meant was that I was used to seeing him in tennis shorts. Not long pants and a shirt and tie.

An example of Margaret Fuller connecting the dots when others did not was in her long article in *The Dial*, “The Great Lawsuit: Man versus Men, Woman versus Women”.

[This article] makes reference to the [abolitionist](#) movement. Women’s lack of freedom is paralleled to that of the slaves, one that was actively fought against by many people in the North, men as well as women. In doing this, Fuller is calling upon men’s compassion for the slave to be applied to women as well, and for women to expand their energy fighting for slaves’ freedom to their own. (Wikipedia referring to “The Great Lawsuit: Man versus Men, Woman versus Women”)

This is an example of how Fuller was ahead of her time. She connected the dots that few others did. She connected the discrimination against black people to the discrimination against women.

***Margaret Fuller made a difference in the world.
Are we making a difference in the world?***

-----Transcendentalists and her group -----

What about *Transcendentalism*? How was that a part of her life?

The Transcendentalists lived in Cambridge and Boston. Many of them were Unitarians, including Emerson and Thoreau. They lived close to one another, and they met and talked

frequently. And if you look on Wikipedia, Margaret Fuller is listed as one of the prominent Transcendentalists, right up there with Emerson and Thoreau.

“The Transcendentalist movement was about a group of people and also about a complex cluster of related ideas” (p5 ref 3). And the ideas *are* complex! Our Intersections group studied this topic last summer through a series of DVD lectures from The Teaching Company. And I still cannot explain it very well. So, here’s a short, two-line, working definition from one of those lectures.

(p5 ref 3)

Transcendentalism [stresses] a divine force in each individual, a force that is also linked to nature and has the power to transform lives, as well as social institutions.

You can see the connection to Unitarianism:

- “*a divine force in each individual*”(that’s our 3rd principle: encouragement to spiritual growth)
- “*a force that is also linked to nature*” (that’s related to our 7th principle: the interdependent web of all existence)
- “*a force that has the power to transform lives*”(recalling our 4th principle: a free and responsible search for truth and meaning)
- “*a force that has the power to transform social institutions*” (that’s the Unitarian struggle for social justice)

So the concepts and values of Transcendentalism were also those of Unitarianism.

Let’s look a few Transcendentalists, and how Margaret Fuller was connected to them.

- *Ralph Waldo Emerson* is considered “the intellectual father and the emotional godfather of Transcendentalism in America” (p17 ref 3). Emerson and Fuller influenced each other. They formed a mutual admiration society.
 - (p4 ref 4) For example, in 1838, when Fuller was just 28 years old, Emerson had invited her to join meetings of the Transcendentalist circle. He clearly respected her ideas. Then, in the next year, when Emerson decided to launch the periodical *The Dial*, he chose Margaret Fuller to be the first editor. This expanded her influence, because she ended up writing many articles, and she corresponded with other Transcendentalist leaders.
 - And, Fuller influenced Emerson with her book “*Woman in the Nineteenth Century*”. Ten years after her book was published, Emerson gave a lecture entitled “*Woman*”, at the Women’s Rights Convention in Boston.

- Another prominent Transcendentalist leader was *Henry David Thoreau*, whom you may imagine at Walden Pond, communing with nature. Thoreau and Fuller were both friends of Emerson and visited him and his family frequently (p 4, ref 3).
- *William Ellery Channing* was another Transcendentalist leader and Congregationalist minister who later became a Unitarian. Earlier I read a quotation from one of Margaret Fuller's book, which her showed admiration for Channing.
- *Amos Bronson Alcott*, father of the famous author Louisa May Alcott, was a leader as well as a founder of the Transcendentalist movement. He was an educational reformer and started a school, where Fuller taught for a few years.
- *Elizabeth Peabody*, another leading Transcendentalist and educator, was a central figure in Fuller's life. Peabody offered her bookstore for an activity for women organized by Fuller, called "Conversations" from 1839 to 1844. Fuller wanted to "... encourage women to think for themselves and to learn to express their opinions publicly..." (p24 ref 1).

These Transcendentalists, both men and women, were Fuller's support group. They nurtured her. They nurtured each other.

Think about your own circle of close friends. Those you get together with frequently to talk things over, share views, think about challenging ideas.

An example from our own church is a group of four men who met weekly for several years at the Dairy Queen on 19th Street and the West Loop. Bill Watkins. Darwin Holder. Richard Wilde. Lynn Steele. The focus was supposed to be physics and specialty areas such as string theory and the big bang. One time Richard drew a picture of an alternate universe on a napkin. Wish I had been there for that! Besides the esoteric, their discussions were also about what they were doing in their every day lives. They shared personal stories. These men were great friends to each other.

Margaret Fuller's Transcendentalists were intellectuals, and their ideas were outside the mainstream. They challenged conventional thought as well as each other. In addition to advocating for the abolition of slavery, they promoted women's rights, workers rights, children's rights. They advocated for prison reform. For better treatment of the insane and the poor. They were ahead of their time. *Way* ahead of their time.

They were a support group for each other.

Just as our church provides a community of support for each of us. We share ideas. We test ideas. We work together to act. To do! To make a difference.

That's what Fuller's group did.

They were instrumental in her making a difference in the world.

Are we making a difference in the world?

----- *Sexual views and behavior* -----

Now besides being a writer, promoting Women's rights and advocating for other social causes, Fuller had what we would now call racy sexual views. (p5 ref 4) *You were getting ready to fall asleep, right?*

- “She met and admired George Sand, the cross-dressing female novelist[. Sand was] notorious for her combination of social activism and sexual promiscuity.”
- “Fuller was, to some, also a version of the scandalous scarlet woman[. Her sexual freedom] led to an illegitimate child and a [common-law] marriage to her Italian lover, who was 10 years her junior.” Today, we would say she robbed the cradle.

----- *Today* -----

When the Sunday Services Committee decided to have a service on Margaret Fuller, Sara McLarty got very excited. She would have liked to do it herself, but her schedule in the weeks leading up to today prevented it. But she had some material that she would contribute. One is this picture of Margaret Fuller, which she thought I might use on the front of the order of service. And I did.

Then I read the short biography and understood why Sara thought so much of Margaret Fuller. And hopefully, now you also have such an appreciation.

After I looked briefly at this, I put it aside, piled with other stuff. When I got around to preparing for this day, I actually got curious about where this page had come from. I had assumed it came from a magazine of some sort.

Anyway, I turned it over and discovered it was a calendar! Sara's calendar. From May 2000. The title is “Liberating Visions, a wall calendar by the Unitarian Universalist Women's Heritage Society”. Not only had Sara kept this calendar for 10 years, she remembered Margaret Fuller being on it.

This is an actual working calendar that Sara used from May of 2000! All her activities in her own hand writing. Here are just some of her activities, all church related.

- Newsletter
- History at Shirley's (Sikes)
- Call Inez (Crawford)
- WTOS meeting
- Lunch at Shirley's (Sikes)
- Interfaith (Dialogue)
- Dinner at Weninger's (Bob and Sue)

And the most amazing thing is that “Margaret” is not Fuller’s first name. It’s her middle name. Guess what her first name is. That’s right! Sarah! Her first name is Sarah! “Sarah Margaret Fuller”

What a coincidence! An activist Sarah from the past. And an activist Sara today. In our church!

History is alive. Social activism is alive and still needed. We are promoting social justice through our activities as a church community as well as individuals.

Is that not wonderful!

***Sarah Margaret Fuller made a difference in her world.
Are we making a difference in the world?***

Yes! We, as individuals and as a church, can and are making a difference in the world.

Let’s continue!

References

1. “Standing Before Us: Unitarian Universalist Women and Social Reform, 1776-1936”, Edited by Dorothy May Emerson, 1999, Skinner House Books.
2. “Woman in the Nineteenth Century”, Margaret Fuller, 1845.
3. “Emerson, Thoreau, and the Transcendentalist Movement”, Taught by Professor Ashton Nichols, Part 1, Course Guidebook, The Teaching Company, 2006.
4. “Emerson, Thoreau, and the Transcendentalist Movement”, Taught by Professor Ashton Nichols, Part 2, Course Guidebook, The Teaching Company, 2006.