

## Remembering Margaret Fuller

Readings: 'Tula [Books are Door-Shaped]' by Margarita Engle  
'Councils' by Marge Piercy  
from *The Memoirs of Margaret Fuller*

If you were holding a dinner party and your guest list was Unitarians, Universalists, and Unitarian Universalists from throughout history, who would you invite?

Perhaps a circle of dear church friends, perhaps a pillar or two who shaped our faith, perhaps a dinner table full of presidents like John and John Quincy Adams, Millard Fillmore and William Howard Taft. You could do worse than hosting some of our more literary co-religionists: Louisa May Alcott, Sylvia Plath, Kurt Vonnegut, Herman Melville, Beatrix Potter, Ray Bradbury, William Carlos Williams. A dinner could also be had with musicians: folk singer Pete Seeger, Ysaye Barnwell of Sweet Honey in the Rock, Annie Clark (who performs under the stage name St. Vincent), and classical composers Bela Bartok and Edvard Grieg. I would keep a piano and guitar nearby in hope of some impromptu performances.

This dinner party question might feel silly. Perhaps it would be a good a question for our children when they've completed their year of study of Unitarian Universalism. There was a time, about a decade ago, when I took this question really seriously, thinking carefully about my answers and what they would say about me, how I understood our faith, and my ability to be a minister.

One of the final stages of becoming fellowshiped as a Unitarian Universalist minister is a high-stakes interview. It is an hour. The first ten minutes are preaching a sample sermon to an interviewing panel of about a dozen Unitarian Universalists, followed by about 45 minutes of questions, which could include questions about hypothetical dinner parties. To prepare for this interview, one needs to complete seminary and internships in congregations and as a hospital chaplain. There is a reading list with about 100 books on it. When I did it, there were 17 areas of knowledge and skill that I needed to prove myself competent in, ranging from theology to administration and institutional leadership, music and the arts to pastoral care to church history to antiracism to the Bible. This is the process that the Unitarian Universalist Association uses to make sure new ministers are qualified. One has to run this gauntlet to be eligible to use the UUA's search process, which is how most congregations find their ministers. Because each Unitarian Universalist congregation is autonomous, in charge of its own affairs, you can hire or call whoever you want to be their next minister. Churches don't need someone with the UUA's stamp of approval, but most congregations do seek out ministers who have passed the interviews and reference checks and background checks that the Unitarian Universalist Association requires.

Which brings us back to that question. "If you were holding a dinner party and your guest list was Unitarians, Universalists, and Unitarian Universalists from throughout history, who would you invite?" When I was studying for my interview, I had heard from many friends and seminary classmates who'd recently gone through it that the panel asked them this question, as it makes

for a fairly interesting way to gauge if someone knows a bit about denominational history. Sometimes there were variations... "And your guest list should be only women." "And you should have a conversation about religious education." "And you need to make sure each of the last three centuries are represented." So I spent some time, both alone and with my study group making up guest lists for imaginary dinner parties. There were many folks on various lists, but one constant was Margaret Fuller, a 19<sup>th</sup> century American author, journalist, and thought leader, who was famous in her day for her writing and criticism and has been largely forgotten. This sermon is my small attempt to change that.<sup>1</sup>

As I studied our denominational history and worried over those hypothetical guest lists, I thought about how much I really would like to have dinner with Margaret Fuller, so this is an attempt to create something of that dinner party conversation, as best as I can.

First, as soon as Fuller accepted my invitation, I would have to take some steps to settle my nerves. Margaret Fuller was truly an exceptional human. She was born in 1810 in Massachusetts. Her father believed that she should be as well educated as a boy and drilled her in reading and languages from the time she was very little. She mostly lived up to his high expectations. She was reading at three and a half and translating Latin by age 5. While formal schooling options were limited for girls, she took advantage of what was available. She was a formidably intelligent young woman who was not afraid to speak her mind. She was the only woman who as part of the transcendentalist circle, which included Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, some of the leading thinkers of the time. They were a group of Unitarians pushing the limits of the faith, urging people to see personal experience and non-Western religions as sources of religious wisdom. The transcendentalists pushed our tradition away from being a Christian denomination with theology a bit outside the mainstream to a tradition that seeks wisdom from many sources. Fuller edited and wrote for *The Dial*, the transcendentalist journal, whose issues regularly topped 500 pages and included the writings of Persian poets Rumi and Hafez. She later worked for *The New York Herald Tribune* as a journalist and critic. She brought attention to authors like Nathaniel Hawthorne. She then went to Italy as a foreign correspondent, reporting on Italian attempts to break free from the Austro-Hungarian Empire. I would feel very intimidated, indeed, and would have to spend some time calming myself so I wouldn't just fawning over her and her accomplishments.

When the occasion arrived, I would begin our conversation by talking about the impact of her work, especially her efforts to increase women's public roles. First, I might talk to her some about understandings of gender have shifted. In Fuller's writing, she speaks of men and women, but it is clear she did not understand gender as a binary. She wrote, 'there is no wholly masculine man,

---

<sup>1</sup> The sources I consulted for this sermon are

Popova, Maria. *Figuring*. New York: Pantheon, 2019.

'Margaret Fuller.' In *Standing Before Us: Unitarian Universalist Women in Social Reform 1776-1936*. (Dorothy May Emerson, editor.) Boston: Skinner House Books, 2000. Pages 24-29.

Goodwin, Joan. 'Margaret Fuller.' *Dictionary of Unitarian Universalist Biography*. Published August 10, 2001.

Retrieved from <http://uudb.org/articles/margaretfuller.html>

no purely feminine woman.' She would probably welcome the abundance of words for gender that we have—and are creating now.

I would then praise Fuller's work. Her book *Women in the Nineteenth Century* was the first major feminist book in this country and its arguments supported the feminist movements that emerged later. In it, she writes,

'Man and woman... are the two halves of one thought. I lay no especial stress on the welfare of either. I believe that the development of the one cannot be effected without that of the other. My highest wish is that this truth should be distinctly and rationally apprehended, and the conditions of life and freedom recognized as the same for the daughters and the sons of time... Woman... needs now take her turn in the full pulsation, and that improvement in the daughters will best aid in the improvement of the sons of this age.'<sup>2</sup>

and

'We would have every arbitrary barrier thrown down. We would have every path laid open to Woman as freely as to Man. Were this done, and a slight temporary fermentation allowed to subside, we should see crystallizations more pure and of more various beauty. We believe the divine energy would pervade nature to a degree unknown in the history of former ages, and that no discordant collision, but a ravishing harmony of the spheres, would ensue.'<sup>3</sup>

Fuller didn't only write of these commitments to equality of all people, she lived them. One of her great projects was called simply 'Conversations for Women.' Fuller believed that women were not considered the intellectual equal of men because they had not been taught how to present themselves as equals in conversation. Most women were socialized to have conversations about trivial things – and then men thought women were trivial. So Fuller held conversations for women in Boston, mostly focused on Greek mythology, beauty, truth, and life's grand questions. She took women's ideas seriously and showed them how to hold their own in conversations about ideas. These conversations were life-changing for many of the women who attended. The women learned to dare to speak. The women learned to say 'I think this is so.'

I would want to talk to Fuller about her vision of equality and her work to make it so and the progress we've made since she wrote her book in 1843. Many of the arbitrary barriers have been thrown down. The fact that I am clergy would have been unimaginable to Fuller. She was the first woman ever allowed to use the library at Harvard College, which is where most Unitarian clergy were trained in those days. Women have made great strides in many other professions as well. I would tell her that women are allowed to own property, that domestic violence is criminalized, and that advances in birth control technologies have allowed people to make choices about parenthood in ways that were not possible 177 years ago when she wrote... and, before she thinks that everything is great, I would name that we are not yet in a world where, 'the divine energy

---

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Popova, 161

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in *Standing before Us*, 25

would pervade nature to a degree unknown in the history of former ages, and that no discordant collision, but a ravishing harmony of the spheres,.. ensue[s].’ There are still pay gaps and sexual assaults and the reality that women, trans folks, and gender nonconforming people have to be careful after dark, have escape plans for first dates, think about self-defense, and be vigilant in the world in ways that most men never have to consider. We have not yet achieved the harmony of the spheres that Fuller envisions but there are many continuing her legacy and working for equity for all.

By this point in our meal together, I would hope to have gained enough of Fuller’s trust to ask her about her love life. For most of her life, Fuller’s romantic energy was focused on unrequited romantic friendships with her intellectual friends, both men and women, including some of her fellow transcendentalists and participants in her *Conversations for Women*. It would be rude to ask too much about this, I know, but I would be really interested in knowing how she understood herself, given the labels that we might use for her, like bisexual or pansexual, were not in use in her day. How did she understand these relationships? Were they intellectual infatuations? Romances? Some other form of relationship? She was so thoughtful about so many things that I trust that her sense of herself would be enlightening... and much of this was intentionally erased. After her death, her friends Ralph Waldo Emerson, James Freeman Clarke, and William Channing published a heavily redacted version of her personal journals, leaving out anything that could tarnish her legacy.

And I would also want to hear about the man she loved and who loved her back, Giovanni Ossoli, an Italian freedom fighter. I would want to hear her tell the story of how they met, as it sounds like something out of romantic fiction. They met on April 1, 1847 while Fuller was working as a foreign correspondent in Rome, covering Italian campaigns for freedom from the Austro-Hungarian Empire. It was Holy Thursday and they were both attending services at St. Peter’s Cathedral, though Fuller was mostly looking at the beautiful building and ignoring the mass. She was so enraptured by the art, that she lost track of her companions in the crowd. She grew flustered and scared. And then Ossoli appeared, took her arm and helped her search for her friends. When they couldn’t find them, he offered to escort her to her lodging and she accepted. They walked together for 45 minutes and a connection formed. She spoke very little Italian and he spoke nearly no English, but nonetheless, they recognized something in each and were brought together. It wasn’t the intellectual debate and kinship that had formed the basis of so many of Margaret’s previous relationships. Ossoli did not know about Margaret’s reputation back home.

One biographer described their early relationship like this, “They began spending time together, first because Ossoli provided an invaluable inside perspective for Fuller’s journalistic work, and then because she sense while with him something arrestingly novel: an attentive presence that seemed to cherish her company not for her mind or accomplishments but simply for who she was.”<sup>4</sup> As someone who was always striving to prove that she was worthy – first to her demanding

---

<sup>4</sup> Popova, 196

father, then to men who doubted her because of her gender – this acceptance must have been a revelation to Fuller.

They quickly fell in love – and within the year Fuller was pregnant. She was in a precarious position, pregnant and unmarried, a foreigner, far from family and friends, in the middle of revolution. I want to hear about that moment, about why she kept her relationship and pregnancy quiet from those she loved back in the states, not mentioning Ossoli or her pregnancy in her letters until after the baby's birth. How must she have worried about her reputation, and consequently her livelihood, if word spread that she was pregnant and unmarried?

At our dinner, I would also love to ask Fuller if she married Ossoli, as the history is inconclusive. We know she refused his marriage proposal at least once, but in the spring of 1848, when she was about five months pregnant, she started using the name Margherita Ossoli on documents, but those documents also listed a false birthdate and that she had Italian citizenship, which she did not possess. No marriage document has ever been found, but such things are often lost in wartime. In her earlier public and private writings, she had criticized marriage, calling it a "corrupt social contract."<sup>5</sup> Whether she married or not, I know she thought carefully about her decision and I would love to know how she made it.

The advances of women over the past two centuries and Fuller's fascinating personal life would make for a very long dinner, so I'm stepping aside from that imaginary dinner party to tell you how the story of Margaret Fuller Ossoli and her family ends. This is not something I would discuss with Fuller at my imaginary dinner party anyway. Fuller had her baby, a little boy that she and Ossoli named Angelo Phillip Eugene Ossoli and called 'Nino.' He was sick a lot, in part because life was getting harder and harder in Rome. The revolution was failing. Fuller had little money and Ossoli was cut off from his family's wealth because of political differences. They struggled and finally decided to go to the United States, where it would be peaceful, they would have support from Fuller's family and friends, and it would be easier for her to earn a living.

They bought the cheapest passage they could find on a rickety ship with an experienced captain that they trusted. Unfortunately, that captain died of smallpox shortly into the journey and the less experienced first mate took over. Because the ship was not equipped with the latest navigation technology and the new captain was not skilled, the ship ran into a hurricane, and sunk just off Fire Island, New York, on July 19, 1850. It was the night before they were to sail into New York Harbor. The seas were too rough for lifeboats and Margaret Fuller and her family drowned. Their bodies were never recovered. Margaret was 40 years old. Upon hearing the news of Fuller's death, Ralph Waldo Emerson sent Henry David Thoreau to the local beaches to see if he could find any of Fuller's writings that might have washed ashore.

I want this story to have a different ending. I long to know what Margaret Fuller could have accomplished had she lived. The Women's suffrage movement began while Fuller was in Italy. How would she have impacted it? Would her powerful writing had helped advance the cause?

---

<sup>5</sup> Popova, 189

How would our faith be different if Margaret took her experience of being loved for who she was and not what she achieved back to conversations with the transcendentalists? How might that have made us as Unitarian Universalists to be a little closer to the Beloved Community that we aspire to be? These questions are impossible to answer, but I do know that Fuller's calls for a more equitable world, a world with all arbitrary barriers thrown down, a world with a more ravishing harmony echo across the generations and are ours to carry forward.

So may we know the story of Margaret Fuller, this ancestor that shaped our faith.

May we remember her not only in telling and retelling her story, but in helping make real what she imagined.

And as we sang earlier, may we 'revere the past but trust the dawning future more; and bid our souls, in search of truth, to adventure boldly and explore.'

May it be so. May we make it so. Amen.