

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York
“Remembering Our Foremothers: Margaret Fuller”

Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore May 14, 2017

Sermon

This morning we will remember one of the great lights of the first wave of American Feminism born at the beginning of the nineteenth century. In their book, *History of Woman Suffrage*, Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton declared, “She possessed more influence on the thought of American women than any woman previous to her time.”

Margaret Fuller was a bright example and role model for women in public and intellectual life who was instrumental preparing the way for women’s suffrage. Here are some of her firsts:

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

First child born to Timothy and Margaret Fuller in 1810, Margaret showed signs of great intellectual promise at the age of three. Noting this, her doting father set up a lesson plan for her that her mother followed during the day while he was tending to his growing law practice. At night she would recite for him what she had learned. Now many parents in those days would encourage this early education but would do so for boys and not girls. At the age of six her father set her to learning Latin so she could memorize passages of Virgil. And Margaret absorbed all the learning she could like a sponge.

Historians have focused on how her father drove her to learn. She spend much of her time with her mother learning to cook and sew too. Her intellect however was so broad that she absorbed not just the content she was reading but it affected her speech. She didn’t sound like a little girl when she spoke which made her social life with other children difficult. Add to that her awkwardness and she had a difficult time making friends. At nine she attended Cambridge Port Private Grammar School that also allowed girls. She quickly became known as “the smart one.” By 10 she had a command of the standard classics in translation and began reading French. At 14 she added Greek and later German.

At the age of fifteen she lived in Cambridge. She stopped attending school and decided to develop her own curriculum with her father’s guidance and Lydia Maria Child’s tutorage. She became friends with luminary Unitarian ministers James Freeman Clarke, Frederic Henry Hedge and Unitarian founder William Ellery Channing for whom she was a reader and translator. Hedge was the key

leader of the famous Transcendentalist Club and likely influenced Margaret to read Goethe and the German Transcendentalists.

From these friendships with men who appreciated her intellect, came the opportunities later to make connections that would advance her.

Margaret was more than her intellect – she had a religious side. At the age of 21 she had a remarkable experience. This was a difficult time in her life as she wasn't having much success in the marriage department and her future was uncertain. She had terrible headaches and experienced mood swings. Her faith had followed Channing's view of Jesus as an example for character development. And then, on Thanksgiving after going to church and hearing a less than inspiring sermon, she stopped and sat by a dark pool in the woods. "Suddenly," she later wrote, "the sun shone out with that transparent sweetness, like the last smile of a dying lover, which it will use when it has been unkind all a cold autumn day." Then she had this powerful experience: "I saw there was no self; that selfishness was all folly, and the result of circumstance; that it was only the idea of the All, and all was mine. This truth came to me, and I received it unhesitatingly: so that I was, for that hour, taken up into God." This kind of direct personal experience prepared her well to embrace Transcendentalism later in life.

The death of her father when she was 25 came as a big financial shock for her family. He had a law practice and had served in both the Massachusetts legislature and as a congressman in Washington DC. You might think that would have set him up financially. Not in those days. Now the head of the household, Margaret needed to go out and find work.

It wasn't long after this that Margaret had her first visit with Ralph Waldo Emerson at his home in Concord beginning a lifelong friendship. At this point Margaret had written a few articles, one about Goethe that might have gotten Emerson's attention.

It was there that she met Bronson Alcott. He invited her to replace Elizabeth Peabody to teach at his innovative Temple School. From there she landed a well-paying teaching position at the Green Street School in Providence Rhode Island. It was at this school she began to shine as a teacher. This job helped get her three brothers through Harvard.

Appreciation for her skills and brilliance got her teaching outside the school. She started teaching German literature in Providence. Later she would offer classes in Greek mythology and private literature classes in Boston. Then in 1839, in Elizabeth Peabody's book store in Boston she began to offer conversations for women which she continued for about five years. Participants were the who's who of Boston blue-stockings including Lidian Emerson, Sarah Ripley, Lydia Maria Child, and the Peabody sisters. The seeds of American Feminism were planted here. The conversations also launched Margaret as a Transcendentalist leader.

The next big break for Margaret was the editorship of the Dial, the journal of the Transcendentalists, a position she held for two years. It gave her wide exposure to the innovative Transcendentalist writers and thinkers. She was the first woman invited to participate in the Transcendentalist Club. The next several years had her circulating in this community and out to stay at the utopian community Brook Farm.

It is during 1842, being a single woman surrounded by married friends she did a lot of reflection on marriage, sex and gender roles. Out of this came her article for the Dial in 1843 titled, "The Great Lawsuit: Man vs. Men and Woman vs. Women." She expanded this article into her book *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* published in 1845. In it she argued that the egalitarian ideals of the American Revolution had yet to extend to women and people of color. Freedom is a human right for all people. She rejected the ideology that men and women had separate spheres of influence. She praised the Abolitionists who were the first to treat women as equals in a political movement. Her article was so popular that Horace Greeley published a section of it in the New-York Daily Tribune, a paper with wide readership.

Margaret had the opportunity to travel with the Clarke family west to Illinois and Wisconsin and experience the American wilderness. While she was taken with the natural beauty she saw, she also had the opportunity to witness the displacement of indigenous people and became deeply troubled by the "the plight of the Indian." She took time to visit their villages and get to know them, adopting their cause. She published a book titled *Summer on the Lakes* about her journey. This book further promoted her concerns but also greatly increased her readership.

Horace Greeley had been watching her literary ascent and offered her a position writing for his paper. Margaret stayed in their household as she got established in New York. Quickly she became a top critic of literature, drama, and social conditions. Greeley gave her a salary equivalent to a man and often put her work on the front page of the paper.

Her concern about the plight of the Indian grew into a strong concern for social justice. She visited the female prison at Sing Sing, meeting the prisoners, especially prostitutes, and writing about their conditions and stories. She wrote anti-slavery tracts, wrote sympathetically about the Irish, and denounced the War with Mexico.

When the opportunity arose to travel with friends to Europe she funded her travels as the Tribune's foreign correspondent. She sent back articles on art, music, literary figures, social life and also dispatches on poverty and social conditions. She traveled to England, Scotland and Paris meeting with the luminaries of the day like George Sand, Carlyle and Wordsworth. One important person she met was the Italian revolutionary Giuseppe Mazzini. He turned her interest to Italy which she visited, carrying secret letters for him. She settled in Rome enjoying the lack of racism and misogyny she had experienced back home. It was there that she met Marquess Giovanni Angelo Ossoli. The two became romantically involved. It didn't take long for Margaret to be pregnant and gave birth to their child Angelo whom they called "Nino." There is some doubt about whether they had been married at the time but they did claim to have married before the child was born.

Having married a revolutionary, she became very involved in the Italian revolution and writing its history. She reported about the revolution with dispatches to the Tribune from the front lines but also worked in the battlefield hospital. The revolutionaries took Rome but were ousted by the French. The two of them fled to where their son was being cared for then lived as a family in Florence. I imagine this was a happy time for her.

Publishing her history of the Italian Revolution required a return trip to America. The family arranged the trip but Margaret had a sense of foreboding. Something wasn't right but she didn't know what it was. The Ossolis traveled to New York on the steamer Elizabeth. It was a difficult

voyage with the captain dying of cholera. The boat was shipwrecked off Fire Island not far from the beach on a sand bar. It took twelve hours to sink while those on the beach looted the cargo and didn't assist. Some did survive but the family perished.

Emerson sent Thoreau to see if he could recover their bodies. The only one he found was Nino. He wrote to Emerson:

The ship struck at ten minutes after four A.M., and all hands, being mostly in their nightclothes, made haste to the forecandle, the water coming in at once. There they remained; the passengers in the forecandle, the crew above it, doing what they could. Every wave lifted the forecandle roof and washed over those within. The first man got ashore at nine; many from nine to noon. At flood-tide, about half past three o'clock, when the ship broke up entirely, they came out of the forecandle, and Margaret sat with her back to the foremast, with her hands on her knees, her husband and child already drowned. A great wave came and washed her aft. The steward had just before taken her child and started for shore. Both were drowned.

Margaret's death was a great tragedy. At 40 she had so much yet to contribute. Her death led to the publishing of her memoirs by Emerson, Clark and Ellery Channing and biographies by her contemporaries.

For us she is an example of what one person can do to shake off the shackles of society and live boldly. Not just an example for women but someone who cared passionately for justice. She opened a path for the women who followed her to fight for their rights. Though not a glamorous woman, not someone graced with sociability or very humble (Emerson reports her saying: I now know all the people worth knowing in America, and I find no intellect comparable to my own) she created the life she wanted to live. And she did it while also tending to the needs of her brothers, and mother after her father died suddenly. She was an historical example of what we can still aspire to today.

As her body was never recovered, her family erected a cenotaph to Margaret's memory at Mount Auburn Cemetery. They chose these words there inscribed to honor her memory:

“Born a child of New England,
By adoption a citizen of Rome,
By genius belonging to the World.”

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Visit www.margaretfuller.org for more information and links. Very helpful source.