

IN BODY AND SPIRIT: Margaret Fuller's Legacy for Us

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In the Gospel of Thomas, saying 70, Jesus says, "If you bring forth what is within you, what you have will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you."¹

What makes a person great? What shapes the kind of person who will act boldly for justice? What enables a person to bring forth that which is within them to save themselves and the world?

Marianne Williamson suggests this capacity is in all of us.

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. ... We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. ... We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone.

One of the uses of history is to provide us with role models. The role models who most inspire me are people who struggled against considerable odds to become great. In entering their stories, we can gain insight on our own challenges. We might even receive moments of grace that enable us to let our own greatness emerge more powerfully.

Margaret Fuller has that sort of effect on people, which is why there are a growing number of people who call themselves Fullerenes, or some similar term, women and men who find such resonance with this woman born 200 years ago that they are gripped with the desire to discover more of her insights and learn more about her incredible short life.

I must confess to having recently become one of these people. Part of what fascinates me about Margaret is the questions she raises for me about my own life. She challenges me to respond to questions like:

- How do we turn the difficulties we encounter in life into opportunities for growth?
- How do we know we have something important to contribute to the world?
- How do we find the courage and support to bring forth what is within us to create?

¹ Translated by Elaine Pagels, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/story/thomas.html>

Barry Andrews, UU minister and editor of a new book of Margaret Fuller's writings, describes her as a "religious radical, avant-garde cultural critic, feminist, progressive social theorist, investigative journalist, war correspondent [and] public intellectual"²—and he left out educator. Any one or two of these would have made her an important person.

But she did all this in a short life of only 40 years, in a society where women had almost no rights, where her access to education—and even to libraries—was limited, and where she had to struggle with difficult economic circumstances.

On the plus side, she was born in Cambridge, Massachusetts, into an educated although not wealthy family. Her father home schooled her, guiding her in a strict classical education, and her mother taught her to appreciate the beauty of nature. Her friendship circle included many of the luminaries of the day, like famous Unitarian ministers and early American writers and thinkers.

Her accomplishments are impressive for anyone in the first half of the 19th century. She wrote and published five books, and nearly 350 articles, poems, and essays. She influenced many women of her day by encouraging them to think and articulate their ideas through her famous Conversations. She helped launch the Transcendentalist movement by serving as the first editor of their journal, *The Dial*. She articulated the need for gender equality in an article in that journal and later developed it into the best-selling book, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, which became the Bible of the women's suffrage movement. Then she moved to New York to become the first literary editor of a major metropolitan US newspaper and later went to Europe as America's first major foreign correspondent.

Her tragic death in a shipwreck off Long Island, New York, ended her life, but not her influence. As of the beginning of the 20th century, she was still one of the best known and read women in America, and now another century later, she is coming back into prominence through this Bicentennial.

I hope that's enough biography to whet your interest in learning more, because what I want to focus on today is her inner journey, how she came to know who she was and what she could contribute to the world.

When she was in her early thirties, Margaret Fuller looked back at her life and remembered something she realized as a child:

I had stopped myself one day on the stairs, and asked, how I came to be here? How is it that I seem to be this Margaret Fuller? What does it mean? What shall I do about it?³

² Barry Andrews, *The Spirit Leads: Margaret Fuller in Her Own Words*, ix.

³ Margaret Fuller, in a letter to Jane Tuckerman, *Memoirs I*, 139-41.

She remembered asking herself these questions during a mystical experience she had when she was 21. It was Thanksgiving and she had gone to church to please her father, but like so many young adults did not relate to the service. She was struggling with a disappointing relationship and could not accept the smiling people and the benevolent God being preached. As soon as the service was over, she ran into the fields, walking for miles in the barren late fall New England landscape, where she had a vision that stuck with her for the rest of her life.

First she stops at a stream she describes as "shrunken, voiceless, choked with withered leaves." Pretty much how she was feeling, I imagine. "I marveled that it did not lose itself in the earth," she wrote to a friend. Continuing on her walk, she came to a pool surrounded by thick trees. Here's where things began to change.

Suddenly the sun shown 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. And, even then, passed into my thought a beam from its true sun, from its native sphere, which has never since departed from me.⁴

Then she remembers the questions she asked herself as a child about who she was. She reflects that she "saw how long it must be before the soul can learn to act under [the] limitations of time and space and human nature." And then she recognizes something about the soul: "I saw, also, that it *must* do it." She understood that the soul must learn to act in spite of it all, and "that it must make all this false true,--and sow new and immortal plants in the garden of God."⁵ Reminds me of that Indigo Girls song: "How long till my soul gets it right? Can any human being ever reach that kind of light?"⁶

Throughout her life, Margaret Fuller reached and kept reaching. She was spurred on this quest by visions like this one and others she had during her life. Usually these visions came at times of disappointment, conflict and confusion, when she could have easily given up. Over time, she learned that difficulties often led to new insights and growth.

For several years when she was in her 20s, her family moved away from their exciting urban life in Cambridge out to a farm in the country. As an unmarried woman, she was required to go with them. She hated the isolation and resented having to leave her friends, but she came to appreciate all she learned in those years. As she reflected back a few years later

There ... in solitude the mind acquired more power of concentration and discerned the beauty of a stricter method. There the heart was awakened to sympathize with the ignorant, ... and hope for the seemingly worthless, for a need was felt of realizing the only reality, the divine soul of the visible

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Emily Ann Saliers, "Galileo"

creation, ... which cannot permit evil to be permanent or its aim of beauty to be eventually frustrated in the smallest particular.⁷

She came to consider her time of isolation on the farm as her graduate school. There she delved deeply into the study of German writers, particularly Goethe. And there she wrote her first essays for publication. This is also where she was first paid as a teacher of children other than her family. Teaching and writing became her dual career.

At first she wrote commentary on other authors and ideas, and then on the art and music she experienced in Boston. Before long, though, she turned to writing about what she experienced most directly in her life—the inferior status of women. Although alluded to in other essays and articles, she confronted the issue head on in her ground-breaking essay in *The Dial*.

From our perspective in the early 21st century, it's very difficult for us to understand the enormity of what it meant for her to question the gender norms of her day a mere half century after the formation of this country. Biographer Bell Chevigny asserts: "To conceive of women differently was tantamount ... to challenging the assumptions on which the nation was built."⁸ To say nothing of the religious assumptions of the Christianity, even the Unitarianism, of the day.

To do this, Bell Chevigny continues: "She had to create a way of life that was not yet possible and a self whose nature was without local example."⁹ (repeat) Mahatma Ghandi said something similar in these often quoted words: "You must be the change you wish to see in the world." What amazes me is how someone like Margaret Fuller could do this two centuries ago.

Fortunately, she was not the only woman on this journey at the time. Other women were awakening to the limitations of their proscribed roles. Margaret Fuller's deep friendships with both women and men and her *Conversations with women* helped shape her new ideas. Later she met women in Europe who were living radically different lives from the norms she grew up with.

Still, she was the one who articulated a new vision for the relationship between men and women. "A new manifestation is at hand," she declared, envisioning a time when women and men would share equally in all aspects of life. Perhaps her most radical new idea, though, was that she based her rationale for equality on an understanding of male and female as fluid forms, something we are just now coming more fully to comprehend. Here's how she put it:

Male and female represent two sides of the great radical dualism. But in fact they are perpetually passing into one another. Fluid hardens to solid, solid

⁷ MF to Richard Fuller, Aug. 11, 1842.

⁸ Bell Chevigny, *The Woman and the Myth*, 5-6.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

rushes to fluid. There is no wholly masculine man, no purely feminine woman.¹⁰

Margaret Fuller wrote that she enjoyed being a woman, but constantly felt restricted by the role of woman. When she spoke or wrote intelligently she was often complimented as having a masculine mind. Her goal for herself and for society was to integrate the two, so that women would be free “as a nature to grow, as an intellect to discern, as a soul to live freely and unimpeded, to unfold such powers as were given her.”¹¹

In 1844 she went to a country home near the Hudson River in New York to develop her *Dial* essay into the book *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*. While at work on that project, she learned there was a prison housing women criminals nearby. Ever on the lookout to learn more, she accepted an invitation to visit women inmates in Sing Sing prison.

Meeting these women, most of whom had been either prostitutes or thieves, blew her theories about proper female behavior wide open. To her surprise she discovered much similarity in her conversations with the prisoners and her cohorts in Boston. John Matteson writes: “Fuller saw womankind as indivisible, not only in a social sense, but also in a spiritual one.”¹² She appealed to women of means to recognize their connection with all women and to establish more just relationships across class lines.

Although she was concerned with women’s spiritual development, she did not separate the spirit from the body or from women’s physical and social conditions. As we have come to realize today, the social is the spiritual and the personal is political.

She once wrote: “Early on I knew that the only object in life was to grow.” And she did continue to grow throughout her life. Each new circumstance and experience widened her vision and expanded her understanding of the meaning of life and the depths of her soul.

Her travels to the Great Lakes in 1843 brought her into contact with the difficulties of frontier life for the immigrants there and with the devastation westward expansion had on indigenous peoples. Originally planning to write a travel journal, her book *Summer on the Lakes* became more a critique of life in what was then understood by those on the east coast as “the west.” Increasingly she considered the implications of economics as formative for social values and relationships. Her later experiences in New York City and urban areas of England, Scotland, and Europe, awakened her prophetic voice in advocacy for better conditions for working and poor people.

¹⁰ MF, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² John Matteson, “Woes ... of which we know nothing”: Fuller and the Problem of Feminine Virtue,” Mass. Historical Society conference, April 9, 2010.

She was one of the early holistic thinkers. Just as she understood male and female as in fluid relationship, she also understood body and spirit as inseparable. One could not expect people to develop spiritually if their bodies were suffering from deprivation. Nor could any people develop when some were being denied basic necessities of life.

Her columns in the New-York Tribune raised the consciousness of the American people about the conditions of a broad range of people, including prisoners and those living in poverty, both at home and abroad. She became increasingly alarmed at inequities, especially those resulting from industrialization. And she spoke out for the rights the oppressed in all circumstances.

Her goal was to encourage and inspire the establishment of what she understood as true democracy, which would enable every person to develop their gifts and become contributing members of society. She increasingly sought to shift public attention from the self-reliant individual to the just society, from the reformation of the self to the reform of society as a whole.¹³

It might seem as if she were moving away from the self-culture promoted by the Transcendentalists, but in a sense she was simply taking it a step further by shifting the application of the principles of transformation from self to society. In her commentary on Ralph Waldo Emerson's essays, she notes that the responsibility of the writer is "to admonish the community ... and arouse it to nobler energy."¹⁴ I would say this is precisely the role of ministry and of our prophetic communities of faith.

My goal in sharing this story with you about the evolution of Margaret Fuller's life and work is to inspire you to examine your own life. How is it with your soul? Are you doing the work you were meant to do? Are you following your own path in life, or are you stuck in someone else's notion of who you are?

Margaret Fuller had to fight long and hard to be herself, to carve out her own way in the world. It may seem like we have it easier these days. We don't have the same limitations due to gender restrictions, but prejudice and oppression still challenge many of us.

Margaret Fuller believed society should be directed by "the divine obligation of love and mutual aid between human beings."¹⁵ It is up to us to continue to work together to bring that vision into reality. In so doing, her legacy continues through us, as we continue the process of creating greater justice and equity in our world. May it be so.

¹³ Jeffrey Steele, *Sympathy and Prophecy: The Two Faces of Social Justice in Fuller's New York Writing*, Mass. Historical Society conference, April 10, 2010, 2.

¹⁴ MF, "Emerson's Essays," NY Tribune, Dec. 4, 1844.

¹⁵ MF, "Caroline," NY Tribune, April 9, 1846.