“Nothing But the Truth Will Do”
The First Feminist—Margaret Fuller, Unitarian

— a sermon by Jaco B. ten Hove —
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[Follows RESPONSIVE READING #575. “*A New Manifestation*” by M. Fuller]

INTRO TO SONG #212 (*We Are Dancing Sarah’s Circle*)

The piece you just read together was written over 150 years ago and is a small example of the influential power contained in the work—and the story—of Margaret Fuller, Unitarian intellectual pioneer and arguably the first American feminist. I shall tell more of wherefrom and how such innovative thought derives in a minute, but first, let us sing a song—#212—that also invokes, to my mind, similar inclusive power.

Contemporary Unitarian Universalist Carole A. Etzler put a new set of words to the African American spiritual of struggle toward liberation, shown on the page prior, #211. This song, *We Are Dancing Sarah’s Circle,* is also pertinent because the full name of our featured character today is *Sarah* Margaret Fuller. #212…

There is a small group of people in our time who have shown a devotion to the seeking, finding and naming of the history embodied by Sarah Margaret Fuller's life, which ended tragically exactly halfway through the 19th century, when she was only 40 years old. It is a story worth telling, as I shall do in a small way today, after which you may be as affected by her courage and trail-blazing as I have been.

I sense that there is a finite amount of material with which these historians work; Margaret Fuller was not nearly as prolific a writer as some of her Boston area compatriots in this very notable Transcendentalist era, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson (the Unitarian minister, who also lived almost twice as many years as she did). Furthermore, as you shall see, a major and almost finished manuscript of hers was completely lost the same time she was.

But her Unitarian connections and culture are significant factors in this story, so I think it behooves us, especially the women among us, to know how much she represents our religious heritage, how much we today reflect the liberating trail she helped blaze.

Earlier this year, Barbara preached on “Finding Your Voice,” and urged us to articulate our own authenticity. That is the essence of Margaret Fuller’s story: she endeavored to do her own naming and speak her truth over 150 years ago, when it was not at all proper for women to have—let alone give voice to an intellectual life.

Despite the ridicule and barriers that confronted her, she did not succumb to bitterness toward the dominant male culture she critiqued. In fact—as portrayed in the reading— she envisioned a “new manifestation” that would bring a “fair share” liberation to men as well. Margaret Fuller may still be ahead of her time in that respect.

Your 21st century UU identity is indelibly linked to this stirring character in our denominational drama of the first half of the 19th century. Join me now on a journey back to that formative time—and even earlier, to find out that her grandfather, Timothy Fuller, was a Harvard-educated minister, who went to Philadelphia as a delegate to the Constitutional Convention in 1787. There, he added to an already controversial image by refusing to ratify the Constitution because it condoned slavery.

His oldest son, Timothy Jr., also at Harvard, and also a bit of a gadfly, prepared for his law career by leading student protests, including one

against the saying of grace before meals. In religious conversations he dared to affirm a unitarian theology at a time when to do so was asking for trouble from the majority of trinitarian Congregationalists. And he was an abolitionist among offspring of Boston businessmen who profited from the slave trade. But his leadership skills were noticed and he was elected to both the Massachusetts Senate and the US Congress.

Into such a free-thinking but prominent family did Sarah Margaret Fuller arrive in 1810, born in Cambridgeport, just across the Charles River from Boston, to Timothy, Jr., and Margarett Crane Fuller, who very much overshadowed by her husband, as was common in that day. She was an even-tempered spouse, a well-read and independent-thinking Unitarian, but she cheerfully accepted her role as consort to an overprotective and domineering man. He displayed tendencies we today might label compulsive, and as was also not unusual in that era, Margarett Crane Fuller knew how to agree to her husband’s demands and then quietly go about her own way, especially as the number of their children grew.

Sarah Margaret was the first of these children, followed shortly by another daughter, Julia, who died suddenly a couple years later. This not only deprived young Margaret of a female sibling close to her in age, but it left

her as the primary object of her father's concerted and considerable attention.

Margaret's next sibling was five years younger and male, a significant gap. The other seven children to come would be even farther away in age, so she would never have the comfort of a peer sister with whom she could navigate the dangerous channels of childhood and adolescence. Furthermore, her father had strong intentions for her education, which he began to accelerate when Margaret was three years old, around the time of her younger sister's death.

Soon after her sixth birthday, she was reciting Latin passages from Virgil by memory to her father after his evening tea. He pushed her for perfection in her studies, keeping her up beyond a child's normal bedtime, and the strain of it all created early nightmares about violent Greek wars and the horrors of Hades. (She was to have bouts of sleep-walking and nightmares until adulthood, and the excruciating headaches that began at this time never left her.)

More intense schooling followed, as Timothy Fuller continued to lead his eldest daughter into realms of education few girls knew. She absorbed the lessons to a remarkable degree, building an impressive breadth of

comprehension, but she was also awkward and shy among her peers, understanding the language of Shakespeare and Plutarch better than that of the neighborhood. She withdrew into herself and her reading more and more. She developed a habit of squinting.

Finally, her father took off his blinders and began to see the effect of all this on his prodigy. He had never really expected her to follow other than the normal path for women of that era, i.e., marriage and household duties, but he had wanted his daughter to be intelligent in her roles. Now he realized that she was fast heading toward a posture that would not be so attractive to the young men of Massachusetts, i.e., she was already smarter than most of them. So, with typical intensity, he suddenly changed course.

Her father's compulsive tendencies had given Margaret a start in life that was extreme and extremely unusual, but now in her 14th year she was pulled away from all that intellectual education and sent off, under protest, to finishing school: Miss Prescott's School for Young Ladies. Twenty years later, Margaret would write a fictional account of a girl at boarding school who suffers a transformative head injury. It would not be farfetched to say that the real life experience did, in fact, turn her head around.

The abrupt switch in education styles made her psychically dizzy and she was not very receptive to the proper postures society required of a lady, such as "modesty and deportment and female propriety." She was more accustomed to seeking the *truth* of the matter, as held by logic and history and comparative literature. Even this early in her maturation, there seemed to her to be a supreme moral ethic in the cultivation of the intellect, demanding an unceasing authenticity of purpose.

Nevertheless, she obeyed her father and left Miss Prescott’s School with somewhat more refined edges. However, one critical side effect of these contradictory educations—intellectual and social—was to discourage the expression of Margaret's emotional life, which bubbled under the surface, repressed. There were fierce inner frictions caused by the imposition of a pair of such widely divergent disciplines.

Years later, Margaret would invent two separate fictional characters, both very intelligent, but one with a dominant emotional need who dies of a broken heart. The other is a paragon of genderless intellect, happy and fulfilled, but emotionally vacant, described by a later scholar as a “Transcendental nun.” These seem to be the two poles of Margaret's own existence: a gifted intellect dancing with an unruly heart. Her lifelong

struggle was to integrate them, but she had no positive role model to offer a pathway out of the inner conflict.

The ambition that had emerged for her, despite instruction from the School for Young Ladies, was for "a life of letters," but it also had no precedent. All that was open to her in the culture around Boston were the traditional fields of marriage and raising children, teaching children in a school, or hiring out as a governess for other people's children, or maybe nursing. "A life of letters" had no precedent among women. Even among men of that time a literary career was usually combined with a more lucrative or practical occupation, such as law or higher education. But she set her mind to it nonetheless, in the face of vast societal and familial disapproval.

At least now, at age 16, she was able to pursue her own studies, which she did with typical, perhaps inherited resolve. Her appetite for learning was voracious, and much of it she directed herself, since there were no formal courses for women beyond the basics. The previous two decades had seen some growth in women's education, but it was only at elementary levels and still largely for ornamental reasons.

Meanwhile, in her late teens a curious development occurred. Despite Margaret's previous shyness and her questionable manners in groups,

whenever people—especially other young people—met her one-on-one, they now often took a strong liking to her. They were drawn in by her wit, and then such was her receptiveness to them that they invariably ended up disclosing much personal experience to her, binding them in authentic friendship.

Margaret prized integrity even over intellect and was able to evoke it in her friends, who felt larger for the relationship. This was a quality of her growing genius and would soon lead to one of her most innovative contributions, on a much larger scale.

After her stint at the School for Young Ladies and now back in the family fold for a few years, Margaret pursued her studies and contributed dutifully around the house as she moved into her twenties. She started writing articles for various Unitarian and other periodicals and began composing a biography of her German hero, the romantic philosopher Goethe. She also began to write about new books in a way that was more substantial than any previous reviews, most of which were fluff. There were no standards for literary criticism, so she invoked her own.

But the cost of her unequivocally intellectual stance in public was high; she was ridiculed as arrogant and unseemly. Her suppressed emotional side

was unjustly characterized in gossip and innuendo. She suffered bouts of depression and those awful headaches. Yet her temperament remained friendly and once people got to know her they invariably set aside all stereotyped images and grew fond of her, enjoying her company thoroughly. She was welcome in many homes throughout New England.

Family financial difficulties ensued upon the death of her father and she had to give up a much-desired trip to Europe in order to care for her mother and siblings, which she always handled responsibly. On one escape from that obligatory realm, in 1836, she finally got to meet up with Ralph Waldo Emerson, seven years her senior, who became the most important influence on her life after her father. She retreated regularly to his Concord home, browsing in his expansive library and engaging him in challenging discussions.

While visiting at Emerson's Margaret met another significant Unitarian Transcendentalist, Bronson Alcott, a radical innovator in children's education (and father to Louisa May Alcott). Bronson saw an ally in Margaret and hired her to help him in his radical teaching method, which was conversational. By asking open-ended questions, he encouraged children to express their spark of divinity freely, with no topic banned.

This approach was an expression of the Transcendentalist philosophy: that divinity pervades all nature, including humanity, and can be experienced directly by any individual, of any age.

Alcott's controversial Temple School had a short run, 1834-36, before it was forcefully disbanded by angry citizens who insisted on traditional recite-by-rote methods of education—but it confirmed for Margaret the power of conversation as an educational tool.

Soon, an informal "Transcendentalist Club" formed, meeting irregularly at a Boston bookstore run by another strong Unitarian woman, Elizabeth Peabody. At these gatherings, prominent, young, free-thinking Unitarians, including Emerson, explored new and controversial religious turf together in dialogue.

Margaret moved to the center of this activity whenever she was there. Emerson declared that her conversation was simply the most entertaining in America. That women were included in these gatherings was itself a radical step.

Around this time Margaret also wrote for and edited a very noteworthy Transcendentalist journal, called *The Dial,* which gave a published voice

to the thoughts of Club members. For almost three years she coaxed articles and poems from reluctant writers, rejected unsuitable material, and wrote much of the *Dial's* content herself.

Margaret was now firmly convinced by her own experience that women were hungry for and capable of more than merely decorative knowledge, despite strict gender conventions of the day. She fiercely observed that

> *Men are called on, from a very early period, to reproduce all that they learn. Their college studies, the first actions of life in any direction, call on them to put to use what they have learned. But women learn… only for purposes of display.*

However, in the women all around her she felt a desire for learning that could then be applied to some purpose, and she was moved to address this need. So in the fall of 1839 at the age of 29 she offered the first in a series of 12-week courses designed specifically for women. They were called, appropriately enough, "Conversations," which described the method used.

Her intellectual leadership was direct, but her presence evocative. She was there…

> *…to provoke the thought of others,*

and that is what happened for 200 women over the next four years, in a strikingly original educational concept. She believed that the development of one's intellect was a moral imperative and this value pervaded the Conversations. Margaret provided opportunities that reflected the Transcendentalist emphasis on self-culture. Later she would write:

> *Very early I knew that the only object in life was to grow.*

So she forged off into conversations with her sisters to invent ways of building their self-cultures. Margaret aimed her courses at advancing important philosophical principles *and* at radically affecting the context of women's culture. She would not only help women systematize thought in general, but then define the objects of that thought…

> *…to ascertain what pursuits are best suited to us in our time and state of society, and how we may make the best use of our means of building up the life of thought upon the life of action.*

This combination of intents had never before been attempted, let alone successfully accomplished by a group of women, as it was here. A generation of Boston women expanded their horizons and never looked back.

For the Transcendentalists, ethical, aesthetic, spiritual development was a value in life at least equal in practicality to business and politics. For example, the abolition of slavery was perhaps the most driving issue of the day in which the life of thought could be built up upon the life of action, and vice versa. Women were beginning to take significant lead roles in this movement.

During the years of her Conversations and other activity at the heart of the Transcendentalist movement, Margaret wrote a very provocative article for *The Dial* magazine, titled, "The Great Lawsuit: Man vs. Men, Woman vs. Women." It was, in one scholar's estimation, "the most radical feminist document yet produced in America" [P. Blanchard].

In this essay, Margaret declares that all souls are equal in *this* world, including Negroes and Indians, and women.

> *We would have every arbitrary barrier thrown down. We would have every path laid open to women as freely as to men.*

In writing here she gives voice to the bitter disillusionment she felt, as friend after female friend shared horrific tales of contrast between the

freedom they could experience for two hours a week at her Conversations and the wretchedly limited life they had waiting for them at home.

She herself knew only too well the social censure and ridicule that awaited any woman who stepped out of line. Her writing style in "The Great Lawsuit" is a bit uneven, as usual, but nonetheless forceful, also as usual. Her residence at the heart of Transcendentalism allowed her to strike there as well, challenging those liberal men of liberal ideals and ideas to follow the logical flow of their own thought toward the emancipation of their wives and daughters. Ha!

With this provocative essay, Margaret was now firmly in public view, and the snide comments about her grew to a deafening roar, but she was intellectually secure in her own circle and in her own passion for the *truth* of the matter. She was less secure in her other passions, however, and continued to suffer from a heartfelt loneliness. The few flings at romance that came her way she doused with her own confused instincts for distancing.

She kept outsiders at bay with an odious air of pompous intellectual vanity. But inside she was more and more aware of the void of outlets for her emotional needs. Now in her thirties, she was an oddity in Boston society:

independent. She went on a tour of what was still called the American Northwest: in and around Chicago and Milwaukee, and put together her reflections in a book, called *Summer on the Lakes.*

As she wandered among the Great Lakes people, ever on the lookout for the truth of a culture, she began to realize the tragedy that was befalling the American Indian and, not surprisingly, took sad note of the hard lot of the women in that besieged culture.

> *They inherit submission.*

On her return route she came through New York City and renewed an acquaintance with Horace Greeley, editor of the crusading newspaper *The New York Tribune* and a professional journalist who respected her writing. He suggested that she expand "The Great Lawsuit" into a book, which she then set out to do. Greeley also offered her a job on the *Tribune* staff, which she accepted. She moved to New York in 1944 with manuscript in hand. It was titled, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century.*

As she proceeded very ably to pioneer the journalistic field of literary criticism (Edgar Allan Poe was the only other such reviewer of this time), the shock waves from her book were felt. In it she elaborated on many of

the same stances as were outlined in "The Great Lawsuit," hitting hard at the male-dominated system, and aiming at not only equal consideration, but equal participation for women.

> *Those who think the physical circumstances of Woman would make a part in the affairs of government unsuitable, are by no means those who think it impossible for negresses to endure field-work, even during pregnancy, or for (seamstresses) to go through their killing labors.*

She anchored her message with the Transcendentalist theme of self-reliance by encouraging all women to form their own images of themselves on the basis of inner standards, not through the dominant, oppressive view of men.

This is 1845, remember, and Margaret Fuller was not parroting anyone else's material. Her work is full of startlingly original assertions, many of which found their way into later feminist thinking.

But perhaps her greatest insight, anticipating much modern thought, was about the masculine and feminine principles that *both* reside in *all* of us to differing degrees. In this she may have been reflecting the

Transcendentalist openness to Chinese philosophy, as in the balance of Yin and Yang and the intimate relation of opposites.

> *Male and female represent the two sides of the great radical dualism. But, in fact, they are perpetually passing into one another. Fluid hardens to solid, solid rushed to fluid. There is no wholly masculine man, no purely feminine woman.*

In this book, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century,* which had the quality of a feminist manifesto, Margaret intuitively described how the proper emancipation of women will require a redefinition of all gender roles in order to make possible…

> *…a harmony of common growth.*

For members of each gender, fulfillment is somehow more than the sum total of the feminine and masculine principles. But her primary focus was, of course Woman in the Nineteenth Century and she set forth a demanding vision of no barriers to the full development of Woman's nature, her self-culture. She also included especially persuasive passages about the evils of prostitution (which result from an unjust double standard in sexual affairs) and about the need for total vocational freedom for women.

Margaret Fuller's courageous presentation of *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* created a predictable storm of controversy and ridicule, but its author was not in a mood to look back or be discouraged from her own development.

She left New York but never returned to Boston, traveling instead to Europe and finally, to the almost ultimate satisfaction of her soul, to Italy. It is there, among the expressive Italians, that Margaret felt most socially comfortable and there that she got the clearest, if most critical view of her own country's democracy through the lens of the Roman revolution for democracy. She sent back regular reports to the *Tribune* and an eager readership.

Soon Margaret fell in love with an Italian named Giovanni Angelo Ossoli and bore a son. She was one of the only non-Italians staying in Rome during the actual overthrow of a corrupt government and the installation of a short-lived republic. Motherhood and Italy agreed with her, but the family decided to leave dangerous Italy and move to the States.

Only it is not a safer trip at all: father, baby son and mother, aged 40, all perish in rough seas only 50 yards off the shore of Fire Island, New York.

Also lost was the manuscript of her book describing firsthand the revolution in Italy.

Shortly thereafter, Emerson helped edit Margaret Fuller's *Memoirs,* and the body of work about her, including a series of biographies, began its curious journey toward today. Most people… most Unitarian Universalists… most *women* are unaware of the contributions and sacrifices this lone pioneer made decades before the suffragette movement galvanized women's rights advocates into concerted action.

But leaders of that time, like Elizabeth Cady Stanton (who was only five years younger than Fuller but lived a long life, into the 20th century), acknowledged that Margaret Fuller showed them, among other things, how to organize a women's circle: sharing wisdom, conversation and growing power.

The struggles of Margaret's life—the depressing social loneliness of a gifted woman and the blockades to her genius thrown up by a society viciously resistant to change—these themes recur among us still, begging for resolution in an ever-evolving consciousness.

As a model to us, Margaret Fuller's passionate commitment to personal integrity and the hopeful realization of her own design, her human wholeness, might be summed up in one word: TRUTH. Perhaps such truth *will* set us free.

Her *Memoirs* contain this passage:

In the Chamber
of death, I prayed
in very early years,
"give me truth;
cheat me by no illusion."

O, the granting
of this prayer is
sometimes terrible to me!
I walk over the
burning ploughshares,
and they sear
my feet. Yet nothing but
the truth will do.

The life and story of Margaret Fuller inspires us to embody anew the manifestation of authentic possibility, honoring and living out our increasing heritage, and animating generations to come with a Faith of the Larger Liberty—which is the noble title of Hymn #287. I invite you to sing this now, perhaps with greater appreciation for its stirring message.
#287…

Sources drawn upon for this sermon:

1. Paula Blanchard. *MARGARET FULLER: From Transcendentalism to Revolution.* New York: Delacorte Press/Seymour Lawrence, 1978.

2. Charles Capper. “Margaret Fuller as Cultural Reformer; The Conversations in Boston.” American Quarterly, Vol. 39, No. 4 (Winter, 1987), pp. 509-528.

3. David M. Robinson. “Margaret Fuller and the Transcendental Ethos: *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*.” *PMLA*, Vol. 97, No. 1 (Jan., 1982), pp. 83-98 (Proceedings of the Modern Language Association of America).

4. Bell Gale Chevigny. “To the Edges of Ideology: Margaret Fuller’s Centrifugal Evolution.” American Quarterly, Vol. 38, No. 2, 173-201. Summer, 1986.

5. Paula Blanchard. “*Corinne* and the ‘Yankee Corinna’: Madame de Staël and Margaret Fuller.” Chapter 4 of *Woman as Mediatrix: Essays on Nineteenth-Century European Women Writers. Vol 10,* Avriel H. Goldberger, ed. New York: Greenwood Press, 1987.

6. David Robinson. *The Unitarians and the Universalists*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1985.

7. Joan Goodwin. “Margaret Fuller.” *The Dictionary of Unitarian and Universalist Biography*, UU Historical Society (www25.uua.org/uuhs/duub/articles/margaretfuller)

CALL TO WORSHIP (4/22/07)

I add my welcome…

It *is* a beautiful morning today, and spring looks like it's really going to be with us to stay now. We are gloriously present to this welcome seasonal shift, and I invite you to take a big deep breath or two with me to more fully arrive and settle into your seat, your body, your being.

We appreciate this present moment together again, but my chosen topic this morning will take us *back* in time and portray a very significant Unitarian historical character, Margaret Fuller, who may not be as familiar to many of you as she hopefully will be by the end of the service. I find her story inspirationally instructive and am glad to share it with you.

But it also has to be said that this certainly has not been a beautiful week, emotionally, in this country, with tragedy nearby claiming so many promising lives in such awful and dramatic fashion. If you're like me, you've been breathing heavily all week in sad recognition of how unexpected, unexplainable violence can suddenly, radically alter our human landscape.

Such traumatic events nearby can also remind us, harshly, that similar brutality is almost daily claiming many other lives in far-off places, like Iraq and Darfur. That may be violence more explainable and perhaps even expected in "war zones," but it is nonetheless senseless and tragic, to my mind at least.

For too many years now I have been breathing heavily in hopes that creative paths to peace will emerge and draw more attention than the destructive routes to ruin our kind seem to rely on too often. Whether local or global, violence and weaponry usually breed more of the same, along with pain and loss for too many people. At least the Irish are taking giant steps in the right direction now, finally.

So it is imperative, I believe, that in the midst of any and all anguish, we add and multiply our energy toward the common good, and I call us into worship this bright spring morning with that intention. We come to church once again to hold onto each other and sing out our resolve to be grateful *For All That Is Our Life,* which is Song #128…