23 May 2010 ❀ Margaret Fuller
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I begin with a reading, which will sound familiar if you opened your *UU World* magazine this weekend. These are the words of Kimberly French:[1]

> *If Unitarian Universalism were the sort of religion that canonized saints, then Margaret Fuller would be Our Lady of Wisdom – and Wit, Equality, and Social Justice.*
>
> *Or, if we were completely honest, we might have to call her Our Lady of Perpetual Obscurity.*
>
> *[Today] marks the bicentennial of the birth of Sarah Margaret Fuller, one of the three principal thinkers of the Transcendentalist movement, the vanguard theorist on women's equality and gender roles in America, and, some say, the first public intellectual in the United States, male or female. Yet a lot of us, perhaps most of us, have only a vague idea of who she was.*

My purpose this morning is to remove Margaret Fuller from obscurity within our midst, and to provide *more* than "a vague idea" of her life, as well as the paradox and contradictions contained therein. If you find her life's story half as compelling as I do, then be prepared: you'll be left with a bittersweet feeling, and not a small amount of anger at The Powers That Be for cutting her life so tragically short.

Margaret Fuller was born two hundred years ago, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, to Unitarian parents. From the time she was three years old, her Harvard-educated father took it upon himself to teach her Latin and Greek, along with music, math, and history. On one hand, it was a stroke of luck that, in the 1810s, a father would take so seriously his daughter's intellect and feed her curiosity so enthusiastically. On the other hand, Latin- and Greek-speaking six year old girls were then (as now) rare in New England. Her education and confidence made an odd duck of Margaret. She was proud of her intelligence, but it stung her to know that she was social awkward.

By the time she was a teenager, Margaret had finally learned how to form friendships with people who could appreciate the lofty conversations that she loved generating. Her loneliness soon returned, as she lost her friends to the culture of 19th century New England. All of Margaret's female friends married and "her... male friends began to enter Harvard, many of them to become prominent Unitarian ministers."[2] Women's colleges would not be established for another few decades.[3]

From her earliest years, Margaret's life had on a nontraditional course; now she had little choice but to keep to its path, winding her way through the unknown. There was no place for her in society; there were no role models for her to look to for guidance. She *was* the role model for the women of her generation. "At a time when women were prized for their obedience," says one author,[4] "Fuller had a habit of skewering pretension with wit. She was a Dorothy Parker in a Jane Austen world." And so, Margaret carved out her *own* place in the world.

In an age with so few options – and very few legal rights – available to unmarried women, Margaret flourished nonetheless. Her innate teaching skills were put to use in schools (including Bronson Alcott's), and then in the educational salons – called "Conversations" – that she held for women, mostly Unitarian, in a bookshop owned by Elizabeth Peabody. Over the course of five years, Boston's most prominent women flocked to Margaret's Conversations, which – in the words of Elizabeth Cady Stanton – offered "a vindication of women's right to think,"[5] and laid the groundwork for feminism and the suffragist movement.

It's possible that Margaret's dexterity in the art of conversation, and in writing, would have been enough to propel her to become "the intellectual at the heart of the Transcendentalist movement and the first American theorist of women's equality."[6] But gazing back through the lens of history, her claim to those titles was cemented by one of the great transformative events of Margaret Fuller's life: her relationship with Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Upon their first meeting in 1835, Waldo didn't take to Margaret right away. Most people didn't; like others, Waldo described Margaret in unflattering terms; he noted that "the men thought she carried too many guns, and the women did not like one who despised them.[7] When he met her, Waldo said to himself, "We shall never get far"[8] – but he also admitted "she made me laugh more than I liked."[9] In short order, Margaret gained his enduring admiration. He had found in her a kindred spirit, an eager disciple, and an unparalleled conversation partner.

Waldo had long since given up his Unitarian ministry along with his patience in "corpse-cold" Unitarianism. He was caught up in "the newness"[10] known as Transcendentalism: a movement of freedom and liberalism striking back against "the old Calvinism of Puritanism and the practical humanism of New England Unitarianism."[11]

Waldo was Margaret's guide through Transcendentalist circles, whose Mecca was Concord, Massachusetts. Her spark and wit won her entrance to the crowd of esteemed men whose writings and ideas would shape an entire century: Bronson Alcott, Henry David Thoreau, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allen Poe, Walt Whitman, Herman Melville, Henry James... (Asks one author, rhetorically,[12] "What was it about the time and place – the mid nineteenth century in a landlocked town west of Boston – that

caused this sudden outbreak of genius?")

Margaret's influence on them was subtle but profound. She prompted Edgar Allan Poe to say that humanity was divided into three classes: men, women, and Margaret Fuller, and she inspired the character of Hester Prynne in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*.

When Emerson needed an editor for his Transcendentalist journal, *The Dial*, he offered the job to Margaret, promising her a salary of $200 per year. Her new job revealed yet another of her talents, as she took on the role of critic, and promoter of arts and young writers, making her this country's first female literary critic. Margaret also filled the pages of *The Dial* with her own essays, filled with controversial beliefs like the right to education and the right of women to choose marriage.

The salary that Margaret had been promised never materialized; a new opportunity did. Horace Greeley, publisher of the *New York Tribune*, asked her to write for his paper because he so admired her work in *The Dial.* Margaret left *The Dial* and became an investigative journalist – and the first woman editor. She was the first woman to be granted access to the Harvard library, so that she might do research.

Wherever she went, professionally, doors opened for Margaret Fuller. Her peers recognized her as one of the most important figures of the Transcendentalist movement – and yet in her personal life, Margaret watched doors close, leaving her ever more The Outsider. As much as Margaret was admired in intellectual circles, she "confused, unsettled and quite simply scared many of the men she met."[13]

My sense is that the more time she spent in Concord, the more painfully Margaret felt how *different* she was. She spent long weeks with the Emersons, drawing the ire and jealousy of Waldo's wife, Lydia; she visited with Hawthorne and his new wife, Sophia, who adored and annoyed Margaret. But she was still, by virtue of her intelligence and independence, an odd duck. Women like her knew "that all the men they fell in and out of love with would be married or would marry other kinds of women."[14]

So when the *Tribune* invited Margaret to be the first woman to serve as a foreign correspondent, she accepted – eagerly. Europe offered her freedom that New England couldn't. As her work for the *Tribune* took her to Italy, she covered the Italian Revolution, and found herself swept up in the movement to establish a democracy in Rome. And Margaret fell in love.

Giovanni Ossoli was a handsome Italian more than a decade her junior. When she was thirty-eight, Margaret gave birth to a son, Angelino. (Historians disagree as to whether Margaret and Giovanni actually married.) That she left her infant to return to the front lines – only to return shortly – reveals how hard it was for Margaret to juggle her hunger for revolution *and* the moments of joy in the "jog trot of domestic life."[15]

How long could her happiness have lasted? There was no comfortable place for Margaret among the intellectual elite of New England; did Italy have room for her? Her lover's family had already disowned Giovanni, upset that their Catholic son had taken up with Margaret. What living could they make? What choice did they have but to patch together a life back in the United States? And so they made arrangements to come home.

Margaret didn't want to board their ship – the *Elizabeth* – in May of 1850. She had strange forebodings, and friends urged her to find another passage. The ship was held in harbor for days due to weather, and was heavily loaded with Italian marble. Her only faith was in the seasoned sea captain.

After a week at sea, smallpox swept through the ship, killing the Captain. The infant Angelino survived, to his parents' relief, but after six weeks on the Atlantic, the ship fared poorly in the hands of the inexperienced first mate. As a severe storm blew in mid-July, the seaman was unable to recognize New York Harbor, and took the ship toward Fire Island. On July 19, 1850, at around 3:00 in the morning, the winds and waves struck the ship down on a notorious sandbar, and the marble in the ship's hull broke through.

It took half a day for the ship to sink. Bystanders on shore couldn't reach the ship; the passengers who tried to swim to shore were drowned. Margaret watched her infant son die as a crewman tried to reach the shore. Angelino's body was later found, but little else of the family remained. Emerson was distraught by the news of the wreck, and dispatched Henry David Thoreau to search among the detritus. We don't know which was more precious to Margaret's friends: her body, which they might lay in rest, or the manuscript that she had completed on the Roman revolution (which Elizabeth Barrett Browning had read, and declared Margaret's finest masterpiece).

Henry found Margaret's desk and a button from Giovanni's coat. All else was lost to the water.

What might have come of Margaret's life? It took most of her life to create space for herself in her society. Would there have been enough room for her at forty years old, with an expatriate husband and an infant?

What might she have written? How many books? Would she have become the mother of the suffragist movement? What other "firsts" would she have accomplished, in addition to those she held?

We'll never know. But we can know the story of her life, and her brilliance. We can tell her story, and rescue her from obscurity. Let us be grateful for Margaret Fuller, and keep telling her story.

Endnotes

1. See www.uuworld.org

2. In “Radiant Genius & Fiery Heart,” by Kimberly French. In *UU World* magazine, Summer 2010, p. 38.

3. Although in 1831, in the “frontier” of Ohio, mixed-sex classes were admitted to the preparatory department at Oberlin in 1833. The first four women to receive bachelor’s degrees in the U.S. earned them at Oberlin in 1841.

4. *American Bloomsbury* by Susan Cheever, p. 54.

5. French, p. 39. One biographer describes being in conversation with Margaret like playing ball:

> She was able to ‘[hit] directly on the central idea in a discussion, enlarge upon it at length…AND sense what others were thinking and [toss] the ball to each of them at just the right moment so that the shyest among them had no choice but to catch it.’

6. French.

7. *The American Whig Review*, p. 359.

8. *The American Whig Review*, p. 359.

9. *The American Whig Review*, p. 359.

10. A term used frequently by Bronson Alcott; Cheever, p. 10.

11. Cheever, p. 9.

12. Cheever, p. 5.

13. Watson, p. 109.

14. Cheever, p. 56.

15. Quoted in Cheever, p. 136.