

## Our Foremothers' Blessing

preached by Rev. Colin Bossen at the Unitarian Universalist Society of Cleveland, March 11, 2012

When she was very young Margaret Fuller stopped on a staircase in her parents' house and asked herself four questions: "How came I here? How is it that I seem to be this Margaret Fuller? What does it mean? What shall I do about it?" These are big, religious, questions about the meaning of life and the nature of existence. I suspect that many of us have asked ourselves similar ones at various times in our lives. Certainly, as a religious community, we are called to ask parallel questions: Who are we as Unitarian Universalists? How did we get to be this way? What shall we do about it?

Our religious tradition encourages us to draw from a variety of different sources when we try answer such questions. As theological liberals the most important source that we draw from has always been personal experience. It is a core principle of religious liberalism that theological reflection begins with our personal experiences. As our official list of sources begins, we draw upon that "Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder... which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life."

Personal experiences are not enough on their own. To find answers we turn to collective wisdom in its various forms. Collective wisdom tempers our experiences and aids us in their interpretation. One of the places we can look to for collective wisdom is in the lives and teachings of our religious ancestors.

We are blessed to number among our religious ancestors some of history's most illustrious names. Several U.S. Presidents, including John Adams, John Quincy Adams and William Howard Taft were Unitarian. We can claim artists and musicians like the composer Bela Bartok and the architect Frank Lloyd Wright. Our rolls contain social justice activists such as the leading women's rights activist Susan B. Anthony, the civil libertarian Roger Baldwin and the pioneering abolitionist Lydia Maria Child; scientists like Charles Darwin, Linus Pauling and the astronomer Maria Mitchell; and writers like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Louisa May Alcott, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper and Beatrix Potter.

The lives and actions of such people point the way towards the answers we might find for our big questions. This morning, in honor of International Women's Day, we are going to seek answers to our questions by exploring the lives of some of our liberal religious women ancestors. The contributions that Unitarian Universalist women have made to our movement, and to humanity, are significant. They easily merit several volumes rather than a single sermon. So to help us focus we will hone in on the life of a particular Unitarian woman, Margaret Fuller.

Fuller was a central member of the circle of writers, ministers and activists that we have come to call the transcendentalists. She edited their groundbreaking literary journal the Dial. She was also the first full-time foreign correspondent for a U.S. based newspaper and a pioneering women's rights activist. She wrote "Woman in the Nineteenth Century," a book that has come to be regarded as the foundational text of this country's women's rights movement.

Fuller's life was tragic. She drowned, with her husband and toddler son, off the coast of New York at the age of 40. Emerson, perhaps the central figure in the transcendentalist movement, wrote on her death "I have lost in her my audience."

That Emerson regarded her so highly suggests just how remarkable a woman Fuller was. She possessed a mind and an education that was almost unparalleled by any in her generation. She was born into a prominent Boston area Unitarian family. Her father, Timothy, was a congressman and successful lawyer. He sought to give her all of the educational advantages that he might have given a son.

He oversaw her education himself and before she was ten Margaret could read Greek and Latin. As an early adolescent she worked her way through the major works in the Latin canon and read Shakespeare and other English poets. Later she was sent to a progressive school where she studied French, Italian, mathematics and the natural sciences. This was at a time when schooling was not available to most girls. The schooling that did exist for them emphasized the development of the skills necessary to manage a household and attract a husband.

Fuller's unusual education made her something of a social outsider. She could converse on an intellectual level far ahead of her peers. It was impossible for her to find other young women who had studied like she had. And the young men she knew were intimidated by a woman who was not their intellectual equal but their intellectual superior.

New England society in the early 19th century was not structured to give women like Fuller opportunities. She wished to attend Harvard College, but it was only open to men. She wanted to make her own way in the world but all of the professions were closed to women.

She was, however, able to find a position as a teacher in a progressive school run by Bronson Alcott, the father of the writer Louisa May Alcott. She taught there and then briefly at another school for about two years before launching out on her own. Instead of starting a school she developed her own educational model. It was called the conversations and it was only open to women. A conversation differed from a lecture in that it was more participatory. Instead of announcing a topic and then holding forth on it the converser tried to inspire participants to engage in their own reflections.

Alcott, who had launched a co-educational series of conversations, called it a "Ministry of Talking." The hope was to bring the participants into a communion around a shared idea. For Fuller her conversations were essential as they offered, in her words, "a point of union to well-educated and thinking women in a city which, with great pretensions to mental refinement, boasts at present nothing of the kind..." She wanted her conversations to be a place where women "could state their doubt and difficulties with hope of gaining aid from the experience or aspirations of others."

In this way Fuller's conversations combined emotional support with intellectual stimulation. At a time when she neither teach at a university nor preach from a pulpit Fuller was able to create a space where she and other women could further their education and deepen their spiritual lives. It was a safe space to explore matters that were largely regarded as the province of men.

Her conversations proved to be popular. They attracted many of the leading women of Boston, many of whom were Unitarian. Women from as far away as New York came to participate.

It was not enough for Fuller. She wanted a larger audience and after running her conversations for a few years gradually stopped to concentrate on her editing and writing. Over the next few years she published two books, "Woman in the Nineteenth Century" and "Summer on the Lakes," edited the Dial and, ultimately, secured a position with the New York Tribune.

She worked in New York for close to two years before, in her mid-thirties, accepting an offer to travel to Europe. The newspaper did not want to let her go and so made her what at the time was a remarkable offer. It would continue to pay her as long as she wrote about her travels for its readership.

Prior to Fuller's offer no newspaper in the country had a full-time correspondent in Europe. When she accepted the Tribune's offer she made journalistic history. She also created a remarkable record of mid-19th century Europe. She met with, and wrote about, many of the leading literary, political and artistic figures of the continent. She visited the poet William Wordsworth, befriended the French writer George Sand, Sand's lover the composer Frederic Chopin, and the Italian revolutionary Giuseppe Mazzini.

Mazzini was to play an important role in both Fuller and Italy's future. In a Tribune column about him she wrote words that ultimately might be taken for a summation of both her personal justice philosophy and Unitarian moral theology. They read, "there can be no genuine happiness, no salvation for any, unless the same can be secured for all."

This sentiment was certainly present in her "Woman in the Nineteenth Century." In it she argued that human development and liberty would never be complete until both men and women enjoyed the freedom to develop their full human potential. Educational opportunities, and employment opportunities, could not, in her mind, only be open to men. They had to be open to people of both genders. In this she was partially inspired by her own Unitarian tradition, particularly the teachings of the great Unitarian minister William Ellery Channing and the pioneering British feminist Mary Wolstonecraft, author of "A Vindication of the Rights of Women."

Fuller noted that Channing's claim that all souls contained within them likeness of God extended to women as well as men. Of him she wrote, "He regards them as souls, each of which had a destiny of its own, incalculable to other minds, and whose leading it must follow, guided by the light of private conscience..."

Wolstonecraft's call for women's rights inspired Fuller but it was her achievements as a writer in general, and not her "Vindication of the Rights of Women" in particular, that was important. Someone like Wolstonecraft, who was both successful and, because of her gender marginalized, demonstrated to Fuller both women's potential and the sad reality that that potential went largely untapped. Consequently she wrote, "Such beings as these, rich in genius, of most tender sympathies, capable of high virtue and a chastened harmony, ought not find themselves, by birth, in a place so narrow that, in breaking bonds, they become outlaws."

The intellectual and religious relationship between Channing, Fuller and Wolstonecraft suggests how exploring the life of one of our foremothers is related to both the theme of worship for the month, generosity, and our annual stewardship campaign. We have a religious tradition because of those who came before us. Fuller's work built off of the teachings and writings of other religious liberals like Channing and Wolstonecraft. Our religious community benefits from the heritage Fuller and others like her have bequeathed us.

That bequest is a generous gift. It is a gift that we can repay by preserving and, if possible, improving for the next generation. This is the very definition of stewardship, preserving what we have been given so that it might be passed on. Such stewardship is rooted in both gratitude and generosity. We do it because we are grateful for the gifts that we have been given. We are generous because the generosity of previous generations has ensured that we have a tradition to inherit.

As stewards of a tradition we are also tasked with its guardianship. I am reminded of this each election season when politicians and religious leaders on the right try to co-opt our liberal religious tradition for their own purposes. An example of this which you may be aware of is an anti-abortion group called the Susan B. Anthony List. The list creates voting guides to anti-abortion politicians. It claims that in doing so it is working "in the spirit and tradition of the original suffragettes."

Such claims are revisionist history. Anthony's opinions about abortion are not particularly clear. The quotes that the List uses to bolster its claim are ambiguous. One for instance, seems to point more to a critique of a male dominated society than an attack on abortion, "The statutes for marriage and divorce, for adultery, breach of promise, seduction, rape, bigamy, abortion, infanticide—all were made by men." Another comes from a diary entry written after she visited her brother and found her sister-in-law sick in bed after an abortion. She wrote, "She will rue the day she forces nature."

Even if these quotes represented an anti-abortion sentiment on Anthony's part it is difficult to use them to suggest that she would have been part of the so-called pro-life movement. Abortion in the 19th century was something different from abortion in the 20th and 21st centuries. Abortions, like most medical procedures then, were risky and pregnancy itself was frequently life threatening. Just as importantly, children often did not survive childhood so attitudes towards the importance and value of a child's life were different than they are today.

These differences remind us of one of the most important lines separating religious liberals from religious conservatives. As religious liberals we hold truth to be mutable and changeable. What is true for one generation might not be true for the next because human culture is always changing and human knowledge is always expanding. As the Unitarian Universalist theologian Paul Rasor has written, "Liberal theology is characterized by the belief that human religiousness should be understood from the perspective of modern knowledge and experience."

We believe, in other words, that revelation is ongoing and continuous. As Fuller's good friend Emerson preached in his famous "Divinity School Address," we are charged to "speak the very truth, as your life and conscience teach it, and cheer the waiting, fainting hearts of men with new hope and new revelation."

This is not true of religious conservatives. In contrast to us they believe that the truth is unchanging and that religious knowledge is fixed. In their minds, a quote taken from a scripture written three thousand years ago must mean the same thing today that it did then. Likewise a passage from a diary written a hundred years ago must mean the same thing today that it did then. Because of this lack of critical sophistication, Emerson described conservatives' belief about religion this way, they understand that "the revelation as somewhat long ago given and done, as if God were dead."

It is not our tradition to believe that revelation was given once for all time. If it was women like Anthony and Fuller would have accepted the roles society assigned for them. Instead, Anthony and Fuller believed that social norms and society change over time. If those were unjust people could struggle to change them.

In evaluating whether a group like the Susan B. Anthony List can claim to be the stewards of the tradition they claim we must ask two questions: Are they comfortable with the changing nature of society and a changing understanding of truth? Or do they seek to preserve the current social order and social understandings? If the answer is yes to the first question and no to the second then they can rightly claim their role as stewards. If, on the other hand, they answer no to the first and yes to the second then they are holding up a different tradition than the one they claim.

At the core of the tradition that Fuller and Anthony represent is the notion of conscience. This is the idea that within us we each have the ability to make moral decisions. The fashion in which Fuller cultivated this ability suggests that most elusive of beasts, the Unitarian mystic and spiritual tradition. It is often lamented that we Unitarian Universalists do not have a tradition of spiritual practice of our own. The majority of us who engage in spiritual practice borrow it from another tradition. We practice yoga or meditation, we engage in prayer. But when asked what sort of spiritual practice we have within our tradition we are frequently at a loss.

The life of Margaret Fuller, and her transcendentalist contemporaries, suggests that there is an authentic Unitarian spiritual practice. The purpose of that practice is to nurture the conscience and its discipline is three-fold. It begins with contemplative journal keeping. In the journal a person regularly records his or her daily interactions with others and struggles with the wider world. One of the reasons we know so much about people like Fuller and Emerson is because we have access to their journals.

Journal keeping is supplemented by engagement with the natural world. Each of the transcendentalists wrestled with humanity's relationship with nature. In "Summer on the Lakes," for instance, Fuller sought to understand how the Great Lakes region was being transformed as it was settled by Europeans. She wanted to know what was being lost in that process and what was being gained. Additionally, throughout her life she regularly took three or four hour daily walks to center herself.

The third part of the discipline is putting the conscience into action. As the conscience is discovered through the journal and stimulated in the natural world it leads one to act. For most of the transcendentalists these actions were taken as individuals. Henry David Thoreau famously went off into the woods and committed civil disobedience on his own.

Ideally, this spiritual practice all takes place within a community where people are free to dialogue about their discoveries. The community can offer support when the struggle of conscience becomes difficult. It can also offer correction and guidance when one appears to act counter to the conscience.

Fuller's time in Europe led her to put her conscience in action not as an individual but as part of a reform movement. In the late 1840s she moved to Italy and supported the efforts to unify the Italian peninsula under a single democratic government. At the time Italy was broken into nine different states, each ruled by a monarch or despot.

Inspired by her friend, Mazzini Fuller became part of the movement to change that. In doing so she met and married a young Italian aristocrat, Giovanni Ossoli. The two had a child and when the Italian revolution of 1848 collapsed they fled to the United States together. They were not to make it. Their ship sank, and the entire family drowned, within sight of the shore.

But after her death Fuller's legacy has lived on. Looking to her life we find some possible answers to our questions: Who are we as Unitarian Universalists? We are a justice seeking people called to follow our consciences. How did we get to be this way? Through rich tradition that reminds us that truth is ever changing and knowledge ever expanding. What shall we do about it? Be good stewards and carry that tradition forward.

That it may we so we close with these words from another liberal religious leader, which we had as our unison reading:

We, bearers of the dream, affirm that a new vision of hope is emerging.  
We pledge to work for that community in which justice will be actively present.  
We affirm that there is struggle yet ahead.  
Yet we know that in the struggle is the hope for the future.  
We affirm that we are co-creators of the future, not passive pawns.

So may it be  
and Amen.