

# Margaret Fuller

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*Forde* wrote this paper in Spring 2004 for Dr. Alicia Forsey's online Unitarian Universalist History class at Starr King School.

Born in 1810, Sarah Margaret Fuller distinguished herself a pioneer with regard to women's roles and the exploration alternative ways of discussing and thinking about gender. Fuller has left us with much to ponder regarding her life and her ideas. While today, we may be inclined to think of her writings as common place, it is in fact astounding that in the period of the 1800's, she accomplished all that she did.

Educated at Groton,<sup>1</sup> Fuller sought to expand the understanding of women's roles, not just in theory but in practice as well. She accomplished this in a variety of ways: running the "Conversations" which attracted a specific class of women and as such also allowed for networking, editing *The Dial* and publishing her essays<sup>2</sup> —the most widely known being *The Great Lawsuit. Man versus Men. Woman versus Woman*. With regard to Fuller's *Conversations*, it is said that:

These [Conversations] were not typical adult-education lectures, however. Priced at twenty dollars for a series of ten Conversations compared at two dollars charged for a comparable Lyceum Lecture series, they attracted women from all the prominent Boston social and intellectual families.... Fuller provided an important circle of Boston women with skill in public speaking, in defending their viewpoints, in marshalling evidence. Fuller's efforts helped pave the way for what has been called the "feminine fifties"—the decade of the 1850's, when New England women became prominent in letters, abolition, and women's rights causes.<sup>3</sup>

The significance of this is not to be overlooked. The claim being that Fuller was deeply instrumental in providing to prominent women the skills needed to begin to advocate for social change in a very concrete and effective way. As such, while it may be inaccurate to think of Fuller as a “feminist” in the traditional sense of the term, it certainly seems appropriate to at least recognize that her commitment to women’s equality may have had a crucial impact on later movements.

In this paper, I will attempt to offer a brief survey of Fuller’s life, as viewed through her passion for gender equality. In addition, I intend to examine the significance of Fuller’s thoughts in our current context—with specific regard to current day gender struggles.

Historical fragments offer an account of Margaret Fuller that is positively engaging. That she possessed a critical mind and keen intellect is evident in her writing as well as writings about her. Perhaps without intending to, Fuller began the necessary work of illustrating that to think of the mind, the intellect in gendered terms is profoundly erroneous. And that it is inaccurate to ascribe to women who “think” the term “mannish mind.”<sup>4</sup> In a moment of self-realization and affirmation, Fuller gained and reflected an understanding of herself that seems to be the very force that forms—at least part of the foundation for her essay—The Great Lawsuit. At the age of twenty-one, dissatisfied and seemingly sad she wrote:

It [the sky] was shrunken, voiceless, choked with withered leaves ...all was dark, and cold, and still. Suddenly the sun shone out with that transparent sweetness, like the last smile of a dying lover. [At that moment, there] ...passed into my thought a beam from its true sun... which has never since departed from me.

...I saw how long it must be before the soul can learn to act under these limitations of time and space, and human nature; but I saw also, the it must do it. ...I saw that there was no self: that selfishness was all folly, and the result of circumstance; that it was only because I thought the self real that I suffered.<sup>5</sup>

From this excerpt, one might conclude that Fuller was beginning to gain an understanding of herself as not isolated, but rather part of “a central, all-pervading consciousness”<sup>6</sup> which holds significant implications for the way in which she approaches matters of gender equality.

In The Great Lawsuit, Fuller argues for an understanding of women as equal to men—primarily with regard to the intellect as well as in relationship—in particular marriage. Taking the issue of women and marriage, Fuller argues that women are not “free” in the same sense that men are in marital relationships. And posits that

...in the world of men, a tone of feeling exists towards women as towards slaves, such as is expressed in the common phrase, "Tell that to women and children;" that the infinite soul can only work through them in already ascertained limits; that the prerogative of reason, man's highest portion, is allotted to them in a much lower degree...<sup>7</sup>

She argues that marriage, as it existed in her day, is inherently unequal and does not work in favor of women. As Fuller saw it, many women were denied a voice, property, fair treatment and recognition as a result of the very way the institution was constructed. She also questioned man's ability to truly see his wife as an equal intellectual partner... to be in an intimate relationship with a woman in which there is reciprocal intellectual companionship.<sup>8</sup>

In *The Great Lawsuit*, Fuller questions the need for women to be married and argues for women's self-dependence and autonomy.<sup>9</sup> What Fuller seemed to have keyed in on is the need to reformat the institution of marriage in ways that allow for women to live as equals—that is to embrace all of herself. What she describes as her "masculine and feminine" qualities and the same can be said for men. As Fuller puts it: "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 rushes to fluid. There is no wholly masculine man, no purely feminine woman,"<sup>10</sup> a point to which I will return to later in this paper.

While it would have been conventional for Fuller to marry someone who was as intellectually prominent or dominant as she was—or perhaps even marry someone who required that she fulfill the "traditional" female role of mother and caretaker, she is reported to have married Angelo Ossoli—"...titled... penniless, dissipated, and younger than Margaret by ten years."<sup>11</sup> In so doing, she upset social convention and made a bold move to challenge "normative" social codes<sup>12</sup> that dictated sex roles; meaning while it was acceptable for men to marry women who were "intellectually inferior" or whose place it was to be the care-provider, it was not acceptable for women to marry men who were "intellectually inferior" and were more concerned with home and displaying tenderness and caring. As Rossi points out: "The Fuller-Ossoli relationship is an exact replica of the typical marriage of her day, except that it is the woman rather than the man who would have to gratify intellectual needs outside the marriage."<sup>13</sup>

My particular interest in Fuller is as a result of her views on masculine/feminine arrangements. It is said of her that she harbored "homosexual traits," which is an assumption based on "the quality of her feelings towards her own sex."<sup>14</sup> To support this assumption, Fuller's biographer, Mason Wade quotes her saying:

It is so true that woman may be in love with a woman and a man with a man. It is pleasant to be sure of it, because it is undoubtedly the same love that we shall feel when we are angels.... It is regulated by the same laws as that of love between persons of different sexes, only it is purely intellectual, spiritual, unprofaned by any mixture of lower instincts, undisturbed by any need of consulting temporal interests; its law is the desire of the spirit to realize a whole, which makes it seek in another being that which it finds not in itself.<sup>15</sup>

While Wade interprets Fuller to be displaying homosexual traits, I find in this writing an otherworldly understanding of love and relationship arrangement that, perhaps, was not fulfilled for Fuller in the life that she knew. Given her views on masculine/feminine traits coexisting in men and women, it seems easy to draw the conclusion that Fuller had homosexual traits. That may be so, yet given her views on gender fluidity, it comes as no surprise that she would theorize as such.<sup>16</sup> What I find far more intriguing is the notion that Fuller understood there to be a “soul” to which we are all connected—a soul that was not gender specific.<sup>17</sup> And like that soul, our souls were not particularly gender specific... but rather fluid—ready to be shaped and influenced by the world around it.

The implications of Fuller’s thoughts in her day must have been incredulous to wrestle with... in fact, they remain so today. What she seems to be proposing, though one cannot be certain this is what she meant, is that while we are bound in this life to biological arrangements that have the potential to limit with ways in which we are in the world, solely because of the social interpretation of those biological arrangements—our “souls” possess no such identities and as such, were we to live from that place, we would then be free to live according to our passions, intellect etc.<sup>18</sup>

As an advocate for the promotion of a gender fluid world, rather than a dichotomous world, I am encouraged and amazed to hear strains of today’s arguments alive since the 1800’s. It is important to note that while Fuller seemed to be advocating gender equality, she was, in her thinking, confined to the binary arrangement of male/female; yet the very ideas she put forward regarding gender fluidity continue to be profoundly radical.

While science may continue to attempt to prove the legitimacy of gender stereotyping, separation, and inequality—voices like Fuller’s need to be heard. Voices that remain counter-cultural today, as they probably did in her day—calling for a way of being that creates the space for all to live into their deepest potential regardless of gender or race. In her words: “let [the soul] take what form it will, and let us not bind it by the past to man or woman...,” let us be willing to at least recognize that we are all connected to that one great source of energy and share in the potential to be in the world in multiple ways—not necessarily dictated by our biological sex.

It is important in a discussion of the significance of Fuller's thoughts for us today to take note of her religious understandings. It might be said that the Transcendentalist heavily influenced Fuller. She was closely associated with the Boston Transcendentalist circle and if one were to examine her ideas alongside those that characterized Transcendentalism, it is possible to find areas of influence. Transcendentalism holds that:

...it is a built-in necessity of human nature to express itself, that self-expression, like self-development, is one of the purposes of life itself. ...[Transcendentalism] insists, first, that the well-being of the individual—of all the individuals—is the basic purpose and ultimate justification for all social organizations and second that autonomous individuals cannot exist apart from others. ...Transcendentalism believes that the purpose of education is to facilitate the self-development of each individual. The political trajectory of transcendentalism begins in philosophical freedom and ends in democratic individualism.<sup>19</sup>

Given Transcendentalist thought and major concerns, it is not surprising that Fuller took seriously the “well-being...and self-development” of each individual—each, to include women. In a manner of speaking, she lived her philosophical/religious beliefs by engaging in the work of seeking to liberate women through works such as running Conversations and her essays. One might argue that even her marriage was an act of liberation in itself.

What this leaves us to ponder today is what are we willing to do for the principles that we adhere to as Unitarian Universalists? Where are we willing to subvert the dominant paradigm in our personal and communal lives? Is it enough for me to advocate for gender fluidity—which today encompasses equality and liberation for the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgendered, Questioning and non-categorical community and/or do I need to so in a manner that demonstrates a grounding in my chosen faith? In a manner that is (critically) informed by my chosen faith?

In her lifetime, Fuller dedicated herself to broadening the scope of women's roles. Her work *The Great Lawsuit* demonstrates that she was a woman who was serious about gaining gender equality and perhaps because of her work with *The Dial*, her voice was heard throughout many circles. Fuller says in *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*<sup>20</sup> “...that the heart of a woman demands nobleness and honor in Man, and that, if they (men) have not purity, have not mercy, they are no longer fathers, lovers, husbands, sons of yours.”<sup>21</sup> She advocates forcefully for equality and urges women to claim for themselves, autonomy.

For us today, her ideas may be a given and yet, we are indebted to her for making public a conversation that potentially spurred women to be more vocal with regard to gaining equal rights and liber-

ating themselves from male oppression. She has demonstrated for us how possible it is for philosophical and religious thought to inspire action. And Fuller has inspired me to keep moving in the direction of working to frame a mode of thinking and being that recognizes the possibility of gender fluidity.

### *Notes*

1. It is important to note that Fuller did not attend Groton until her teenaged years and then, only briefly. It is perhaps more accurate to say that she was educated in large part by her innate drive for intellectual stimulation coupled with her father's willingness to "train" her.
2. Alice S. Rossi ed., *The Feminist Papers: From Adams to de Beauvoir*, 152.
3. *Ibid.*, 148–149. The purpose of these Conversations being to ensure that women, like men are being educated with the expectation of productivity and social contribution—much like men.
4. Robert D. Richardson Jr., *Emerson: The Mind on Fire*, 239.
5. *Ibid.*, 237–238 taken from the *Memoirs of Margaret Fuller Ossoli*.
6. *Ibid.*, 238.
7. *The Great Lawsuit*, Fuller reprinted in *The Feminist Papers*, 165.
8. In *The Great Lawsuit*, Fuller discusses the types of marital arrangements as she sees them—to include those in which it seems like both partners are "soulfully" connected and engaged in intellectual companionship—though she does not elevate these examples as the norm, merely uses them to illustrate the point that it is possible to achieve.
9. It is interesting to note that upon her father's death, Fuller became the financial provider for her family.
10. *The Great Lawsuit*, Fuller reprinted in *The Feminist Papers*, 179.
11. Rossi, *The Making of a Cosmopolitan Humanist*, 156.
12. Though one could argue that Fuller in no way saw herself as challenging social codes... yet, she was keenly aware that in marrying Ossoli, she would face criticism from those in her community.
13. Rossi, *The Making of a Cosmopolitan Humanist*, 154.
14. *Ibid.*, 152 quoting Mason Wade.
15. *Ibid.*
16. I do take into account that Wade is writing in the 1940's which perhaps limits the ways in which one might interpret that passage.
17. She says in *The Great Lawsuit*: "Let us be wise and not impede the soul. Let her work as she will. Let us have one creative energy, one incessant revelation. Let it take what form it will, and let

us not bind it by the past to man or woman, black or white.” Ibid., 180.

18. I will admit to interpreting Fuller through my particular lens, and yet it seems almost impossible to deny that Fuller was advocating for a kind of genderless society in which women and men were educated equally—and treated equally. Not because they were women and men, but because they—on a “soul” level were essentially the same, arranged in a fluid manner with regard to gender traits that were not specifically of a physical nature.

19. *Mind on Fire*, 250.

20. *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* is the expanded book version of the essay *The Great Lawsuit. Man versus Men. Woman versus Women*.

21. *Woman*, 167.

### *Bibliography*

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