

“The Sources of Our Faith: Prophetic Women and Men”

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I have a story to tell you today about two women. Both of them were born exactly 200 years ago today. One of these two women was named Margaret Fuller. She was the daughter of a Harvard-educated Unitarian minister and the great-aunt of Buckminster Fuller, the guy who invented the geodesic dome. Margaret Fuller herself was incredibly smart. She spoke multiple languages, including Latin and Greek, which she learned when she was still just a little girl. She studied at Harvard, as much as women were allowed to in those days, and she was very close friends with Ralph Waldo Emerson. She was the editor of the Transcendentalist magazine, *The Dial*. Religiously, this was the time when Unitarianism was really shifting. Unitarian culture in those days had been on the dry side, very rational and brainy, and Margaret Fuller played a huge part in the Transcendentalist movement which really opened us up and helped us bring in emotions and physicality, a sense of the body, and mysticism and love for the natural world.

So, to us, Margaret Fuller was very important as a religious thinker. In the broader culture, she is better known as one of the most formidable feminist thinkers and writers in our entire history. All the way back in 1845, her book *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* called for the full equality of women and men to be recognized in every sphere of life—

legal, educational, social, political, spiritual.
She was the author of the stirring words we read together
in the Responsive Reading:

A new manifestation is at hand, a new hour is come,
when Man and Woman may regard one another as brother and
sister, able both to appreciate and to prophesy to one another.¹

I'm glad we could share those words together,
because they really give a sense of the force of her mind.
And I want to let you know Margaret Fuller had a impact
on me personally that I will always be grateful for.
When I was in 10th grade, I had to read some of her feminist essays
for a class. I found them absolutely electrifying.
A hundred and fifty years later, and she was still so dead on.
I looked around my own surroundings, and I saw a lot had changed,
but I could see there were still all these subtle ways
that men and women, girls and boys were still being slotted
into thinking and behaving in different ways based on their gender.
All of us in that school had to give a speech in front of an assembly,
and I was so inspired by Margaret Fuller
that I chose to give my speech on sexism at my school.
So, thank you, Margaret.
You made *me* a feminist, and I am so grateful.

What's more, Margaret Fuller was not *just* a feminist,
though that would have been plenty for one lifetime.
She was one of those 19th-century reformers
who got involved in just about every major social issue of her time.
In her 30s, she started working as a newspaper reporter
for Horace Greeley's *New York Tribune*, which in those days
was the most respected newspaper in the country.
She wrote stories advocating abolition
and reforms in prisons and mental health clinics.

¹ Margaret Fuller, adapted from *The Great Lamsuit* (1843), *Singing the Living Tradition* #575.

In 1846, she traveled to Italy and become the first American woman to work as a foreign correspondent. She ended up falling in love with an Italian freedom fighter, and she got very deeply involved in revolutionary politics. It was a tragedy when she and her partner and their child died in a shipwreck on their way back to the United States. Margaret Fuller was only 40 years old when she died, one of the most brilliant, passionate, creative reformers this country has ever seen.

I told you this was a story about two women, and now I need to tell you about the second of these two women.² She also was born on May 23, 1810. And her life as a young child was in many ways difficult and sad. When she was three years old, her baby sister died. Her mother was devastated by grief and never really recovered. All her life she felt her mom wished *she* were the one who had died. She felt like a misfit. She was clumsy in a world that expected girls to be graceful. She was outspoken in a world that expected girls to be sweet and silent. Meanwhile her father showered her with love and attention, but only if she did exactly what he told her to. He was a bossy, controlling, mentally abusive father who told her things like, “I will love you *if* you don’t make any mistakes on your homework.”

As this young girl grew up to be a woman, her family went through a lot of economic troubles. They were never well off, and at times they were very poor. She had to work for a living, mostly as a teacher,

² Much of this material is drawn from Meg McGavran Murray, *Margaret Fuller: Wandering Pilgrim* (University of Georgia Press, 2008).

and she worked herself to the point of exhaustion.

She had a whole lot of sorrow in her personal life too.

She had a lot of friends,

but what she really craved was romantic, passionate love,
and she fell hopelessly in love with a series of friends
who cared about her but didn't love her back
the way she wanted them to.

Finally, late in her life, she found love
with a man who truly cared for her.

But she was afraid to get married because she had seen
so many bad marriages among her family and friends.

She had a child with this man and lived with him,
and by all accounts they were very happy together.

But they struggled financially too.

Her friends and family all rejected her
because she'd had a child outside of marriage.

When she died in an accident at the age of 40,
she was discouraged and confused about what to do with her life.
She had been seeking a way forward, but it was not at all clear.

I wonder if you see where this story is going.

The truth is, this second woman who lived through so much
suffering and confusion was also Margaret Fuller.

Both of these stories are her own.

The brilliant feminist reformer, the heroine we celebrate,
and the abused child who struggled for the happiness
other people took for granted,
these two people are one and the same.

I tell you this

because I think there's something we need to understand
about our heroes.

Today we are lifting up the great tradition
of prophetic women and men who inspire us

to do justice and practice love.

And so often we make the mistake of thinking
those prophetic women and men are different from us.
We see them as they appear in our history books,
larger-than-life airbrushed cardboard cutouts,
perfect, un-plagued by confusion.

And we look at our own lives
and we see all the million little things we have to do.
The garden needs weeding.
The car needs an oil change.
We have to pay the bills, mow the lawn, fold the laundry,
this endless stream of stuff which has to be done.
We think, this life, *our* life, is not the stuff of which heroes are made.

But the thing is, the women and men we lift up as heroes,
those prophetic women and men who inspire us with their courage
and the boldness of their justice-seeking—
they weren't so different from us.
Margaret Fuller fit her writing in
around teaching jobs to make money for her family,
caretaking for her younger brothers,
hard physical work on her family's farm.
It's not like she was in this crystal palace
with hours and hours to ponder
and come up with wise prophetic thoughts.
Everything that she did for which we remember her today,
she did in the midst of money worries and hard work
and a million little things to do.
All the stuff that we have to do just to get through the day,
she had to do all that too, and probably more than most of us.
Annie Dillard, the author of our first reading, tells us,
yes, we see ourselves as unfit, unready, busy and preoccupied—

but *there is no one but us. There never has been.*³

We may think the “prophetic women and men” who inspire us are somebody else, not us, somebody with more time and fewer distractions, somebody larger than life, more than mere human, but it isn’t true.

Those heroes, the ones we read about, the ones who inspire us with their bold actions and wise words, we imagine them with these clean, simple lives, full of focus and purpose, *different* from us with our scattered lives and busy calendars, and maybe that’s true for a few, but really most of them are not so different from us.

If we want heroes in this generation, if we seek those prophetic women and men in our own day, I’ll tell you where to look.

Just look around you. They are *us*.

Because there is no one but us. There never has been.

And in a way that’s scary, because it means we don’t get a pass. Just because we’re busy and our lives are complicated and we feel confused about a lot of things, it doesn’t mean we’re off the hook.

Each one of us is called to be like our heroes and “confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love,”⁴ in the place where we are, here and now.

And that can be scary. There is so much to do.

How can one person do enough to make a difference?

How can we possibly afford to give all that will be asked of us?

³ Annie Dillard, *Holy the Firm*, pp. 56–57, quoted in Elizabeth Roberts & Elias Amidon, eds., *Life Prayers* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), p. 36.

⁴ Principles and Purposes, UUA Bylaws.

As I ponder these questions in my own life,
I take great comfort in the words of another one of my heroes,
Howard Thurman. He said:

Don't ask yourself what the world needs.
Ask yourself what makes you come alive and then go do that.
Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.

What the world needs is people who have come alive.
This is the source of our prophecy and our strength.
We don't have to spend years and years
studying all the problems in the world
and ranking them in order of severity
before we start acting for justice in our own lives.
That wouldn't exactly be *un*-helpful, but it is not necessary.
You don't have to be an expert on all the world's problems
to make a difference.
What you *do* have to do is pay attention to what burns inside of *you*.
What you *do* have to do is notice
when your attention is drawn and caught and held,
when every fiber of your being is drawn to *do something*.
Because that is you, *coming alive*.

Margaret Fuller did not become the most brilliant
and passionate feminist of her generation
because she calmly sat down, thought about it impartially,
and decided that would be helpful to her society.
No—this was a woman who was born into a family
where her father relentlessly dominated his wife,
a society in which women were the property of their husbands.
Men were in control of the money, the politics, the jobs.
The boys she knew were sent off to be educated at universities
while the girls were expected to be happy learning embroidery
and housecleaning.
This was a woman who was born with a passion for learning,

whose mind was beyond brilliant.
She became one of our great prophetic women
because there was such an enormous disjunction
between what her culture told her she could do
and what *everything in her* told her she *must* do.
Her very life demanded that she be honest
about what she knew and felt and thought.
Her soul was alive,
and suppressing it would have been like death.

So where are *you* on fire?
What in *you* burns with a life that refuses to be extinguished?
Listen to that.
Don't ignore it.
Because that is *your* passion,
and this world *needs* your passion.
It needs all of our gifts.

Don't ask yourself what the world needs.
Ask yourself what makes you come alive and then go do that.
Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.

We lift up grateful hearts for all the prophetic women and men
who have inspired us to speak and act
in the service of justice and love.
We lift up grateful hearts for the courage that leads ordinary people
to do what is right
and speak what is true,
and for the spirit burning in each of us
which will guide us always, if we only listen.

So may it be, for us and all the world.
Amen.