

Sermon for May 7, 2006.

A woman of Courage and Spirit.

The life of Margaret Fuller.

Let me begin with a question that you only have to answer in your heart of hearts. No raising hands this time and I do hope you have all had your coffee, tea or vitamins this morning. For this is a serious question: *Do you live your life the way you really want to?* Are you, as Joseph Campbell used to say, following your bliss? Are you being true to your own self in your work, in your private life, in all that you do? Well if you are absolutely honest and somewhat sensible you would answer well *most* of the time or *some* of the time but there *are* compromises. To live in a world we did not make we all have to make some compromises. And yet I suspect that this freethinking congregation attracts like a magnet people who are at least trying to follow their bliss and be true to their belief. Otherwise you would be somewhere else this Sunday morning, somewhere more conventional, more predictable and likely safer for your peace of mind than here. But even so, few of us can live entirely true to who we are. So we may dream of running off to Tahiti like Gauguin to paint or write or whatever but we can not like him forget what will happens to the wife and six

children left behind, penniless. Do all the grand and beautiful canvases with their glowing colors make up for that?

No, they do not. And therein lays the problem. Where is the balance? Should one sacrifice all for beauty? Well you can give up all *you* have perhaps but no one has a right to sacrifice some one else for their own true self. That becomes oppression. Just think about it. Some human beings are assigned less value because of their religion, their color, their nationality or their sex.

Gauguin's children paid dearly for our enjoyment of his art.

But there has to be a balance. Sometimes we need to follow that bliss. Or else we may end up living our lives joylessly, uninspired, hiding who we are under an acceptable facade. Sometimes the role we are given by our culture, our family or by society is too narrow, too confining. Like Cinderella's glass slipper we can only fit into it by cutting a heel or a toe and denying who we really are in the process.

Then it is good to remind ourselves of those courageous men and women who either would not, or could not fit in their society's mold and chose instead to break it leaving us a heritage of increased freedom. Margaret Fuller was one such woman.

As you listen to her story I invite you to use her life as a mirror, a way to learn more about yourself and where you may find your bliss and meaning can be found. If this extraordinary woman

was also so very human and imperfect, well then, perhaps you too could attempt to do great things. This free spirited, courageous and often quite outrageous woman cleared a path that others could follow. Few of us have such passion and such strong beliefs. Fewer yet dare to follow them.

Women especially have reason to be grateful to her. None other than Eleanor Roosevelt, herself no weakling wrote:

*It is good for us today to re-read the life of a woman like Margaret Fuller and remind ourselves of the trail which she and many other women blazed. Her book **Women in the Nineteenth Century** was an epoch making book and her power to impress her personality on those around her did more than anything else to bring the acknowledgment and the recognition that women had an intellectual and spiritual contribution to make, as great as that of men. Where ever she went she stimulated thought.*

But all of this came at a price. Make no mistake, trailblazing always carry a price. Margaret came from a New England family that called themselves: *the fighting Fullers*. Had she disembarked with her forebear Thomas Fuller in 1638 she would doubtless have been burned as a witch. Fortunately they had given up burning witches before she was born.

Margaret's father Timothy, a lawyer and member of the State legislature, believed that life was serious business that required

constant vigilance. Each home was ruled by its father and in his mind a good father was one whose children held him in respect and awe. A good husband was one who provided material necessities. Any demonstration of affection, any display of tenderness was a weakness and belonged to women. To men belonged strength, austerity and the right to rule. He admired reason above all else and was determined that his first born, though a girl, should be given every opportunity for mental development.

Because of his plan Margaret Fuller may be said to have had no real childhood. Her father set out to make her the most educated woman in America. As soon as she could talk her training began. So every evening, when he returned from work, no matter how late, Margaret had to recite her lessons for the day. Books were her playthings. It was a wonderful gift of knowledge. But it was cruel to small child. For Margaret, was so keyed up after reciting her lessons, that she could not fall asleep no matter how tired she was and had vivid nightmares. She recalls: *My aunts cried out upon the spoiled child, the most unreasonable child there ever was, who was never, never willing to go to bed. They did not know that when the light was taken away, she seemed to see colossal faces advancing slowly toward her, the eyes dilating and each feature swelling loathsomely as they came till at last when they*

were about to close upon her she started up with a shriek that drove them away. But only to return when she lay down again.

As a child she read Ovid, Cervantes, Moliere and Shakespeare. She knew history, the works of Thomas Jefferson, spoke and read several languages, understood mathematics, could do Biblical Scholarship and loved Greek and Roman Mythology. But she knew neither how to throw a ball or jump a rope. She never learned how to make friends with other children. As a miniature she took life way too seriously. One of her first memories was the illness and death of her baby sister. She later wrote: *my first experience of life was one of death.*

To her the worlds of ancient Greece and Rome seemed more real and friendly than the everyday world where other children played. Always on the outside of a crowd, she found solace and comfort in her secret garden behind her home. Nature's God was constant and she trusted this God's embrace. Yet she was left so hungry for companionship and for love. So little Margaret would press the flower petals to her lips and then imagine that they gave her all she needed. Years later she would write: *Only by emotion do we know thee Nature. To lean upon thy heart, and feel its pulses vibrate to our own, that is knowledge for that is love, the love of infinite beauty, of infinite love. Thought alone will never make us born again.*

In those days there were no colleges for women. Margaret was sent to a boarding school for girls. There she discovered that she had a true gift for the dramatic and entertained the other girls with her plays. She delighted in color and style and dressed as she imagined a Greek Priestess might. Soon she broke the rules. She began to wear some of the theatrical make up to class. Her cheeks took on a reddish tint as she improved upon what she called my rather plain looks. But no decent lady in her day would ever do this.

Margaret was naïve and unaware of the the anger her behavior aroused. Until one day when she entered the dining hall and found that all the students and the teachers had two bright red circles painted on their cheeks. This shook her core. She felt *dead inside, completely humiliated and now believed that any signs of affection they had shown her up till then were false*. How could she trust people after that?

But she had to continue to work and live. Margaret taught school and when her father died took over as the de facto head of the household. She protected her mother and made sure that her younger siblings both boys and girls got an education. Even though it meant that she had to give up her own dream of going to Europe.

In many ways she was like an exotic flower growing in a plain farmer's field. She did not, could not, be what society expected of her. Once she had to entertain at home in a dress her father had bought for her. The dress was fluffy pink and had no style at all. Worse it was several sizes too small, forcing her to lace her corset far too tight to fit into it. All evening she could only stand and smile, any dancing which she loved or other movements were impossible. It seemed a fitting metaphor for her life. Born into a New England rich in ideas and ideals but plain in dress and manners she longed for color and beauty. There was no space for her to spread her wings and fly.

Today we can say gratefully that our young women have far more space than that. We do not force them into pink dresses and corsets. But we still present them with impossible ideals in those cover girls on the front of magazines, the super slim super models, and bodies they can only have if they starve themselves. So we have many young women, who suffer from eating disorders, our day's version of corsets.

Margaret was never a beauty in a time when that was very important in a woman. She was: *“Homely, long necked, nearsighted, but of a passionate nature with which the males in the Transcendental group were ill equipped to cope.”*

Fate put her in the middle of what was an extraordinary flowering of writers, thinkers, ministers and artists. The Transcendental movement encompassed literature, philosophy, religion and an experiment in utopia, Brooks Farm. But even these revolutionary young men had no idea on what to do with such a woman.

Alone, she dreamt of another time and place: A grove in ancient Greece where women could worship freely. She saw no virtue in the puritanical denial of the body at a time when showing a woman's ankle was considered sexy. *If the body is the temple of the spirit* she said, *why should it be regarded as something evil?*

And she recognized her own impatience with the world she lived in: *Oh, why cannot I lay more to heart that God is never in a hurry?*

Emerson when he gave his famous Harvard Divinity school address and changed Unitarianism forever owed some of it to her spirit. His main plea was: *Cast conformity behind you and acquaint men first hand with Deity.* Of Margaret he wrote:

There was a vein of haughty caprice in her character and a love of solitude which made her at times wish to retire apart. Like the whirling dervishes she too would spin around until all around her were giddy, while her own brain, instead of being disturbed was excited to great action."

As a woman with a recognized brain she edited the *Dial*, the Transcendentalist Journal. Ever restless she left New England in 1844 to become a literary critic for Horace Greeley's *New York Tribune*. She was the first woman member of the working press. Then she became notorious if not infamous when she published *Women in the Nineteenth century*. In this book she dared to proclaim the scandalous notion that women could and should follow their inclination and pursue any occupation they wished, including that of sea captains. Horace Greeley from then on resolutely refused to open the door for her. Doesn't that sound "vaguely familiar" to those of us, who lived through the seventies?

The arguments used against her are oddly contemporary: *You are trying to break up the family union, to take my wife away from the cradle and the kitchen hearth in order to vote at the polls and horrors: preach in the pulpit!*. Apart from the quote about the right to vote these words could have been spoken by many of those politicians or so called religious men, who are still uncomfortable with women and power in the same sentence.

She wrote: *I would have woman lay aside all thought such as she habitually cherishes of being led by men. I would have her free from compromise, free from compliance, free from helplessness because I would have her strong enough and good enough to love one and all beings from the fullness, not the*

poverty, of her being. Her vision was of a new manifestation, a new world where men and women were equals. We here today are in many ways that new manifestation, that world made real. But let us not get too comfortable. The battle is not over yet.

Margaret *would* have approved of that ninety year old woman in the Raleigh First Baptist Church who voted to leave the Southern Baptist denomination when it declared that men were to be head of the household and women should submit. *How*, this conservative grandmother said, *how can I tell my 18 year old grand daughter that her opinion is worth less than a man's?*

In 1846 Margaret long held dream came true. She left for Europe where her radical views were not only accepted but celebrated. In Italy she found a cause worthy of her passionate soul: Italy's own war of independence. To the amazement and bewilderment of her friends she managed in the middle of all this turmoil to find and marry Giovanni Angelo Ossoli who claimed to be a Marquis and was ten years younger than her. In great secrecy and under difficult war time conditions she gave birth to a child, a son, in 1848. Later she had to leave her child behind and went to Rome where the writer turned war time nurse. She wrote: *I have seen more bad people this last year than in all my life before...Day after day the boom and rattle, day after day the slow moving carts*

with their loads of wounded. Margaret lived in anguish. But she nursed the wounded as best she could.

Reunited at last with her husband and child she decided to return home. This was a bit much for her friends and supporters. Margaret Fuller, the intellectual spinster, was to return to her native plain spoken, plain clothed and never ostentatious New England as the wife of an Italian Marquis and with a baby too!

But she never did make it home. Her ship was caught in a hurricane and she drowned together with her son and husband a few miles off shore. There is some evidence that while the ship *Elizabeth* was breaking upon the rocks of Fire Island on July 19, 1850 she herself might have been rescued but chose instead to perish with her husband and infant.

Elizabeth Browning wrote after her death: *Now she is where there is no more grief and no more sea and none of the restless in this world, none of the shipwrecked in heart, ever seemed to me to want peace more than she did.*

So what can we learn from this passionate woman? Margaret Fuller refused to conform. She chose to be true to her ideals. In her own words: *Very early on I knew that the only object in life was to grow. I believe in a God, a Beauty and Perfection to which I am to strive all my life for assimilation. From these two articles of belief I draw the rules by which I strive to regulate my life.*

She was a trailblazer. But perhaps her greatest courage showed in how she learned to live with her own, impatient, fearful soul. As she wrote: *The heart which hopes and dares is also accessible to terror, and this falls upon it like a thunderbolt.*

This is the dart within the heart, as well as I can tell it. At moments the music of the universe which I am daily upheld by hearing, seems to stop. I fall like a bird when the sun is eclipsed, not looking for such darkness.

What kept her sane and safe in such moments was that she trusted the Universe and Nature's God to once again allow her to hear the music. She wrote in a letter to a friend: *Emerson has a friend with him by the name of Henry Thoreau.*

*He has a boat, he rows himself and rows me out on the pond. Last night I went out quite late and staid till the moon was almost gone, heard the whippoorwill for the first me this year, there was a sweet breeze full of apple blossoms fragrance which made the pond swell almost into waves. **I had great pleasure.***

In our own lives may we also find both courage and great pleasure. And when we are afraid may we learn to trust the grace of God and the universe. Amen.

