

The Bright Feeling of Progression
May 16, 2010

As a young teenager, I was a big movie goer. It started when my mother took my brother and me to see two of her favorite movies from her own childhood, *Treasure Island*, and *Tarzan*. Then it was *Casablanca* and *To Have and Have Not*. Soon I was going to movies almost every weekend, sometimes with my mother, and sometimes alone. One weekend in 1979, mom and I went to see a movie that, upon my viewing it, became a turning point in my life and a frame of reference for my mother and me from that point on. The theme music for the movie, by the way, was the piece we heard Elke play for the offering--Schumann's *Of Foreign Lands and Peoples*, part of the 13-piece set, *Scenes from Childhood*. The movie itself was called *My Brilliant Career*.

Some of you may remember it. Set in late 19th century rural Australia, and starring a young Judy Davis, the movie chronicles the life of a young woman, Sybella, who aspires to be a writer despite the difficult circumstances of her family existence. Experiencing a taste of both the well-to-do while staying with her grandmother, and the very poor, while working as a teacher for the children of a family her father is indebted to,

Sybella finds mutual love with a man who could very easily care for her for the rest of her life. Just as importantly, or even more so, however, she also begins to find a sense of her own identity, gifts, and purpose. In the end, she cannot sacrifice her dreams of a brilliant career, and asks her beloved for an indefinite delay in marriage. The movie ends with her standing alongside a country road, slipping into a mailbox her handwritten manuscript, carefully wrapped in brown paper and addressed to a publishing company in some distant city.

Though I was only fourteen at the time of seeing this movie, as I said earlier, *My Brilliant Career* became a point of reference for me, along with my mother, for the rest of our shared lives together, as I myself aspired to be a writer--to have my own "brilliant career"--and my mother--either seeing talent in me, or regretting that her own dreams had gone unfulfilled--supported me in pursuing my love of writing.

Now, I don't think that I ever predicted that my dreams, which were planted in Portland, Oregon, thirty years ago would be made manifest through my work as a Unitarian Universalist minister, preaching to a young but growing congregation on Sunday mornings in Austin, Texas. I think I dreamed more along the lines of writing longhand at a large mahogany desk as a fire crackled in the hearth nearby and autumn leaves filled the

window out through which I stared as I searched for the next remarkable line.

Nevertheless, however brilliant it may be, my career--career coming from the Latin *carrus*, meaning “wheeled vehicle,” or “chariot”--has brought me here, and here I stand to talk to you this morning not about movies, not (at least too much) about my own dreams for a brilliant career, not about Australia or Judy Davis, but about another young woman--a religious ancestor, we could call her--whose commitment to finding her own way, her own path, her own career we might celebrate as exemplary for *all of us*, women and men, who wish to be free to pursue *our* greatest dreams. That woman, as you may have guessed from the cover of the order of service, the responsive reading, and the readings Roger shared earlier, is Margaret Fuller.

Now, before I tell you about her, I'm aware that just last Sunday, on Mother's Day, I offered you a fairly biographical sermon about another Unitarian ancestor, Julia Ward Howe. I'm not on a “great women of Unitarian Universalism” spree. It just so happens to be that next Sunday, May 23, will be Margaret Fuller's 200th birthday, and that Unitarian Universalists across the country are celebrating this bicentennial. Since next Sunday I will be out of town and we will have a guest speaker, I am

taking the liberty of celebrating Ms. Fuller's birthday one week early. If only there was going to be an accompanying birthday cake at our congregational meeting!

To be fair, I need to tell you at least a bit about Margaret Fuller's life in order to help lay out why she may be an inspiration. As Bell Gale Chevigny, editor of Fuller's writings, notes, Fuller was in some ways an "underground figure in American letters." Largely because of her gender, or how her gender was treated in her time, Fuller faced typical obstacles to gaining a respectful position in the public and literary domain. However, as the daughter of Unitarian parents living in eastern Massachusetts, Fuller was born, in 1810, into the heart of an exceptionally intellectual community, and as an only child after the early death of her sister, was tutored by her father in Latin, mathematics, history, English, music and modern languages, giving her both the education and the collegial companionship that would support her own pursuits as a writer. By the time she was a young woman, she was translating Goethe, and having her own writing published in local journals.

A major turning point came when she met and befriended Transcendentalist writer and philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson. Soon she was participating regularly in meetings with the mostly male leaders of the

Transcendentalist movement, and by the age of 29, she agreed to serve as editor of the Transcendentalist journal, *The Dial*.

Perhaps the pinnacle of her own success came in 1845, with the publication of her book, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*. In it she revealed herself, As Chevingy says in her introduction to *The Woman and the Myth*, as “a woman who can speak to us still on the problems of reconciling,” among other things, “feminism with other social issues, the strain of struggle with the desire for peace and acceptance, and intellectual idealism with an imperative to act on material reality.” In her own words, Fuller noted in her book, “What woman needs is not as a woman to act or rule, but as a nature to grow, as an intelligence to discern, as a soul to live freely and unimpeded, to unfold such powers as were given her.”

We can see this urgency in Fuller “as a nature to grow, as an intelligence to discern... to unfold such powers as were given her” reflected in the words of her contemporary James Freeman Clarke, as he observes that “one thing only she demanded of all her friends...that they should not be satisfied with the common routine of life,--that they should aspire to something greater, better, holier, than they have now attained.”

Perhaps it was this demand on her friends that Fuller also put on herself, when she left the United States in 1846 for Europe, where she

ended up joining in the Italian revolution, and writing back to the United States about it as a journalist. It was also in Italy that Fuller finally found love, with a young Italian man named Giovanni Angelo Ossoli. Having a child with him, Fuller eventually decided to head back to the United States with her partner and son. But just fifty yards from the shores of Fire Island in New York, after a long and arduous journey across the Atlantic, the ship wrecked in a storm, and Margaret Fuller, along with Ossoli and their infant child, perished. She was just forty years old.

Upon hearing of Fuller's tragic death, Ralph Waldo Emerson sent his friend Henry David Thoreau to the sight of the wreck, in hopes of recovering her body, or at least her personal effects. Thoreau, though he combed the beach for hours, was unable to find anything.

Still, these 200 hundred years since her birth and 160 years since her death, Margaret Fuller leaves us words as worthy of reading as Emerson's *Self-Reliance*, or Thoreau's *Walden*. She also leaves us a life and legacy that reflects her commitment to practicing what she preached. While I have, admittedly, filled your ears and minds once more with a good bit of feminist biography, it is Fuller's call that we *all*--women and men alike--need "as a nature to grow, as an intelligence to discern, as a soul to live freely and unimpeded," that I wish, these many pages in, to be the primary message

of this sermon this morning. As Fuller herself says, and as is printed on the cover of the order of service, “Give the soul free course, let the organization, both of body and mind, be freely developed, and the being will be fit for any and every relation to which it may be called.”

How do we, as a religious community, as a Unitarian Universalist community, see our way to making this so? How do we each and all support the free development of every soul? Some of the answers lie in our seven religious principles. Most immediately comes to mind for me our fourth principle, the free and responsible search for truth and meaning. Note, it doesn't say the “discovery of” or “conviction about” truth and meaning, but *search*. Fuller says in her early writing about religion, “I am yet ignorant of the religion of Revelation. Tangible promises! well defined hopes! are things of which I do not now feel the need...” We too, as a religious people, may be called out for being ignorant of the religion of capital R Revelation. But I like to remind us, as the great religious leaders of our faith have said many times before, “Revelation is not sealed!” In other words, revelation does not stop with the last chapter of the Bible, or the last words of any sacred text, but unfolds with every moment of our lives in which we are willing to seek truth and to discern.

Another of our seven principles that I would like to uphold in honor of Fuller's call for us all to "give the soul free course," to "let the organization, both of body and mind, be freely developed," is our fifth principle. I'm afraid I don't mention this one as often our fourth principle, though I believe we *all* guard it close to our Unitarian Universalist hearts--especially on days like today when we have a congregational meeting. Good thing I bring it up then. That principle is "the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large." While we may *mostly* focus on the democratic process as being about collective involvement in decision-making, and the majority vote ruling the way, I'd like to remind us that one of the most powerful parts of the democratic process comes from exercising the right of conscience, and that is the right and freedom of dissent.

As a woman in the nineteenth century, as her book is titled, Margaret Fuller dissented from conformity, from agreeing to the limits that were set upon her by society at large, and by doing so, was able to pursue and fulfill her own "brilliant career." We too, while not *idolizing* dissent, while refraining from being either *ornery* or *pugnacious* about it--as Unitarian Universalists *are* capable of being--we too are called to search our own hearts and souls when examining religious, cultural, familial, or political

norms. And we are then called to act from our conscience, both individually and as a religious community.

A small example of this work in progress, if I may. As most of you, I'm guessing, are aware, just a few weeks ago, our neighbors in Arizona passed a controversial immigration law which broadens the power of law enforcement officers to detain anyone suspected of being in the country illegally. Not surprisingly, undocumented residents and citizens who happen not to be white are scared. Families are under increased threat of being separated; people unable to show proper I.D. face possible arrest. The spirit of Lady Liberty welcoming the hungry and the poor has been replaced by increasing xenophobia. And that's *not* just in Arizona. A nationwide poll done by CBS news showed that while 51% of those polled believe the new law is "about right," 9% more believe it doesn't go far enough. Other polls vary in their numbers, but the general agreement is that most Americans polled support the Arizona law.

Now, polls are polls. We must take them with a grain of salt. But we must also take them, and the newly passed laws they are responding to, with our consciences at the forefront. So I was glad yesterday morning when, at an immigration reform meeting put on by Austin Interfaith, six Wildflowers including myself showed up expressing a desire to be in the

fight for justice. I am also glad to know that Bill Walker, one of the people at yesterday's meeting, and a member of our social action team, is working on a proposal for a congregational statement of conscience regarding immigration reform. Working from his right of conscience, Bill provides us as individuals and as a community the opportunity to do the same. If and when the time comes to vote on such a statement of conscience, each one of you will be free to discern and to voice what you believe is the right thing for us as a religious people to do.

And every *day*, each one of you is free to discern and to voice what you believe is the right thing to do--for our community, yes, but also for yourselves. Margaret Fuller proclaims, "a new hour is come. We would have every barrier thrown down." In that spirit, I ask you, what barriers would you have thrown down? How might you let yourself, "of body and mind, be freely developed" so that you feel "fit for any and every relation to which [you] may be called"? Is there a brilliant career awaiting you? Is there a passion, a love, a calling that you know you deserve to follow? Is there something, in Fuller's words, to which you aspire that is "higher, better, holier than [you have] now attained"?

If your answer happens to be no, and everything is a-ok, that's cool. I'm not here to say, "come on; isn't there something more you want?" I'm

not about wanting you to want more, more, more. But I am here to support you on your journey. I am here to tell you, when I was fourteen years old, I had a dream of a brilliant career, and though the path my chariot has taken has had many interesting twists and turns, and while it's not up to me to say whether I'm doing a brilliant *job* with my career, I can tell you that the word *brilliant* comes from the French *brilliant*, which means sparkling or shining, which reminds me of our chalice over there, and that makes me think to myself, a brilliant career indeed.

But it is only brilliant because we who aspire to greater lives, more peaceful lives, more just lives, more compassionate lives, for ourselves and for each other, keep this flame alive together. That being so, in memory of one woman who shined her light for those around her and for those to come; in honor of the brilliance that shines within us all, let us be free to experience the bright feeling of progression and to see our lives, our souls, made free and whole.

Amen.

SECOND OFFERING