

Margaret Fuller's thirst for truth and good still inspires



Highland Views

Chris Highland
Columnist

"The candlestick set in a low place has given light as faithfully, where it was needed, as that upon the hill."

This line is from the enlightened intellect of Margaret Fuller (1810-1850) in her groundbreaking book from 1845, "Woman in the Nineteenth Century." Fuller's writing lit a fire for early reformers even before the historic Seneca Falls conference on women's rights. She has been called "the mother of the women's rights movement in America." Her voice deserves to be heard today for its resounding relevance.

Margaret Fuller was from Cambridgeport, Massachusetts, and grew up in a house full of books. Her father, Timothy, a lawyer, politician and son of a pastor, taught her at home, where she learned Latin and Greek and studied French and Italian and became fluent in German.

Yet it was in her mother's garden where she spent "the best hours of my lonely childhood." Her highest desire was to grow into the "fair and flower-like nature" of her mother.

In her 20s Margaret taught school in Boston and Providence before agreeing to edit the Dial — a kind of Transcendentalist gospel — with her friend Ralph Waldo Emerson. She also translated German texts and led a group of women in a series of dialogues and presentations she called "Conversations."

In 1844 she published her reflections on a journey to the Great Lakes ("Summer on the Lakes") and moved to New York City, where she became an editor and writer for the New York Daily Tribune.

In 1846, Margaret became a foreign correspondent, traveling through England and France before settling in Italy. She filed articles throughout the Italian

revolution until sailing for America in 1850. Margaret, her husband and infant son died when the ship went down just off shore from New York. She was only 40.

This background is important because it provides some clue to Fuller's views on the world and religious beliefs that never had the chance to develop fully. With a teacher for a mother, a lawyer for a father and a pastor for a grandfather, Margaret's upbringing was steeped in books that prepared her for a rich intellectual journey. Her career in teaching, writing, translating and editing shaped her wide and creative perspective.

Her views that "man and woman ... are the two halves of one thought," that "all men and women are born free and equal," and that both women and men need to break out of their cultural "sphere" are often based on her understanding of God's original intent. Like many freethinkers, Fuller took faith seriously, while free to question and criticize restrictive traditions.

In the face of inequalities toward women she states, "We would have every arbitrary barrier thrown down. We would have every path laid open to woman as freely as to man." If this happened, Fuller says, "We believe the divine energy would pervade nature to a degree unknown in [history]" and that a "ravishing harmony of the spheres would ensue."

One of the highest and hardest barriers used by men to keep women in a lesser, subordinate position is religion.

Fuller describes Greek gods and goddesses in pairs, female and male, "equal in beauty, strength and calmness." A "harmony" between the assigned "spheres" of female and male will only be possible, she wrote, when women "have the time to think, and no traditions chain them."

For Fuller, "There is no reason why [women] should not discover that the

secrets of nature are open, the revelations of the spirit waiting for whoever will seek them."

Her pen becomes a bright candle as she poetically writes, "When the mind is once awakened to this consciousness, it will not be restrained by the habits of the past, but fly to seek the seeds of a heavenly future."

She isn't calling for an otherworldly faith but a very grounded awakening of reason that will plant the seeds of a more inclusive future.

Again, in "Woman of the Nineteenth Century," she touches the heart of her meaning: "Wherever religion (I mean the thirst for truth and good, not the love

of sect and dogma) had its course, the original design was apprehended in its simplicity."

Margaret Fuller was a great mind who lived her religion by thirsting for truth and good with a profound faith that lit a candle for equality and harmony.

Chris Highland served as a Protestant minister and interfaith chaplain for many years. He is a teacher, writer, freethinker and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife Carol, a Presbyterian minister, live in Asheville. Learn more at chighland.com. His new book, "A Freethinker's Gospel," is available from Pisgah Press.

Relish the Charm of Asheville
and the Beauty of Mountainside Living

Ivester Jackson | Blackstream | Christie's presents
TOWN MOUNTAIN PRESERVE

A premier gated community located less than 5 minutes from Downtown Asheville that also afford the luxuries, privacy and natural beauty of mountainside living.