

***The Spirit Leads:***

***Margaret Fuller in Her Own Words***

**Barry Andrews, Editor (Boston: Skinner House, 2010)**

**Discussion Guide  
for Unitarian Universalist Groups**

**by Polly Peterson**

**Polly Peterson** is the author of *Stirring the Nation's Heart: Eighteen Stories of Prophetic Unitarians and Universalists of the Nineteenth Century* (Skinner House, 2010) as well as a number of biographical stories for the Unitarian Universalist Association's Tapestry of Faith curriculum. She is a freelance writer whose work has been published by a wide variety of educational publishers. Peterson is a member of First Parish Unitarian Universalist in Concord, Massachusetts.

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# Introduction

*The Spirit Leads: Margaret Fuller In Her Own Words* (Skinner House Books, 2010), edited by Barry Andrews, presents quotations from Margaret Fuller's letters, journals, and published writings, preceded by a biographical introduction to Margaret Fuller's life and work. The quotations are arranged in eight thematic sections. Its structure is much like that of a labyrinth—a path that goes forward and backward, passing the same places more than once, but each time from a new vantage point. This arrangement invites the reader to engage directly with the ideas of this nineteenth-century public intellectual, progressive social theorist, and pioneering feminist and to explore how her thoughts resonate today.

During her lifetime, Fuller was best known for her unparalleled skill in the art of conversation—a skill she put to use in a formal way during the period 1839-1844 when she offered, by subscription, group "Conversations" on various broad themes. Fuller's intention was to provide an innovative program of adult education for intellectual women, who, in her day, were denied the opportunity to go to college and were seldom asked to put their ideas or thoughts into words. Although we have very few records documenting what the Conversations were actually like, this discussion guide gives participants a chance to explore some of Margaret Fuller's ideas, using a conversational method.

The guide offers plans for eight one-hour group Conversations, each focusing on selected material from the book. If you need to reduce the number of meetings, you can combine two or more sessions, selecting the quotations and questions best suited to your group. You are invited to follow Margaret Fuller's lead and let the direction of the Conversation determine the questions and topics you discuss next.

Fuller sometimes gave participants a writing assignment when their discussion led the group into difficult topics that would benefit from more concentrated thought. At a subsequent meeting, she read aloud from their papers as a stimulus for further discussion. Your group members might also use writing to deepen and clarify their thoughts. You may then choose to extend sessions to 90 minutes to allow participants more time for written reflection and for sharing those reflections with the group.

Goals:

- Invite participants to experience Margaret Fuller-style Conversations
- Introduce aspects of Fuller's life and work
- Invite participants to reflect together on spiritual, philosophical, cultural, or social topics using quotations from Fuller's work as a jumping off point.

***The Spirit Leads:***  
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**Discussion Guide**

**Session 1, Introduction to Margaret Fuller**

**Time:** 60 minutes [90 minutes]

**Suggested Reading:** Introduction (pages ix-xxii) in *The Spirit Leads*; the biography of [Margaret Fuller](#) in the *Dictionary of Unitarian & Universalist Biography*

**Materials**

- Newsprint, markers, and tape
- Chalice, candle, and lighter or LED battery-operated candle
- *The Spirit Leads: Margaret Fuller in Her Own Words*

**Preparation**

- Write these covenant points on newsprint, and post:
  - We agree to speak from our own experiences and perspectives.
  - We agree to listen respectfully to the experiences and perspectives of other people.
  - We agree to pay attention to the group process, making sure that everyone has an opportunity to speak and to listen.
- Write the discussion questions for this session on newsprint, and set aside:
  - How does Margaret Fuller's experience compare with your own spiritual awakenings?
  - Have you had experiences like hers that you continue to draw on for sustenance and strength?
  - How might this passage help us understand Margaret Fuller's life and work?

## **SESSION PLAN**

### **Chalice Lighting/Opening Reading/Introductions** (5 minutes) [5 minutes]

Light the chalice and remind the group that we have come together to discuss the ideas of Margaret Fuller, a remarkable Unitarian of the nineteenth century. Share this quotation from Margaret Fuller's *Journal Fragments, 1840*:

*. . . thoughts move and push forth from my heart like young birds from the nest, but as yet, if any tries to take wing it falls back into the nest ruffled and trembling with cold.*

*We mortals live too imperfectly to be happy. While brooding on our birds we famish and our bright plumes fall off. I would brood a beautiful lark into life every night and let it soar with the morning sun. I would let loose whole flights of little birds with every new fleece of snow. I would drop them numerous as hail, gentle as manna, upon the harvest field. There is no need of an Inferno, it will be punishment enough for every fault, if we never become creators!*

### **Creating a Covenant** (5 minutes) [5 minutes]

Post the covenant points you wrote. Invite participants to clarify, add, or amend any points, and note the group's changes on the newsprint. Invite participants to accept the covenant by voice or show of hands.

### **Introductions** (5 minutes) [15 minutes]

Invite participants to introduce themselves and say one thing about their interest in Margaret Fuller, the Transcendentalists, or feminist thought. Remind the group that they can refer to the Chronology of Margaret Fuller's Life on pages *xxi* and *xxii* of *The Spirit Leads* during the session.

[90-minute session: Invite participants to share their role(s) and length of time in the congregation and, if they wish, something in *The Spirit Leads* that resonated for them personally.]

### **Conversation: Spiritual Awakenings** (20 minutes) [35 minutes]

Tell participants they will now hear Fuller's description of an experience that took place when she was 21 years old. Read aloud, or invite a volunteer to read aloud, from the book's *Introduction*, beginning at the top of page *xi* and stopping at the end of the third paragraph (with the words "by a later love").

Post the discussion questions. Invite participants to respond one at a time as they are moved and then to respond to what others have shared. Remind them that the group has covenanted to speak from their own experience and perspectives and to listen respectfully to the experiences and perspectives of others. Gently encourage participation by all members of the group.

[90-minute session: Read aloud a longer passage from the letter quoted here, which appears on pages 6-8.]

**Conversation: Fuller's Life and Times** (20 minutes) [30 minutes]

Briefly review some important points about Fuller's life, using these words or your own:

*Margaret Fuller was born in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1810. Her father educated her as if she were a boy preparing for Harvard College, and her keen intellect readily adapted itself to scholarly thinking. By her early twenties she had attained an impressive breadth and depth of knowledge, but women of her day had few outlets for intellectual talent. She decided to write a biography of the German writer Goethe, her literary hero, but her father died unexpectedly when she was 25, and she began teaching to support the family.*

*From 1839 to 1844, Fuller earned her living by offering Conversations for women. The Conversations led to the writing of her most famous book, Woman in the Nineteenth Century, which was published in 1845. By the time the book came out, Fuller was working in New York City as an arts critic and social commentator for the New York Tribune. By this time, her focus had begun shifting from an inward concentration on self-culture to an outward focus on social reform. She left for Europe in 1846, where she became involved in the Italian revolution of 1848. Two years later, at the age of 40, she died in a shipwreck with her Italian husband and their young son.*

*Fuller's spiritual life focused on a personal, intuitive relationship to the divine. Although she was not particularly interested in going to church, she was a deeply religious person. She became close friends with Ralph Waldo Emerson and others in the Transcendentalist inner circle. Margaret Fuller fervently believed in the power of humans to improve themselves and society. She was committed to conversation as a means to self-improvement and social uplift. "Conversation is*

*my natural element," she said. "I need to be called out, and never think alone, without imagining some companion."*

Ask:

- Which aspects of Margaret Fuller's life touch or intrigue you most?
- Do you have unanswered questions about her?

Invite participants to respond one at a time as they are moved.

[90-minute session: Invite volunteers to do some research on Fuller's life, before the next session, and seek answers to the unanswered questions that most interested the group during this Conversation. Ask them to prepare to report back at the next session.]

**Closing** (5 minutes) [5 minutes]

Share these words about Margaret Fuller written after her death by her friend Sarah Freeman Clarke:

*Many of us recoiled from her at first; we feared her too powerful dominion over us, but as she was powerful, so she was tender; as she was exacting, she was generous. She demanded our best, and she gave us her best. To be with her was the most powerful stimulus, intellectual and moral. It was like the sun shining upon plants and causing buds to open into flowers. This was her gift, and she could no more help exercising it than the sun can help shining.*

Invite participants into a moment of silence to honor this time you have had to share ideas, to speak and be heard, and to connect in spirit with those who have gone before.

Invite participants to do the pre-reading for the next session (pages 1-17 of *The Spirit Leads* for Session 2). Thank the group and extinguish the chalice.

***The Spirit Leads:***  
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**Discussion Guide**

**Session 2, Our Pilgrimage Here – The Quest  
for Personal Meaning and Spiritual Wholeness**

**Time:** 60 minutes [90 minutes]

**Suggested Reading:** Pages 1-17 of *The Spirit Leads*

**Materials**

- Covenant, from Session 1
- Newsprint, markers, and tape
- Chalice, candle, and lighter or LED battery-operated candle
- *The Spirit Leads: Margaret Fuller in Her Own Words*

**Preparation**

- Post the covenant the group made in Session 1.
- Write the discussion questions for this session on newsprint:
  - Which parts of Fuller's belief ring true for you?
  - Do you share Fuller's essential optimism?
  - What are your own beliefs about time and eternity?

## SESSION PLAN

### **Chalice Lighting/Opening Reading/Introductions** (5 minutes) [5 minutes]

Light the chalice and share these words of Margaret Fuller:

*We need great energy and self-reliance to endure today. My age may not be the best, my position may be bad, my character ill-formed, but thou, Oh Spirit, hast no regard to aught but the seeking heart.*

Welcome participants. Invite them to share their names, particularly if there are new people in the group. Review the covenant from Session 1.

### **Optional: Writing Assignment from the Previous Session** [20 minutes]

[90-minute session: Have volunteers share their research on Fuller's life and the answers to the questions that interested the group in the previous session. Encourage participants to discuss the research. Does it give them a different understanding of what they have read so far in *The Spirit Leads*?]

### **Conversation: Body, Soul, and Gender** (15 minutes) [20 minutes]

Remind participants of the quotation on page 1 of *The Spirit Leads*, in which Fuller states that a "true philosophy" will seek to put the material part of a person "in its place, as servant and minister to the soul." Read aloud, or have volunteers read aloud, the first passage on page 10. Ask:

- To what extent are your own beliefs about gender and soul the same as or different from Fuller's?

[90-minute session: Encourage participants to take a few minutes and use writing to deepen and clarify their thoughts on this topic. Tell them they may share their written reflections at the next session as a stimulus for further discussion.]

**Conversation: Aspirations** (35 minutes) [40 minutes]

Read aloud, or invite a volunteer to read aloud, the second and third passages on page 15, ending on page 16. Remind participants that in a Conversation modeled on Margaret Fuller's style, the emphasis is on clearly expressing ideas in a group setting, with group members working together to clarify and refine. Invite the group to follow this practice as they discuss Fuller's essential optimism about the human spirit.

Post the three discussion questions, and invite each person to respond to the questions in turn. After all have spoken, invite participants to use questions and discussion to clarify ideas and deepen understanding.

[90-minute session: Encourage participants to take a few minutes and use writing to deepen and clarify their thoughts on this topic. Tell them they may share their written reflections at the next session as a stimulus for further discussion.]

**Closing** (5 minutes) [5 minutes]

Share these words of Margaret Fuller, from page 17 of *The Spirit Leads*:

*Sometime, in God's good time, let me live as swift and earnest as a flash of the eye. Meanwhile, let me gather force slowly and drift along lazily, like yonder cloud, and be content to end in a few tears at last.*

Invite participants into a moment of silence to honor this time you have had to share ideas, to speak and be heard, and to connect in spirit with those who have gone before.

Invite participants to do the pre-reading (pages 19-32 of *The Spirit Leads*) for the next session. Thank the group and extinguish the chalice.

# ***The Spirit Leads:***

## ***Margaret Fuller in Her Own Words***

### **Discussion Guide**

## **Session 3, A Radiant Sovereign Self – The Quest for Self-Reliance**

**Time:** 60 minutes [90 minutes]

**Suggested Reading:** Pages 19-32 of *The Spirit Leads*

#### **Materials**

- Chalice, candle, and lighter or LED battery-operated candle
- Covenant, from Session 1
- Newsprint, markers, and tape
- *The Spirit Leads: Margaret Fuller in Her Own Words*

#### **Preparation**

- Post the covenant the group made in Session 1.
- Write the discussion questions for this session on newsprint:
  - What tensions between independence and relationship does Fuller identify in her time?
  - If the same tensions exist today, what form do they take?

- Do you agree that dependence or excessive devotion by one person in a marriage degrades the relationship for both?

## **SESSION PLAN**

### **Chalice Lighting/Opening Reading/Introductions** (5 minutes) [5 minutes]

Light the chalice and share these words of Margaret Fuller, found on page 19 of *The Spirit Leads*:

*My history presents much superficial, temporary tragedy. The woman in me kneels and weeps in tender rapture; the man in me rushes forth, but only to be baffled. Yet the time will come, when, from the union of this tragic king and queen, shall be born a radiant sovereign self.*

Welcome participants and invite them to share their names, particularly if there are new people in the group.

### **Optional: Writing Assignments from the Previous Session** [20 minutes]

[90-minute session: Have volunteers share their writings on topics from the previous session. Encourage the group to discuss what the participants have written.]

### **Conversation: Religion as Guide** (20 minutes) [25 minutes]

Read aloud, or invite a volunteer to read aloud, the first passage on page 20 and the passage that begins at the bottom of page 20 and ends on page 21 of *The Spirit Leads*.

Say, in these words or your own, "At age 23, Fuller says she wants a religion that she trusts absolutely to guide and comfort her, yet she is never inclined to adopt the religious creeds that offer many people comfort and certainty."

Ask:

- What are the competing impulses she is experiencing?

- How have you struggled with similar feelings?

Read aloud, or invite a volunteer to read aloud, the second paragraph of the passage on page 32. Ask:

- Does Fuller's notion of “the church invisible” resonate for you?
- What sort of communion with others do you think Fuller longs for?

[90-minute session: Encourage participants to take a few minutes and use writing to deepen and clarify their thoughts. Tell them that they may share their written reflections at the next session as a stimulus for further discussion.]

**Conversation: Self-Reliance in Marriage** (30 minutes) [35 minutes]

Read aloud, or invite a volunteer to read, the second passage on page 26, in which Fuller discusses the roles of women and men in society. Remind participants that in a Conversation modeled on Margaret Fuller's style, the emphasis is on clearly expressing ideas in a group setting, with group members working together to clarify and refine their ideas. Invite the group to follow this practice and work together to clarify and deepen their understanding of and response to Fuller's feelings about independence and relationship.

Post the discussion questions, and invite each person to respond to the questions in turn.

After all have spoken, invite participants to use questions and discussion to deepen and clarify what has been said.

[90-minute session: Encourage participants to take a few minutes and use writing to deepen and clarify their thoughts. Tell them they may share their written reflections at the next session as a stimulus for further discussion.]

**Closing** (5 minutes) [5 minutes]

Share these words of Margaret Fuller, from page 22 of *The Spirit Leads*:

*What is done here at home in my heart is my religion.*

Invite participants into a moment of silence to honor this time you have had to share ideas, to speak and be heard, and to connect in spirit with those who have gone before.

Invite participants to do the pre-reading (pages 33-42 of *The Spirit Leads*) for the next session. Thank the group and extinguish the chalice.

# ***The Spirit Leads:***

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### **Discussion Guide**

#### **Session 4, The Majesty of Earth – A Mystical Connection to Nature**

**Time:** 60 minutes [90 minutes]

**Suggested Reading:** Pages 33-42 of *The Spirit Leads*

#### **Materials**

- Covenant, from Session 1
- Newsprint, markers, and tape
- Chalice, candle, and lighter or LED battery-operated candle
- *The Spirit Leads: Margaret Fuller in Her Own Words*

#### **Preparation**

- Post the covenant the group made in Session 1.
- Write the discussion questions for this session on newsprint:
  - What is beauty?
  - Do you find spiritual meaning in nature's beauty?

- Fuller quotes Emerson as saying that pure satisfaction with the beauty of the present moment alternates in every mind with a longing to know more. Do you agree?
- Are you more at home with experiencing nature as a matter of emotion or of thought? How does this affect your relationship to the natural world?

## **SESSION PLAN**

### **Chalice Lighting/Opening Reading/Introductions (10 minutes) [10 minutes]**

Light the chalice and share these words of Margaret Fuller, found on page 34 of *The Spirit Leads*:

*When I feel, as I do this morning, the poem of existence, I am repaid for all trial. The bitterness of wounded affection, the disgust at unworthy care, the aching sense of how far deeds are transcended by our lowest aspirations, pass away as I lean on the bosom of Nature, and inhale new life from her breath.*

Welcome participants and invite them to share their names, particularly if there are new people in the group.

Invite participants to reflect briefly on their own relationship to nature. Go around the circle, inviting each person to provide a word or phrase that comes readily to mind when they think about nature.

### **Optional: Writing Assignments from the Previous Session [20 minutes]**

[90-minute session: Have volunteers share their writings on topics from the previous session. Encourage the group to discuss what participants have written.]

**Conversation: Nature and Beauty** (30 minutes) [35 minutes]

Read aloud, or invite a volunteer to read aloud, the first passage on page 35, in which Fuller recounts a conversation she had with Ralph Waldo Emerson, and the first complete passage on page 39.

Remind participants that in a Conversation modeled on Margaret Fuller's style, the emphasis is on clearly expressing ideas in a group setting, with group members working together to clarify and refine their ideas. Invite the group to follow this practice and work together to clarify their understanding of and deepen their response to Fuller's feelings about beauty.

Post the discussion questions, and invite each person to respond to the questions in turn.

After all have spoken, invite participants to use questions and discussion to clarify and deepen their understanding.

[90-minute session: Encourage participants to take a few minutes and use writing to deepen and clarify their thoughts on this topic. Tell them they may share their written reflections at the next session as a stimulus for further discussion.]

**Conversation: Learning to Look** (15 minutes) [20 minutes]

Tell the group they will now hear what Fuller wrote about a trip she took to the Great Lakes region in 1843. Read aloud, or invite a volunteer to read aloud, the passage that begins on page 40 and ends on page 41.

Ask:

- What landscapes are most beautiful to you?

- Have you ever found beauty in a landscape that seemed barren at first and only gradually revealed its beauty?

[90-minute session: Encourage participants to take a few minutes and use writing to deepen and clarify their thoughts on this topic. Tell them they may share their written reflections at the next session as a stimulus for further discussion.]

**Closing** (5 minutes) [5 minutes]

Share with the group that when Fuller traveled to the Great Lakes region, she was struck by the relationship of native people with the natural world. She also expressed dismay at the way the Indians were treated.

Read aloud the passage from *Summer on the Lakes, in 1843*, found on at the bottom of page 41 and continuing on page 42.

Invite participants into a moment of silence to honor this time you have had to share ideas, to speak and be heard, and to connect in spirit with those who have gone before.

Invite participants to do the pre-reading (pages 43-56 of *The Spirit Leads*) for the next session. Thank the group and extinguish the chalice.

# ***The Spirit Leads:***

## ***Margaret Fuller in Her Own Words***

### **Discussion Guide**

#### **Session 5, A God, a Beauty, and Perfection – A Religious Call to Hopefulness and Idealism**

**Time:** 60 minutes [90 minutes]

**Suggested Reading:** Pages 43-56 of *The Spirit Leads*

#### **Materials**

- Covenant, from Session 1
- Newsprint, markers, and tape
- Chalice, candle, and lighter or LED battery-operated candle
- *The Spirit Leads: Margaret Fuller in Her Own Words*

#### **Preparation**

- Post the covenant the group made in Session 1.
- Write the first set of discussion questions for this session on newsprint:
  - How did Fuller's status as a woman affect her relationship to organized religion?
  - To what extent does today's Unitarian Universalism still hold a tension between the desire for a place to come together for religious purposes and the Transcendentalist emphasis on personal insight?
- Write the second set of discussion questions for this session on newsprint:
  - How do you react to Fuller's idea about various manifestations of divine power?

- What words do you use to express your experience of the Divine, or do you reject this concept entirely?

## **SESSION PLAN**

### **Chalice Lighting/Opening Reading/Introductions** (15 minutes) [15 minutes]

Light the chalice and share these words of Margaret Fuller, found on page 55 of *The Spirit Leads*:

*Life is richly worth living, with its continual revelations of mighty woe, yet infinite hope; and I take it to my breast. Amid these scenes of beauty, all that is little, foreign, unworthy, vanishes like a dream. So shall it be some time amidst the Everlasting Beauty, when true joy shall begin and never cease.*

Invite participants to share a reflection on their own relationship to the world. Ask:

- Do you tend to be idealistic and hopeful, or is your vision less optimistic?

### **Optional: Writing Assignments from the Previous Session** [20 minutes]

[90-minute session: Have volunteers share their writings on topics from the previous session. Encourage the group to discuss what the participants have written.]

### **Conversation: Fuller as Transcendentalist** (15 minutes) [20 minutes]

Read aloud, or invite a volunteer to read aloud, a passage from the Introduction to *The Spirit Leads*, from the second paragraph on page xv to the end of the second full paragraph on page xvi.

Say, in these words or your own, "Some of the nineteenth-century Transcendentalists hoped to reform the Unitarian church from within; others decided to place their focus outside the church."

Post the first set of discussion questions, and invite participants to respond.

[90-minute session: Encourage participants to take a few minutes and use writing to deepen and clarify their thoughts on this topic. Tell them they may share their written reflections at the next session as a stimulus for further discussion.]

### **Conversation: Manifestations of God** (25 minutes) [30 minutes]

Read aloud, or invite a volunteer to read aloud, three passages from *The Spirit Leads*: the second passage on page 50, the second passage on page 54, and the last passage on page 55.

Remind participants that in a Conversation modeled on Margaret Fuller's style, the emphasis is on clearly expressing ideas in a group setting, with group members working together to clarify and refine their ideas. Invite the group to follow this practice and work together to clarify their understanding of and deepen their response to Fuller's ideas about God.

Post the second set of discussion questions, and invite each person to respond to the questions in turn.

After all have spoken, invite participants to use questions and discussion to deepen and clarify their understanding of what has been said.

[90-minute session: Encourage participants to take a few minutes to use writing to deepen and clarify their thoughts on this topic. Tell them they may share their written reflections at the next session as a stimulus for further discussion.]

**Closing** (5 minutes) [5 minutes]

Share the following words of Margaret Fuller, found on page 56 of *The Spirit Leads*:

*I was in a state of celestial happiness, which lasted a great while. For months, I was all radiant with faith, and love, and life. I began to be myself. Night and day were equally beautiful, and the lowest and the highest equally holy. Before, it had seemed as if the Divine only gleamed upon me; but then it poured into and through me a tide of light. I have passed down from the rosy mountain now; but I do not forget its pure air, nor how the storms looked as they rolled beneath my feet. I have received my assurance, and if the shadows should lie upon me for a century, they could never make me forgetful of the true hour. Patiently I bide my time.*

Invite participants into a moment of silence to honor this time you have had to share ideas, to speak and be heard, and to connect in spirit with those who have gone before. Invite participants to do the pre-reading (pages 57-77 of *The Spirit Leads*) for the next session. Thank the group and extinguish the chalice.

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### **Discussion Guide**

#### **Session 6, A New Manifestation – The Quest for Social Justice**

**Time:** 60 minutes [90 minutes]

**Suggested Reading:** Pages 57-77 of *The Spirit Leads*

#### **Materials**

- Covenant, from Session 1
- Newsprint, markers, and tape
- Chalice, candle, and lighter or LED battery-operated candle
- *The Spirit Leads: Margaret Fuller In Her Own Words*

#### **Preparation**

- Post the covenant the group made in Session 1.
- Write the first set of discussion questions for this session on newsprint:
  - Does anything surprise you about what Fuller had to say?
  - What overarching theme(s) do these three excerpts from *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* share?

- These ideas seemed extremely radical at the time—do any still seem so now?
- Write the second set of discussion questions for this session on newsprint:
  - Do you agree with Fuller's ideas about crime and punishment?
  - To what extent do you consider prostitution and other crimes to be the responsibility of the individual? To what extent do you consider crime to be caused by societal ills?

## **SESSION PLAN**

### **Chalice Lighting/Opening Reading/Introductions (5 minutes) [5 minutes]**

Light the chalice and share these words of Margaret Fuller, found on page 69 of *The Spirit Leads*:

*Much has been achieved in this country since the first Declaration of Independence. America is rich and strong; she has shown great talent and energy; vast prospects of aggrandizement open before her. But the noble sentiment which she expressed in her early youth is tarnished; she has shown that righteousness is not her chief desire, and her name is no longer a watchword for the highest hopes to the rest of the world. She knows this, but takes it very easily; she feels that she is growing richer and more powerful, and that seems to suffice her.*

Welcome participants and invite them to share their names, particularly if there are new people in the group. Remind participants that Fuller was a great believer in the ideals expressed in the American Declaration of Independence. Her idealism led her to activism—first, as she wrote to awaken people to the need for social justice, and then,

as she participated in the Italian fight for independence as a nurse in a military hospital.

**Optional: Writing Assignments from the Previous Session** [15 minutes]

[90-minute session: Have volunteers share their writings on topics from the previous session. Encourage the group to discuss what the participants have written.]

**Conversation: American Indians** (15 minutes) [20 minutes]

Read aloud, or invite a volunteer to read aloud, the second passage on page 58 and the first two on page 59. Ask:

- What questions do these passages bring to mind about the establishment of our nation?
- To what extent do today's Americans and our contemporary society acknowledge what happened to Native Americans at the hands of non-Indian settlers?

[90-minute session: Encourage participants to take a few minutes to use writing to deepen and clarify their thoughts. Tell them they may share their written reflections at the next session as a stimulus for further discussion.]

**Conversation: Equal Rights for Women** (15 minutes) [20 minutes]

Tell the group Margaret Fuller is best known today as an early feminist. Read aloud or have volunteers read aloud from *The Spirit Leads* three passages from her most celebrated work, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*: the middle passage on page 62, the last on page 64, and the last complete paragraph (four sentences) on page 65.

Post the first set of discussion questions and invite participants to respond.

[90-minute session: Encourage participants to take a few minutes to use writing to deepen and clarify their thoughts on this topic. Tell them they may share their written reflections at the next session as a stimulus for further discussion.]

**Conversation: Caring for the Dispossessed** (20 minutes) [25 minutes]

Tell participants that they will now hear what Fuller wrote about visiting women's prisons during her time as a writer for the *New York Tribune*. Read aloud, or invite a volunteer to read aloud, the first passage on page 72 and the first full paragraph of the second passage on page 72 of *The Spirit Leads*.

Remind participants that in a Conversation modeled on Margaret Fuller's style, the emphasis is on clearly expressing ideas in a group setting, with group members working together to clarify and refine their ideas. Invite the group to follow this practice and work together to clarify and deepen their understanding of and response to Fuller's thoughts on crime and society's attitude toward women in prison.

Post the second set of discussion questions. Invite each person to respond to the questions in turn.

After all have spoken, invite participants to use questions and discussion to deepen and clarify their understanding of what has been said.

[90-minute session: Encourage participants to take a few minutes to use writing to deepen and clarify their thoughts on this topic. Tell them they may share their written reflections at the next session as a stimulus for further discussion.]

**Closing** (5 minutes) [5 minutes]

Share these words of Margaret Fuller, found on page 77 of *The Spirit Leads*:

*Friends, countrymen, and lovers of virtue, lovers of freedom, lovers of truth! Be on the alert; rest not supine in your lives, but remember:  
Mankind is one,  
And beats with one great heart.*

Invite participants into a moment of silence to honor this time you have had to share ideas, to speak and be heard, and to connect in spirit with those who have gone before. Invite participants to do the pre-reading (pages 79-90 of *The Spirit Leads*) for the next session. Thank the group and extinguish the chalice.

# ***The Spirit Leads:***

## ***Margaret Fuller in Her Own Words***

### **Discussion Guide**

#### **Session 7, These My Contemporaries -- The Quest for Intellectual Engagement**

**Time:** 60 minutes [90 minutes]

**Suggested Reading:** Pages 79-90 of *The Spirit Leads*

#### **Materials**

- Covenant, from Session 1
- Newsprint, markers, and tape
- Chalice, candle, and lighter or LED battery-operated candle
- *The Spirit Leads: Margaret Fuller in Her Own Words*

#### **Preparation**

- Post the covenant the group made in Session 1.
- Write the first set of discussion questions for this session on newsprint:
  - What does Fuller find disappointing about Emerson?
  - What does she find admirable?
  - In what ways does she feel influenced by him?
  - Why might it be a good thing to come into a "questioning season"—that is, to become disappointed in people who have inspired us?
- Write the second set of discussion questions for this session on newsprint:
  - What did the Transcendentalists believe?
  - What were they trying to accomplish?

- What echoes of our Transcendentalist heritage do we find in today's Unitarian Universalism?

## **SESSION PLAN**

### **Chalice Lighting/Opening Reading/Introductions** (5 minutes) [5 minutes]

Light the chalice and share these words about Margaret Fuller written by Ednah Cheney, who attended Fuller's Conversations when she was young:

*The first mistake that the world has made in its effort to comprehend this large nature is in considering her, not as a typical woman, but as an exceptional one, whose powers were masculine, and who wielded some magic sword which she alone had strength to grasp . . . With all the force of her intellect, all the strength of her will, all her self-denial and power of thought, she was essentially and thoroughly a woman, and she won her victories not by borrowing the peculiar weapons of man, but by using her own with courage and skill.*

Welcome participants and invite them to share their names, particularly if there are new people in the group.

Explain that Margaret Fuller was well acquainted with many well known people of her time, including Poe, Hawthorne, Horace Greeley, Lydia Maria Child, and Julia Ward Howe. In Europe, she met George Sand and became friends with Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, as well as political revolutionaries such as Guiseppe Mazzini, the leader of Italy's struggle for independence and unification. Perhaps the most famous of her friends was Ralph Waldo Emerson.

### **Optional: Writing Assignments from the Previous Session** [20 minutes]

[90-minute session: Have volunteers share their writings on topics from the previous session. Encourage the group to discuss what the participants have written.

### **Conversation: Ralph Waldo Emerson** (30 minutes) [35 minutes]

Say, in these words or your own, "Although the friendship between Ralph Waldo Emerson and Margaret Fuller was sometimes troubled, it was an important crucible for the development of their ideas."

Read aloud, or invite a volunteer to read aloud, the passage beginning at the bottom of page 80 and ending on page 81 of *The Spirit Leads*.

Remind participants that in a Conversation modeled on Margaret Fuller's style, the emphasis is on clearly expressing ideas in a group setting, with group members working together to clarify and refine their ideas. Invite the group to follow this practice and work together to clarify their understanding of and deepen their response to Fuller's thoughts about her friendship with Emerson.

Post the first set of discussion questions. Invite each person to respond to the questions in turn.

After all have spoken, invite participants to use questions and discussion to deepen and clarify their understanding.

[90-minute session: Encourage participants to take a few minutes to use writing to deepen and clarify their thoughts on this topic. Tell them they may share their written reflections at the next session as a stimulus for further discussion.]

**Conversation: Transcendentalism** (20 minutes) [25 minutes]

Tell the group that beginning in 1840, Emerson and Fuller were the editors of *The Dial: A Magazine for Literature, Philosophy, and Religion*. Explain that they will now hear part of a letter in which Fuller describes the varied group of intellectuals, known as the Transcendentalists, whose ideas were published in *The Dial*. Read aloud, or have a volunteer read aloud, the passage beginning at the bottom of page 85 and ending on page 86 of *The Spirit Leads*.

Post the second set of discussion questions. Invite participants to respond.

[90-minute session: Encourage participants to take a few minutes to use writing to deepen and clarify their thoughts on this topic. Tell them they may share their written reflections at the next session as a stimulus for further discussion.]

**Closing** (5 minutes) [5 minutes]

Share these words of Margaret Fuller:

*I begin to see a change in the forms of these my contemporaries who have filled my eye. It is a sight that makes me pensive, but awakens, I think, a deeper tenderness and even a higher hope than did these forms in the greatest perfection they ever attained. For they still only promised beauty, not gave it, and now seeing the swift changes of time I feel what an illusion all ill, all imperfection*

*is. As they fail to justify my expectation, it only rises the higher and they become dearer as the heralds of a great fulfillment.*

Invite participants into a moment of silence to honor this time you have had to share ideas, to speak and be heard, and to connect in spirit with those who have gone before. Invite participants to read pages 91-111 of *The Spirit Leads* before the next, final session. Thank the group and extinguish the chalice.

# ***The Spirit Leads:***

## ***Margaret Fuller in Her Own Words***

### **Discussion Guide**

#### **Session 8, When Souls Meet and The Magic Mirror – The Power of Love, Friendship, Art, and Creativity**

**Time:** 60 minutes [90 minutes]

**Suggested Reading:** Pages 91-111 of *The Spirit Leads*

#### **Materials**

- Covenant, from Session 1
- Newsprint, markers, and tape
- Chalice, candle, and lighter or LED battery-operated candle
- *The Spirit Leads: Margaret Fuller in Her Own Words*

#### **Preparation**

- Post the covenant the group made in Session 1.
- Write the first set of discussion questions for this session on newsprint, and set aside:
  - How might you restate Fuller's ideas about love and friendship?
  - How do those ideas resonate with your own? In what ways do they not resonate?
  - How might the intensity of Fuller's ideas have made her friends uncomfortable?
  - How might they have made friendship with her especially meaningful?
- Write the second set of discussion questions for this session on newsprint, and set aside:

- What do you consider to be important about the arts?
- Do you agree with Fuller about the role of the critic?
- In what ways would Fuller's notion of the role of the critic be at home in today's world of blogs and online commentary?

## **SESSION PLAN**

### **Chalice Lighting/Opening Reading/Introductions (5 minutes) [5 minutes]**

Light the chalice and share these words of Ralph Waldo Emerson about Margaret Fuller's visits to his Concord, Massachusetts, home in the late 1830s:

*Her arrival was a holiday . . . All tasks that could be suspended were put aside to catch the favourable hour, in walking, riding, or boating, to talk with this joyful guest, who brought wit, anecdotes, love-stories, tragedies, oracles with her, and with her broad web of relations to so many fine friends, seemed like the queen of some parliament of love, who carried the key to all confidences . . . She drew her companions to surprising confessions. . . . [Her conversations] interested me in every manner—talent, memory, wit, stern introspection, poetic play, religion, the finest personal feeling, the aspects of the future, each followed each in full activity, and left me, I remember, enriched and sometimes astonished by the gifts of my guest.*

Welcome participants and invite them to share their names, particularly if there are new people in the group.

### **Optional: Writing Assignments from the Previous Session [20 minutes]**

[90-minute session: Have volunteers share their writings on topics from the previous session. Encourage the group to discuss what the participants have written.]

### **Conversation: The Nature of Love and Friendship (35 minutes) [40 minutes]**

Read aloud, or invite volunteers to read aloud, the second passage on page 93 and the last passage on page 101 of *The Spirit Leads*.

Remind participants that in a Conversation modeled on Margaret Fuller's style, the emphasis is on clearly expressing ideas in a group setting, with group members working together to clarify and refine their ideas. Invite the group to follow this practice and work together to clarify and deepen their understanding of and response to Fuller's ideas about love and friendship.

Post the first set of discussion questions, and invite each person to respond to the questions in turn.

After all have spoken, invite participants to use questions and discussion to deepen and clarify their understanding of what has been said.

[90-minute session: Encourage participants to take a few minutes and use writing to deepen and clarify their thoughts on this topic.]

**Conversation: Importance of the Arts and the Critic** (15 minutes) [20 minutes]

Tell the group that Margaret Fuller was highly respected as the *New York Tribune's* art critic. Read aloud, or invite a volunteer to read aloud, both passages on page 103 of *The Spirit Leads*, ending on page 104.

Post the second set of discussion questions, and invite participants to respond.

[90-minute session: Encourage participants to take a few minutes and use writing to deepen and clarify their thoughts on this topic.]

**Closing** (5 minutes) [5 minutes]

Share these words about Margaret Fuller, written by her friend James Freeman Clarke to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, one of her biographers:

*Margaret had so many aspects to her soul that she might furnish material for a hundred biographers, not all could be said even then.*

Invite participants into a moment of silence to honor this time you have had to share ideas, to speak and be heard, and to connect in spirit with those who have gone before. Extinguish the chalice and bid the group farewell.