

Belonging
Rev. Carol Allman-Morton
UUMSB
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Reading: Rev. Dr. Lynn Ungar, in *Quest for Meaning*, October 2016, excerpt from RE article, <https://www.questformeaning.org/quest-article/resources-living-october-2016/>

Sermon:

I was talking with a friend last week about something going on with one of her kids that came down to an issue of belonging. This junior high aged kid was struggling with what he felt he needed to do in order to belong with his peers. In an effort to belong, he said things that he didn't believe or mean, and he was dealing with the consequences. Do you know anyone who had a great experience in Junior High? Maybe there were a few... As humans we need to connect and belong somewhere, and as we grow up, we figure out what that means for us as individuals, as we venture outside of our families, schools, neighborhoods or communities. We figure out more of who we are, what communities we want to be a part of, and hopefully, how we will connect our values and choices. In communities not of our choosing, especially our families of origin, belonging can be complicated. Sometimes our worldview or values can be different than those of our parents, or family, and I imagine for kids where that is true, who are stuck in unsafe or really challenging conditions, this time of social distancing is especially perilous and hard, a layer of trauma on trauma. And today is also layered. Mother's Day – originally envisioned as a day to call mother's to action for peace by Julia Ward Howe, has become a day to honor those who mother. A worthy endeavor, though not all hearts and flowers. Today we may be experiencing grief, remembering the loss of someone who loved us, taught us, and helped us figure out who we are, or, we may be navigating the challenging waters of grieving someone who hurt or abandoned us. We may be grieving not being able to see our mothers, children, or grandbabies because of social distancing. If that is true for you, I am sorry. It is all very hard, and I am right there with you.

Margaret Fuller was a 19th century Transcendentalist leader from the Unitarian branch of our UU family tree, who struggled with finding a community and support. She was a genius. She taught herself Latin, Greek, French, German and Italian. Though she was not allowed to attend college, she was a prolific writer and an important thinker. She was the first editor of *The Dial*, the Transcendentalist journal. And among many roles, she was the first foreign correspondent for an American newspaper, covering the Italian revolution in the 1840s and was the first woman to have a front page byline. She fought for the rights of women, wrote about gender and sexuality as non-binary, and was a working mother. After her work in Europe, she was heading back to the United States with her child and his Italian father, who was said to be Fuller's husband, but I gather there is no record of the wedding, when their ship wrecked just off the coast of Fire Island and the family perished. Fuller was only 40. On her grave is written, "By birth a child of New England, by adoption a citizen of Rome, by genius belonging to the world." It seems from Fuller's own writing that she was often lonely, seeking an exploration of ideas on the edge of what was acceptable in society, especially for women. An article in the New Yorker reviewed a number of her biographies and the author concluded:

Few women have fought more valiantly than Margaret Fuller to achieve autonomy. But her struggle required her to create and to endure a profound state of singleness. She had to become, she wrote, “my own priest, pupil, parent, child, husband, and wife.” That austere self-isolation, perhaps, is why each new biography excites interest in her, which then subsides. Her example gives you much to admire but not enough to envy.¹

This same article recounts her wonderful day visiting with George Sand in Paris, and I can imagine that the gender-queer Sand and Fuller had a lot to talk about, and perhaps some kinship in experience. In a poem “The One in All” Fuller wrote:

And dost thou seek to find the one in two?
Only upon the old can build the new;
The symbol which you seek is found in you.

The heart and mind, the wisdom and the will,
The man and woman, must be severed still,
And Christ must reconcile the good and ill...

...One presence fills and floods the whole serene;
Nothing can be, nothing has ever been,
Except the one truth that creates the scene.

Does the heart beat, — that is a seeming only;
You cannot be alone, though you are lonely;
The All is neutralized in the One only.²

The idea of the one in all, also appears in an 1841 essay Fuller wrote for *The Dial* about the first magnolia tree she encountered at Lake Pontchartrain in Louisiana, “The stars tell all their secrets to the flowers, and, if we only knew how to look around us, we should not need to look above.”³ This Transcendentalist ideal of recognizing the interconnection in the natural world is a foundation of our tradition today.

The process of figuring out who we are, how to live our values, and growing up, does not end at some magical age. If we are lucky, and open, we are learning more about ourselves, and about what it means to be human as long as we are living. Lynn Ungar reflects:

Even at our very best, at our most compassionate and connected and loving, we will still fail to see and understand one another completely. That’s just the nature of being human, walking around in our separate bodies.... The truth is that belonging is not a state, it’s a process. It isn’t something you have, it’s something you build.⁴

If a young Margaret Fuller was able to swash-buckle her way through as much patriarchy as she did, I like to imagine what her elder years might have been speaking truth to power, or her as a mom, teaching her son about gender. What a loss. In these new roles, she might have built more

1 <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/04/01/an-unfinished-woman> April 1, 2013 Issue, “An Unfinished Woman: The desires of Margaret Fuller.” By Judith Thurman

2 <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/52046/the-one-in-all>

3 “The Magnolia of Lake Pontchartrain” 1841, <https://www.google.com/books/edition/-ukAAAAAYAAJ?hl=en>

4 <https://www.questformeaning.org/quest-article/resources-living-october-2016/>

communities and relationships, and pushed societal boundaries for more room for other people who shared her values.

I am sure we all have felt out of place before, as if we didn't belong. My hope for each of us is that we find belonging, a practice of connection, throughout our lives. We can feel isolated even in a crowd, and in this time without crowds, that feeling may be closer to the surface. Though in the web of life, as Fuller notes, "You cannot be alone, though you are lonely." As we face new challenges, are building this new normal, and whatever the next new normal will be, what will we learn about ourselves, our culture, and how we understand our roles in that culture? What are our opportunities? As we learn how to speak truth to power, and raise our voices for justice when we can't gather to raise our voices, and as we learn to build and support our relationships in new ways, we will need to build new skills in connecting with one another, and maybe dust off some old ones. We have different needs and expectations, capacities and availability than we had two months ago, and different from what we will have two months from now. And all of that is fine. We can treat one another with compassion, recognize that it is okay to not be okay, that our feelings and our ability to connect may be all over the place, because so many in our country and our world are experiencing stress and trauma. Our brains only have a certain amount of bandwidth, and when we are anxious, or reacting from fear, our reptilian, fight or flight brain, sucks up all the air in the room and it is hard to be thoughtful and make good choices.⁵ And as I always say, a vital reason we engage in spiritual practices, including worship, is so we have those practices to fall back on when our bandwidth is low. Part of our work as individuals, and in community is to work together, as we are able, to hold this community as a space of renewal and grounding for the work we do in the world, for our spiritual work, a place of building belonging. Through our care, and our practices, we can work together on what comes next for each of us and for our community, seeking growth and spiritual connection, and in Lynn's words:

...following that longing for connection into the delicate work of building trust and understanding. It isn't easy. It isn't ever finished. But it is at the center of our hearts' longing.⁶

Amen.

5 https://www.ted.com/talks/alain_hunkins_the_basic_truth_most_leaders_neglect

6 <https://www.questformeaning.org/quest-article/resources-living-october-2016/>