Boston Conversations

Gayle G. Curtin

Colorado State University

EDAE 520

Dr. Leann Kaiser

September 28, 2014

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore the genesis of the Boston Conversations, intellectual dialogues that began as a result of Margaret Fuller's ambitions for herself and for the future of the female gender. It will further raise issues surrounding the impact of these gatherings on adult education today.

Boston Conversations

To those immersed in adult education, either on the giving or receiving end of the equation, its existence seems as much a part of the landscape as traffic on the interstate. The composition of students spans the breadth of our nation's ethnic identities, and the ages range from Gen Y to Baby Boomers. Both genders now have access to adult studies to further their careers, start a new one, or simply get educated on selected topics. Little thought is given to the origins of adult education, or how it has evolved over the last 180 years. However, one woman can be credited with a few of those historic ripples, and it is her life that is to be scrutinized, with an eye to the impact of her early education through her relationships during her last years in the United States. Margaret Fuller Ossoli--to be referred to as Fuller throughout this paper, due to doubts surrounding whether she married (Thurman, 2013, para. 3)--affected change in not only continuing education for females, but the nature of their education. She challenged them to question their own culture, and to think for themselves. Fuller's series of female discussions on literary topics widened the crack in a door barely opened by her predecessors, which increased women's pursuit of adult education. This ultimately changed our national culture to be open to the existence of female intelligence beyond household management.

Developmental factors

To understand the evolution, it is necessary to explore Fuller's childhood and other life events that led her to create an opportunity women at that time would not have otherwise enjoyed. Without question, the predominant influence of Fuller's father in her

formative years created a female child that did not follow the prescribed route for young ladies of that era.

Early years

Fuller's early childhood would be considered today as harsh by most standards. Her father began her home schooling at the tender age of three, as she appeared to be highly intelligent. He had no son then, and educated her as though she had been a male child. This was circa 1813, and her rigorous education was unusual for the time. Timko (2002) tells us it included German, history, literature and biblical studies, and Fuller was " ...reading the classics by six and Shakespeare by eight" (para. 8). By the time she reached the ripe age of fifteen, both her time commitment and her course of studies had broadened to dictate a daily regimen beginning at six a.m., including piano, philosophy, Greek, Italian, singing and metaphysics, as well as "French and Italian literature" (Timko, 2002, para. 9). The discipline required and her father's treatment of her further molded Fuller into a woman that did not depend on other females for superficial interactions. In any case, her schedule precluded extensive social activities by mathematical elimination, if not by choice. Margaret herself remembered having to " ...put on the fetters" and that she "...had no natural childhood" (Marshall, 2013, p. 21).

Young womanhood

Marshall (2013) provides a wealth of background about Fuller's teen years, much of which helps to explain her passion for women's equality. For example, by the time Fuller was thirteen years old, her formal education only lacked boarding school to "finish" her, as even her father had no plans for her to enter university. At that time, circa 1823, there were no American colleges that had yet begun to admit women. The

elder Fuller had begun to look to marriage as the young woman's next challenge, and expected a season at Miss Prescott's academy to accomplish the transition from scholar to sought-after young maiden. By this time, the family was living in Old Cambridge, which was "...congenial to members of both sexes". This allowed Fuller to take the floor in mixed company, and she impressed people with her, " ...brilliant wit, her sharp insight, her creative imagination, by the inexhaustible resources of her knowledge". She was proving that women could have keen intelligence and own a room as well as a man. In the process she began to develop female friendships for the first time. Even then, though, she was involving them in deep conversation, and expecting them to, " aspire to something higher, better, holier". Throughout her life, it seems that most of her female friends were much older than her, and this was the case with Eliza Farrar, who took Fuller under her wing and converted her into a gentlewoman, a job Miss Prescott had been unable to accomplish (Marshall, 2013, pp. 26, 42-44).

There are a number of factors to this point that prepared Fuller for her later self-determined intellectual development of Boston's females. The first is her father's insistence on educating her as a boy, which not only guaranteed her to feel equal to any male, but also left her, at some point, feeling there had to be more for females. Her brutal study schedule left her with only her father for company until she was at least nine years old. She did not have the luxury of interacting with other little girls. Her father's demand that she recite her lessons to him on a daily basis (Timko, 2002, para. 7) developed her oratory skills, and of course her studies imbued her with incredible knowledge, considering her position, and she was eager to share it. Farrar was teaching her to be accepted socially, and that " ...a strong-willed woman could give

lessons to other women on what to think and how to behave" (Marshall, 2013, p.47). Fuller was primed.

Independence

The next period of Fuller's life took her one step closer to what many believe to be a pivotal period. Her father died in 1835, and she was forced to generate income for the family. Timko (2002) mentions that Fuller had "various" teaching jobs, but the critical position was one with Temple School, where Bronson Alcott was the director (para. 9). It was in this school that her teaching style was developed, one that " ...featured the give-and-take of conversation rather than the conventional memorize-and-recite method" (Marshall, 2013, p. 103). Apart from the promised salary, Alcott introduced Fuller to a famous transcendentalist minister, William Ellery Channing, with whom she continued her German studies. Through him, she was introduced to yet other transcendentalist friends, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, to name a few. These contacts became important from a networking perspective.

The "Conversations"

To enhance her income, Fuller invited wives, friends, fiancés and sisters of this group to her "conversations" beginning in 1839 (Timko, 2002, para. 10). Fuller charged each woman twenty dollars, for enrollment in her seminars, which offered topics of her choosing. Among those were social, literary, historical and philosophical subjects (Columbia, 2014, para. 1). It is noteworthy that these were designed to attract women to the seminars, but Timko (2002) tells us that Fuller's intent was to encourage them to, " ...think for themselves far beyond the limitations imposed by the patriarchal world they inhabited" (para 11).

Fuller also required essays from her students, so they could “learn to build logical arguments in their essays” (Marshall, 2013, p. 138). Fuller read them aloud, made comments and required all the women in class to comment on each one as well. She gradually moved the topics from literature and history to intellectual and moral questions. By this time, the hook at been set, and all the participants wanted to continue their studies. The next series’ title was “Woman,” a topic that was rarely considered in the mid-nineteenth century. One issue to be discussed was the distinction between men and women regarding character and mind (Marshall, 2013, p. 139). This kind of deep-dive into the women’s self-image would motivate them to consider their value to society beyond the picket fence.

Fuller had the knowledge forced on her by her father, the social acceptability learned from Ferrar, and “ ... the intellectual qualities and character of a great teacher” and “...accuracy of statement, keen discrimination, and a certain weight of judgement” according to one woman who attended (Timko, 2002, para. 11). She has been credited with inventing “...a new vocation: the female public intellectual” and a “sibyl” by women who attended her seminars (Thurman, 2013, para 1). Fuller intended that these conversations would “lay aside the shelter of vague generalities, the cant of coterie criticism, and the delicate disdains of *good society* ...” (American Eras, 1998, para. 3).

She certainly was well prepared to be a trailblazer for women’s studies, preceded primarily by Sophia Ripley and Elizabeth Peabody, who had offered history classes for adult women earlier in the 1830s (Marshall, 2013, p. 134). While Fuller was not the first to offer classes, she may have well been the first to challenge women to think for themselves. Fuller served as a facilitator, not a lecturer; she posed questions and then

simply directed the conversation. One woman commented that, “though these great questions were not settled it was useful to discuss them” (Marshall, 2013, p.137). Fuller had set the wheels in motion for women to pursue their individual identities.

Conclusion

While Fuller was unusual in the scope of her education, it is possible that another woman in another time might have led the charge to move women forward. There likely are women who have done just this, but the transition made during Boston Conversations cannot be ignored as a huge leap in the Women’s Studies movement, and in education for adult women, generally. Fuller envisioned a “possible future: a changed world, with women as powerful as men...” (Marshall, 2013, p.140). Women may not have reached full equality just yet in all facets of society, but regarding their accessibility to education and public discourse, they have arrived. For this, they have Fuller and other women like her to thank.

Works Cited

Margaret Fuller. (2013). *Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia, 6th Edition*, 1. Retrieved from https://ezproxy2.library.colostate.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=cookie,ip,url,cpid&custid=s4640792&db=aph&AN=39007966&site=ehost-live

Margaret Fuller. (1998). In *American Eras* (Vol. 5). Detroit: Gale. Retrieved from http://ic.galegroup.com/ic/suic/ReferenceDetailsPage/ReferenceDetailsWindow?ailOverType=&query=&prodId=SUIC&windowstate=normal&contentModules=&display-query=&mode=view&displayGroupName=Reference&limiter=&currPage=&disableHighlighting=false&displayGroups=&sortBy=&search_within_results=&p=SUIC&action=e&catId=&activityType=&scanId=&documentId=GALE%7CK2438000114&source=Bookmark&u=tel_s_tsla&jsid=e7ff6b22b1b45dd900b24265f d09f613

Marshall, M. (2013). *Margaret Fuller: A new American life.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Thurman, J. (2013). An Unfinished Woman. *New Yorker*, *89*(7), 75-81. https://ezproxy2.library.colostate.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=cookie,ip,url,cpid&custid=s4640792&db=aph&AN=87415794&site=ehost-live

Timko, M. (2002, November). Margaret Fuller - Forgotten American Heroine. *World and I*, *17*(11), 290. Retrieved from http://ic.galegroup.com/ic/suic/MagazinesDetailsPage/MagazinesDetailsWindow?

failOverType=&query=&prodId=SUIC&windowstate=normal&contentModules=&display-query=&mod=view&displayGroupName-Magazines&limiter=&currPage=&disableHighlighting-false&displayGroups=&sortBy-&search_within_results=lighting=false&displayGroups=&sortBy=&search_within_results=&p=SUIC&action=e&catId=&activityType=&scanId=&documentId=GALE%7CA94142660&source=Bookmark&u=tel_s_tsla&jsid=673426bb9067f144c3a12eed023d00db