

“WALT WHITMAN’S SONG OF LOVE”
A sermon by the Rev. Roger Bertschausen and Cynthia Stiehl
Fox Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
2600 E. Philip Ln.
P.O. Box 1791
Appleton, WI 54912-1791
(920) 731-0849
Website: www.fvuuf.org

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Call to Gather

Love is not concerned
with whom you pray
or where you slept the night you ran away
from home.
Love is concerned
that the beating of your heart
should kill no one.¹

Sermon

Walt Whitman was a larger-than-life character. With his wild hair, flowing beard and exuberant personality, he was always easy to spot in a crowd. There’s even evidence that Abraham Lincoln noticed Whitman as he often stood in a crowd waiting to catch a glimpse of the president he so idolized. In the world of poetry, Whitman had a huge presence that has only grown larger over time. It’s true that he spent considerable energy stoking his fame by writing anonymous—and, naturally, glowingly favorable, often over-the-top—reviews of his own poetry. But even without his shameless promotion, his poetry would have had an enormous impact on literature and on our nation. If Whitman were a visual artist instead of a poet, I picture him as one who boldly paints on huge canvases or creates building-sized sculptures.

And the themes he addressed were all the big ones: life, death, meaning, nature, hope, war, despair, sex and love. It is hard to pick out one theme that he mined more deeply than others, but certainly a case can be made that love was the ultimate theme of his poetry.

Today we will hear five fragments of poems in which Whitman addresses love in widely divergent ways. Each of these has been set to music by a contemporary composer. We are indebted to Cynthia Stiehl for finding these pieces and performing them here today with the pianist Dan Van Sickle. I will read and reflect on each poem, and then Cyndy and Dan will perform the musical setting of the poem.

“Beginning my Studies” by Walt Whitman

Beginning my studies, the first step pleas’d me so much,
The mere fact, consciousness—these forms—the power of motion,

¹ <http://www.pbuuc.org/worship/sermons/sermons0405/reclaimingSin.html>.

The least insect or animal—the senses—eyesight—love;
The first step, I say, aw'd me and pleas'd me so much,
I have hardly gone, and hardly wish'd to go, any farther,
But stop and loiter all the time, to sing it in extactic songs.

With this poem we begin at the beginning. How do we begin to love? What's the first step? Whitman answers that the first step is simply consciousness. It is being aware. This, he says, is the first step of everything—from seeing or hearing or any of the other senses all the way to love. The first step is always conscious awareness. In our lives every single day, we have the choice about what stance we take toward the world. We have the opportunity to choose a stance of love, or hatred, or fear, or scarcity (to name a few). In poem after poem, Whitman calls on us to choose to live in love. He wants us to be conscious of the reality that we have the capacity to make this choice, now matter where are in our lives.

Whitman suggests a simple way to live consciously in love. There's not a complicated formula to living this way. It's not spiritual rocket science. The key, he says, is simply to “stop and loiter all the time.” We cannot be consciously aware if we are always moving, if our mind or body is constantly flitting from one thing to the next, always looking forward or backward and never focusing on this moment. To live consciously in a loving way, we need to be attentive to the moment at hand. And you know something? We learned how to do this as kids when we learned how to cross the street. We learned to “stop, look, and listen.” This is what we need to do in our lives! And then we need to celebrate the good we see in the midst of our lives.

I try to incorporate this spirit of “stop, look and listen” into my daily spiritual practice. In one way or another, just about every spiritual practice helps us stop and loiter in the midst of our busy lives. Spiritual practices help us look at what is going on around us, and even more importantly, within us. In my spiritual practice, I like to take an inventory of what's going on in and around me—in my body, in my spirit, and in my relationships with others and with the world. I try to bring to conscious awareness all of these aspects of my life. In doing so I naturally identify areas of concern; but almost inevitably I also am moved to a place of gratitude because it is always so evident when I stop, look and listen that I am the beneficiary of so many incredible gifts. Even in the hard times. So inevitably—if I'm truly paying attention—my meditation will lead to gratitude and praise. This is what happened to Walt Whitman, and it's why his poetry is so chock full of gratitude and praise. This is why he finds this first step of conscious awareness to be so pleasing. This is why he can't keep himself from breaking out into ecstatic song!

[Cynthia Stiehl sings “Beginning my Studies” by Lee Holby]

“Among the Multitude” by Walt Whitman

Among the men and women, the multitude,
I perceive one picking me out by secret and divine signs,
Acknowledging none else—not parent, wife, husband, brother, child, any
nearer than I am;

Some are baffled—But that one is not—that one knows me.

Ah, lover and perfect equal!

I meant that you should discover me so, by my faint indirections;

And I, when I meet you, mean to discover you by the like in you.

When I ask a couple to face one another and utter their sacred vows in a wedding ceremony, I usually say something like: “Out of all the people in the world, you two looked into each other’s eyes and found there both a uniqueness and a oneness.” This is the kind of love that Whitman lifts up in “Among the multitude.” It is the love of soul-mates. It is the love that is the focal point of so much literature and cinema—the love of Romeo and Juliet, Robert Kincaid and Francesca Johnson in *The Bridges of Madison County*, Vivian and Cay in “Desert Hearts,” Inman and Ada Monroe in *Cold Mountain*. It is the deepest and most powerful love of all. This is the love that sets the world on fire.

A soul-mate is the person who seems to know you even when you’ve only just met. It is the person who penetrates through the masks and walls that we customarily put around our souls, the person who sees and accepts the imperfect yet wondrous essence of who we truly are. Whitman suggests that that this one (or maybe it’s more than one) is out there, somewhere in the multitude. If you haven’t met him or her yet, you might.

I met my soul-mate in 1985 at a party for new students at the University of Chicago Divinity School. A third year student, she was there checking out the “newbies.” It was a modest beginning—the earth did not stop revolving, violins did not start playing. We didn’t even start dating for six months. But there was a spark that signaled the possibility of a deep connection between us. So began the dance of discovering each other with faint indirections, and finding in that discovering not only a uniqueness, but a oneness that continues to bind our lives together twenty-three years later.

[Cyndy sings “Among the Multitude” by Craig Urquhart]

“Look Down, Fair Moon” by Walt Whitman

Look down, fair moon, and bathe this scene;

Pour softly down night’s nimbus floods, on faces ghastly, swollen, purple;

On the dead, on their backs, with their arms toss’d wide,

Pour down your unstinted nimbus, sacred moon.

The twist in the second line of this poem is about as jarring as any imaginable. You will hear the twist musically in the setting Cyndy will sing in a few minutes. As you hear the first line of the poem, what pops into your mind? These are the images that popped into my mind: Two lovers alone on a moonlit beach; sitting with friends on a bluff looking at the moon bathing the waters of Lake Michigan; the full moon washing the walls of the Grand Canyon with light.

Then the second line jars our attention away from such idyllic scenes with a sickening jolt: no, instead it’s nightfall on a Civil War battlefield (or any battlefield), the

quiet of the scene punctured by the agonized cries and mumbles of the wounded and dying amidst the silence of the already dead.

The Civil War was the first war extensively memorialized in photographs, most notably by Matthew Brady. Each of us can probably picture some of those photographs of dead soldiers sprawled on the field of battle, and their descendents lying on the fields of Verdun, the beaches of Normandy, the flattened streets of Hiroshima, the jungle of the Mekong Delta, and the mountains of Afghanistan. With his typical power, Whitman summons the scene in our imaginations with incredible force: we can see the ghastly, swollen, purple face of the dead soldier lying on his back, arms toss'd wide, gun strewn to the side in his mortal fall to the ground. Thanks to Matthew Brady and the tragic commonality of such images ever since, this has become an iconic image of human suffering and folly.

Walt Whitman's life was forever changed by volunteering in the Union Army's medical corps. The scene depicted in this poem is not one that Whitman conjured up in his imagination or from Matthew Brady photographs. No, it comes from his own experiences tending to the wounded and the dead. For Whitman, tending to the Civil War fallen soldiers may well have been the most significant work of his life. More than anything, his healing work with fallen soldiers was a work of love. With unabashed feeling, he loved these fallen soldiers. This is *agape*: unconditional love for everyone—even people that you don't even know. Whitman passionately loved each fallen Civil War soldier—Yankee or Rebel. This love motivated him to voluntarily walk into living hells like battlefields and hospitals.

Perhaps the challenge for us is to see and to love contemporary versions of the fallen Civil War soldier: the American soldier horribly wounded in a road-side bombing, the Iraqi shot in his car full of explosives as he speeds up toward an American convoy. Maybe, as Whitman seemed to understand, in this unconditional love lies the seed of peace. Maybe this is the light of love and healing and peace that the sacred moon symbolically pours onto the battlefield. Maybe *our* love can be the healing light that pours down on our hurting world.

[Cyndy sings “Look Down, Fair Moon” by Ned Rorem]

“O You Whom I Often and Silently Come” by Walt Whitman

O you whom I often and silently come where you are, that I may be with you;
As I walk by your side, or sit near, or remain in the same room with you,
Little you know the subtle electric fire that for your sake is playing within me.

Part of the magic of Whitman's life and poetry was the sensuousness which so electrified both. Even by today's standards this sensuousness is sometimes arresting; we can only imagine how shocking and controversial it must have been in the Victorian period in which he wrote. This week Whitman's poem “I Sing the Body Electric” popped into my mind—a poem far more fiery than this one. It seemed so improbable that the nineteenth century could have produced such a poem that I imagined e.e. cummings

penned it. “No, no: it was Whitman!” I was reminded. And again I felt awe at the deeply revolutionary nature of his poetry.

In “O Look Whom I Often and Silently Come,” Whitman writes about sensual love, the love that electrifies our body when we come into or conjure in our imaginations the presence of the object of our desire. Deep, interior electricity is the best metaphor for this love.

Whitman understood and celebrated that love is always embodied, physical, earthy. It is never ethereal; it is not heavenly. For him, not just romantic love was this way: even agape was embodied, physical and earthy. In the act of giving water or holding the hand or, as he often did, kissing the face of a wounded soldier, he gave earthy, even sensuous form to the act of agape.

[Cyndy sings “O You Whom I Often and Silently Come” by Ned Rorem

“Sometimes with One I Love” by Walt Whitman

Sometimes with one I love, I fill myself with rage, for fear I effuse
unreturn’d love;

But now I think there is no unreturn’d love—the pay is certain, one way or
another;

(I loved a certain person ardently, and my love was not return’d;
yet out of that, I have written these songs.)

This poem is a statement of faith. Whitman, like most of us, had his painful share of unrequited love. But with these words, he asserts that ultimately there is no such thing as unreturned love. Our acts of love always return something good and powerful back to us. “The pay is certain, one way or another.” Or, in the words of the familiar children’s song, “Love grows, one by one, two by two and four by four. Love grows round like a circle and comes back knocking at your front door.” We may never get the love back from the person we love, but it comes back to us in some other way. There is never an act of wasted love. Never! Oh, it does not always come back directly; maybe it comes back as wisdom we use in the next relationship or as the Muse that inspires our art. Or maybe it comes back in compassion for a friend struggling with unreturned love of his or her own.

Whitman’s poem takes me back to a time in my own life when my deep love for another went unreturned. He names the feelings I felt at the time—especially the rage and fear. It took time and a lot of tears to work through. This turned out to be the only way to move forward. And in doing so, I learned a lot about myself and about love. Eventually, I realized that I had gotten something very powerful indeed in return: self-knowledge and wisdom. What a blessing this turned out to be two years later when at last I met my true soul mate at that University of Chicago party!

[Cyndy sings “Sometimes with One I Love” by Craig Urquhart]

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