

## Letters From God

A Sermon for the Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst

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Do you, like I, have the urge to wax poetic, write phrases so beautiful they might change someone's life, and be remembered for hundreds of years? Or, in my case, maybe they could be remembered at least until next week when I will, of course, say something equally as beautiful and inspirational that will touch your hearts and minds all over again?

I'm afraid it is a rare event for most of us who write, and so, for the most part lacking a muse that will make me famous, I am enamored of others who have already written what I would, if I could. Such a poet is Walt Whitman, whom I bring to you today. What about for you, though? Who would your particular poet be? I think we each have our own favorites – those writers whose words touch us just where we, personally, need to be touched. Their words ring more true than others' words – the images are just right – the metaphors make sense.

With the help of a few of you, here are some of the 52 verses from Walt Whitman's *Song of Myself*, the longest poem in his book Leaves of Grass, written in 1855.

*I celebrate myself, and sing myself,  
And what I assume you shall assume,  
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.  
I loafe and invite my soul,  
I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass.  
My tongue, every atom of my blood, form'd from this soil, this air,  
Born here of parents born here from parents the same, and their parents the same,  
I, now thirty-seven years old in perfect health begin,  
Hoping to cease not till death.*

*The wild gander leads his flock through the cool night,  
Ya-Honk he says, and sounds it down to me like an invitation,  
The pert may suppose it meaningless, but I listening close,  
Find its purpose and place up there toward the wintry sky.  
The sharp-hoof'd moose of the north, the cat on the house-sill,  
The chickadee, the prairie-dog  
The litter of the grunting sow as they tug at her teats,  
The brood of the turkey-hen and she with her half-spread wings,  
I see in them and myself the same old law.*

*I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journey-work of the stars,  
And the pismire is equally perfect, and a grain of sand, and the egg of the wren,  
And the tree-toad is a chef-d'oeuvre for the highest,  
And the running blackberry would adorn the parlors of heaven,*

*And the narrowest hinge in my hand puts to scorn all machinery,  
And the cow crunching with depress'd head surpasses any statue,  
And a mouse is miracle enough to stagger sextillions of infidels.*

*I think I could turn and live with animals, they are so placid and self-contained,  
I stand and look at them long and long.*

*They do not sweat and whine about their condition,  
They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins,  
They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God,  
Not one is dissatisfied, not one is demented with the mania of owning things,  
Not one kneels to another, nor to his kind that lived thousands of years ago,  
Not one is respectable or unhappy over the whole earth.*

*Sermons, creeds, theology – but the fathomless human brain,  
and what is reason? and what is love” and what is life?*

*I have said that the soul is not more than the body,  
And I have said that the body is not more than the soul,  
And nothing, not God, is greater to one than one's self is,  
And whoever walks a furlong without sympathy  
walks to his own funeral drest in his shroud.*

*And I or you pocketless of a dime may purchase the pick of the earth,  
And to glance with an eye or show a bean in its pod confounds the learning of all times,  
And there is no trade or employment but the young man following it may become a hero,  
And there is no object so soft but it makes a hub for the wheel'd universe,  
And I say to any man or woman, Let your soul stand cool and composed  
before a million universes.*

*And I say to mankind, Be not curious about God,  
For I who am curious about each am not curious about God.  
(No array of terms can say how much I am at peace about God and about death.)  
I hear and behold God in every object, yet understand God not in the least,  
Nor do I understand who there can be more wonderful than myself.  
Why should I wish to see God better than this day?  
I see something of God each hour of the twenty-four, and each moment then,  
In the faces of men and women I see God, and in my own face in the glass,  
I find letters from God dropt in the street, and every one is sign'd by God's name,  
And I leave them where they are, for I know that wheresoe'er I go  
Others will punctually come for ever and ever.*

When I planned this sermon on Walt Whitman I had no idea that its following on the heels of last week's service about the Concord Transcendentalists would be so appropriate. We probably would never have had the poems of Whitman if it had not been for Ralph Waldo Emerson's impassioned cry for an authentic American poet – he was tired of having to continually bow to the literary prowess of the British and the rest of the world – it was time for homegrown genius to blossom – and he did. Walt Whitman

personally and intentionally took on Emerson's challenge, becoming what some have called the voice of America at that time – and, for many, the voice of a whole new religion. The amazing thing is that Whitman had not been a poet before this time, and his formal education had ended at the age of twelve.

But when, upon sending Emerson an unsolicited copy of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, he received a spectacular endorsement, this fueled Whitman's desire to continue his writing. Emerson wrote "I greet you at the beginning of a great career." He described Whitman's work as "the best piece of American Buddhism that anyone has had strength to write, American to the bone." He also attempted to counter the widespread criticism of Whitman's unabashedly sexual content by saying that his writings "show extraordinary power, and are more deeply American, democratic, and in the interest of political liberty, than those of any other poet." (Robert Richardson, *Emerson: the mind on fire*, p. 527-8)

In one review of a new book of Whitman's writings I read: "Among his disciples – and 'disciples' is by no means too strong a word – he was considered not only a great poet but a prophet and sage. To them, *Leaves of Grass* was more than a book of poetry; it was a new religion. ('Do you suppose a thousand years from now people will be celebrating the birth of Walt Whitman as they are now the birth of Christ?' asked an eminent Whitman pal in 1890.) Indeed, Whitman considered himself an American avatar [that's an incarnated Hindu God]. He admitted, "The public has no notion of me as a spiritualistic being. Apart from a few...no one understands that I have my connections – they are deep-rooted – that they penetrate shows, phenomena, do not pause with these." (Amazon.com book review)

Like Emerson, Thoreau, and the others from American Bloomsbury, Whitman rejected traditional organized religion. But he was definitely religious, or spiritual, or metaphysical, whichever word appeals to you. Let me read verse 48 to you again – it's the one printed in the white pages of your order of service. Listen for the clear theological statements that he is making with these simple, yet beautiful, declarations of faith.

*I have said that the soul is not more than the body,  
And I have said that the body is not more than the soul,  
And nothing, not God, is greater to one than one's self is,  
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 And I leave them where they are, for I know that wheresoe'er I go  
 Others will punctually come for ever and ever.*

These lines that constitute verse 48 of *Song of Myself* are considered by many to be Walt Whitman's most beautiful writing. From the conversations I have had with many of you, I can say that his words are very much in line with how many of you, and I, would describe our faith. I hear much that is familiar to us as Unitarian Universalists today.

I hear the non-dualism of the soul and the body, and of the divine and the mundane. *And nothing, not God, is greater to one than one's self is.* Walt Whitman was a pantheist, that is, his beliefs did not go beyond what "is" – the natural world. For him the sacred, or God, was a part of everything, but did not exist beyond that same everything.

Whitman believed in the unity of everything and, because of this, called us to live lives of non-judgmental humility. Each of us is a beautiful, meticulously designed, unique miracle, equal to every other miracle and equal to God. We should be able to *stand cool and composed before a million universe*, he wrote.

I hear, in this poem, that without sympathy for our fellow travelers on this earth, we must be among the living dead, shrouded in life as in death.

I hear, and I agree, that the gifts of this life are available to all, even the penniless or the undeserving; *(And I or you pocketless of a dime may purchase the pick of the earth.)* Very Universalist.

Whitman's words tell us that the wonders of nature are infinite and nothing is more amazing or perfect or mysterious than any other; that there is potential and possibility for everyone to live a good, honorable, salvific life, regardless of education or profession.

In his own unique way, I hear Whitman tell us that there is nothing so soft, so small, so weak, so unimportant, that it could not be the center of an ideal and non-judgmental universe.

I hear him admit that the world is a mystery – and that's OK. He is fine, and wants us to be fine, living with uncertainty. I've told you many times that I think this is something we Unitarian Universalists are very good at. In the poem, Whitman *beholds God in every object, yet understands God not in the least.* And he is content to do so.

He finds *letters from God dropt in the street, and every one is signed by God's name* – if we are looking, paying attention, we will be able to see the divine nature (God's signature) in everything around us.

Most of all, writes Whitman, we must leave our glimpses of truth and beauty, our letters from God, where we find them, for in the act of possession, of taking them to be our own, we put an end to possibility. This is a very Buddhist concept, that “the truth you believe in and cling to makes you unavailable to hear anything new.” (Pema Chodron)

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