

## Loving Bodies: Do I Contradict Myself?

Sermon for the Birthday Bicentennial of Walt Whitman

Rev. Dr. Roger D. Jones

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Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

### Hymns:

#162 Gonna Lay Down My Sword and Shield, #159 (seated) This Is My Song, #1018 Come and Go with Me to that Land



### Readings:

*To be read with live music underneath.*

These readings are excerpts from poetry by Walt Whitman, who was born in New York 200 years ago this week. He died in 1892 at age 72. During the Civil War he was a volunteer nurse in the soldier's hospital where his brother was a patient.

This is from *Song of Myself*, section 48:

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.

This is from *I Sing the Body Electric*, Section 8

Have you ever loved the body of a woman? Have you  
ever loved the body of a man?

Do you not see that these are exactly the same to all, in  
all nations and times all over the earth?

If any thing is sacred, the human body is sacred...

This is from *I Sing the Body Electric*, Section 9

O my Body! I dare not desert the likes of you in other  
men and women,  
nor the likes of the parts of you;  
I believe the likes of you are to stand or fall with the  
likes of the Soul,

(and that they are the Soul;)

I believe the likes of you shall stand or fall with my  
poems—and that they are poems,

...

Head, neck, hair, ears, drop and tympan of the ears,  
Eyes, eye-fringes, iris of the eye, eye-brows, and the  
waking or sleeping of the lids,  
Mouth, tongue, lips, teeth, roof of the mouth, jaws, and  
the jaw-hinges,  
Nose, nostrils of the nose, and the partition,  
Cheeks, temples, forehead, chin, throat, back of the  
neck, neck-slue,  
Strong shoulders, manly beard, scapula, hind-shoulders,  
and the ample side-round of the chest.

Upper-arm, arm-pit, elbow-socket, lower-arm, arm-  
sinews, arm-bones,  
Wrist and wrist-joints, hand, palm, knuckles, thumb,  
fore-finger, finger-balls, finger-joints, finger-nails,  
Broad breast-front, curling hair of the breast, breast-  
bone, breast-side,  
Ribs, belly, back-bone, joints of the back-bone,

...

Strong set of thighs, well carrying the trunk above,  
Leg-fibres, knee, knee-pan, upper-leg, under leg,

...

All attitudes, all the shapeliness,  
all the belongings of my or your body, or of  
any one's body, male or female,  
The lung-sponges, the stomach-sac, the bowels sweet  
and clean,

The brain in its folds inside the skull-frame,  
Sympathies, heart-valves, palate-valves, sexuality,  
maternity,

Womanhood, and all that is a woman—and the man that  
comes from woman,

The womb, the teats, nipples, breast-milk, tears,  
laughter, weeping, love-looks,

love-perturbations and risings,

The voice, articulation, language, whispering, shouting  
aloud,

Food, drink, pulse, digestion, sweat, sleep, walking,  
swimming.

Poise on the hips, leaping, reclining, embracing, arm-  
curving and tightening,

The continual changes of the flex of the mouth, and  
around the eyes,

The skin, the sun-burnt shade, freckles, hair,

The curious sympathy one feels, when feeling with the  
hand the naked meat of the body,

The circling rivers, the breath, and breathing it in and  
out,

The beauty of the waist, and thence of the hips, and  
thence downward toward the knees,

The thin red jellies within you, or within me—the  
bones, and the marrow in the bones:

The exquisite realization of health;

O I say, these are not the parts and poems of the Body  
only, but of the Soul,

O I say now: these are the Soul!



## Sermon

It's been 40 years since I graduated from high school. Even so, I want to sue my high school for educational malpractice. They gave us only one semester of American literature. That was barely enough to say they'd exposed us to it, but not enough to give us any depth, not enough for us to learn about and wrestle with the challenging and contradictory messages of some of the great writers of this country, like Walt Whitman.

Our textbook for that one semester of my junior year was an anthology, with little parts of every selected writer, and a brief introduction. I know Whitman was there, but can't remember being moved, inspired, annoyed or offended by him. Perhaps that is what the editors of the textbook or the State Board of Education feared about him. They saw him as provocative, or even dangerous. He was!

He was dangerous to conformity and social conventions. His life and his words urge us to freedom, which includes thinking for yourself, and building human kinship across barriers of class, race, gender and other differences. His poetry celebrates human bodies, desire, and physical affection. Whitman was challenging to the customs of this country in his day. Today he remains challenging to our ways of regarding one another and our ways of treating vulnerable people--and that includes all of us.

Born 200 years ago this week, Walt Whitman was one of his parents' eight surviving children. He grew up in Brooklyn, New York, and on Long Island. He calls Long Island by its native name, Paumanok. After moving to Manhattan, he worked for newspapers, wrote stories and poems, and got involved in politics. During the Civil War, on hearing that his brother George was wounded at the battlefield in Virginia, Walt went to the front and became a caregiver, a volunteer nurse. He then served a couple of years in a military hospital in Washington, D.C. After the war, he worked for the federal Department of the Interior.

Throughout his life, Whitman published several collections of poems, especially *Song of Myself* and *Leaves of Grass*. He added new poems

to later editions of these works, and published prose works too.<sup>i</sup> The collection of his prose and poetry is more than a thousand pages long.<sup>ii</sup>

In 1873 Whitman had the first of a series of strokes, which left him increasingly paralyzed over his last 15 years of life. He moved in with his brother James, in Camden, New Jersey, and later bought a house there. He died at 72.

“Do I contradict myself? Very well then, I contradict myself,” the poet says in *Song of Myself*. “I am large. I contain multitudes.” He takes self-contradiction—that which is normally seen as a flaw—and shows the richness it holds. He does this first for himself, but the poet speaks as well for all people. That is, we should appreciate the multitudes and complexities contained in each of our lives.

Whitman has been called the poet of democracy. He asserts the freedom of all citizens to think for themselves, not to take at face value what others tell them to think. In a poem from *Song of Myself* he says: “You shall no longer take things at 2<sup>nd</sup> [hand] or 3<sup>rd</sup> hand.” Maybe that’s what my high school didn’t want us to *get* about Whitman. In other words, he says: trust your own goodness and good sense. Don’t even give the poet any authority over you, he says, writing this:

“You shall not look through my eyes either, not take things from me, You shall listen to all sides and filter them from yourself.”<sup>iii</sup>

Religiously Whitman was a skeptic. As a writer, a queer man and a free spirit, he might feel quite welcome in many UU settings today, but he was not a member of a Unitarian or Universalist congregation in the 1800s. Whitman’s outlook on life was too large to be held by any church of his day. An early trauma no doubt cemented his avoidance of religious institutions and his criticism of religious hypocrisy. It’s clear from his writing and other historical evidence that he was gay. When Whitman was 21, a Presbyterian minister speaking from the pulpit accused him of committing immoral sexual acts. The preacher called for punishment. Afterwards, a mob “hunted Whitman down where he hid” in a neighbor’s house and took him out and poured tar on his body and covered him with feathers. They made him sit on a wooden rail and held him aloft as they paraded him out of town. It

took him a month to recover physically. After the pain of his injuries and such public shame, it’s amazing that he could write with deep love about human beings and optimism about his country.<sup>iv</sup>

Perhaps that assault had something to do with Whitman’s insistence throughout his life/ that he was not talking about same-sex love or longing in any his poems. One man [John Addington Symonds] wrote Whitman in 1890 to inquire about the homoerotic themes of one set of poems, poems now recognized widely for their male sexual imagery. The man was more affirming than accusatory, but Whitman wrote back a flat denial.<sup>v</sup> Yet in his poetry, he seems to make an admission that we can look at the words beneath his denials. Whitman says this: “Here the frailest leaves of me/ and yet my strongest lasting. Here I *shade my thoughts*, I myself do not expose them,/ And yet they *expose me* more than all my other poems.”

A notable few of Whitman’s poems do contain homoerotic images. They evoke longing and loving of one man for others. They describe the male form—working, walking, swimming, rowing; clothed and naked. Yet when his books were published, the scandal wasn’t the male imagery in a few poems. The scandal was the sexual explicitness of his verse in general. It was the nudity and sexuality of women that he celebrates. It was words about sex and love between men and women which upset many critics.

The critics’ controversy over the erotic images of Whitman’s poems was about whether he meant what he wrote. His attackers asserted that he *was* talking about sex, and because of this he was corrupt and filthy. His defenders denied that he was talking about sexual passion at all. His verse wasn’t obscene, one supporter said; it merely showed “simplicity and freshness.” Both sides of this argument reflected Americans’ general discomfort about sex—one side objecting to its discussion, the other denying it was a factor at all. In pushing the envelope and stretching social comfort zones, Whitman was exposing our fears of our own desires and our own freedom, fears of our own physical bodies.

It was radical for any published poet of any gender to discuss and celebrate the female form, celebrating women as sexual beings. Whitman

wrote of “The sprawl and fullness of babes, the bosoms and heads of women, the folds of their dress, their style as we pass in the street, the contour of their shape downwards.”<sup>vi</sup>

Whitman says it is foolish to corrupt your body. To the so called moral and religious leaders of Whitman’s day, giving pleasure to our bodies or with our bodies was corrupting. What he means, however, is the opposite—that is, failing to respect your body and to love it is corrupting. After all, the body was made for sensation, pleasure, and erotic love. Whitman says he wants to dis-corrupt us all. Hence, the parts of our bodies that are the most ordinary and often unrecognized parts are for him subjects of celebration and praise.

He writes: “Welcome is every organ and attribute of me, and of any man/ hearty and clean. /Not an inch nor a particle of an inch is vile, and none shall be less familiar than the rest.”<sup>vii</sup> And he describes his body, inch by inch. Countless poets have spoken of the mind; Whitman praises the folds of the tissues of the brain. Other poets invoke the heart; Whitman has named the valves in it. If a poet is in love, they will mention the lips of a beloved. Whitman covers the whole thing! He says: “Mouth, tongue, lips, teeth, roof of the mouth, jaws, and the jaw-hinges.”

All these parts of us are miracles to him. This Tuesday I’m going to the dentist’s office for a checkup. Maybe I’ll tell them about Whitman. I’ll ask: “Is that why you’re looking in my mouth? Is that why you care for it, because it’s amazing?”

Whitman’s eyes and words go farther down the body. He points out the belly, the back, the fingernails, knees and armpits. How many poets mention armpits? He goes further: “the stomach-sac, the bowels sweet and clean.” He will not let any part of our bodies be less than beautiful. There is no reason for avoidance and none for disgust. In the words of philosopher Martha Nussbaum, the emotion of disgust is what fuels the fear of sexuality and the fear of physical pleasure. Disgust is what fuels repression among people, and the control and policing of people through customs, habits and laws.

Recently the state legislatures of Alabama and Mississippi passed laws that severely criminalize abortion in almost any pregnancy,

including a pregnancy caused by rape or the assault known as incest. Their governors approved the laws. Their aim is to get the Supreme Court of this nation to receive these laws as court cases and then reverse the right of any woman to decide whether to have an abortion.

These officials, including a few women, are claiming to protect unborn children. Meanwhile in this country, six migrant children who fled here from Central America have died while being held in the custody of the U.S. government. Meanwhile in the United States, 12 million children experience food insecurity. That is, one family out of every six families doesn’t know how it will pay for the next meal. That means 12 million children are living with chronic hunger. If government officials don’t wish to protect all the children among us now, they can’t be serious about protecting the fetus carried by a woman. The goal of their severe legislation is control over bodies—the bodies of women and youth, especially the bodies of people in poverty.

Respecting the body of every person is not merely spiritual; it is deeply political. In one poem, Whitman writes: “Have you ever loved the body of a woman? Have you ever loved the body of a man? Do you not see that these are exactly the same to all, in all nations and times all over the earth?” These lines conclude a pair of poems depicting a slave auction. The poet shows the auctioneer’s degrading sales pitch for the human property—first a man and then a woman. Yet the auction is not the center of the poem; the center of the poem is each human being’s body, a body that’s being sold, being stolen, being broken. Whitman appeals to our common humanity: “Have you ever loved the body of a woman? Have you ever loved the body of a man? Do you not see that these are exactly the same to all, in all nations and times all over the earth? If anything is sacred, the human body is sacred...”

Whitman’s daring vision and vivid words are part of our legacy—not only as residents of the United States, but as human beings. His courage and encouragement belong to us all, to all people everywhere, of all ages and stages of life. This vision and courage are not Whitman’s work alone. Among this nation’s artists and writers Whitman has comrades of all genders, colors and conditions, comrades who also have made the case for the

equality of everybody and the dignity of the human body. He is not alone in making the case for liberation and love of our own physical beings. But when he wrote, Whitman surely must have felt alone. Perhaps this is why he denied that any of his poems with homoerotic images had anything to do with homoerotic love.

As a sensual man whose love and longing for other men would be condemned for nearly a century after his passing, his writings have urged all of us to see the sacredness of our bodies, honor our desires, and show to our fellow humans the blessings of tenderness, compassion and kindness. According to Nussbaum, the philosopher, Whitman's democracy is a democracy of love.

He writes: "The sleepers are very beautiful as they lie unclothed,/ They flow hand in hand over the whole earth from east to west as they lie unclothed;/ The Asiatic and African are hand in hand... the European and American are hand in hand,/ Learned and unlearned are hand in hand... and male and female are hand in hand."

In recognition of the bicentennial of his birth, I have three suggestions of ways to honor Whitman's life--and ways to experience him honoring you and your life.

First, in the coming days, read something of Whitman; it could be one poem or several of them. Most are online and in the public domain. The *public domain* is a phrase I bet he would have liked. You can also find his works at the public library, one of the few places remaining where people gather and mix together from countless backgrounds—a place of human kinship. But if Whitman's work is not your cup of tea, find somebody else's poem to read, and then reflect on that one for a few days.

Second, in the coming days, celebrate your body and give thanks to it. Focus on one or more

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<sup>i</sup> The first edition of *Leaves of Grass* (1855) had only 12 poems; the second (1856) had 33 plus letters between R. W. Emerson and Whitman; the fifth edition (1870) had a few hundred poems plus other works.

<sup>ii</sup> *Walt Whitman: Complete Poetry and Collected Prose*; selected with a chronology by Justin Kaplan (New York, 1982: Library of America). At 1345 pages long, it includes repeated publications or earlier poems, including *Song of Myself*.

specific parts. Appreciate how it works and what it does. It doesn't matter which part. Perhaps when you blow your nose, you can give thanks for it and appreciate your nostrils, throat and sinuses too. This doesn't mean you like your allergies or the cold you might have, but you can marvel at those amazing parts of your body, your nose, nostrils, throat and sinuses. Every part of us is a miracle—nose, fingernail, knee. Whitman says: "The body is the soul, the body is a poem."

Third, in the coming days, take some action on behalf of the bodies and souls of other people. Whether it's demanding humane treatment by governments, insisting on the rights of women or calling attention to the needs of children and families, decide on something to do. Perhaps it would be giving monetary donations to ease the suffering of others from abuse, repression, war, hunger and so on. Perhaps it would be showing up at the City Council meeting on Tuesday.

Whatever it is, do something to extend the gift of dignity to others, by protecting the freedom and safety of their bodies and souls.

Wounded by the violence of repressive social codes, Whitman still celebrates human bodies, desire and pleasure as gifts and blessings. He does this for himself and for us. In the midst of cruelty, Whitman promotes human dignity and freedom. He does this in his time, and for our time, and for all times.

In a world with so much to make us fearful or break our hearts, he calls us to courage. He invites us to take his hand in ours, and to join hands with one another, and go forward in love and faith, together.

So may it be

<sup>iii</sup> *Song of Myself*, sect. 2 (p. 190 in Library of America).

<sup>iv</sup> Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought* (Cambridge, 2001: Cambridge University Press), pp. 651-652.

<sup>v</sup> Library of America edition's chronology, p. 1351.

<sup>vi</sup> *I Sing the Body Electric*, sect. 1 (p. 251 in Library of America).

<sup>vii</sup> *Song of Myself*, section 3 (p. 190 in Library of America).