

Crossing the Narrows Bridge

Sheri Gietzen

It avails not, time nor place—distance avails not,
I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or ever so many
generations hence,
Just as you feel when you look on the river and sky, so I felt,
Just as any of you is one of a living crowd, I was one of a crowd

Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*

The October morning is chilly and damp as I climb into my car. I sip the steamy coffee from my Starbucks travel mug and slide it into the small holder. Snuggling the fuzzy collar of my jacket around me, the fog so soupy that the headlights barely penetrate to shine a beacon of safety, I turn the car around. The sun is too low yet to shine its warming rays into the clingy moist blanket on the sleepy roads and waterways of the Puget Sound. My mind wanders to recent news broadcasts of terrorism on the opposite coast, seeming like apparitions, as I make my way down the familiar twists and turns. My ghostly beacon hovers above the black ribbon casting filtered light that radiates off the tall shadowy giants looming on either side, and now others began to appear, like phantoms pushing through walls of water. In orderly fashion each falls into line, their beacons attaching them together in a long train heading toward the unseen Narrows Bridge. I become one of the crowd on the black ribbon, one with the crowd in a small string of light, one alone while connected with countless others still hidden in the cloak of darkness and fog. Visions of the twin towers crumbling cloud everything else yet crash into my consciousness this October, the words, phrases, and visions of Walt Whitman challenge my understanding of democracy and freedom and what it means to be an American. I muse upon a passage in Walt Whitman's *Democratic Vistas*:

When the present century closes, our population will be sixty or seventy millions. The Pacific will be ours, and the Atlantic mainly ours. There will be daily electronic communication with every part of the globe. What an age! What a land! Where, elsewhere, one so great? The individuality of one nation must then, as always, lead the world. Can there be any doubt who the leader ought to be? (1005)

And here, at the turn of the following century, born and raised on the Pacific Coast, indeed able to communicate daily with every part of the globe, I reflect upon Walt Whitman's words and feel his buoyant unfaltering enthusiasm for life, his yearning for awakening the powerful consciousness within democratic America, and his passionate love and connection with the people. This month in the aftermath of September 11th, when the anguish in America is as thick as the fog through which I make my way, I wonder about Walt Whitman and his transcendent vision of the American people.

Walt Whitman crossed the Brooklyn Ferry as regularly as I cross the Narrows Bridge; he mused within himself about the independent yet ultimately unified nature of the men and women alongside him, about the hundreds that cross and return home, about the generations hence that would cross the swiftly rushing current. As I approach the Narrows Bridge with hundreds of others, indeed thousands that cross everyday, Whitman's words drift to me; "you that cross from shore to shore years hence are more to me, and more in my meditations, than you might suppose./ The impalpable sustenance of me from all things at all hours of the day,/ The simple, compact, well-join'd scheme, myself disintegrated, every one disintegrated yet part of the scheme,/ The similitudes of the past and those of the future" (308). He seemed to see others in a way that was so much a part of himself, so interdependent with his own existence, that they were all parts of the whole of life; disintegrated as individual independent entities, but integrated in an overall scheme that surpassed individuality, that surpassed even time. Generations connect through time to join as one whole democratic soul: "Who knows, for all the distance, but I am as good as looking at you now, for all you cannot see me?" (312). Whitman asks, "What is it then between us?/ What is the count of the scores or hundreds of years between us?/ Whatever it is, it avails not—distance avails not, and place avails not" (310). He exudes confidence throughout his declarations of unified existence between himself and his beloved others. Life to Whitman is not a dream, or a reflection in a mirror, or an echo from a distant hill, nor is it to be thrown to the winds; life is peace, and victory, and true connection with real others that will transcend death and time.

Whitman's perception of the deep connection with other people is evident in every poem and piece of prose. From the curious faces he describes in "Crossing

Brooklyn Ferry,” to each face that Whitman sees or imagines in the streets and byways in “Song of Myself,” to each face he touches in the hospitals throughout the Civil War, to those faces though they be but a vision from his mind’s eye wandering, Whitman felt united with them:

Was one with the rest, the days and haps of the rest,
Was call’d by my nighest name by clear and loud voices of young men as
they saw me approaching or passing,
Felt their arms on my neck as I stood, or the negligent leaning of their
flesh against me as I sat,
Saw many I loved in the street or ferry-boat or public assembly, yet never
told them a word,
Lived the same life with the rest, the same old laughing gnawing, sleeping,
Play’d the part that still looks back on the actor or actress,
The same old role, the role that is what we make it, as great as we like,
Or as small as we like, or both great and small. (311)

Whitman cherished them and felt intertwined with them. Ordinary and commonplace people engaged in routine activities are breath and life to him; they are the soul of America. Together they are the faith and doctrine and witnesses of true existence worthy of Whitman’s everlasting attention. Here among the ordinary people is the true strength and power of democracy; Whitman declares, “I resist anything better than my own diversity” (43). Does he believe there could ever be anything better? I think not.

Sipping my coffee as the fog begins to lift, Whitman’s world and thoughts penned one hundred years ago collide with my world and take on significance; under the Narrows Bridge a small silent tugboat pushes its clumsy barge in a steady line against the swift current, ferries crisscross on the sunlit water circled by seagulls, “high in the air floating with motionless wings, oscillating their bodies/ Saw how the glistening yellow lit up parts of their bodies and left the rest in strong shadow” (309); beneath me small sailboats linger in the crisp morning air among the misty islands as the sun’s rays reach out like fingers across the northwest sky—I think of Whitman watching “sailors at work in the rigging or out astride the spars,/ The round masts, the swinging motion of the hulls, the slender serpentine pennants,/

The large and small steamers in motion, the pilots in their pilot-houses,/ The white wake left by the passage, the quick tremulous whirl of the wheels,/ The flags of all nations, the falling of sunset" (309). Strength in diversity, flags of all nations under one united nation—seeing others in their daily routine as extraordinary, as powerful, as the strength of America, has different meaning and hopeful possibilities as the nation pulls together in the aftermath of September 11th.

Whitmanian exuberance and confident determination rustled through the ages in the weeks following September 11th, rising out across the nation in the display of the flag and talk in the coffee shops, then resounding in a unified cry of "United We Stand!" from every corner. Whitman predicted, "A new order shall arise and they shall be the priests of man, and every man shall be his own priest... They shall not deign to defend immorality or God or the perfection of things or liberty or the exquisite beauty and reality of the soul. They shall be responded to from the remainder of the earth" (25). Whatever the response from the remainder of the earth, whether yea or nay, Whitman was right in attributing strength to diversity and power to ordinary people within this disintegrated yet well-joined scheme called America. Every American rose to say, "I am the mashed fireman with breastbone broken.... tumbling walls buried me in their debris,/ Heat and smoke I inspired.... I heard the yelling shouts of my comrades,/ I heard the distant click of their picks and shovels;/ They have cleared the beams away....they tenderly lift me forth" (65). The thousands that joined together in the ash and rubble at ground zero, the relief workers that followed, the blood donors, the financial contributions, the memorials that were raised all across the nation, reveal the disintegrated diversified ordinary populace as united with purpose and power: "The diverse shall be no less diverse, but they shall flow and unite....they unite now" (115).

Beyond feeling horrified and vulnerable, I think we have surprised ourselves these past months, but we would not have surprised Whitman. Whitman believed in Americans and believed in his vision of Americans: "my soul embraces you this hour, and we affect each other without ever seeing each other.../ And that I think such thoughts as these is just as wonderful,/ And that I can remind you, and you think them and know them to be true is just as wonderful" (141). The truth of the power and strength within the awakened democratic people would not surprise

Whitman. Through his days writing “Song of Myself,” through the Civil War, through his poetry over one hundred years later, he believes in his beloved people. As I park my car I wonder what Whitman would have thought about the world today—compartments of life intertwine, mix and blend, the isolation and freedom of cars, global news on TV screens, cell phones, email. The crisp air of this blustery day blows through my hair, and leaves of burgundy, orange, red and yellow circle about me. He seems to have been able to transcend time, just as he predicted—and to have known the potential for strength and unity in the heart and soul of Americans.

Closer yet I approach you,
What thought you have of me now, I had as much of you—
 I laid in my stores in advance,
I consider'd long and seriously of you before you were born.

Who was to know what should come home to me?
Who knows but I am enjoying this?
Who knows, for all the distance, but I am as good as looking at you now,
 for all you cannot see me? (311)

Kaplan, Justin, ed. *Walt Whitman: Poetry and Prose*. New York: Library of America College Editions, 1996.