

Walt Whitman, model for chaplains & secular saint



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Highland Views
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"There will soon be no more priests ... a new order shall arise ... and every person shall be their own priest."

—Walt Whitman, *Preface*
"Leaves of Grass," 1855

He's been called America's poet and no poet at all. Some have even called him a Christ-figure while others have called him everything but the Antichrist (and maybe that too). Angel or devil or maybe a mix of both. He'd love it all.

Walt Whitman. Born on Long Island, journalist in Brooklyn, clerk in Washington, D.C., during the Civil War, he was attracted to the wildness in city and countryside.

A child brought him a handful of grass and his life-work was born. "Leaves of Grass," published in 11 editions, first appeared in 1855. Hardly anyone cared or dared to read it, except one of the great minds of the time, Ralph Waldo Emerson, who wrote to the young poet, "I find it the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed ... I greet you at the beginning of a great career."

The literary genius met the poetic genius and the spark was kindled.

Fired from his job as clerk at the Interior Department (the Secretary was horrified the author of "that book" worked for him), Walt went on to work in the Attorney General's office. Yet his heart was



This image of Walt Whitman is from the National Archives' Civil War photograph collection.

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with the wounded soldiers in the national capitol, a city that had become "one vast central hospital."

In my years as a chaplain I often went back to thumb through Walt's mind and words (he said his book was identical to himself). I always have been impressed by his service among the wounded and dying. He seems to me the perfect example of good chaplaincy or any relevant ministry. He willingly walked into suffering and became a model for anyone seeking to be a companion for others in their suffering.

"During those three years in hospital,

camp or field, I made over six hundred visits or tours, and went, as I estimate, counting all, among from eighty thousand to a hundred thousand of the wounded and sick." He comforted everyone, Northerner or Southerner.

"In my visits to the hospitals I found it was in the simple matter of personal presence, and emanating ordinary cheer and magnetism, that I succeeded and helped more than ... anything else" (Memoranda). His small pack and bulging pockets were often full of gifts for the men including fruit, pencils, magazines and books. The greatest gift he brought was himself.

Walt first served with the Christian Commission, but when it became obvious they were more interested in saving the souls of soldiers than bringing "real aid," Walt went on his own. His brother, George Washington Whitman, had been wounded at Fredericksburg so Walt knew the infirm needed a different quality of "soul care."

Whitman was no atheist. But where do we root him in religion?

"My faith is the greatest of faiths and the least of faiths, enclosing all worship ancient and modern," he writes in "Song of Myself" (43). Later he speaks bluntly: "And nothing, not God, is greater to one than one's self is" (48).

Those most shocked by these statements need to press on to hear the full message of the prophetic poet: "I call to mankind, Be not curious about God ... I am not curious about God ... I hear and behold God in every object, yet I understand God not in the least."

Honesty is one major quality of effective chaplaincy: "In the faces of men and women I see God, and in my own face in the glass; I find letters from God dropped in the street, and every one is signed by God's name" (48).

For Walt, any "God" must include everyone.

Where do we root him in religion? A deeper question may be: What is below, under the beliefs, beneath the traditions people hold so tightly to? Walt digs down to deeper roots. He finds anything divine in the earth, and in "comrades" who, like him, are "absorbed" (a favorite word for the poet) into a messy but common humanity — sensual and suffering — intertwined in the beauty of the "Kosmos."

"Every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you." (Song of Myself, 1)

Walt didn't throw out divinity, faith or scriptures. He simply absorbed it all. He found all that within himself and became his own priest, his own chaplain.

Many people have tried to ignore or even censor Walt Whitman. I find that strange for one main reason: He was a practicing chaplain who loved his own life and life itself. I would think we would want to have more of that living poetry in our contemporary lives.

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