

Common Air for All to Share

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Today is the 177th birth anniversary of Walt Whitman. For many people, Whitman is regarded as America's foremost and most original poet. He was the champion of democracy, the voice which spoke from the very spirit of a growing, thriving, bustling, diverse and boisterous nation of the mid-19th century, land of seemingly unlimited resources and opportunities open before a people of equally boundless hopes.

Whitman's poems sang of every possible occupation and aspect of mundane life, drawing attention to the dignity of ordinary human beings, their hopes and fears, joys and sorrows. He believed the true value and telling difference of democracy over other forms of society and government lay in its recognition and support of the common individual.

Whitman certainly admired the energies of ambition which drove the industry of the new nation. But he also believed that the assertion of individuality and the struggle for distinction were only half the story -- the other half is the spirit of solidarity.

The word "democracy" literally refers to the power ("kratos") of the people ("demos"). In contrast to monarchy, aristocracy, and oligarchy, democracy carries the utopian suggestion of non-exploitation. It is not merely that there is power in the masses—a fact which has been known and taken advantage of since the dawn of time—but that there should be opportunity to exercise that power in a self-determined way. This prescription follows from the notion of the intrinsic value of the individual. This value is inherent, essential and inalienable, and cannot be supplanted by the relatively arbitrary and artificial social distinctions traditionally used to justify misappropriation of resources and power. Whitman's fear, and Emerson's before him, was that Americans would fail to identify their unique historical opportunity, fail to produce a culture that looks toward the ideal and the future, and in the fertile soil of democracy would sprout the weeds of the past.

Today democracy seems valued mostly for its coincidence with the free market. We think of a kind of level playing field, a place where anyone has the opportunity to pursue a better life. There are enormous pressures of competition, and many people driving hard to gain status, distinction and wealth, but where relatively few at any given time can actually enjoy this kind of success. In this sense, our break from the past, our "American Revolution," has not been one of essential values. We are still dominated by a preoccupation with elitism; it is just that access is less arbitrarily restricted than once upon a time.

Even our use of the term "American dream" is frequently individualistic and materialistic, connected with home ownership for the nuclear family, or upward mobility for the enterprising. Not that these sorts of dreams aren't important. But

nothing about them is distinctly American or democratic.

When Whitman considered the "kratos" of the "demos," he saw much more than material power and political self-determination. He saw spiritual, intellectual and moral dimensions to the ordinary person that were mostly latent, enormous reserves locked up and ignored throughout centuries. The promise of their unfoldment was the true American dream, and the energies and values activated then would alone be effective in healing wounds and knitting together the social fabric. This takes enormous faith. But the love and insight which fed Whitman's inner life he felt was the birthright of anyone. "What I assume you shall assume," he states in *Song of Myself*. And again, "In the faces of men and women I see God."

His monumental collection of poems was humbly titled "Leaves of Grass," and the first edition was even published anonymously. What sprouted forth in his book could potentially cover the fields and hills of the nation, he believed. The sunshine which has always greened the world's lands and brought forth the inspired word of all revered traditions, could warm anyone's face directly without the mediation of academic or ecclesiastical institutions. This, for Whitman, was the deeper meaning of democracy—the common man or woman accessing the power of illumination, resulting in clear minds and open, loving hearts.

This would not negate the traditions of the past, but ultimately vindicate them by bringing forth religious experience where there is now only religion, and wisdom where there is only knowledge.

At a time when many sense the rat race has reached its terminus of expansion, and emptiness and ennui are at epidemic levels, we need to expand our ideas about democracy, where the "kratos" is not merely property rights and buying power, claim and consumption. There must be direct routes to fulfillment, ways that don't require more space and competition, but are as inalienable as our humanity. "What is commonest, cheapest, nearest, easiest, is Me," sings Whitman.

Whitman's power was the breadth of his vision, just as a wider aperture increases the light. His spirit was an overflowing well which approached the world with a sense of ecstatic abundance. And he thought anyone could recover this same expansive selfhood if they would but search on behalf of all.

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