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**LEAVES OF GRASS:**  
**A CELEBRATION OF INTERBEING**  
a sermon given by The Rev. Rosemary Lloyd  
at the First Church in Boston  
Sunday, April 20, 2008

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It's all about me.

These are the opening lines to one of the longer poems in Walt Whitman's lifetime collection known as *Leaves of Grass*. It is called "Song of Myself":

*"I celebrate myself, and sing myself,  
And what I assume you shall assume,  
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you."*

A chant in celebration of the self continues for verses and pages that rollick through the senses and the sensual, unpeeling and revealing the body electric that Whitman—in words and form—freed to full, bold and creative expression during his life in the mid to late 19th century.

A printer, journalist, editor and publisher, Whitman self-published 12 free-verse poems in 1855. They went essentially unsold (but for 2 copies). He sent one slim volume off to Ralph Waldo Emerson—the person and personality one Whitman scholar equated with being the "Oprah Winfrey and Billy Graham"<sup>1</sup> of his time. Emerson's personal reply to Whitman (b. 1819) was encouraging and congratulatory:

*"I find it the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed... I find incomparable things said incomparably well, as they must be. I find the courage of treatment which so delights us, and which large perception only can inspire. □ I greet you at the beginning of a great career..."*<sup>2</sup>

With such high praise from such high authority, it may surprise that Whitman's was a career marked by grave criticism—of his poetic style and, more virulently, his content. Best known selected excerpts of his work include near aphorisms like: "*Do I contradict myself? Very well then, I contradict myself. I am large. I contain multitudes.*" And lines such as the one in our responsive reading: "*Afoot and lighthearted, I take to the open road, healthy, free, the world before me!*"

Wedding couples sometimes choose the beautiful segment also from "Song of the Open Road":

*"Allons, the road is before us!...I give you my hand!  
I give you my love more precious than money.  
I give you myself before preaching or law;  
Will you give me yourself? will you come travel with me?"*

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<sup>1</sup> Heard on a WGBH presentation on Whitman, April 14, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Concord, Massachusetts, 21 July, 1855, found on the website: [www.sc.edu/library/spcoll/amlit/whitman.html](http://www.sc.edu/library/spcoll/amlit/whitman.html) 12Apr08.

*Shall we stick by each other as long as we live?"*

Most high school English classes skip over the more sensual even erotic poems Whitman pens in celebration of his lover, the unnamed "he." And his livelihood was threatened as a result. He worked briefly as a clerk in the Department of the Interior in Washington, D.C. but was fired when the connection was made that Whitman was the author of *Leaves of Grass*, which the Interior Secretary found offensive.

For whatever literary criticism Whitman still earns to this day, there is an inescapable element in his poetry that has a resonance of a profoundly spiritual quality, and it is this element I lift up for you this morning.

In a torrent of words, Whitman pours out his central thesis: that "everything emanates from the universal soul, and since his own soul is of the same essence, he can identify himself with every object and with every person living or dead, heroic or criminal."<sup>3</sup>

In Whitman's view, we are all connected. We are part of an interdependent web of existence. We are one.

Wake up!

This is not the first time anyone has said this. From Jesus to Billy Collins, from the Buddha to John Donne, spiritual and poetic minds have tried to articulate this truth.

*"All mankind is of one author, and is one volume;...*

*No man is an island, entire of itself,*

*every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.*

*If a clod be washed away by the sea,*

*Europe is the less...*

*...any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind;*

*and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.<sup>4</sup>*

This morning, the choir sang a piece of Whitman's credo in the second movement:

*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 [masterpiece] for the highest, ...*

*And a mouse is miracle enough to stagger sextillions of infidels.*

Whitman's vision of unity scans the globe and the nations; he penetrates the body and the cosmos, connecting his cells with mountains and germs, prostitutes and ants. He is immersed in the being of his human being-ness. And he is alive and without judgment or scorn for another that lives and breathes or is now dust.

This state of being at one is deeply intriguing. Yet I do not meet it entirely without resistance. I recall, for example, that from this same pulpit I have extolled the

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<sup>3</sup> from Malcolm Cowley, "Introduction to Leaves of Grass," 1959 in Walt Whitman edited by Francis Murphy, 1969, Penguin Critical Anthologies.

<sup>4</sup> John Donne, *Meditation XVII*

virtue of setting boundaries! “Do I contradict myself? Very well, I contradict myself. I am large, I contain multitudes!”

The call to understand our essential connectedness is foundational to the teachings I am most familiar with in Christianity and Buddhism, as examples. Thich Nhat Hanh, the renowned Vietnamese Zen teacher espouses the concept of “Interbeing.” In one example he establishes that a sheet of paper is everything in the world: the cloud, the rain, the sun and earth that fuel the tree; the logger who cuts it down; the mill; the hand that touches it, writes on it, reads from it...All is one. What we do to one person, we do to ourselves.”

Jesus in the Gospel of Thomas said: “Split a piece of wood; I am there. Lift up a stone, and you will find me there.”<sup>5</sup>

In his poem, “Please Call Me By My True Name,” Thay writes:

*“I am the 12 year old girl, refugee on a small boat / who throws herself into the ocean after being raped by a sea pirate / and I am the pirate, my heart not yet capable of seeing and loving.”*

We are all interrelated...

This truth is essential for us to awaken to. Our world is in crisis. The planet teeters on the edge of destruction from nuclear winter and global warming. Our souls are decaying from the assaults and degradations suffered by beings everywhere: in war, and torture chambers, through sexual abuse and sex slavery. It is no surprise that we are asleep; we can hardly bear to be awake to pain!

Yet it is only through waking up and embracing our interconnectedness that we can save ourselves! Coming alive to this truth is the antidote to the suffering!

So how can we wake up? How can we embrace the truth of our interconnectedness and revel in the joy of our oneness?

There is always a lot of press when a major religious leader comes to the United States. You’ve read that the Pope was in NY recently. Well, when the Dalai Lama was last there, he walked up to a hot dog vendor, handed him a twenty-dollar bill, and said, “Make me one with everything.” (You heard that, right?) Well, the vendor pocketed the money, and handed His Excellency his hot dog. The Dalai Lama, after waiting for a moment, asked for his change. The vendor looked at him and said, “Change comes from within.”

If you are laughing, you are not asleep...This is a good sign...

The practice for being one with everything could be laughter...It could be breathing. It could be mutually respectful and loving sex. It could be walking in nature and letting it wash over you and fill you with awe. It could be reading a sacred text with deep, quiet attention. It could be singing. It could be whatever has you be present to this moment. Not the past, not the future. NOW!

You know. I’m really happy that you are here this morning. And I’m very grateful that you are listening on the radio or at your computer. But I have to tell you, I have trouble staying connected with the ecstasy when I start comparing myself to Oprah Winfrey....

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<sup>5</sup> Gospel of Thomas, saying 30 and 77:2-3 (Coptic Version).

Have you heard about what she's up to?! She is combining the world of technology with her indisputable popularity and influence and to conduct what is probably the world's largest web-based, remote learning project on human transformation. Do you know about it?

She has partnered with Eckhardt Tolle, the author of *The Power of Now* and *A New Earth*. Together they are leading a weekly workshop on enlightenment, on waking up to the truth of our interconnectedness. Tolle had his own encounter with awakening years ago. He confesses that for the first 30 years of his life he lived in a "state of almost continuous anxiety interspersed with periods of suicidal depression." At a point of deep despair the thought invaded his mind, "I cannot live with myself any longer." But what happened next saved him: He had a sudden awareness that if he could think, "I cannot live with myself" than there is an "I" and a "self"—and only one of them is real...

He was shocked into stillness with no more thoughts. He was gripped by an intense fear as he felt himself sucked into a void and heard the words "Resist nothing." He surrendered to the experience and his fear disappeared. Afterwards, he experienced an intense awareness of the miracle of all of life. Like Whitman, his sense of connection spread down to a microscopic and out to a cosmic dimension. After years of spiritual study and trying to understand his experience, he became devoted to trying to share this awareness with the world, for the sake of the entire planet and all its inhabitants.

It's an inspiring goal.

And the stakes have never been higher.

If indeed, as Thich Nhat Hanh says, "everything is everything else, we inter-are," then "everyone is responsible for everything that happens in life."

In short: it's up to you.

It's up to you to begin celebrating yourself—your whole self. We need to face the truth of our whole selves—the sweat and rough, the shamed and vulnerable. The dark side as well as the bright. When we bring all of ourselves into the light of acceptance and bless it with our compassion, we begin to heal. St. Paul wrote: "Everything is shown up by being exposed to the light, and whatever is exposed to the light itself becomes light."

Begin by breathing and smiling. Begin by producing peace in yourself.

"I celebrate myself, and sing myself," Whitman wrote. This celebrating one's self may sound selfish or self-absorbed. But if we listen with care and all the way through, we learn something very important. His poem begins with "I", but it ends with "you."

Again, Thich Nhat Hanh: "When you produce peace and happiness in yourself, you begin to realize peace for the whole world. With the smile that you produce in yourself, with the conscious breathing you establish within yourself, you begin to work for peace in the world... If you do not give yourself peace, how can you share it with others? If you do not begin your peace work with yourself, where will you go to begin it? To sit, to smile, to look at things and really see them, these are the basis of peace work."

To celebrate one's self. To see things as they really are. To resist nothing. To know that we are one.

This is the practice of peace. This is the practice of healing the whole and holy world. Let it begin with me. AMEN.