

“Leaves of Grass”
Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
June 5, 2005
Bruce A. Bode

Poetry for Order of Service

A child said *What is the grass?* fetching it to me with full hands;
How could I answer the child? I do not know what it is any more than he.

I guess it must be the flag of my disposition, out of hopeful green stuff woven.

Or I guess it is the handkerchief of the Lord,
A scented gift and remembrancer designedly dropt,
Bearing the owner's name someway in the corners, that we may see and remark, and
say *Whose?*

Or I guess the grass is itself a child, the produced babe of the vegetation.

Or I guess it is a uniform hieroglyphic,
And it means, Sprouting alike in broad zones and narrow zones,
Growing among black folks as among white,
Kanuck, Tuckahoe, Congressman, Cuff, I give them the same, I receive them the
same.

And now it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves.

Tenderly will I use you curling grass,
It may be you transpire from the breasts of young men,
It may be if I had known them I would have loved them,
It may be you are from old people, or from offspring taken soon out of their mother's
laps,
And here you are the mothers' laps.

This grass is very dark to be from the white heads of old mothers,
Darker than the colorless beards of old men,
Dark to come from under the faint red roofs of mouths.

O I perceive after all so many uttering tongues,
And I perceive they do not come from the roofs of mouths for nothing.

I wish I could translate the hints about the dead young men and women,
And the hints about old men and mothers, and the offspring taken soon out of their
laps.

What do you think has become of the young and old men?

And what do you think has become of the women and children?

They are alive and well somewhere,
The smallest sprout shows there is really no death,
And if ever there was it led forward life, and does not wait at the end to arrest it,
And ceas'd the moment life appear'd.

All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses,
And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier.
(Walt Whitman, chant 6 of "Song of Myself," Leaves of Grass)

Call to Worship

Holy and beautiful is the custom by which we gather together on this first Sunday in the month of June.

Here we come to give our thanks, to face our ideals, to remember our loved ones, to seek that which is permanent, and to serve goodness, beauty, and the qualities of life that make it rich and whole.

Through this hour breathes the worship of all ages, the cathedral music of all history, and blessed are the ears that hear that eternal sound.

Lighting of Chalice (spoken in unison)

We are here to abet creation and to witness to it,
To notice each other's beautiful face and complex nature
So that creation need not play to an empty house.
(Annie Dillard)

Responsive Reading

The responsive reading this morning consists of lines from Walt Whitman's signature poem, "Song of Myself." "Self" here is not, first of all, the individual self, but rather a "self" which all being shares, and which, so to speak, is all being.

MINISTER: Urge and urge and urge, always the procreative urge of the world.

CONGREGATION: I have heard what the talkers were talking, the talk of the beginning and the end, but I do not talk of the beginning or the end.

MINISTER: There was never any more inception than there is now, nor any more youth or age than there is now.

CONGREGATION: And there will never be any more perfection than there is now, nor any more heaven or hell than there is now.

MINISTER: Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origin of all poems; you shall possess the good of the earth and sun.

CONGREGATION: You shall no longer take things at second or third hand, nor look through the eyes of the dead, nor feed on the specters in books,

MINISTER: You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me; you shall listen to all sides, and filter them from your self.

CONGREGATION: I loaf and invite my soul; I lean and loaf at my ease observing a spear of summer grass.

(Walt Whitman, excerpts from chants 1, 2, and 3 of "Song of Myself," Leaves of Grass)

Reading

My sermon this morning will be an attempt to open us up to the summer months ahead; to allow our hearts, minds, and spirits to drift into some of the questions that lying on the summer grass seems to encourage. One of those questions, addressed by Walt Whitman in his poem, "Song of Myself," is, "What is the grass?"

My reading is a poem by the contemporary American poet Mary Oliver, a great admirer of Whitman. The poem, "Some Questions You Might Ask," poses a series of questions on the nature of the soul, implying that at bottom all things share a common soul. The poem ends, not accidentally I think, with the question that Walt Whitman asked about grass.

Is the soul solid, like iron?
Or is it tender and breakable, like
the wings of a moth in the beak of the owl?
Who has it, and who doesn't?
I keep looking around me.
The face of the moose is as sad
as the face of Jesus.
The swan opens her white wings slowly.
In the fall, the black bear carries leaves into the darkness.
One question leads to another.
Does it have a shape? Like an iceberg?
Like the eye of a hummingbird?
Does it have one lung, like the snake and the scallop?
Why should I have it, and not the anteater
who loves her children?
Why should I have it, and not the camel?
Come to think of it, what about the maple trees?
What about the blue iris?
What about all the little stones, sitting alone in the moonlight?

What about roses, and lemons, and their shining leaves?

What about grass?

(Mary Oliver, "Some Questions You Might Ask," New and Selected Poems)

"LEAVES OF GRASS"

Introduction

This Sunday near the end of the church year, near the end of the school year, and near the beginning of summer, we are about to enter upon a change in the rhythm of life.

For many of us there will be a definite and very real change in the pace and routine of our lives – perhaps an opportunity to take a vacation, to travel and visit other places, to reconnect with family members and friends we may not have seen for a time, to participate in a different set of activities and interests.

For others of us the summer months may not bring all that much change in the rhythm or routine of things, but still we think of the summer months as being different from the rest of the year, different from the school year and the church year. And so even if there is not a definite physical change in our lives, the summer months may still mark a mental change.

Thus, these summer months provide us with an opportunity to consider our lives from a different perspective – not burrowing down or hunkering down, not with the narrowed intensity and introspective, inward focus that the dark of winter seems to invite; but in the summer, perhaps lying on the grass or in the grass, the mind seems to lighten and loosen; it's allowed to float and roam, to speculate, to reflect even on the very grass upon which one sits or in which one lies.

A few weeks ago a friend sent me a poem with the simple title, "Grass," and so I began thinking about grass. Certain biblical verses from my youth related to grass came to my mind:

Thou dost sweep us away; we are like a dream,
like the grass,...

In the morning it flourishes and is renewed,
in the evening it is cut down and withers.

(Psalm 90:5,6)

A voice says, "Cry!"

And I said, "What shall I cry?"

All flesh is grass,

and all its beauty is like the flower of the field.

The grass withers, the flower fades,

when the breath of the Lord blows upon it;

surely the people is grass.

(Isaiah 40:6,7)

If God so clothes the grass of the field,
which today is, and tomorrow is not,
shall he not much more clothe you,
O ye of little faith?"

(Matthew 6:30)

Also some lines of poetry came to mind. This from Emily Dickinson:

The Grass so little has to do -
A Sphere of simple Green -
With only Butterflies to brood
And Bees to entertain -

And stir all day to pretty Tunes
The Breezes fetch along -
And hold the Sunshine in its lap
And bow to everything -

And thread the Dews, all night, like Pearls -
And make itself so fine
A Duchess were too common
For such a noticing -

And even when it dies - to pass
In Odors so divine -
Like Lowly spices, lain to sleep -
Or Spikenards, perishing -

And then, in Sovereign Barns to dwell -
And dream the Days away,
The Grass so little has to do
I wish I were a Hay -

Also these tender words from poet Robinson Jeffers written to his wife, Una, after her death:

You were faithful and a lion heart... But the ashes have fallen
And the flame has gone up; nothing human remains. You are earth and air; you are
in the beauty of the ocean
And the great streaming triumphs of sundown; you are alive and well in the tender
young grass rejoicing
When soft rain falls all night, and little rosy-fleeced clouds float on the dawn.
(Robinson Jeffers, from "Hungerfield")

Wondering about grass

Thinking and wondering about grass is what a child might do. In the summer we are invited to return to those simple, first questions like, “What is the grass?”

That is a question the poet Walt Whitman posed in the book he spent his whole life laboring at, adding to, amending. That book, a type of literature never seen before, was titled Leaves of Grass – “leaves” having the double meaning of being the paper, the pages, the poems themselves, as well as individual blades of grass.

In his most famous and far-reaching poem from that book, “Song of Myself,” he wrote:

A child said *What is the grass?* fetching it to me with full hands;...

You can imagine a child doing that? Pulling up some grass, bringing it to an adult, and innocently asking, “What it this?,” as if expecting an answer.

What is the grass? If you could answer that question, wouldn’t you have the answer to all questions?

By asking a question about something so simple, so common, and so ephemeral as grass, one is asking the ultimate question of being, the “ontological question” – the how, the why, the wherefore of being itself. How is it that anything at all *is*?

With such a question one is not asking first of all about the constituent parts of grass or of what it is composed. This is not that kind of question – not a question for the scientific laboratory, though an individual scientist in a scientific laboratory studying grass might well be led even more deeply into the child’s question, which is the first and last question humans ask, “What is something really?” “How is it that anything *is*?”

This is not a question you can give a definitive answer to, and yet it is a question we should never let go of, for it is the question that makes us most human, one that indicates we are alive in spirit.

To return to Walt Whitman and his adult response to the child’s question, “What is the grass?”

How could I answer the child? I do not know what it is any more than he.

But then Whitman goes into a reverie about grass. He makes some guesses about what grass is; he brings forth some reflections about grass. He writes:

I guess it must be the flag of my disposition, out of hopeful green stuff woven.

I take that to mean that grass is for him an emblem or banner of his mindset and

temperament, his attitude and approach to life, which is forever hopeful in its nature – grass in its ubiquity, persistence, and greenness a symbol of hope springing eternal

Or I guess it is the handkerchief of the Lord,
A scented gift and remembrancer designedly dropt,
Bearing the owner's name someway in the corners, that we may see and remark, and
say *Whose?*

Is the grass a product of some kind of larger intelligence and design, a token of some greater power and process whose effects we can see but whose full reality and nature will always be hid from our eyes? The poet wonders.

Then changing direction, he says:

Or I guess the grass is itself a child, the produced babe of the vegetation.

At the beginning of this poem it was the child with hands full of grass asking about the grass, but here the grass is itself a child, the offspring of vegetative life. Here the distance between human life and vegetative life is collapsed. And we will see even more deeply in a moment how grass and humans are linked.

Or I guess it is a uniform hieroglyphic,
And it means, Sprouting alike in broad zones and narrow zones,
Growing among black folks as among white,
Kanuck, Tuckahoe, Congressman, Cuff, I give them the same, I receive them the
same.

Here grass, like a picture in the Egyptian writing system, is an egalitarian symbol. It grows everywhere and among peoples and tribes of all sorts. As such, it is a lesson in the equality and unity of things.

And now it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves.

Grass, of course, has a long association with graves and death. Grass grows in burial places and from burial places. And the ephemeral and anonymous nature of grass suggests human temporality and mortality – “All flesh is grass.” But what an image this is: the uncut grass as the hair of graves!

If you look upon grass as the hair of graves, grass as flowering spears growing from the bodies of loved ones ... if you look in this way, you will walk a little differently and more tenderly upon the grass.

Tenderly will I use you curling grass,
It may be you transpire from the breasts of young men,
It may be if I had known them I would have loved them,
It may be you are from old people, or from offspring taken soon out of their mother's

laps.

And here you are the mothers' laps.

This grass is very dark to be from the white heads of old mothers,
Darker than the colorless beards of old men,
Dark to come from under the faint red roofs of mouths.

O I perceive after all so many uttering tongues,
And I perceive they do not come from the roofs of mouths for nothing.

For the poet there is some meaning to all of this. But what is that meaning? He says:

I wish I could translate the hints about the dead young men and women,
And the hints about old men and mothers, and the offspring taken soon out of their
laps.

What do you think has become of the young and old men?
And what do you think has become of the women and children?

And the poet's answer:

They are alive and well somewhere, the smallest sprout shows there is really no
death,
And if ever there was it led forward life, and does not wait at the end to arrest it,
And ceas'd the moment life appear'd.

Death is a part of the larger process of life and being, not something separate and different. It's part of life. Through his reflecting on the grass – its commonness, its humbleness, its tenaciousness, its ubiquity – the poet perceives that reality is of one piece, each individual blade of grass part of a larger reality and process. When one has that perspective then one may find, as the poet does, that:

All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses,
And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier.

The poet here affirms a mystical connection with a larger reality that embraces and encompasses individual death. His reflection on grass has led him into a different zone of consciousness, a consciousness that sees beyond the separate parts to a larger wholeness of being.

Somehow by reflecting on that which is so ephemeral and so ordinary the poet has broken through to something eternal and extraordinary of which he is and always has been a part.

Conclusion

Let me close with one last poem, the one that started my own reverie on grass, and hopefully this will be enough to kick-start you into the important summer labor of having enough leisure to attend to the ordinary grass of the fields, perhaps even to carefully observe a single spear of summer grass.

The poem is by Ruth Schwartz and is titled, "Grass." Like Whitman's poem it asks the child's question, however here, it's not a human child:

Yesterday, and the day before that,
the cows ate grass.
Tomorrow, and the next, and every day after that,
the cows will eat grass.
They'll eat until they can't stand up,
and even then, collapsed upon the earth in their last hours,
if they can reach it with their mouths, they'll eat grass.
They'll eat until they've eaten it all, until there are only
a few stray blades
halfway buried under boulders—then
they'll nudge aside the boulders
with their large and knowing lips,
and eat that grass, too.
Only the smallest calves, today,
the ones no bigger than dogs, are lying down.
They gaze out onto the landscape like dreamers:
the sky marbled with fatty clouds;
the cherry trees beginning to leaf;
the first few poppies, unfurling their cadmium banners;
the fences making some things possible, and others difficult;
the shadows falling from, and following, each thing;
and the world seems so strange, so common and wondrous
at once, that the calves ask the cows eating grass,
Is this all there is?
And the answer comes back from mouths full of grass:
This is all there is.

("Grass," Ruth L. Schwartz, from *dear good naked morning*)

Benediction

I end our service with words of benediction from Walt Whitman, the concluding words of "Song of Myself":

I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,
If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles.

You will hardly know who I am or what I mean,
But I shall be good health to you nevertheless,

And filter and fibre your blood.

Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,
Missing me one place search another,
I stop somewhere waiting for you.

(Walt Whitman, from chant 52, "Song of Myself," Leaves of Grass)

Extinguishing the Chalice

We extinguish this chalice
But not the light of truth,
The warmth of community,
Or the fire of commitment.
These we carry in our hearts
Until we are together again.

(NOTE: This is a manuscript version of the sermon preached by The Reverend Bruce A. Bode at the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship on June 5, 2005. The spoken sermon, available on audio cassette at the Fellowship, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)