



Walt Whitman portrait, circa 1861-1865. Stocktrek Images, Inc./Alamy Stock Photo

LESSONS AT THE BEDSIDE: WALT WHITMAN

Richard B. Gunderman, MD, PhD

Dr. Gunderman, (ΑΩΑ, University of Chicago, 1992) is the Chancellor's Professor in the Schools of Medicine, Liberal Arts, and Philanthropy at Indiana University, where he also serves as ΑΩΑ Chapter Councilor, Indianapolis, IN. He is a member of the Editorial Board of *The Pharos*.

Many know Walt Whitman as a great American poet. Fellow bard Ezra Pound called him “America’s poet,” writing “He is America,”¹ and the critic Harold Bloom wrote, “If you are American, then Walt Whitman is your imaginative father and mother.”² United States President Bill Clinton was in the habit of giving copies of Whitman’s magnum opus, *Leaves of Grass*, to people he befriended. However, what many people don’t know is that Whitman spent most of the Civil War in hospitals near Washington, DC, working as a volunteer at the bedsides of thousands of wounded and sick soldiers. For this America’s greatest poet, life’s deepest lessons were to be found at the bedside, a lesson that should not be lost on today’s physicians.

The early years

Whitman was born on Long Island, NY in 1819, the second of his parents’ nine children.³ His family moved frequently, and his formal schooling ended at age 11. Over the ensuing years, he worked to help support them, finding employment as a journalist, a teacher, the

founder-publisher of a newspaper, and a government clerk. In 1855, he self-published a collection of his poetry, *Leaves of Grass*, which included “Song of Myself,” “I Sing the Body Electric,” and “When Lilacs in the Dooryard Bloomed.” He added to and revised *Leaves of Grass* multiple times throughout the remainder of his life until his death in Camden, New Jersey in 1892.

In 1862, Whitman read a newspaper list of Civil War casualties that seemed to include his brother, George. He set off toward Washington in search of him. To his relief, he found George in Virginia, only slightly wounded. But during his search, Whitman encountered some sights he didn’t expect, such as a pile of amputated limbs outside a makeshift hospital. He was so moved by the sight that he agreed to accompany a transport of wounded soldiers to Washington.³ He stayed there tending the soldiers in numerous hospitals—some on the grounds of today’s Smithsonian Institution—between 1863 and 1866. In some cases, his hospital visits extended over multiple days.

At the bedside

Although Whitman did not take up arms in battle, his care for the soldiers manifested remarkable courage. The hospitals of the day—especially war hospitals—struck many visitors as chambers of horrors, overflowing with patients whose loathsome illnesses and mutilating injuries assaulted the eyes, the ears, and the nose. It was the

Lessons at the bedside: Walt Whitman

professional calling of doctors and nurses to be there, and some soldiers could count on visits by friends and loved ones, but most people scrupulously avoided such places. Whitman was able to complete his government clerk's duties in a matter of hours and chose to spend most of his free time with the wounded and dying. He wrote:

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, as sustainer of spirit and body in some degree, in time of need. These visits varied from an hour or two, to all day or night; for with dear or critical cases, I generally watch'd all night. Sometimes I took up my quarters in the hospital and slept or watched there several nights in succession.⁴



Armory Square Hospital, Washington, DC, 1861–1865. Alamy

Ignoring the gore and foul odors, Whitman felt a call to care for those who had no one else. Nurses and doctors were frequently overburdened and could spend only as much time with each patient as absolutely necessary. Although untrained as a health professional, Whitman could linger at the bedsides of the sick and wounded and make a real difference for the men and boys housed there. In one case, he held the hand of Lewis Brown as his leg was amputated and then remained all night on the adjoining cot.⁴ He found that such extreme situations, instead of numbing his compassion, revealed it in ways that engaged

and transformed him as a poet and a human being. He wrote to his mother:

I devote myself much to Armory Square Hospital because it contains by far the worst cases, most repulsive wounds, has the most suffering & most need of consolation—I go every day without fail, & often at night—sometimes stay very late—no one interferes with me, guards, doctors, nurses, nor any one—I am left to take my own course.⁵

The gift of generosity

Whitman had very little in the way of personal property or wealth. His job as a part-time postmaster in the government paymaster's office paid little, and he lived humbly in a single rented room. To obtain money to assist the soldiers, he often solicited donations.³ Yet, Whitman was rich by comparison to those he visited, many of whom had not even a cent. When he could, Whitman would fill his haversack with gifts for the soldiers:

I try to give a word or a trifle to everyone without exception, making regular rounds among them all. I give all kinds of sustenance, blackberries, peaches, lemons & sugar, wines, all kinds of preserves, pickles, brandy, milk, shirts & all articles of underclothing, tobacco, tea, & handkerchiefs...I always give paper, envelopes, and stamps.⁶

Whitman received no remuneration whatsoever for his efforts. He was strictly a volunteer, sharing whatever he could get his hands on to sustain the soldiers and brighten their days. Many had no one but Whitman and he cared for as many as he could. In view of medicine's state in the 1860s, it is not surprising that many soldiers did not fare well. Wound care was in many respects primitive by today's standards, and antibiotics would not be discovered for more than half a century. The doctors did the best they could.

The importance of compassion

Unlike the doctors and nurses, Whitman was in no hurry. He could listen to the soldiers. He could read to them. In some cases, he could even hold their hands.

Many of those he cared for were but boys of 16 or 17 years old, in most cases away from home for the first time in their lives. Many were seriously ill or dying. Whitman's greatest resource was one which is available to contemporary health professionals in equal measure, compassion, but from which it is easy to be distracted by the technical wizardry of 21st century medicine. Recalling one soldier, Whitman wrote:

He asked me to read him a chapter in the New Testament. I complied and ask'd him what I should read. He said, 'Make your own choice.' I open'd at the close of one of the first books of the evangelists and read the chapters describing the latter hours of Christ, and the scenes at the crucifixion. The poor, wasted young man asked me to read the following chapter also, how Christ rose again....He talk'd of death and said he did not fear it. I said, 'Why, Oscar, don't you think you will get well?' He said, 'I may, but it is not probable.'⁷

Whitman managed to minister not only to the soldiers he tended at the bedside but also to their families back home. For those who could write, he ensured that they could reach out to loved ones in their own hand. In some cases, he would write to the families of the deceased, recounting how their son, husband, brother, or father had fared in the hospital and offering some testimony to their good nature:

I do not know his past life, but I feel as if it must have been good. At any rate what I saw of him here, under the most trying circumstances, with a painful wound, and among strangers, I can say that he behaved so brave, so composed, and so sweet and affectionate, it could not be surpass'd. And now like many other noble and good men, after serving his country as a soldier, he has yielded up his young life at the very outset in her service.⁸

A stellar communicator

Even before he ventured into his first Civil War hospital, Whitman knew something that every health professional needs to learn: the power of words. *Leaves of Grass* represents perhaps the supreme American expression of the meaning of democracy and the brotherhood of all men. Yet, it was in the hospital, writing ordinary letters for ordinary boys and men, that much of Whitman's genius shines through. He lacked the medical knowledge and technical expertise of the nurses and doctors, but he offered a poet's eye, ear, and heart. Each soldier's story, he

knew, was unique and deserved to be conveyed with as much fellow feeling as possible.

He connected those confined to a cot in a miserable place with the outside world. When soldiers could not write, he conveyed what they said. For those who could not speak, he captured what they would have said. Again and again, he ensured that what needed to be known was shared. Whitman played a health care role as vital today as it was then—that of a communicator. The injured and sick, and for that matter, the hale and hearty, need more than bodily sustenance and healing—they need to be connected to others, and especially those dear to their hearts. So Whitman sat patiently at the bedside, composing letters such as this one to people he would never meet:

Washington, Jan. 21, 1865

My Dear Wife,

You must excuse me for not having written to you before. I have not been very well & did not feel much like writing—but I feel considerably better now—my complaint is an affection (sic) of the lungs. I am mustered out of service but am not at present well enough to come home. I hope you will try to write back as soon as you receive this and let me know how you all are, how things are going on—let me know how it is with mother. I write this by means of a friend who is now sitting by my side and I hope it will be God's will that we shall yet meet again. Well, I send you all my love and must now close.

Your affectionate husband,
Nelson Jabo

Written by Walt Whitman, a friend⁹

Whitman knew that many of the soldiers had not written home to parents, siblings, spouses, and children for a long time, if at all. Whether because of illiteracy, injury, illness, or a simple fear of worrying those back home, they were cut off from those desperate for news. Whitman encouraged them to write, and if they could not write, he could do it for them. Medicines, surgeries, dressing changes, and the like were all important, but so too were words, the words that connect human beings to one another, giving meaning to life and expressing our deepest hopes and fears. Whitman could act as midwife to the words.

Taking time for reflection

In later years, Whitman thought often of those many hours he passed in the company of the sick and wounded. For one thing, he believed that his service to the soldiers had cost him his health. He was never again the strong and vigorous man who entered his first Civil War hospital in 1863, and in 1873 he suffered the first of several strokes that forced him to leave Washington and go to live with his brother, George, in Camden.³ He had sacrificed not only a good part of his life but also his well-being in service to others, but in so doing he discovered perhaps the deepest fellowship he knew.

Naturally, Whitman put these experiences and feelings into words. In his poem, “Come Up from the Fields Father,” he captures a mother’s lingering despair upon learning, by letter, of her soldier son’s death:

But the mother needs to be better,
She with thin form presently drest in black,
By day her meals untouch’d, then at night fitfully sleeping,
often waking,
In the midnight waking, weeping, longing with one deep
longing,
O that she might withdraw unnoticed, silent from life
escape and withdraw,
To follow, to seek, to be with her dear dead son.¹⁰

Likewise, Whitman speaks directly to those he cared for and lost, writing to the 21-year-old Erastus Haskell:

Poor dear son, though you were not my son, I felt to love you as a son, what short time I saw you sick & dying here—it is as well as it is, perhaps better—for who knows whether he is not better off, that patient & sweet young soul, to go, than we are to stay? So farewell, dear boy—it was my opportunity to be with you in your last rapid days of death—no chance as I have said to do anything particular, for nothing could be done—only you did not lay here & die among strangers without having one at hand who loved you dearly, & to whom you gave your dying kiss—.¹¹

Whitman’s was a ministry of presence, poetry, and love. Those who were alone would not remain alone. Those who could not write would write. For those who could not express themselves in speech, words would be found. Those who languished for days, weeks, and months in a dingy

army hospital, far from those who loved them, would be found by someone with an abundance of love to give.

Whitman could not perform the surgeries and prescribe the drugs known to doctors in his day, but he could bring to, and discover at, the bedside something equally, perhaps even more necessary—a fellow human being and a friend. We can only hope that today’s physicians recognize this same opportunity.

References

1. Bergman H. Ezra Pound and Walt Whitman. *American Literature* 1955. 27: 56-61.
2. Bloom H. Whitman’s America. *Wall Street Journal*. July 29, 2005. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB112260447471999630>.
3. Kaplan J. *Walt Whitman: a life*. New York: Harper, 2003.
4. Whitman W. *Specimen days & Collect*. Mineola (NY): Dover. 1995; p. 78.
5. Murry MG. *Traveling with the wounded: Walt Whitman and Washington’s Civil War hospitals*. Walt Whitman Archive. <https://whitmanarchive.org/criticism/current/anc.00156.html>.
6. Whitman W. *Selected letters of Walt Whitman*. Ed: Miller EH. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press. 1900: 74.
7. Fuller J. A Walt Whitman reading list. *Lapham’s Quarterly*. July 8, 2019. <https://www.laphamsquarterly.org/roundtable/walt-whitman-reading-list>.
8. National Museum of Health and Medicine. *Death of a Pennsylvania soldier*. Letter to the mother of Frank Irwin, May 1, 1865. *Walt Whitman’s soldiers*. https://www.medical-museum.mil/index.cfm?p=visit.exhibits.virtual.waltwhitman.page_04.
9. Walt Whitman Archive. *In Whitman’s hand: letters written for soldiers*. Letter to Adeline Jabo, January 21, 1865. <https://whitman-prod.unl.edu/manuscripts/amanuensis/transcriptions/nar.03612.html>.
10. Whitman W. *Come up from the fields father*. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/51785/come-up-from-the-fields-father>.
11. Whitman and the Civil War. Letter to Mr. and Mrs. S. B. Haskell, August 10, 1863. <https://iwp.uiowa.edu/whitman-web/en/writings/civil-war/week-17/walt-whitman-letter-to-haskells>.

The corresponding author’s E-mail address is rbgunder@iu.edu.