

WALT WHITMAN, MY BROTHERS AND THE GREAT BEYOND

By Ilene Cummings
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Happy first day of Spring. Those dandelions will soon be showing their trustful faces once again. So enjoy. Hope springs eternal in the promise of spring.

But it's instructive to remember that the promise of spring is in fact the promise of mortality. That is, that which is born will some day die. Each such promise comes to an end. Spring we must remember, is a limited offer.

And so today on this first day of spring, I choose to take up the subject of mortality, our living and dying, using the stories of the lives of my two brothers as the focal point for today's sermon. The title should be "Walt Whitman, my brothers (plural) and the great beyond" but I didn't know that until I wrote it.

"Every night and every morn some to misery are born;
every morn and every night, some are born to sweet delight".

These words by William Blake from this morning's hymn, never fail to move me. The evidence is all around us. Even within the same family, some people seem to be born in lucky circumstances and others seem to be born to a less happy design.

During the Olympics many of us were much inspired by the story of the two Biladeau brothers—the one a Gold Medal mogul skier, the other physically disabled with cerebral palsy. They presented such a contrast in physical abilities and yet such brotherly love was evident between them it was most moving to see. Although their physical abilities were so markedly different they had similar aspirations.

In recent months I have been thinking a lot about my own two contrasting brothers. Now my oldest brother Jerry was not a gold medal skier (far from it—he was quite clumsy physically) but he was a gold medal citizen of his community. For twenty-nine years he was the well-known and respected city attorney of a small city in Washington State. He was a tireless attender of meetings to help benefit the community and a member of the board of numerous organizations or committees.

Just to give you an example of the kind of guy he was, he was on the Library Board for Clark County and they were trying to get a referendum passed to give funding to build a new library. Two times it had come up and both times it had failed to get the sixty-five percent vote needed, though it was very close both times. When the third vote on the referendum came around, Jerry noted one area of town where the vote had been particularly close and at the age of seventy-five went out personally door to door to every house in an area thirty blocks by twenty blocks pressing people to vote yes for the new library. I'm pleased to report it passed this third time. Many credited Jerry's efforts as a major deciding factor.

He had a sharp legal mind, coupled with a positive, easy-going manner and an endearing self-deprecating sense of humour. You'd have liked him, practically everybody did.

And he was a true-blue humanist Unitarian-Universalist. It could be said that I am standing here before you this morning as a direct result of my brother Jerry. We were born into a Methodist family in Whatcom County, in the upper northwest corner of Washington State. We all, that is my two brothers, my sister Belle and I, attended the Methodist church faithfully during the years we lived at home.

Jerry was the first to leave home to go to University in Seattle. A confirmed Democrat as was all my family, Jerry was a big admirer of Adlai Stevenson (who was running against Dwight D. Eisenhower in the presidential election of 1952). Jerry read somewhere that Stevenson was a Unitarian and decided to check it out. He attended one Unitarian service and was instantly "converted"—a conversion that lasted to his dying day literally. I attended his Unitarian wedding to Dona Parvey in 1955 when I was thirteen. Although I continued to attend the Methodist church through my school years, I knew there was something else out there and that I intended to become a Unitarian "when I grew up". I started attending the Unitarian church while at university myself and when I moved to Toronto in 1969 soon found my way to this congregation. It's been a long road, but here I am.

As you can see, I am very proud of my oldest brother. But as I mentioned I had another contrasting brother. My brother Chris three years younger than Jerry, had a good heart and aspirations to be a good citizen too but he had a

lot of problems. He was diagnosed with schizophrenia in his early twenties and after many years of spending time inside and outside of hospitals for treatment, he committed suicide at the age of thirty eight in 1974.

I find that when I share this experience with others it turns out that almost everyone has a family member or dear friend who suffers or suffered from mental illness and/or experienced a suicide in the family. Perhaps you do too and understand the emotional turmoil this situation entails for the family.

Each of my two brothers began life in the same loving family, each showed the promise of spring in their early years and each died in very different circumstances. In 1974, it was still something of a shame to have a family member with mental illness. The word suicide was whispered but not spoken aloud in my home community. By 1974 I was already living in Toronto and with two small children and my husband away in South America, I was not able to even go home for the funeral. And so I contained it and never really allowed myself to grieve deeply at that time I realize now.

Walt Whitman says of life and death:

The two old simple problems ever entwined,
Close home, elusive, present, baffled, grappled.
By each successive age passed on,
To ours today—and we pass on the same.

As we grow older the dreaded phone calls come more frequently, don't they? The news we don't want to hear. It's one of the sadder aspects of gaining years, the phone calls, the bad news about someone dear to us.

Among others, I had that phone call in 1974 and then I received another dreaded phone call in late October, 2008. "You'd better come soon," Belle, my sister said, "if you want to have a coherent conversation with him." We'd known since February that Jerry had colon cancer which had spread to the liver and was inoperable. He'd had a reasonably good summer and early autumn on the whole, despite bad reactions to chemo therapy. John and I had gone out for several weeks in the summer and had a good visit with him while he was still well enough to enjoy it.

But now it seemed the end was coming. About a week later I flew west. I was not to return for five weeks, during which I was present to see Jerry

through his last few weeks of life and to attend the Unitarian-Universalist memorial service afterwards.

And by the way, if ever I was glad to have the Unitarian connection it was at this time. I had attended Jerry's Fellowship many times during past visits, been there for Jerry's wife Dona's memorial service in 1995. I feel very much at home there and received much support from the members. I've stood beside Jerry and my sister and sung many of the hymns we sing here, including Jerry's favourite hymn "We Would Be One" which we will sing a little later.

Seeing someone through to his or her death is quite a journey—no doubt some of you have experienced such an event. It is a time of much sadness and yet it can be so connecting for all who are there.

"Sorry to put you through all this," Jerry said, "but I'm not sorry about my life, I've loved it all." With the assistance of a visiting hospice nurse and the family, Jerry was able to die at home. "You guys are doing a great job," he said so many times during the last few days. There was never a question of love.

It's the death we all say we want, isn't it? Peacefully at home, surrounded by loved ones. And he deserved it, he was a good man, much loved by many.

But what a stark contrast between this loving death and the death that took my other brother in 1974 when he threw himself off a bridge in Portland, Oregon. He too was a good man. He didn't deserve to die like that.

I've cried a lot for both my brothers since 2008. Each of them did their best to make this a better world. The grief I contained in 1974 returned for fuller expression in 2009. And I've experienced a surge of creative writing about my brothers and about life. Mortality stalks me. Jerry was only ten years older than me, I better write while I can!

I've talked a lot about Jerry. Let me tell you a bit about Chris. Despite all his personal problems Chris was very concerned about the state of the world and in particular the war in Viet Nam. He said he often woke in the night crying, "how they must hate us", thinking about the bombs, napalm, murders. Some of us so-called sane ones slept much better than he the so-

called crazy one did. He sincerely loved his country and had a hard time reconciling this love with the actions of the U.S. government.

I didn't see much of him in his final years as I have lived away from my home area since 1966 and so I can't speak about Chris in as much detail as about Jerry. Despite all his problems, there was a sweetness about Chris and his sensitive nature. Jerry recalled a time when he went to pick up Chris at the halfway house where he was staying, a house for people with mental health issues. A couple of other tenants were having a heated argument and Chris called out to them, "Negotiate! Negotiate!"

From his childhood days as a sweet sensitive kid with a cute smile who could sing in tune from his earliest days he transformed into a delusional haunted man who never really found his path. I see his face on the faces of some of the homeless men around Toronto and I can't help slipping them a quarter or two, thinking—that could be my brother.

When Chris died, the family found two copies of "The Prophet" by Kahlil Gibran among his effects. This was rather surprising to us as he seemed uninterested in spiritual matters. But you never really know another person, do you?

Among my brother Jerry's effects left at his death was a huge library of Walt Whitman books. Ah, yes, at last we get to the Walt Whitman connection!

Because you see, behind the scenes of his ordinary life as city attorney and community builder Jerry was a Walt Whitman scholar. He said when he was still living in Seattle, he was riding a bus one day and noticed another rider reading "Leaves of Grass" and it occurred to him he should read it. He went out and bought a copy. "And I've been reading it ever since", he used to say.

(And by the way, Whitman only really wrote one book, "Leaves of Grass" which he edited, added to and rewrote over his whole adulthood.)

In the last twelve years or so of Jerry's life he gave lectures about Whitman at Unitarian Fellowships and organizations around the area. I have a cherished CD of one of his talks.

Jerry was a secular humanist, didn't read the Bible or other religious books

much. He prided himself on being a rational man, never spoke about life after death or “spirit”—although he was very accepting of my more esoteric beliefs. Anyway, "Leaves of Grass" became Jerry's Bible. He said he liked to set aside an hour or two every little while to just mull over this book. Quote: "And I never fail to find a new phrase, a new way of looking at things that I somehow missed before."

I've never really been able to get into Whitman poetry I must admit. It feels awkward to read, a little overblown, too many adjectives and adverbs. But because Jerry loved it so much, I make an effort. It seems to be a way to see beyond the surface of the rational Jerry into the depths of his unspoken spiritual side. His soul.

Listen again to the Whitman words sung by the choir in the anthem we just heard. They speak of life, death and the great beyond. I wish so much I had found them and read them to Jerry during his final days. They might have brought him some comfort.

Darest thou now O soul,
Walk out with me toward the unknown region,
Where neither ground is for the feet nor any path to follow?

No map there, nor guide,
Nor voice sounding, nor touch of human hand,
Nor face with blooming flesh, nor lips, are in that land.

I know it not O soul,
Nor dost thou, all is blank before us,
All waits undream'd of in that region, that inaccessible land.

Till when the ties loosen,
All but the ties eternal, Time and Space,
Nor darkness, gravitation, sense, nor any bounds bounding us.

Then we burst forth, we float,
In Time and Space O soul, prepared for them,
Equal, equipt at last, (O joy! O fruit of all!) them to fulfill, O soul.

And for Chris. What can I read for him? I've been looking through *The Prophet* by Kahlil Gibran—the book he had two copies of—for a suitable reading.

How about this short snippet from the section on good and evil:

Of the good in you I can speak, but not of the evil.
For what is evil but good tortured by its own hunger and thirst?
Verily when good is hungry it seeks food even in dark caves,
and when it thirsts it drinks even of dead waters.

Both were good men and both lived their lives as best they could. I loved them both. May they both rest in peace.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak about them today.