

**By the Bivouac's Fitful Flame
November 9, 2008**

In a document dated January 20, 1863, and addressed to "Officers of the Army and Navy of the United States," the Christian Commission, organized by a convention of the Young Men's Christian Association (or YMCA), proclaims that Walt Whitman, of Brooklyn, New York, shall serve as a delegate of the Christian Commission, and that "all possible facilities, and all due courtesies, are asked for him." Whitman's work, the document states,

will be that of distributing stores where needed, in hospitals and camps; circulating good reading matter among soldiers and sailors; visiting the sick and wounded, to instruct, comfort, and cheer them, and aid them in correspondence with their friends at home; aiding surgeons on the battle-field and elsewhere in the care and conveyance of the wounded to hospitals; helping chaplains in their ministrations and influence for the

good of the men under their care; and addressing soldiers and sailors, individually and collectively, in explanation of the Christian Commission and its delegates, and for their personal instruction and benefit, temporal and eternal.

Whitman served for a year and a half in this position, working indeed in the camps, hospitals, and battlefields of the American Civil War, before he was forced to take leave, due to the suffering of his own health. But, notes biographer Gay Wilson Allen, because of Whitman's dedication to the sick and wounded, many soldiers and sailors, quote, "never forgot the kindness of the large, graybearded man who gave them so unselfishly of his time, energy, and sympathy."

What Whitman also gave, if not directly to the men he served, then certainly to the nation and to countless generations to come, was the poetry he composed about his experiences, serving in and being witness to the Civil War. One

such poem, entitled “A Sight in Camp in the Daybreak Gray and Dim,” I would like to share with you in its entirety, as an addition to the Whitman poem that Dana read earlier. The poem reads:

A sight in camp in the daybreak gray and dim,
As from my tent I emerge so early sleepless,
As slow I walk in the cool fresh air the path near the hospital
tent,
three forms I see on stretchers lying, brought out there
untended lying,
Over each the blanket spread, ample brownish woolen blanket,
Gray and heavy blanket, folding, covering all.

Curious I halt and silent stand,
Then with light fingers I from the face of the nearest the first just
lift the blanket;
Who are you elderly man so gaunt and grim, with well-gray'd
hair, and flesh all sunken about the eyes?
Who are you my dear comrade?
Then to the second I step—and who are you my child and
darling?

Who are you sweet boy with cheeks yet blooming?

Then to the third—a face nor child nor old, very calm, as of
beautiful yellow-white ivory;
young man I think I know you—I think this face is the face
of the Christ himself,
Dead and divine and brother of all, and here again he lies.

To read that last line for the first time, for me, is to
experience something of my own curious lifting of the blanket,
not quite knowing what to expect as I do, and then finding
there, in the face of a dead soldier, the “divine and brother of
all....” And to find that face—*that* face—is thus to confront
myself with the question, if this face is the face of the Christ
himself—the divine, or love, or whatever you want to call it—if
this face is the face of the divine, and here he lies *again*, dead,
what should be my response? What should be my *revelation*?
Should I simply find beauty and solace in the face, “very calm,
as of beautiful yellow-white ivory”? Or should my impulse to

express feelings of anger and sorrow about the fact that “divine and dead... here again he lies” permit me to shout to the living, “What are we *doing* to each other?!?”

To seek some balance between solace and sorrow, comfort and anger, so that I neither fold into passivity nor act out in rage, I turn to theologian Howard Thurman’s prayer, which we shared earlier:

In the quietness of this place, surrounded by the all-pervading presence of the Holy, my heart whispers: keep fresh before me the moments of my High Resolve, that in good times or in tempests, I may not forget that to which my life is committed. Keep fresh before me the moments of my High Resolve.

Grounded in this prayer, I can ask myself, in beholding in the face of a dead soldier “the Christ himself, dead and divine and brother of all,” what is my High Resolve? What life commitment, “in good times or in tempests,” may I not forget,

so as to help me understand what we are indeed doing to each other, and what we might do differently? To explore that question, let me move about 145 years into the future, from Walt Whitman's American Civil War to the Iraq war of the 21st century. While, for some, comparing those two wars may seem a little like comparing apples and oranges, or, in other words, just wars and unjust wars, I ask you to bear with me as I share with you some of the story of Sam Slevin, an Iraq War veteran whose story was recently featured on the radio program, "This American Life." Sam's story begins after he has come back from Iraq and has been hired to work in an Army recruiting office in Florida. "Falling apart isn't something soldiers brag about," Sam begins.

I was sitting in my recruiting office. Sitting in the far back... there was recruiter even newer than I was.... He hadn't been to Iraq, was giving a speech on how *not* bad Iraq was. I was sitting in the back of the room... and I

was like I just can't take this. No one lets you know we're lying to these kids... We're training people to lie to these kids. I left the office... and I just broke down. I was crying, I couldn't take it.... I just had to go home, and just quit. And it's totally unacceptable in the Army, and even more unacceptable in recruiting... Really if anything I was doing recruiting a favor, just 'cause how many people are going to come in and join the army when they see another recruiter, the only war vet in there, crying, because he can't stand the war anymore?

Sam left the Army, and moved to Illinois, where he started taking classes at a community college and seeing a therapist for post traumatic stress disorder. Now, though there was not a *large* Arab or Muslim population in the town where Sam was now living, there were enough such people to trigger his deep fear and anxiety that had been created while fighting in Iraq. The radio producer of Sam's story offers an analogy that Sam's therapist (with Sam's permission) had shared with

her about how Sam's PTSD was created. "Imagine you're in a room with ten identical chairs," the producer says.

You're told to sit in one of them and you get an electric shock. The next day you're told to sit in the same chair again and get you shocked again. The third day, you wise up. You're not sitting in that chair anymore.... "Well... [says the therapist] how about one of these other chairs? And you're looking around those and you're thinking, no, no, *they* may all be wired up.... They all look the same, it all seems the same, it's the same thing. So you've developed a fear of all of them. Well, that happens with somebody in a combat situation where you're on full alert all the time, you never know who the enemy is, you don't know when they're going to pop up... So you kind of develop of an anxiety or a fear or an avoidance of all...."

This was Sam's situation whenever he saw someone who reminded him of Iraqi people he had encountered in the war. The miraculous part of the story comes when Sam suddenly

decides to immerse himself in his own, confront-your-fear type therapy, and joins the community college's Muslim Student Association. At first, *everyone* in the room is tense and suspicious. Despite the Muslim custom of men sitting on one side of the room, and women sitting on the other, Sam sits with the women, because that's the only way he can stay near the door. On their part, the Muslim students worry he is a spy of some sort. But over time, trust develops, Sam is the most frequent attendee of meetings, becomes personal friends with the president of the Muslim Student Association, and even staffs the Association table at college events.

Consider this transformational story, and the poignant vignette of Whitman's three dead soldiers, in contrast with the passage from Michael Herr's *Dispatches*, which Dana read earlier. "The press got all the facts (more or less).... But it never found a way to report meaningfully about death," Herr

remarks. “The jargon of Progress got blown into your head like bullets and by the time you waded through all the ... stories ... the suffering seemed unimpressive....”

While Sam Slevin’s story and Walt Whitman’s poem show a struggle for and persevering love of humanity, particularly in the context of war, Herr’s dispatch powerfully illustrates the shadow side of those experiences—of how numbing and dehumanizing war can be, even for those who are simply reporting it.

Which brings me back to my question that I promised to explore: “what life commitment, ‘in good times or in tempests,’ may *I* not forget?” The answer lies in all these stories. It lies in the faces of all three of Whitman’s dead soldiers; it lies in Sam’s inability to listen to and swallow the lies being promoted in his recruiting office, and in his own trauma-based reactions to Muslim or Arab people; it lies in the callous, anesthetizing

claims of progress Michael Herr reports of in his book, and of how he himself began to be “unimpressed” by the suffering he was witness to. The answer, I believe, is this: may I not forget that there is no human being undeserving of compassion and understanding. There are no people, black, brown, white, Arab, Asian, American, that I should not seek to *at least* understand. For it is in seeking to understand one another as well as ourselves; it is in reaching across differences, rather than building walls between them, or shooting them down, that we find those very common elements of our humanity, and begin to be transformed. It is in seeking to understand one another and that we share common human needs, rather than battling each other for power, that we can begin to answer the question, “What are we doing to each other?” and start developing new ways of supporting not only ourselves, or

the neighbors we're *comfortable* with, but *all* of our neighbors—local, national, and global.

In his Civil War work as a Christian Commission delegate, Walt Whitman energetically and empathically tended to the sick and wounded, and was remembered by them for his kindness. In his Civil War poem, “By the Bivouac’s Fitful Flame,” Whitman shows another, lonelier, if equally empathic side of his experiences. Sitting by the fire at night, near “the tents of the sleeping army,” he notes the winding procession of his thoughts. “O tender and wondrous thoughts, Of life and death, of home and the past and loved, and of those that are far away; a solemn and slow procession there....”

For veterans of war, such a “solemn and slow procession” of thoughts must be all too familiar. How many thousands of men and women, on how many thousands of nights, whether in the fields of Virginia, the villages of Europe, the jungles of

Vietnam, or the deserts of Iraq, have had minds and hearts wander to thoughts “of home and the past and loved, and of those that are far away”? And how many of those thousands have never returned home, or have come back wounded to the core?

Knowing that the answer to that question is an all too tragic one, let us strive to see the face of the Christ—of the divine, of love, of our common humanity—in all whom we meet. Let us not wait to lift the blanket of the dead in order to have revealed before us the “brother [or sister] of all,” but work vigilantly to practice compassion and understanding for the living. Let us not be numbed by world events and how they are presented to us, to the point that suffering becomes unimpressive, but instead allow the world to impress upon us the motivation to transform and to be transformed.

Commemorating veterans day, whether we sign up to be a delegate of the Christian or any other commission to tend to the sick and wounded, or advocate for the healthcare rights of veterans, or struggle to bridge international, religious, and political differences, or simply greet and receive veterans of war in kindness and compassion, let us not forget that to which our lives are committed, and thus keep alive the brotherhood and sisterhood of all.

Amen.

Please stand as you are able and join in singing all five verses of hymn #298, Wake Now My Senses.