

THAT ONE KNOWS ME

For Walt Whitman - May 31, 2012

Happy Birthday

To speak or to write we must in some way believe in one, in at least one single listener, one listener with an open heart and attendant spirit. That loving receiver we need in a reader, in a friend. For me, Walt Whitman was the first friend who to everything said yes. That is what a friend is - allowing, knowing, being and its result is love. Love in its various forms is a communication of deepest things, and friendship is the field in which it all happens.

Emerson wrote, "A friend is a person with whom I may be sincere. Before him I may think aloud. I am arrived at last in the presence of a man so real and equal that I may drop even those undermost garments of dissimulation, courtesy, and second thought, which men never put off, and may deal with him with the simplicity and wholeness with which one chemical atom meets another...Every man alone is sincere. At the entrance of a second person, hypocrisy begins. We parry and fend the approach of our fellow man by compliments, by gossip, by amusements, by affairs. We cover up our thought from him under a hundred folds."

"Every man alone is sincere." But is this true? Alone, I am never alone. Surrounded, surrounding myself, with the living, the dead, the yet born, parrying and fending away, my mind and soul in constant tangle of conversation. So that always being with others, I need and want my sincerity to be with others. A first personal sincerity of friendship.

That shadow my likeness that goes to and fro seeking a livelihood
chattering, chaffering
How often I find myself standing and looking at it where it flits
How often I question and doubt whether that is really me;
But among my lovers and carolling these songs,
O I never doubt whether that is really me.

Today I am thinking of a great and special kind of friendship -- the friendship with the dead. To be allowed a friendship with the dead is to be allowed into an infinitely gratifying society, one of which you are a part, one from which no human is excluded, one into which the entirety of what one feels and says is accepted, one in which everything one thinks one believes one knows one wants is accepted, and accepted whole. As the friend cannot separate the joys and difficulties of friendship from each other, so in life the friend is undiminished by the genuine efforts of being a friend, the listener is undiminished by the efforts of listening, and the artist is undiminished by the efforts of creating. Love, profound and difficult does not diminish. Walt says live and be, be and speak, speak and listen, listen and grow, grow and die, die and be -- the earth wants only your everything. He says, I give I grow I reproduce infinitely. The resilient organic perennial flowering that is in all loving acts and ways is maybe most present and accessible among our friends the dead. Nature does not cease but there are times when it becomes dark, silent, or impenetrably stormy -- but at any time of day or night, in any place I find myself, I can wake Walt up and in a full vibrant honest loving voice he will speak and sing to me with the companioned quality of one who believes my truth, and that it exists beside and in relation to his own. "All truths wait in all things." And there is a universal human equality in this. As a society, as a nation, friendship's presence makes us more acutely aware, it creates itself as a voice and living challenge to actual people. First to oneself and then to each right here American. That they must. Friendship is the joy and responsibility of being human. Equally we must live together and beyond life will all be together equally. When we write, when we speak we are enacting a part in that communal friendship.

When you read these I that was visible am become invisible
Now it is you, compact, visible, realizing my poems, seeking me,
Fancying how happy you were if I could be with you and become
your comrade
Be it as if I were with you. (Be not too certain but I am now with you.)

Death will accept my whole self, it will accept everything I was, everything I did, everything I felt thought and said, and it will only accept everything. Walt Whitman explained that to me. It accepts everything already. And the dead are the same -- there is no partial truth for them to know, there is no pretense they are capable of accepting. So speak freely, because you are with the dead, and one can be oneself with the dead.