

Walt Whitman's Healing Presence

BY JOHN ZEN JACKSON, ESQ.



The year 2019 marked the 200th birthday of Walt Whitman, who was born in New York in 1819, died in New Jersey in 1892 and was buried in the Harleigh Cemetery in Camden, New Jersey. This is a good time to recall the poems and other writings that convey Whitman's emotional reaction to his service as an agent of healing during the Civil War.¹ These written records of Whitman's experiences with the wounded and dying highlight the function of empathy and compassion in healthcare as a key component of the medical history of the United States.

A PACIFIST IN BATTLE

Whitman did not participate in the fighting that broke out between the North and the South in 1861, and was criticized for this stance. Whitman's pacifism, however, was not shared by his younger brother George, who joined a New York militia unit in the spring of 1861 and then enlisted for the duration with the Fifty-First New York Volunteers.

George's service with the Fifty-First included the Battle of Fredericksburg, fought December 11–15, 1862, between Lee's Confederate Army of Northern Virginia and the Union Army of the Potomac. The Union Army's repeated frontal attacks up a hillside against the entrenched Confederate soldiers behind a stone wall are considered one of the most one-sided battles of the Civil War. Union casualties were more than three times those experienced by the Confederates.²

Whitman saw a newspaper report of New York soldiers injured in this battle that cryptically referred to his brother. Whitman promptly traveled south to Washington, D.C., by train, uncertain if George had been injured or killed. When Whitman could find no sign of George in the hospitals in

Washington, he traveled to Falmouth, Virginia, near the battlefield and to the Lacy Mansion, which was being used as a field hospital. (See Figure 1.)

Whitman found his brother on the afternoon of December 19. George's only injury was a gash in a cheek from a shell fragment. He also had received a field promotion to captain.¹

But earlier in the day, searching for his brother at the battlefield, Whitman wandered by the mansion being used as a hospital. He came across a startling sight that enhanced his anxiety for his brother. In his diary, he recorded seeing "a heap of feet, legs, arms, and human fragments, cut, blood, black and blue, swelled and sickening." In a nearby garden, he saw a row of dead bodies awaiting burial, "each covered with its brown woolen blanket."³

These images stayed with him and are repeated in a number of his writings, including the poem "A Sight in Camp in the Daybreak Gray and Dim"⁴:

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 by 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.

converted into a hospital. Many were housed in rough tent hospitals. Whitman spoke with many of the soldiers and began keeping track in a notebook, which would later result in publication of his *Memoranda During the War*. He also gathered ideas and images for future poems, many of which appeared in his *Drum-Taps* collection, published in 1865. In the poem "Come Up From the Fields Father," Whitman wrote of the practice he developed of writing letters for the wounded soldiers:

Open the envelope quickly;

O this is not our son's writing, yet his named is sign'd;

*O a stranger writes for our dear son—O stricken
mother's soul!*

*All swims before her eyes—flashes with black—she
catches the main words only.*

*Sentences broken—gun-shot wound in the breast,
cavalry skirmish, taken to hospital,*

At present low, but will soon be better.

The poem, however, ends darkly with the lines "While they stand at home at the door, he is dead already; /The only son is dead."⁵

While Whitman was at the site of the Battle of Fredericksburg, he provided help by moving wounded soldiers, and he provided comfort by being with them and listening to them. He had no training as a nurse and lacked the necessary skills to dress wounds. He described himself more simply as a "visitor and consolatory."⁶

Early on December 28, 1862, Whitman left the encampment at Falmouth and traveled back to Washington, D.C., along with troops being evacuated to more formal hospital settings. While traveling with the soldiers, Whitman went from man to man to get names and addresses to write to families about their conditions and whereabouts. After reaching Washington, Whitman continued to visit soldiers in hospitals throughout the remainder of the Civil War.

Whitman's approach to patients was simple. He was kind. Although he often brought gifts and food purchased with his own funds or wrote letters for them, he also just sat by their beds and listened as they talked of their homes and families, their hopes and their fears. He was frequently nearby during traumatic treatments such as amputations and often when young men died.

The hospitals in Washington began filling up after the failed Union offensive at Chancellorsville in May 1863, and Whitman's continued visits and attention to the wounded began to affect him physically and emotionally. Typically, after working as a copyist in a Washington office for a few

Figure 1. Whitman at Fredericksburg



Edwin Forbes, an artist who accompanied the Army of the Potomac and prepared illustrations for *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, did a sketch in December 1862, "Fall in For Soup," showing a line of men waiting for food at the Fredericksburg encampment. The third person depicted in the line is Walt Whitman. From Penn State University Libraries, University Park, PA.

THE MEDICINE OF KINDNESS

After connecting with his brother, Whitman moved among the soldiers in the camp. There were so many wounded men that there was not enough room for all inside the mansion

hours, he was with the soldiers between noon and 4 p.m. and then returned between 6 and 9 p.m.¹ The optimistic tone of his poetry darkened, with moments of disillusionment. He also began manifesting signs of what physicians now would likely diagnose as posttraumatic stress disorder.⁷

HUMORING THE YEARNINGS FOR LOVE AND FRIENDSHIP

During the Civil War, more wounded soldiers were treated in Washington, D.C., than in any other city. Whitman made notes about his hospital visits and wrote a series of letters to his mother describing his visits with wounded soldiers. These letters were later collected and published by his biographer Richard Maurice Bucke in 1898.⁸ These documents provide a window into what Whitman was doing and feeling as he made his visits. In one passage from January 28, 1863, Whitman wrote the following:

My custom is to go through a ward, or a collection of wards, endeavoring to give some trifle to each, without missing any. Even a sweet biscuit, a sheet of paper, or a passing word of friendliness, or but a look or nod, if no more. In this way I go through large numbers without delaying, yet do not hurry. I find out the general mood of the ward at the time; sometimes see that there is a heavy weight of listlessness prevailing, and the whole ward wants cheering up. I perhaps read to the men, to break the spell, calling them around me, careful to sit away from the cot of any one who is very bad with sickness or wounds.⁹

In another passage from later that year, he made the following insightful comments:

The work of the army hospital visitor is indeed a trade, an art, requiring both experience and natural gifts, and the greatest judgment. A large number of the visitors to the hospitals do no good at all, while many do harm. The surgeons have great trouble from them. Some visitors go from curiosity—as to a show of animals. Others give the men improper things. Then there are always some poor fellows, in the crises of sickness or wounds, that imperatively need perfect quiet—not to be talked to by strangers. Few realize that it is not the mere giving of gifts that does good; it is the proper adaption. Nothing is of any avail among the soldiers except conscientious personal investigation of cases, each for itself; with sharp, critical faculties, but in the fullest spirit of human sympathy and boundless love. The men feel such love more than anything else. I have met very few persons who realize the importance of humoring the yearnings for love and friendship of these American young men, prostrated by sickness and wounds.¹⁰



Whitman visited dozens of these facilities but tended to spend the most time at Armory Square Hospital, which had the most serious injury cases and the highest death toll.¹¹ In 1887 when a pension for Whitman was proposed in the House of Representatives, the hospital's Superintendent, Dr. D. Willard Bliss, wrote: "I am of the opinion that no one person who assisted in the hospitals during the war accomplished so much good to the soldiers and for the Government as Mr. Whitman."¹²

POEMS OF THE WOUNDED


During his time in Washington, Whitman worked on one of his most famous Civil War poems, "The Wound-Dresser." Lacking the training and skill, Whitman did not typically dress patients' wounds, but for this poem he put himself into that role. The 65-line poem, divided into four sections, recounts what Whitman had seen constantly. The following is an excerpt from the third section of the poem⁵:

*Bearing the bandages, water and sponge,
Straight and swift to my wounded I go,
Where they lie on the ground, after the battle brought in;
Where their priceless blood reddens the grass, the ground;
Or to the rows of the hospital tent, or under the
roof'd hospital;
To the long rows of cots, up and down, each side, I return;
To each and all, one after another, I draw near—not one
do I miss;
An attendant follows, holding a tray—he carries a
refuse pail,
Soon to be fill'd with clotted rags and blood, emptied
and fill'd again.*

This was one of 43 poems in Whitman's collection of Civil War poems entitled *Drum-Taps*, published in 1865. It was then included in a revision of *Leaves of Grass* published in 1876. Near the release of *Drum-Taps*, Whitman discontinued his hospital visits in Washington after tending to an estimated 80,000 to 100,000 men during more than 600 hospital visits.⁶

After suffering a stroke in 1873, Whitman moved from Washington, D.C., to his brother George's home in Camden, New Jersey. Although Whitman never returned to Washington after 1875, his presence there is literally chiseled into stone. Users of the Dupont Circle Metro station enter and exit using a long slow-moving escalator that travels past a circular frieze on which is etched this passage from the fourth and last section of "The Wound-Dresser"⁷:

*Thus in silence in dreams' projections,
Returning, resuming, I thread my way through the hospitals,
The hurt and wounded I pacify with soothing hand,
I sit by the restless all the dark night, some are so young,
Some suffer so much, I recall the experience sweet and sad.*

These words from Whitman's pen and heart remind commuters, visitors and us all of the role of empathy and compassion in the healing of human beings. 

John Zen Jackson is a Fellow of the American College of Trial Lawyers and a partner in the law firm of McElroy, Deutsch, Mulvaney & Carpenter, LLP, where he is a member of the Health Care Practice Group.

- 1 Morris, R. (2000). *The better angel: Walt Whitman in the Civil War*. New York, NY: Oxford Press. NOTE: This book served as a substantial resource for this article.
- 2 McPherson, J. (1988). *Battle cry of freedom: The Civil War era*. New York, NY: Oxford Press.
- 3 Morris, R. (2000). 52.
- 4 Whitman, W. (n.d.). *The Walt Whitman archive*. <https://whitmanarchive.org/published/LG/1891/poems/165>.
- 5 Whitman, W. (n.d.). *The Walt Whitman archive*. <https://whitmanarchive.org/published/LG/1867/poems/175>.
- 6 Roper, R. (2008). *Now the drum of war* (p. 10). New York, NY: Walker.
- 7 See, e.g., Hsu, D. (2010). Walt Whitman: An American Civil War nurse who witnessed the advent of modern American medicine. *Archives of Environmental Health*, 65(4), 238–239.
- 8 Bucke, R. M. (Ed.). (1898). *The wound dresser: A series of letters written from the hospitals in Washington during the War of the Rebellion*. Boston, MA: Small Maynard.
- 9 Bucke, R. M. (Ed.). (1898). 28–29.
- 10 Bucke, R. M. (Ed.). (1898). 33.
- 11 Price, K. M. (2014). Walt Whitman and Civil War Washington. *Leviathan*, 16(1), 121–134.
- 12 Donaldson, T. (2009). *Walt Whitman the man* (p. 169). Charleston, SC: Bibliobazaar.
- 13 Whitman, W. (n.d.) *The Walt Whitman archive*. <https://whitmanarchive.org/published/LG/1891/poems/169>.

