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Manifesting Snowballs: Lessons on Connection in “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”

An earnest heart and an open mind unlock parts of one's heart that reflect who they are, and how they see the world – their vision. Walt Whitman's distinctive affection for the world and his readers and his acute observations of people and places forge a special connection with readers that enriches the monotony of everyday life in his famous work “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”. In this poem, Whitman describes his thoughts on the flowing of the water, the beauty in people's faces he passes by, and the grand scheme of the intertwining elements—nature, humanity, present and future--as he perceives them. Whitman shows that by stretching out your arms, drawing in your breath, and opening your mind, you, the reader, embark on the first steps in inviting curiosity and appreciation for the world, your students, and for your neighbors. When I was a high school student, the little things teachers did were the things that inspired me to get into teaching. Whether it was a small compliment on my positive attitude or an acknowledgment pertaining to a bit of progress I had made, the great experiences with intentional teachers in high school all added up to form a curiosity in me akin to Whitman's. This curiosity blossomed into actively pursuing the idea that I could do the same thing for future generations as my teachers did for me. Great teachers are not solely focused on the content or the following of rules – no! A great education starts with the teacher's establishment of strong connection with the students because they know class must be relational to be the best it can be. To establish and maintain

strong teacher-student relationships is to be *intentional* with content, teaching, speaking, and writing at a higher level as Whitman does with a steady compassion.

Whitman shows us that to be a great teacher, you must show your students how much you care by exercising innovative forward-thinking. In “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” Whitman pays impeccable attention to detail to create a relationship with readers that begs them to believe his words can stretch beyond the limitations of physical space and the vastness of gaps of generations – far out! Whitman writes (observing the life of the ferry boat and river) of “The glories strung like beads on my smallest sights and hearings, / on the walk in the street and the passage / over the river.” Winifred Bevilacqua explains that “One of these ‘glories’—the river [Whitman] is crossing—reminds him that they will not always be within the range of his immediate perception, for the passage of time is swiftly carrying him away” (Bevilacqua 144). Whitman establishes this *innovative* relationship by speaking to the generations to come, acknowledging their future presence despite understanding his time will eventually be over: “I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or ever / so many generations hence.” Christopher David Case notes how Whitman “now addresses these future passengers and readers in the present tense, by affirming, ‘I am with you,’ thereby projecting his existence forward, and in a sense transcending the limitations of time and space” (42). Those few words themselves capture so much— “transcending the limitations of time and space”. Whitman was so innovative and forward-thinking that you could almost believe he was somehow thinking of just you and writing about you long before you were born. Attempting to break the confines of literal time and space to touch the reader’s heart in a refreshing way speaks to the scope at which Whitman aims in his poetry and *is* the scope at which every fruitful teacher should aim.

To have a great voice, you must have a great intention behind the words you speak. Whitman's words are undoubtedly beautiful, and in each line, you can find something to enjoy like "the sunset, the pouring-in of the flood-tide, the / falling-back to the sea of the ebb-tide." These charming lines do not come without intentional placement, and as a teacher, you do not come to class unprepared. You cannot just speak out of thin air with flattering words thoughtfully composed about a subject. You cannot satisfyingly relate to others without the intention to. You cannot simply expect others to connect with you. Meaningful relationships require a desire and a longing to leave behind the mediocrity of monotony. Monotony dwells within those who decide to remain bland, and within the abandonment of purposely challenging and developing one's cognitive abilities. Whitman exudes the characteristics of an authoritative teacher with his democratic vision and intentionality to stretch beyond the norms and thought processes of the society he lived in – which in many ways, sounds like the society we live in today. In section 4, Whitman writes:

The men and women I saw were all near to me,
Others the same—others who look back on me because I
look'd forward to them . . .

The men and women who look back at him turn his way because he first chose to look at them. It may be a small connection, but it's a purely intentional one.

To break up the monotony of life, one must find beauty in the small details that envelop them. Whitman saw special attributes in the routines of everyday life that other people overlooked and still do. I am sure people grew used to riding the ferry and seeing the flow of the water along with the faces they passed. Whitman looked past the value of public transportation to find the value of bringing things together – the flow of water, people, and life. The scope of

Whitman is as large as the universe, but in his grandeur, he pays attention to those tiny details and notes that all these things “continue to envelop the soul” like a camera. Everyone is unique, but each individual is also capable of becoming the greatest version of themselves they can be. He writes to the future ferry-crossers as I am writing to my future students. He writes almost as if he’s shining a light directly upon the lonely, self-conscious reader:

We use you, and do not cast you aside—we plant you permanently within us,
We fathom you not—we love you—there is perfection in you also,
You furnish your parts toward eternity,
Great or small, you furnish your parts toward the soul.

Finding perfection and divinity in oneself is hard when you’re a middle-schooler going through puberty and are attempting to figure life out. Whitman writes “great or small,” you and your actions “furnish [themselves] toward the soul”. My students will know that their teacher will come to class every day with a Whitmanesque love and care no matter how hard life may be to figure out, and no matter how great or small they may feel.

To be a great writer, you must first find honesty within yourself. As a writer and an innovator, Whitman’s ability to imaginatively conjure proactive manifestations and visions of generations of people to come after him is done with great care and expertise that stems from his sincerity. He writes that the future crossers of the Brooklyn ferry occupy his meditations more “than you might suppose.” This level of honesty and love is overwhelmingly evident and seems to come at such an ease for him, like wiggling your toes or opening your eyes. His curiosity is almost childlike, and instead of shying away from the words he yearns to say, he thrusts them out with a shameless confidence. As a future middle-school teacher, I envy Whitman’s prowess in conveying his thoughts, but also his ability to create a forward connection with his reader. As a

former middle-school student, I admired my teacher's ability to create these bonds with my classmates and with the child I once was. Now, as a college student, I immediately recognized I was admiring Whitman's abilities reminiscent of the teachers in my past when I read through "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" for the first time. I knew something powerful lived within Whitman's words before I could even fully land my finger on it.

To manifest greatness for oneself, they must wish greatness upon others. Whitman craftily reaches out to the reader with a leathery hand you can't help but hold. He relates himself to the reader in section three:

Just as you feel when you look on the river and sky, so I felt,
 Just as any of you is one of a living crowd, I was one of a crowd,
 Just as you are refresh'd by the gladness of the river and the bright flow, I was
 refresh'd.

An incredible comfort washes over the reader and invites them to join Whitman in his humble Brooklyn journeys. He too was "one of a crowd," just as you and I. In his meditations, he doesn't wish to be a gatekeeper of the allure of the ferry ride for himself; he calls upon the reader to enjoy it with him with the warm simplicity of four gentle words – "I am with you." Defeating the drowning intensity of loneliness students can feel is not only a goal of mine, but the driving force behind my efforts. The following lines from Weezer's "Aloo Gobi" are akin to Whitman's "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry":

You are not alone
 You are not alone
 Someone else will be there with you, be there with you
 You are not alone (Cuomo, lines 20-23)

Being selfless and wishing to extend a helping hand to and for others is what makes a good person and is what makes a worthwhile teacher. These Whitman-aspirations establish a connection that “forge[s] bonds that overcome the intense separateness of each individual” (Bevilacqua page 2). Simply showing someone that they are not alone can be enough to enrich their life. Christopher David Case writes that Whitman’s writings have become “something greater than the world itself, something that resists description and definition” (Case 3). This meta-description of Whitman alone resonated with me and is one that I hope sticks with me when I talk about my excitement for his poetry to and for my future students.

To believe in a hopeful future, one must understand that time will reach us all and the future will inevitably be here before we know it. To my future students, I take delight in Whitman’s words:

What is it then between us?

What is the count of the scores or hundreds of years between us?

Whatever it is, it avails not—distance avails not, and place avails not . . .

Nothing separates humanity but a little bit of time and a little bit of space. Whitman gets that.

Nothing can separate intentional connection and the power of manifested love but some time and space. Just as Whitman did, “I consider’d long and seriously of you before you were born.”

Really, “what is it then between us” but a little bit of time that will slip away and a little bit of care that will grow? My affection for teaching affects my admiration for Whitman and his tender pedagogical nature. Together, everything works to “furnish your parts toward the soul.”

Manifestations from more than one-hundred years ago did what they intended to do. They touch a soul from the future, despite the time and space. Nothing can truly separate the strings that hold

us together, and the hope that can start to snowball within us all like a train of thought or a spiritual experience on a ferry.

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