

To One Shortly to Die

By Walt Whitman (1819–1892)

With comment by John Birtwhistle

From all the rest I single out you, having a message for you,
You are to die – let others tell you what they please, I cannot prevaricate,
I am exact and merciless, but I love you – there is no escape for you.

Softly I lay my right hand upon you, you just feel it,
I do not argue, I bend my head close and half envelop it,
I sit quietly by, I remain faithful,
I am more than nurse, more than parent or neighbor,
I absolve you from all except yourself spiritual bodily,
That is eternal, you yourself, will surely escape,
The corpse you will leave will be but excrementitious.

The sun bursts through in unlooked-for directions,
Strong thoughts fill you and confidence, you smile,
You forget you are sick, as I forget you are sick,
You do not see the medicines,
You do not mind the weeping friends, I am with you,
I exclude others from you, there is nothing to be commiserated,
I do not commiserate, I congratulate you.

This poem is from Walt Whitman's great ongoing book *Leaves of Grass*, being added to the third edition (1860) which is the one that affirms death as equal in meaning to life. Whitman may have assisted victims of cholera¹; he certainly was a faithful visitor of hospitals and he was drawn to themes of sickness and injury. When the American Civil War broke out soon after this poem was written, he worked as a nurse in Washington army hospitals.

Such preoccupations are to be thought of in the context of high mortality through infectious disease in cities before modern sanitation, similar themes in other writers of the time, and the practice of deathbed vigil which was believed to have instructive and moral value. Nevertheless, Whitman's preoccupation with the dying seems exceptional, almost a vocation:

*I pass death with the dying and birth with the new-wash'd babe...
To any one dying, thither I speed and twist the knob of the door,
Turn the bed-clothes toward the foot of the bed,
Let the physician and the priest go home.*²

'To One Shortly To Die' is not to be taken as a literal address to any individual. Rather, Whitman is dramatizing what he might ideally wish to convey to any dying person in his care. He bravely explores what it might be like to speak with integrity in that situation. His lines are encouraging and affectionate, yet they have a rigour that respects the patient and his death. As such, the idealized speaker is one of Whitman's exemplars of man-to-man frankness.

It says much about shifts of opinion, custom and professional practice that these lines should open a recent British anthology of poems suitable for reading at funerals.³

Competing interests None.

Provenance and peer review Commissioned; internally peer reviewed.

REFERENCES

- 1 Aspiz H, *So Long! Walt Whitman's Poetry of Death*. University of Alabama Press, 2004: 161.
- 2 Whitman W, 'Song of Myself' in *Leaves of Grass*. Philadelphia: David McKay, 1892: Sections 7, 40.
- 3 Paterson D, ed. *The Picador Book of Funeral Poems*. London: Picador, 2012: 3.

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