

Commemorative Lecture of the 49th Soka University Festival and the 35th Soka Women's College Swan Festival "Soka Glory Meeting"

Kenneth M. Price

Thank you very much for that kind and generous introduction. I am honored to speak on this day of festival for Soka University. This is the largest gathering I have ever addressed, so I hope I won't disappoint you: I have a deep desire to find words adequate to the occasion. To be at the Soka Festival is especially meaningful because it is a student-run event, and I value what emerges directly from students, from you who embody our collective hope for the future. This year is the 200th anniversary of the birth of Walt Whitman, a favorite poet of Dr. Daisaku Ikeda, so it is fitting to comment on these two men as sources of inspiration for Soka students (and in fact for everyone!). Poets and trailblazers, they were both extraordinary humanitarians who advanced the cause of peace while also being pioneers of thought.

Like Whitman, Ikeda encourages us to think about the interconnections between the past, present, and future. In "Standing Among the Ruins of Takiyama Castle," written at the start of a new millennium in January 2000, Ikeda considers the relationship between a "fortress of past wars" and a "fortress of peace," Takiyama Castle and Soka University itself. A key word is in Ikeda's title: "ruins." I admire his forthright recognition of challenges, destruction, loss, and defeats, and also his determination to build again, to summon new courage, to move forward in a positive way. Dr. Ikeda's tone is typically one of victory, not of mournfulness or loss.

Ikeda read *Leaves of Grass* soon after World War II, and his own account of the experience is illuminating:

In the years following Japan's defeat, when the country was under the occupation forces, I remember with fondness and gratitude what it meant to me, a poor young man, to encounter this collection of poems. And when, in the midst of those gray and troubled times, I learned from that book the secret of how to face the future, my initial admiration gave way to intense affection. ... One time when I was particularly tired I remember flopping down on the grass in the outer garden of the Meiji Shrine, opening my copy of *Leaves of Grass*, and

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reading avidly for the better part of an autumn day.¹

This passage depicts a healthy response to ruins or defeat. We all face setbacks, reversals of fortune, that can be unsettling. At their worst these setbacks can be so jarring that one is not sure that life can ever be set right again. Whitman offered an intriguing example for Ikeda because of his optimism, his generosity of spirit, and because he, too, had experienced enormous losses—in his case, during the American Civil War. In the conflict between north and south, free states and slave states, the extent of the killing and the magnitude of the environmental destruction were equally astounding. For Ikeda, similarly, World War II was devastating: one of his brothers died in the war, and the other three returned to Japan never to be the same. Adding to the sense of dislocation, the family home had been bombed, with personal possessions lost. In this regard, sadly, the Ikedas were like thousands of other families.

Ikeda is known to have a profound interest in American writers, particularly the New England transcendentalists, including Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, and he especially reveres one of their contemporaries, the New Yorker, Walt Whitman. He once described Emerson and Whitman as his "constant companions." In an essay of appreciation titled "The Poetry that Touches the Human Spirit: Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*," Ikeda mentions reading Whitman when he was twenty-two in a translation done by Saika Tomita.² The first two sentences of "The Poetry that Touches the Human Spirit" both stress Whitman's connection to "ordinary people," making clear Ikeda's admiration of this aspect of *Leaves of Grass*. Ikeda also notes that Whitman was as "strong as a weed" and remained undaunted by adversity. Ikeda describes himself, too, in a charmingly self-deprecatory way as a weed here:

Rather than live as a
 brief and high-minded flower,
 I want to live
 a weed-like life
 of tenacious vitality.³

Both Whitman and Ikeda wish to connect with ordinary individuals by employing a clear, accessible, and unpretentious style.

We can see that unpretentious style in Whitman's accounts of his visits to soldiers. In the American Civil War, more wounded soldiers were treated in Washington, DC, than in any other

¹ Daisaku Ikeda, "A Book," in *Glass Children and Other Essays*, trans. Burton Watson (Tokyo and New York: Kodansha International, 1979), p. 41.

² Daisaku Ikeda, "The Poetry that Touches the Human Spirit: Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*," *Living Buddhism* 10 (January/February 2006), p.90.

³ Daisaku Ikeda, "To My Young Friends," in *Journey of Life: Selected Poems of Daisaku Ikeda* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2014), p.24.

city, and Whitman, a visitor to dozens of hospitals, gravitated toward the epicenter of suffering. He returned repeatedly to Armory Square Hospital, which hosted the worst cases and had the highest death rate. At a time of unprecedented maiming and killing, Whitman engaged in the work of healing. In Washington's Civil War hospitals, Whitman dedicated himself to easing pain, promoting healing, and—through attentiveness, small kindnesses, and love—saving as many lives as possible.

For Whitman, these visits to Civil War hospitals were paradoxically the most terrible and most rewarding experiences of his life. Out of them he penned his most eloquent and moving letters; helped invent the genre of war reporting; filled notebooks with scraps of raw information, idle doodles, stories from soldiers, and early drafts of compelling war poetry and prose. Within the hospitals he also became a self-described “missionary to the wounded.” As Drew Gilpin Faust has noted, “religion defined the values and assumptions of most mid-nineteenth-century Americans,” and it profoundly shaped commentary on the war.⁴ At a time when appeals to God for victory in battle were pervasive, when fallen soldiers were routinely depicted as martyrs, Whitman attributed sacred importance to healing, caring, grieving, loving, and restoring. Still, there is something odd about Whitman calling himself a *missionary*, a striking term. The term *missionary* provides an important frame of reference for his hospital work and can be used not only to gloss his Civil War service but also to illuminate some of the largest ambitions he entertained as a poet and cultural theorist.

Ikeda rightly detects connections between his work and that of Whitman because we can see that Ikeda extends and enlarges his predecessor's mission. As he said in “Like the Sun Rising,” his poem addressing Whitman:

I will take up the banners
of democracy and freedom
which you held so proudly aloft;
I will fight on and will advance
along the path of the poet,
pioneer of the spirit's wilderness,
on a journey of infinite mission,
forging paths of friendship
to all corners of the Earth.⁵

For Ikeda, an awareness of the pain and anguish of war led to his vitally important peace advocacy. In addition, it led to practical, tangible benefits in the world, acts of affirmation like

⁴ Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Vintage, 2008), p.172.

⁵ Daisaku Ikeda, “Like the Sun Rising,” in *Journey of Life*, p.225.

the building of Soka University and the encouragement of future generations. The optimism and inspirational quality of Dr. Ikeda's poems are striking. Whitman and Ikeda rebuilt out of the ashes, and they dedicated themselves to a mission. Whitman became a "missionary to the wounded" during the war, despite having misgivings about missionaries both before and after the war.

As a journalist in the 1840s, before he wrote *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman had criticized missionaries for often being more determined to destroy a culture than to save it. His approach to missionary work was atypical: instead of going to a strange land to convert people of color, he went to the U.S. capital, Washington, D.C., to treat primarily fellow whites. Instead of working to destroy a culture viewed as alien, he attempted to help realize a culture lurching fitfully toward an inclusive democracy. If most missionary work occurred on the imperial frontier, Whitman's took place on medical, psychic, social, and sexual frontiers. If the ordinary missionary aimed to convert and to save souls, Whitman held that humans were already quasi-divine, and thus he focused on assisting in this life. He cared deeply about souls but not in a conventional way. For Whitman, bodies and souls were entangled, mutually constitutive: souls were inextricable from bodies, and bodies were divinized. Perfect or damaged, bodies mattered enormously, and he adored them even when mangled, weakened with disease, or disfigured because of wounds or amputations.

Dr. Ikeda devoted himself to Soka Gakkai and its movement with the mission of world peace. Meanwhile, consistent with these efforts, and as part of his mission, he founded Soka University. In "Standing Among the Ruins of Takiyama Castle" he said movingly,

I want to do anything
I possibly can for you.
Soka University is my life
and you are my eternal comrades,
through the three existences of past, present and future.⁶

Ikeda and Whitman each found his life's work, something each man could dedicate himself to with great focus and passion. For Whitman it was healing the wounds of war both literally in the Civil War hospitals and figuratively through his writing of *Leaves of Grass*. Ikeda's life work is dedicated to advancing peace efforts, to developing Soka movement, and to nurturing the next generation. I urge you—in fact, allow me to challenge you—to consider what *you* would consider a life's work for yourself. What could you imagine dedicating decades of labor to that would be fulfilling, that would aid the world, that would be bigger than any private or

⁶ Daisaku Ikeda, "Standing Among the Ruins of Takiyama Castle" in *Journey of Life*, pp.296-297.

personal reward?

Late in life, in conversation with his friend Horace Traubel, Whitman reflected on the meaning of his commitment to hospital visits:

it never occurred to me . . . that I had any right or call to abandon my work: it was a religion with me. A religion? Well—every man has a religion: has something in heaven or earth which he will give up everything else for—something which absorbs him, possesses itself of him, makes him over into its image: something: it may be something regarded by others as being very paltry, inadequate, useless: yet it is his dream, it is his lodestar, it is his master. That, whatever it is, seized upon me, made me its servant, ... induced me to set aside the other ambitions: a trail of glory in the heavens, which I followed, followed, with a full heart.⁷

Whitman as servant of his lodestar is a very different nurse from other famous nurses from his era—Florence Nightingale and Clara Barton—both of whom can be usefully compared to Whitman. Their most significant contributions were organizational. In contrast, Whitman's greatest contributions were at the side of the individual soldier. Whitman became a “sustainer of spirit and body in some degree, in time of need.”⁸ He provided companionship, someone to talk to, healing touch, and a concern for the individual at a time when many soldiers perceived coldness and corruption in the military establishment. His approach was highly personalized and idiosyncratic and provided no template for others to follow. But Whitman's approach yielded important results. D. Willard Bliss, the chief surgeon of Armory Square, the hospital with the highest mortality rate and where Whitman spent most of his time, asserted: “From my personal knowledge of Mr. Whitman's labors in Armory Square and other hospitals, I am of [the] opinion that no one person who assisted in the hospitals during the war accomplished so much good to the soldier and for the Government as Mr. Whitman.”⁹

In this regard Dr. Ikeda is very different. He does provide a template for others to follow. He is interested in systematized ordering to improve life. Like his mentor, Jōsei Toda, he was intent upon further developing a complex system of mutually reinforcing communication lines that lent strength and cohesiveness to the Soka's organizational structure. Informing those lines of communication, Ikeda's poetry is geared to enabling self-discovery and self-creation. His poetry speaks to many at a deeply personal level. He offers guidance on how to reach a greater self and call forth the good we have latent in ourselves. The ensuing change will not be merely personal as one of Dr. Ikeda's book titles makes clear: *The World is Yours to Change*.

Thank you.

⁷ Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden* (New York: Mitchell Kennerley), 3: 581-582.

⁸ Walt Whitman, “Tis But Ten Years Since,” *New York Weekly Graphic*, 7 March 1874: p.46.

⁹ Thomas Donaldson, *Walt Whitman the Man* (New York: Francis P. Harper, 1896), p.169.