

The best I can do

The Bethlehem Gadfly Uncategorized March 18, 2019

Jon Harris, “People of all faiths unite for peace in Allentown vigil honoring those killed in New Zealand mosque massacre.” Morning Call, March 17, 2019.

As I write this, there’s a vigil/ceremony for the New Zealand victims in Allentown.

And maybe it’s as much for “us” as for them.

I can not get there.

But my mind is there.

I happen to be rehearsing my reading of Walt Whitman’s “[Song of Myself](#)” for a recording project with the Bethlehem Area Public Library.

And I can’t help reading Whitman — a man, a gay man, unparalleled in identification with American democratic values — through New Zealand.

At meeting today, a member asked for spiritual help “managing my rage.”

I understand.

New Zealand unmoors you.

The central message of Whitman’s poem defining the American Self is that “a kelson of the creation is love.”

It’s a great image if you know what a kelson is: the spine that runs along the bottom of a boat that holds it all together.

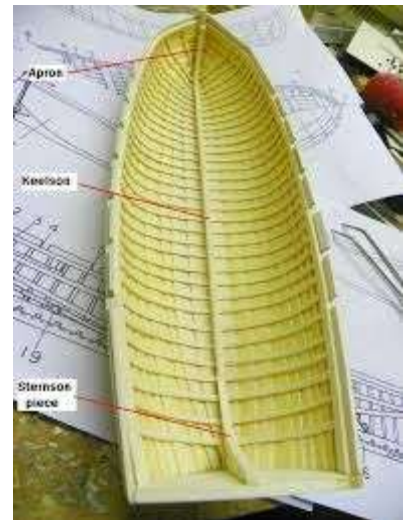
In the wake of such hate, it’s hard reading that line now with the old conviction.

But it’s the message I need to hear.

Whitman’s Self in the poem *loves* everyone. That’s what it means to be an American. Whitman’s hard message is that true equality is not based in law but in love.

There is no discrimination on the basis of race, gender, sex, whatever because the law won’t allow it but because we see the inherent worth in everybody. Whitman makes “appointments with all,” he resists anything better than “his own diversity,” he’s a “caresser of life wherever moving.”

After parading before our eyes presidents, and prostitutes, and peddlers among a cavalcade of people from all geographies, all castes, all moral strata,



Whitman concludes:

*these tend inward to me, and I tend outward to them,
And such it is to be of these more or less I am,
And of these one and all I weave the song of myself.*

I'm not sure I have managed my rage. But Whitman is working his way on me. In the face of New Zealand, must hold on to and, more importantly, must act on the Whitman ideal.

How have you been thinking about these particularly horrendous events of the last few days?