

LITERARY PORTALS TO PRAYER

# WALT WHITMAN

50  
PRAYER  
STARTERS

ILLUMINATED BY

THE MESSAGE<sup>®</sup>

COMPILED AND INTRODUCED BY

NORBERT KRAPF

Lo, soul, seest thou not God's purpose from the first?

WALT WHITMAN



*I want you to get out there and walk—better yet, run!—  
on the road God called you to travel.*

THE MESSAGE

LITERARY PORTALS TO PRAYER™

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## A NOTE FROM THE PUBLISHER



Prayer is sometimes difficult. Perhaps we need spiritual inspiration. Something to reignite our spiritual life. A way to initiate a new and fruitful spiritual direction.

Great literature can do these things: inspire, ignite, and initiate.

Which is why ACTA Publications is publishing a series of “Literary Portals to Prayer.” The idea is simple: take insightful passages from great authors whose work has stood the test of time and illuminate each selection with a well-chosen quotation from the Bible on the same theme.

To do this, we use a relatively new translation by Eugene Peterson called *The Message: Catholic/Ecumenical Edition*. It is a fresh, compelling, challenging, and faith-filled translation of the Scriptures from ancient languages into contemporary American English that sounds as if it was written yesterday. *The Message* may be new to you, or you may already know it well, but see if it doesn’t illuminate these writings of Walt Whitman in delightful ways.

We publish the books in this series in a size that can easily fit in pocket or purse and find a spot on kitchen table, bed stand, work bench, study desk, or exercise machine. These books are meant to be used in a variety of ways. And we feature a variety of authors so you can find the one or ones that can kick-start your prayer life.

So enjoy these portals to prayer by Walt Whitman illuminated by *The Message*. And look for others in this series, including Louisa May Alcott, Hans Christian Andersen, Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell, Herman Melville, William Shakespeare, Edith Wharton, and others. Consider them, if you will, literary *lectio divina*.

Gregory F. Augustine Pierce  
President and Publisher  
ACTA Publications



REGARDING PRESENTATION OF BIBLICAL PASSAGES  
FROM *THE MESSAGE*

Some of *The Message* passages paired with Whitman poems in this book are re-lined as free verse poems in the rhythm and form of Whitman, in an attempt to help the reader enjoy the insights they facilitate.

## INTRODUCTION



There are so many Walt Whitmans one is tempted to conclude that many if not most readers claim a different one. After all, near the end of “Song of Myself,” Whitman proclaims with no excess modesty, some say, and plenty of twinkle in each eye:

*Do I contradict myself?  
Very well then I contradict myself,  
(I am large, I contain multitudes).*

What he means in those three lines could take a whole book to explain, but let us instead consider some of the Walt Whitmans we often hear or read about. Prominent are Walt the literary and cultural nationalist who creates a “new” poetry in spoken American English, the adversary of European literary tradition, the free-verse avant-gardist, the prophetic visionary, the bohemian, the champion of the body and sexual liberation. We know the nature-lover (often on a mystical level), the spokesperson for the common man and woman, the voice of the dispossessed. We recognize the celebrator of the music in the speech of city streets and smallest beauties of rural life and the enthusiastic reviewer of theater and opera. Less talked about is Whitman the devotee of the life of the soul, of the universal Spirit within and beyond all things.

Anyone familiar with the expanding editions of *Leaves of Grass* has seen evidence of all these Whitmans, and



more. In revisiting the so-called “deathbed edition” (1891-1892), I have discovered another less celebrated poet. After graduate seminars I taught on his work and selected poems in decades of survey and poetry classes at Long Island University, not far from the historic Birthplace in West Hills, as well as a Whitman seminar in Germany, I have, in my seventies, found another quieter poet engaged in an archetypal spiritual quest. The Walt Whitman at the center of this book brings us along on the spiritual journey of his evolving self. The biblical passages from *The Message*, also in the American vernacular, deepen our appreciation of the presence of a seeker exploring the life of the spirit.

The Whitman who speaks as a joiner of all people and things is conjoined at his spiritual center to Whitman the loner. Walt the loner gives us the most memorable lines and visionary poems, such as the “dark patches” and concluding lines in “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” and the “outsetting bard” who finds his voice and mission on the Paumanok (Long Island) seashore in confronting the pain of loss in “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking.” Related is the grieving lover of the assassinated President Lincoln who descends into the dark recesses of the swamp in “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” to hear and “tally” the cry of the kindred hermit thrush. Somewhat different is the man in “Song of Myself” who says he could turn and live with the animals because “They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God.” “Logic and sermons never convince,” this visionary voice proclaims. “The damp of the night drives deeper into my soul.”

In the poems that came of the Civil War, the great “Lilacs”

elegy, the powerful “Drum Taps” cluster, and the shorter late poems, Whitman is more spirit-haunted. Learning that his brother George was among the wounded at Fredericksburg, he travels to Virginia and finds him alive, but the human devastation he describes in *Specimen Days* moves him to become a nurse’s aide in tent hospitals. After his stroke and aging, we meet a more prayerful Whitman who looks back and into the beyond. Gone is the buoyant optimism of his and our country’s youth; present are sober reflections on final things, the “Invisible World.”

As a new father at thirty-seven to an adopted baby girl from Colombia, I taught an undergrad “Proseminar” on Whitman at the University of Freiburg, Germany, in 1981. I would like to describe the reading experience of a young woman in that class. Near the semester’s end, to solicit the students’ personal response to reading and discussing Whitman’s poetry, I distributed a questionnaire. Don’t fret over making your English “perfect,” I advised. Focus on expressing honestly and clearly your response to reading this distinctly American poet. The last question was: “Has your reaction to Whitman changed since you read him the first time?”

This thoughtful student told me that her reaction to reading Whitman did change. At first, she was excited, perhaps even overstimulated by his poetry, but eventually she “calmed down and was quieter.” Why? She was more used to him now, she wrote, had a better understanding of her feelings because reading his poetry enabled her to articulate them better. Whitman’s work can be challenging, she admitted,

because “He is very personal. He forces you to think about your sense of life and you have to be honest with yourself.” This can be troublesome, she admitted. The poignancy of her last two sentences haunts me still: “I’m nineteen years old, maybe it’s just the time to really feel the intensity and beauty of life. Sometimes I was afraid that this feeling could get lost in my life, but I think it depends on you and your honesty with yourself.”

If we can be as honest about our life goals and yearnings as this young German woman was in describing her relationship with Walt Whitman’s poems, we can’t fail to be grateful for the spiritual journey the same poet takes us on in this book. As I approach seventy-four, I wish I could experience reading out loud and discussing these fifty yoked passages with readers. I have no doubt—rather a renewed faith—that Walt the spiritual seeker and explorer is out there somewhere waiting for us. As he reassures us at the end of “Song of Myself,”

*Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,  
Missing me one place search another,  
I stop somewhere waiting for you.*

Norbert Krapf

WALT WHITMAN



SELECTIONS FROM

*Leaves of Grass, 1891-1892*

ACTA SAMPLE

ABOUT TO BURST

There was a child went forth every day,  
And the first object he'd look upon, that object he became,  
And that object became part of him for the day or a certain  
part of the day,  
Or for many years or stretching cycles of years.

The early lilacs became part of this child,  
And grass and white and red morning-glories, and white  
and red clover, and the song of the phoebe-bird,  
And the Third-month lambs and the sow's pink-faint litter,  
and the mare's foal and the cow's calf,  
And the noisy brook of the barnyard or by the mire  
of the pond-side,  
And the fish suspending themselves so curiously below  
there, and the beautiful curious liquid,  
And the water-plants with the graceful flat heads, all  
became part of him.

FROM "THERE WAS A CHILD WENT FORTH"



ABOUT TO BURST

*One day I went strolling through the orchard,  
looking for signs of spring,  
Looking for buds about to burst into flower,  
anticipating readiness, ripeness.  
Before I knew it my heart was raptured,  
carried away by lofty thoughts!*

SONG OF SONGS 6:11-12



ACTA SAMPLE

GOD DECIDED FROM THE OUTSET

A child said *What is the grass?* fetching it to me  
with full hands;  
How could I answer the child? I do not know what it is any  
more than he.

I guess it must be the flag of my disposition, out of hopeful  
green stuff woven.

Or I guess it is the handkerchief of the Lord,  
A scented gift and remembrancer designedly dropt,  
Bearing the owner's name someway in the corners, that we  
may see and remark, and say *Whose?*

Or I guess the grass is itself a child, the produced babe  
of the vegetation.

Or I guess it is a uniform hieroglyphic,

And it means, Sprouting alike in broad zones  
and narrow zones,

Growing among black folks as among white,  
Kanuck, Tuckahoe, Congressman, Cuff, I give them  
the same, I receive them the same.

FROM "SONG OF MYSELF"



GOD DECIDED FROM THE OUTSET

*God knew what he was doing from the very beginning.  
He decided from the outset to shape the lives  
of those who love him  
along the same lines as the life of his Son.  
The Son stands first in the line of humanity he restored.  
We see the original and intended shape of our lives  
there in him.*

*After God made that decision of what his children  
should be like,  
he followed it up by calling people by name.  
After he called them by name, he set them on a solid basis  
with himself.  
And then, after getting them established,  
he stayed with them to the end,  
gloriously completing what he had begun.*

ROMANS 8:29-30





THE ONE WHO COMES AFTER ME

Poets to come! orators, singers, musicians to come!  
Not to-day is to justify me and answer what I am for,  
But you, a new brood, native, athletic, continental, greater  
    than before known,  
Arouse! for you must justify me.

I myself but write one or two indicative words for the future,  
I but advance a moment only to wheel and hurry back  
    in the darkness.

I am a man who, sauntering along without fully stopping,  
    turns a casual look upon you and then averts his face,  
Leaving it to you to prove and define it,  
Expecting the main things from you.

"POETS TO COME"



THE ONE WHO COMES AFTER ME

*The very next day John saw Jesus coming toward him  
and yelled out,  
“Here he is, God’s Passover Lamb!  
He forgives the sins of the world!  
This is the man I’ve been talking about,  
‘the One who comes after me but is really ahead of me.’  
I knew nothing about who he was—only this:  
that my task has been to get Israel ready  
to recognize him as the God-Revealer.”*

JOHN 1:29-30



Norbert Krapf, former Indiana Poet Laureate, taught English for over 30 years at Long Island University, where he directed the C.W. Post Poetry Center. He holds a BA in English from St. Joseph's College (IN) and an MA and PhD in English and American literature from the University of Notre Dame. He was a Fulbright Professor of American Poetry at the Universities of Freiburg and Erlangen-Nuremberg in Germany. The most recent of his twenty-seven books are the poetry collection *Catholic Boy Blues: A Poet's Journal of Healing*, and the prose memoir *Shrinking the Monster: Healing the Wounds of Our Abuse*, winner of an Illumination Book Award. He has won the Lucille Medwick Memorial Award from the Poetry Society of America, a Glick Indiana Author Award for the body of his work, and a Creative Renewal Fellowship from the Arts Council of Indianapolis. Walt Whitman and bluesman Robert Johnson inspired him to begin writing poetry in 1971. Norbert has collaborated with jazz pianist-composer Monika Herzig and bluesman Gordon Bonham. For more, see [www.krapfpoetry.com](http://www.krapfpoetry.com).



# LITERARY PORTALS TO PRAYER™

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**LITERARY:** pertaining to or of the nature of books and writing, especially those classed as literature

**PORTAL:** a door, gate, or entrance, especially one of imposing power or utility

**PRAYER:** the lifting up of the mind and heart to divine reality

**TO ILLUMINATE:** to brighten, light up, make lucid or clear



The Walt Whitman at the center of this book brings us along on the spiritual journey of his evolving self. The Whitman who speaks as a joiner of all people and things is conjoined at his spiritual center to Whitman the loner. In this volume of *Literary Portals to Prayer*, each verso (left) page contains an excerpt from one of his poems and the opposite recto (right) page illuminates the selection with a Bible verse from *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* by Eugene H. Peterson.

This book is the perfect gift for fans of Whitman, as well as those who have yet to discover some of his writings, and will serve as a welcome resource for those seeking a way to reignite their prayer life. Think of it as literary *lectio divina*.

Other volumes in this series include Louisa May Alcott, Hans Christian Andersen, Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell, Herman Melville, William Shakespeare, and Edith Wharton.

Prayer/Literary



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